



Successful projects using Broadband in rural development...

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GETTING TO WHERE WE ARE NOW

The European Strategic Guidelines for Rural Development (2006) increase the focus on ICT take-up and use in rural areas in line with EU priorities for the Information Society:

“...there is a need to accompany changes in rural areas by helping them to diversify farming activities towards non-agricultural activities and develop non-agricultural sectors, promote employment, improve basic services, including local access to ICT.”

In 2007, DG Agriculture and Rural Development led a major investigation into the ‘digital divide’ and instances of rural best practice in take-up of broadband (to be published in 2008). The information given here is drawn from that project.

Success Factors

From an analysis of case studies, there are six major success factors contributing to the rural take-up of broadband:

- 1 Financial support from the EU
- 2 Support from national/regional authorities (political, financial and legal)
- 3 Involvement and co-operation of local businesses and organisations
- 4 Understanding and reacting to new business opportunities created by ICT
- 5 Strong involvement of local communities
- 6 Understanding the need to promote the Information Society



Categorisation

Rural Broadband projects can be categorised by

- *Access*, or the equipment needed to access the internet. The most important target areas are eCommunities, SMEs and eBusiness/eCommerce practices.
- *Content*, or what people choose to access and the services which encourage them to go on line. The primary and secondary sectors are Agrifood and SMEs, ICT and eBusiness practices, respectively.
- *Capacity*, or developing new skills to make the most of ICT. These address eLearning and eSkills for populations targeted located in predominantly rural and in remote / isolated areas.

ICT projects which combine all three categories make the greatest impact.

Drivers and enablers

- 7 A project must inspire the desire to take-up ICT. Community enterprises are built upon a communal vision or desire, whereas top-down initiatives may not be.
- 8 Legal requirements, business plan development, understanding the target group and project management skills are among broader list of pre-requisites.
- 9 Projects driven by the public sector for economic development purposes or connecting public buildings can enable take-up and provide a resilient service.
- 10 eProcurement or the fast-tracking of rural ICT infrastructure projects can facilitate the roll-out of broadband. Web-based systematic guidance could bring consistency and clarification to complicated information. Targeting groups who want to achieve a particular outcome can also inspire ICT take-up. But just telling rural citizens to take up ICT is unlikely to work.
- 11 The private sector is always involved in rural ICT projects – as initiators / co-ordinators / partners, as suppliers / subcontractors, and even as beneficiaries. They can deliver training, technology and websites, while SMEs are helped to access business support which they might not normally be able to afford.

Benefits, barriers and best practice in ICT and Rural Development

Benefits

The benefits of rural ICT projects are not always directly linked to ICT but include quality of life and job creation. Project impacts include increased awareness; increased information and implementation of ICT; promotion of sustainable farming; better access to training opportunities (for farm activity and enterprise diversification); and, in turn, greater representation, return to work and business start-ups by women and so on.

Barriers

Active inclusion of disparate local organisations can exacerbate project development and management. More views need to be taken into account and objections can slow down project implementation. However, it does generate greater ownership and take-up within a community.

Problems could occur when public funding for broadband projects conflicts with the State Aid rules. Key issues then become the transparency of the procurement process, the current level of competition, the justification and the focus of the project's objectives on social and economic cohesion, and the positive impact on welfare and competition.

Transferability is a problem. Where the public sector works closely in partnership with the private sector, intellectual property rights can prevent the sharing of best practice through confidentiality agreements.

Common consistent reasons for projects to fail were not found. However, several factors could lead to failure, including overestimation of demand, underestimation of the required revenue funding, over selling of the service and lack of focus on the end user.



Best practice

A number of policy approaches and proposals have been made in the very extensive 2007 report. In addition, its specific recommendations include:

- 1 A coherent eRural strategy as an integral part of sustainable rural development policy, focusing on building capacity.
- 2 Improvement of control and monitoring of ICT indicators, policies and initiatives including the collection of coherent statistical data.
- 3 Measures which stimulate business and technical competition at different levels of scope and sophistication.
- 4 Developing sustainable, connected rural eCommunities to stimulate demand and ICT take-up.
- 5 Enhancing Regional Leadership and supporting Local Champions to ensure that 'bottom up' projects flourish.
- 6 Supporting Awareness ("know what") and Training ("know how").
- 7 Providing services and content that rural users feel are pertinent to them, especially entertainment and local content, as well as policy priorities such as eBusiness, eLearning, eHealth and eGovernment services.
- 8 Encouraging initiatives which promote the theme of eCommunity, particularly by way of a common eRural agenda.
- 9 Adopting a rubric of best practice at the interface between LEADER and those seeking access to funding:
 - Self-evaluation by communities against an identified envelope of best practice
 - A route map incorporating an initial action plan
 - Published criteria for key stages of the initial action plan
 - Unconditional release of stage funding provided published criteria are met
 - A prioritising of content and originality over form and consistency when deciding whether criteria are met

Training and practical advice and support for local attempts to reach the next stage

Decision points concerning options delegated to community projects and the authority retained over the use of public money - specifically, 'choice' or 'control', 'public' or 'private

Assisted decision-making to community-led projects (to cover technical, financial and contractual options)

Ethical assessments of the consequences of decisions

Structured 'third partnership' where public private partnerships (PPPs) are implemented - specifically, the inclusion of target communities as 'third partners' with their own contributions to make within the governance of PPPs

Protected dialogue where interventions may be controversial - that is, impact assessments which are sensitive to the needs and expectations of affected communities and which include them appropriately in the options available.

- 10 Extending investment in broadband infrastructure to all local public sector agencies and schools in order to provide:

Channels by which eGovernment, eHealth and eLearning can be presented and extended

Physical 'building blocks' for local imagination and knowledge to adapt and develop

- 11 Investing and developing the content of local networks.
- 12 Raising the digital e-skills of local businesses and citizens.
- 13 An eProcurement process with appropriate safeguards and innovative proactive online support, to fast-track ICT projects in rural areas.
- 14 Explicitly encouraging local authorities to lay ducts and then rent them to operators



on an open and non-discriminatory basis, and to promoting indoor pre-cabling for all new buildings in their regions.

Some factors definitely influence the choice among rural populations to use ICT and experience the benefits of the Information Society:

- 15 A shared sense of lagging behind, which can be stimulated constructively by a local 'champion'.
- 16 Being spurred on as a consequence of a successful local enterprise.
- 17 Being encouraged by the experience or ICT familiarity of others.
- 18 Following a targeted intervention which demonstrably has improved the local quality of life.
- 19 Emotional responses for local, personal reasons.
- 20 Local resistance to an imposed agenda.
- 21 Defence or protection of local values or traditions.
- 22 Being offered control or ownership of a project which will enhance local life.
- 23 Being part of a meaningful partnership arrangement, rather than one which pays only lip service to 'stakeholders'.
- 24 Interventions which trigger such responses should be encouraged and supported.



Links & Contacts:

- www.abard.org, John O'Flaherty, john@mac.ie
- Study on Availability of Access to Computer Networks in Rural Areas, Contract No: 30-CE-0099278/00-78, Dec-07, DG Agriculture & Rural Development
- www.cybermoor.org
- European Commission, 2007, *Bridging the Broadband Gap Conference May 2007*, at http://europa.eu.int/information_society/events/broadband_gap_2007/index_en.htm
- European Council, 2006, *Council Decision of 20 Feb 2006 on Community strategic guidelines for rural development (programming period 2007 to 2013)*, (2006/144/EC), (OJ L 55, 25.02.2006, p 20).