

How to make use of rural digitalisation for territorial development?

A view from Latvia

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Introduction

The impact of the digital transformation on rural areas is widely acknowledged, and a birds-eye view of the opportunities provided by digitalisation and the vulnerabilities of rural areas to specific disruptions and forms of digital inequality is readily available in research and policy arenas. However, the actual possibilities and threats attendant to the implementation of digital technologies and the development of digital infrastructures more broadly are invariably contextual and local, determined by country and region-specific social, digital and physical factors. This underlines the important role that micro and meso level analyses of digital ecosystems, access and skills can play in disentangling programmatic statements regarding the potential impact of digitalisation from the actual practices and mundane experiences in which digital tools can become embedded. In view of this, this paper considers the process of rural digitalisation in Latvia from the perspective of user-centred sustainable territorial development and urban-rural linkages, with a focus on maximising the socio-economic benefits of the digital transformation in rural areas.

The potential of rural digitalisation in Latvia

One of the key challenges of sustainable territorial development is achieving a comparable level of development throughout a country or region, regardless of location or proximity to large urban centres. However, even a cursory examination of planning documents suggests that rural and urban areas have frequently been approached as separate and distinct spaces with different needs, development potentials and sociodemographic profiles. Cities are treated as vibrant places where development takes place, while rural areas are treated as places that require assistance from and depend upon urban centres. However, the growing recognition of urban-rural interdependences has made the issue of equitable and sustainable territorial development more prominent. An integrated approach to thinking about territorial development in a manner that considers the linkages and entanglements of rural and urban territories is being increasingly driven by changes in territorial policy and development (e.g. the EU's Territorial Cohesion Policy, Territorial Development Programme 2020). In this context, rural digitalisation is becoming more important. It has been noted that rural digitalisation has the potential to revitalise rural areas and reduce territorial development disparities, while reinterpreting the relationship between the rural and the urban. It can also allow for a more efficient provision of different public services for sparsely populated areas and facilitate collaboration for collective benefit.

The National Development Plan of Latvia (2021-2027) states that digitalisation will have broad impacts across many different sectors. Nonetheless, given the pervasive disparities in economic development between urban and rural areas in Latvia, there are legitimate concerns that urban areas (where digital infrastructure and skills are considerably better) will reap the lion's share of benefits. As a consequence, the growing role of digital tools and forms of communication could widen social and regional disparities and deepen the current gaps and inequalities between cities and rural areas.

At first glance, Latvia appears to be in a good position with respect to digital infrastructure and e-services, though the digital transformation does not appear to be high on the policy agenda and there

are issues that hamper rural digitalisation. Latvia's digital strategy is outlined in the Digital Transformation Guidelines for 2021-2027, a document that was prepared in 2020. However, while the guidelines mention the digital gap between rural and urban areas, little attention is paid to this issue in the descriptions of specific goals. Similarly, the country performs well in rankings concerning digital public services and connectivity, but the population has comparatively poor digital skills. Furthermore, there are clear regional differences - skills are much better in urban centres. Likewise, despite overall broadband and mobile network coverage being high, there are pronounced differences in internet accessibility between rural and urban areas, largely determined by low population density and business activity. Finally, despite the creation of numerous state municipal platforms for the provision of digital services, and policy measures and support programmes aimed at facilitating digitalisation, not all social groups have been reached, meaning that some do not benefit from these developments. In conjunction, these factors can hamper the capacity of rural communities to make use of the opportunities offered by digitalisation, while simultaneously making them more vulnerable to the risks associated with the digital divide. This raises the question of what can be done in order to maximise the socio-economic benefits of the digital transformation in rural areas, while countering some of the potentially negative impacts.

Materials and results

A deeper insight into the role of rural digitalisation in the context of sustainable territorial development in Latvia was obtained in the project EKIP (*Enacting user-centred knowledge and innovation partnerships for smart and sustainable territorial development*) funded by the Latvian Council of Science. The overall objective of this project was to generate and consolidate knowledge from multiple H2020 (e.g. Desira, AgriLink) and national projects through a participatory multi-actor approach, and promote user-centred solutions. Based on consolidated findings from different projects, expert interviews and multi-actor-workshops, several aspects were identified that should be borne in mind when deploying the resources of digitalisation for countering the digital divide and fostering sustainable territorial development in Latvia and more generally.

Firstly, our findings suggest that the success of local digital solutions depends on a good understanding of the regional socio-digital ecosystem. Specifically, attempts to implement digital solutions should be mindful of the skill levels and social routines of the population in question, and the available infrastructure. This will ensure that the social and technological dimensions are aligned and increase the chance of digital solutions becoming integrated in practices that have previously relied on direct, face-to-face contacts and relations of trust established over an extended period of time.

Secondly, we observe that in developing digital solutions, special attention should be paid to the role and enrolment of local mentors and knowledge brokers. This serves a dual purpose of both building trust with the local community by making the relevance of the proposed solution clear and also gauging the readiness of people in the region to alter the way they commonly do business and interact with each other, service providers and public institutions.

Thirdly, investments in digital solutions should take a long-term view, as their impact on territorial development and urban-rural linkages may not be immediate. A common theme in the workshops that were organised as part of EKIP was that digital solutions can facilitate gradual changes as more and more people start using a particular tool or application. While the impact is difficult to quantify in the short term, digital tools can reverse negative underlying trends and incrementally reshape the relationship between the urban and the rural.

Finally, it should be borne in mind that digital solutions do not always entail radical departures from the mundane with a disruptive impact. Thus, even seemingly minor and trivial solutions such as digital community calendars and mailing lists maintained by farmers engaged in direct marketing are worthy of attention. While such examples may appear quaint, this does not preclude them from having a transformative impact on rural communities and their ability to flourish, thus contributing to a more equitable and sustainable distribution of digital benefits.

Conclusion

In summary, our findings reiterate the importance of integrating digital technologies with local knowledge and an appreciation of the social routines and physical environments that surround the digital. Consequently, policy interventions oriented towards infrastructure development, digital ecosystem design and skill enhancement should be attuned to the practical realities in which digital tools are employed, and support initiatives that seek to introduce novel solutions for integrating the digital into everyday practices in rural areas.