



Smart Villages in rural Romania: building local capacity for community-led strategies

SUMMARY

LAG Someș Transilvan developed a practical methodology to help rural communes turn the Smart Village concept into a community-led planning process. The approach was first tested in the Bonțida commune through a Living Lab involving Babeș-Bolyai University and community development professionals and students.

LAG created a structured pathway through which communes establish local strategy committees, develop a shared vision for the future, carry out consultations and prepare Smart Village strategies.

The process combines local participation with targeted support from the LAG, including workshops, counselling and small grants for strategy development.



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Themes: LEADER/CLLD, smart and start-up villages

Country: Romania

Organisations:

> Asociația GAL Someș Transilvan, Local Action Group

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Funding sources:

> European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) via LEADER/CLLD

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CONTEXT

The Someș Transilvan LAG territory in north-west Romania covers 12 communes and around 45 600 inhabitants, ranging from peri-urban areas connected to Cluj-Napoca to more remote rural communities. In Romania, Smart Villages are mainly supported through LEADER. In the 2021-2027 period, around 90 of the approximately 250 Romanian LAGs have allocated at least 10% of their budgets to Smart Village activities.

However, the concept is often understood primarily as a technology-driven approach, while community-led interpretations can be more difficult to explain and organise. At the same time, existing administrative frameworks tend to be better suited to physical investments than to participation, cooperation and social innovation. This created a need for a practical and replicable methodology that could help communities organise participation, build consensus around local priorities and develop strategies that are both locally owned and implementable.



OBJECTIVES

- > Help communities understand and apply Smart Village as a community-led planning process, rather than a technology-focused approach;
- > Strengthen local capacity for cooperation, consultation and priority setting;
- > Support the development of locally owned Smart Village strategies that can guide future action and investment;
- > Ensure that communities have the skills and structures needed to continue implementation beyond external support.



ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

The initiative was developed in two stages. First, the LAG **piloted the approach through a Living Lab** in the commune of Bonțida, working with Babeș-Bolyai University and community development professionals and students. The pilot focused on **explaining the Smart Village concept, clarifying expectations around participation and testing whether local actors were willing and able to take ownership of the process**. It also broadened local discussions beyond traditional municipal planning topics to include issues such as community cohesion, entrepreneurship, tourism, education, communication, skills, traditions and mobility.

Building on this experience, the LAG established an **umbrella strategy-development pathway** for communes across its territory, **combining structured support with clear participation requirements**. Interested communes first apply through a short pre-selection process and present their vision for the future of their community in a dedicated 'Vision 2035' pitching event.

Selected communities then **establish local strategy committees and receive support through local workshops, personalised counselling and small grants** for planning activities. Communities are required to carry out needs analyses and consultations, involve community development and digital experts, and organise study visits to other communities to support learning and the integration of 'smart' solutions. Particular **emphasis is placed on inclusive participation**, with requirements for youth involvement and incentives for balanced representation of young people and women within local committees.

Throughout the process, **community members co-create the strategy content, municipalities** provide an institutional anchor and formally approve the final strategy, and the **LAG** coordinates the methodology, ensures transparency and supports implementation across the territory. Funding is provided in stages, **linking support to the completion and approval of Smart Village strategies** and helping ensure that planning activities lead to concrete action. The LAG also plans to support selected investments and initiatives emerging from the completed strategies.



RESULTS

- > **A tested and transferable methodology:** the Living Lab in Bonțida enabled the LAG to test community mobilisation and ownership in practice, helping refine an approach that can be applied across other communes.
- > **Broader local planning discussions:** the pilot expanded strategy development beyond traditional municipal priorities to include topics such as community cohesion, entrepreneurship, tourism, education, participation, communication, skills and mobility.
- > **A structured pathway for Smart Village strategies:** building on the pilot, the LAG established a guided process through which communities create local committees, develop a shared vision, carry out consultations and prepare locally owned Smart Village strategies.
- > **Stronger local capacity and implementation focus:** the methodology helps communities organise participation, identify priorities and develop strategies that are formally approved and linked to future actions and investments.



SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

- > **Start with concept clarity:** communities need a practical understanding of Smart Villages as a community-led development approach, not only a technology-focused concept.
- > **Pilot before scaling:** the Living Lab helped test participation, ownership and mobilisation before rolling out the methodology to other communes.
- > **Make participation concrete:** local strategy committees, consultation requirements and expert involvement help translate participation into practical actions.
- > **Use transparent selection processes:** pitching events, jury assessment and clear criteria help identify committed communities and strengthen credibility.
- > **Link planning to implementation:** staged funding and formal strategy approval help ensure that planning leads to future actions and investments.



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