

## Villages Vivants: rural community development cooperative in France

### SUMMARY

Villages Vivants is a rural cooperative founded in 2018, bringing together citizens, institutional investors, and local authorities to buy, renovate, and manage premises hosting essential services and social economy activities in rural areas. The initiative responds to the decline of local shops and services, which affects employment, local supply chains, rural heritage, and social cohesion.

Since its creation, the cooperative has acquired 33 premises across 13 departments in three regions of southeastern France, creating 190 jobs and mobilising EUR 12.5 million in investments from over 1 000 contributors.



**Themes:** Access to services, social economy

**Country:** France

**Organisation:**

> Villages Vivants, private business (lead organisation)

**Start & end date:** 07/2018 - Ongoing

**Budget:** EUR 800 000 per year (operational expenditure)

**Funding sources:**

- > Private donations, patronage, sponsorship
- > Banque des Territoires (Caisse des Dépôts) and national and local subsidies (Fonds de restructuration des locaux vacants)
- > National social banks and investment funds

**Website:** <https://villagesvivants.com/>

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### CONTEXT

Rural areas in France face a lack of public and private investment in the renovation of buildings, alongside significant difficulties for young entrepreneurs seeking to create new activities and local services. Although many buildings remain vacant, the absence of adequate commercial premises is a major barrier. High renovation costs and strict accessibility standards require substantial initial investment, while expected profitability in rural contexts remains limited. Villages Vivants was established to address this real estate challenge and to support the long-term development of local economic activities.



### OBJECTIVES

- > Facilitate access to affordable and suitable commercial premises for entrepreneurs in rural areas;
- > Mobilise funding from institutional partners and local communities to acquire and renovate buildings;
- > Develop and provide spaces for collective businesses offering essential local services, such as bakeries, restaurants, second-hand shops, and social and cultural centres;
- > Support entrepreneurs in building sustainable business models and strengthening links with local authorities;
- > Act as a trusted intermediary, providing expertise and reducing the burden of real estate challenges for entrepreneurs.



## ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

Villages Vivants supports collectives, associations and cooperatives with projects to create economic, social or cultural activities in rural areas and who are facing obstacles in accessing land. Their projects must foster community connections and be accessible to local residents and stakeholders.

Villages Vivants assists organisations by purchasing, renovating and leasing premises to house these activities. It supports project leaders in developing their initiatives by strengthening business models, building connections with the local area and relevant partners, and providing guidance throughout the entire lifecycle of the business, including, where relevant, the transition towards entrepreneurs' ownership of premises. Tenants participate in the cooperative's activities and contribute to the partnership.

During the business plan and purchase phase, several in-depth discussions and site visits are scheduled to allow Villages Vivants to assess a project's economic viability, develop an acquisition and renovation plan, and propose rental rates. After setup, Villages Vivants provides ongoing, tailored support to ensure sustainability, building cooperative, trust-based relationships beyond a landlord role.



## RESULTS

- > 33 properties have been bought since 2019, involving EUR 12.5 million investment for purchase and renovation costs. EUR 5.3 million were raised from more than 1 000 citizens, showing their commitment to rural development. More than 200 people are involved in activities supported by the cooperative, 60% of which are women.
- > Villages Vivants supports rural entrepreneurship and collective projects by managing investments and properties and by fostering robust economic activities. For 86% of the properties, Villages Vivants' intervention was decisive for their opening or continued operations.
- > Villages Vivants contributes to the transformation of society by supporting rural communities, preserving the environment through the rehabilitation of built heritage and the creation of shared spaces: 75% of sites are located in priority areas (based on France Ruralités Revitalization zoning)
- > Villages Vivants targets very small rural municipalities and reuses existing buildings: 41 % of sites are in municipalities with fewer than 1 000 inhabitants and two thirds of acquired sites were vacant at purchase.
- > User monitoring indicates strong local use and social connection. 80 % of shoppers live in the municipality; among users of hybrid spaces, 93 % reported meeting people outside their usual circles and 97 % reported a positive impact on daily life. All sites report working with local suppliers.



## SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

- > The practice strengthens rural resilience by promoting collective entrepreneurship. It combines associative structures with social business models, enabling voluntary engagement and access to public subsidies, and increasing recognition of alternative rural business models among banks and partners.
- > It prioritises economic activity over property ownership by supporting business transfers and working with owners so investment goes to viable local enterprises. Local authorities help by facilitating rental agreements, negotiating renovation works and rebuilding trust.
- > It works with constraints (staff turnover, limited resources) through flexibility, stronger cooperation and low-cost solutions.
- > It relies on clear, transparent relationships between municipalities, owners and entrepreneurs; treats local shops as essential services supported through viability-linked subsidies; and uses vacant public buildings for experimentation.
- > It is designed to be replicable and scalable through adaptable partnerships and diversified funding, while improving environmental performance by reusing existing infrastructure.



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