

Sustainability requires local and global answers. For the organisations, villages and regions involved in SMART, it was very stimulating to be linked to other experiences in Europe.



WEB ARTICLE

**SMART**VILLAGES

*Sustainable Villages & Education Networking*



“ In SMART, partners searched for attractive methods to become active actors in the process to sustainability.”

THE SMART TEAM

## Summary of the project

Fortunately, small rural communities become more and more aware of the urgency to find sustainable solutions for energy use, land use, food and health issues, waste, water management, transport, local economy and social subjects. Many communities develop activities to respond to the current challenges in this field. To achieve good results - also on the longer term - sustainable activities must count with the active support of the whole population, including socio-economic disadvantaged groups. In the learning partnership SMART (2011 – 2013), partners searched for attractive methods to facilitate these groups to become active actors. SMART partners were and still are convinced that (participatory) education plays a key role in this process.

For two years SMART partners worked together to exchange and discuss, to learn and to disseminate the following issues

- Education as an indispensable component in the realization of sustainable villages
- Educational needs of the rural population concerning sustainability
- The role of volunteers in this process
- Good practices on the contribution of education to local sustainable policy and practice
- Strategies to motivate the local population, including socio-economic disadvantaged groups
- The contribution of social media in sustainable action

Every partner involved a second circle of organisations and experts from their own country in the project in order to share and discuss the project results on the own regional or national level.

SMART partners arranged study visits, exchanged good practices and did practical research on several topics: sustainable local planning, participation and training of volunteers, methods to involve all habitants in the debate and in the implementation of activities, networks of sustainable villages and the role of social media.

Six international meetings were organized. The first meeting took place in Azeitão (Portugal) and was dedicated to the establishment of the partnership. The next four project meetings involved a bigger group of staff, learners, volunteers and network partners of the hosting organization. Each of these four meetings consisted of thematic workshops, study visits and evaluation/monitoring sessions. During these meetings good experiences and innovative approaches were discussed, pitfalls and common mistakes were analyzed. Thematic workshops were held on the following issues:

- Localism, sustainability and kick starting a community activity (Norfolk, United Kingdom)
- Building sustainable villages (Oosterwolde, Netherlands)
- Study circles as a connector and stimulator of sustainable rural development (Radece, Slovenia)
- Getting the whole community involved – Use of web stream, digital voting and digital whiteboards in sustainable rural development (Norfolk, United Kingdom)

The final SMART meeting took place in Snæfellsnes (Iceland) and, besides interesting study visits, was merely dedicated to the finalisation of the project outcomes and dissemination of the results.

The joint outcomes of this learning partnership are bundled in a project website: <http://beasmartcommunity.wordpress.com>. On this website, inspiring Skype-testimonies of local activists can be found as well as descriptions of good practices SMART identified. This project article and a leaflet to facilitate the dissemination the project outcomes can also be found on this website.

Future plans: SMART partners will maintain contact with each other like we already did before the project took place. There will be regular updates of everyone's activities via institutional and personal contacts. Participation in the Grundtvig Training *Vital Villages* is seriously considered to be included in the work plan of the partner organizations and their second circle. Three SMART partners cooperate in the delivery of this training<sup>1</sup>.

In continuation you will find a short description of some project findings and an attachment on the content of the partner meetings.

## Some project findings

In the first project meeting SMART 'adopted' the concept of the Egon Wheel, a tool for evaluating sustainable communities. This wheel, developed by Sir John Egan in 2004, distinguishes eight fields that are relevant for a holistic and inclusive approach of sustainable communities: governance, transport & connectivity, services, environment, equity, economy, housing & the built environment, social & cultural. In SMART discussions and study visits the Egon Wheel served as a significant 'benchmark' in order to determine the value of an idea, a project or a concept.

SMART gave us the opportunity to explore new methods that can help to include as many people as possible in sustainable activities. The Living Library, originally used as an instrument to tackle prejudices between human beings, proved to be also interesting as an instrument to collect the seemingly ordinary stories of local activists and to learn from them. SMART also explored the possibilities of new technologies such as live web-stream and digital voting. The use of new technologies is challenging: it requires good equipment, professional knowledge and finances, but the benefits can really be very significant in terms of reaching a broader audience, 'spreading the word', collecting data and opinions, etc.

Volunteers are a key factor in sustainable rural development work. They are the stimulating persons who inspire other inhabitants to join sustainable action. We have met many volunteers who, with their strong intrinsic motivation, want to make a difference and contribute to a sustainable rural area. We met younger and older volunteers who dedicate themselves to small-scale initiatives and others who work on a more general and broad scale projects (and everything in between). Testimonies of such volunteers are presented on the SMART website.

SMART identified good practices in the partner countries. These practices that inspired the participants can serve as Food for Thought and Discussion. Of course, they cannot be copied blindly, but they are valuable in the quest in each country to a more sustainable rural area and the measures required for this.

Good practices presented on the website: [Sustainable Villages | SMART VILLAGES](#)

1. The Network Sustainable Villages, founded in Friesland (Netherlands), demonstrates how small villages link with other villages in order to learn from each other and give an extra boost to their sustainable activities. In this network 1 + 1 is so much more than 2!
2. Reepham (United Kingdom) and Balinge (Netherlands) are two of the villages that impressed because of the varied package of sustainable measures they have taken during the last years.

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<sup>1</sup> More information about this training *Vital Villages – planning and development for a sustainable and inclusive rural area*: [info@platformlearnforlife.nl](mailto:info@platformlearnforlife.nl)

3. In Snæfellsnes (Iceland) the primary school integrated environmental education and sustainability successfully in their school curriculum, showing how a group of dedicated teachers and parents can create awareness on sustainability among all generations. A real process of lifelong learning!
4. Environmental planning as a study line in agricultural schools (Iceland) is important for the upcoming professionals in the rural area who will also put their stamp on the rural area in the near future.
5. Study circles (Slovenia) have proven to contribute significantly to rural development. In small groups, inhabitants from all backgrounds work together for common and feasible sustainable goals. The concrete and visible results do stimulate other people to get active.
6. The wish of rural municipalities to distinguish themselves from other local governments can lead to the development of an explicit local sustainable policy and obtaining an Eco Certificate (Iceland).
7. Farm diversification projects including sustainable tourism (SI, IS, PT) respond to several goals: the farmers' need to earn a sustainable income, the wish of visitors to have an 'green experience', the creation of awareness of the value of the rural area and the urgency to take sustainable measures in order to keep the world livable.
8. Heritage and landscape projects (NL and ?) also respond to the same wish of visitors of the countryside to have this 'green experience' and also contribute to the awareness mentioned above.
9. The Natural Step, a non profit organisation for training and research in sustainable development, delivers education, coaching and advice. With their expertise they want to contribute to solutions-oriented innovation and system change initiatives.
10. The Living Library, developed under auspices of the Youth Department of the Council of Europe, attempts to challenge prejudices by facilitating a conversation between two people: a Book and a Reader. In the context of SMART the Living Library was recognized as a very useful instrument to learn from/with local activists and to collect testimonies.

## Some words about the European added value

Sustainability requires local and global answers. For the organizations, villages and regions involved in SMART it was very stimulating to be linked to other experiences in Europe. We learned a lot from the great variety of strategies that are used in partner countries to realize sustainable villages and to incorporate education within these strategies. Through the international exchange, especially the study visits and lectures all partners found concrete new ideas and/or methods they can introduce in their own work. The many learners that have been participating in SMART also experienced the value of European cooperation. This cooperation broadened their view to their own needs and wishes concerning sustainability and education. Some of the organizations and persons involved in SMART are even considering establishing further European contacts/projects in this area.

## ANNEXO:

### The project meetings

#### Azeitão (October 2011)

In this first meeting only coordinators participated. The meeting was dedicated to get familiar with the content of the programme and the methodology of the learning partnership. Together we went through all the project issues and decided to organise already mentioned thematic workshops. There was recognition that the project partners were all at different starting points and therefore the results and outcomes could be quite different for each partner.

We had the opportunity to know more about the Junta de Freguesia de São Lourenço – Azeitão and its Independent Movement Group of Citizens's board. We got an insight in the creativity and hard work of a motivated group of citizens who, balancing between local political parties, successfully shape new kinds of local democracy and citizenship. There was a round table discussion with local volunteers. And finally, we had some interesting study visits with accent on local economy, social cohesion and cultural heritage.

#### Norfolk (March 2012)

The focus of this meeting was 'How to start a process in the local community towards sustainable measures and villages?'. We visited South Green Enterprise Park in Mattishall, developed as part of a farm diversification strategy, and now acting as a training centre, conference facility, community venue, restaurant and business incubator. In this centre the seminar 'Smart Norfolk- Localism Sustainability and kick starting community activity' took place, with the participation of many community groups from the region. The event included a showcase of community movements in the area, like Transition Towns and Slow Food Aylsham.

Next day SMART was based in the Town of Reepham, one of the first winners of the Low Carbon Communities Challenge. The Green Team in this small rural town developed many sustainable activities, like car sharing, electric community bus, community allotments, solar and wind energy projects, etc. Children from the Eco Action team of the municipal primary school gave us an educational tour to show us all sustainable the measures the school had taken. In the afternoon we discussed with local professionals involved about how to (help) initiate community activities and develop insight in to local needs.

The SMART group was highly satisfied with this meeting that offered us so many good local initiatives. The formal and informal meeting with local activists was very valuable. Maybe the idea of making Skype-interviews with so-called 'community champions' was born here.

#### Oosterwolde (June 2012)

Topic of the NL meeting was Building Sustainable Networks. Local interest groups in Drenthe and Friesland received the group and gave a good insight in the possibilities and challenges they face during their efforts to achieve sustainable villages. The seminar 'Building Sustainable Villages' was meaningful to learn more about which aspects and players are involved in working towards sustainability. It was also an opportunity to exchange experiences with Dutch rural activists. The question that arose was how to involve disadvantaged groups in sustainable matters.

#### Radece (October 2012)

The meeting in Radece started with an overview of the current situation on adult education in Slovenia in relation to the problematic of the rural area. The contribution of the hundreds of Slovenian study circles as a connector and stimulator for rural development was stressed. The director of the correctional facility in Radece explained how this entity stimulates young inmates to develop themselves and play a positive role in their community after release. The afternoon was dedicated to study visits, many of them related to sustainable tourism: timber-rafting on the Sava river and examples of extended farming (e.g. chestnut products & carving, museum with traditional agricultural objects). The active community of Svibno with its primary school showed us how their children learn to value local traditions and cultural heritage.

Next day we visited Biomasa Plant Mozirje where we were informed about the significance of biomass for the rural area. The nearby Vrbovec Museum presented the heritage of the forestry and timber industry, both areas with a profound impact on the economical development of the region. In Solčavsko, European Destiny of Excellence, the local mayor explained how this small mountain village successfully profiled itself and generated funding for their community projects. In their actions they integrated villagers that generally are not very keen to participate. One of the 'tools' they used was the Study Circle. We saw

various examples of study circles that played a significant role in the rural community. The meeting in Slovenia demonstrated how to make good (sustainable and touristic) use of the richness of the nature, heritage and traditions in the rural area in order to give a socio-economic impulse to the region.

### Norfolk (February 2013)

This second SMART meeting in Norfolk was dedicated to the use of new methods and technologies with the aim to include as many people as possible in sustainable activities.

SMART participated in a Living Library. Community champions around the county acted as 'books' telling about issues as Social Enterprise, Environmental Projects, Good Neighbour Schemes, Community buildings, Renewable Energy, Engagement and Parish Council's. SMART delegates had one-to-one conversations of 20 minutes with several 'books'. There was a drop-in session to get familiar with the use of digital voting technology and whiteboards, both as engagement tools for communities.

Next day SMART joined a live web-stream activity undertaken by Norfolk RCC. The event was in 2 parts. Part 1: What is a sustainable SMART community, moving beyond just talking about the environment and looking also at other important areas. This included recorded Skype interviews with EU partners providing an international perspective. <http://youtu.be/O45suwx-EM0>.

Part 2: How to engage people in a SMART community and involve them as volunteers and participants. <http://youtu.be/vpaoXl4x60Q>. This live event was followed by SMART contacts in other countries. We concluded that it is a promising tool, worth to be developed more. Besides some technical challenges (e.g. the speed of the web), you the event must be attractive for interested external followers. During the meeting, a coordinator meeting was held about the outcomes of the learning partnership, while the rest of the group took part in community visits to Dereham.

### Iceland

Main issue of the final project meeting was the outcome and dissemination of SMART. In addition, good practices in West-Iceland were visited, like a farm in Hvalfjörður, where the owners gave a presentation about their Six Golden Rules to ecological and sustainable life. One of their key factors is having a good network with the neighbours and cooperating together to develop the area. They consider education for all ages as a fundamental factor to achieve their goals. Next stop was at the Agricultural University of Iceland who recently included environmental planning in their curriculum. This new study line is a good basis for further studies in landscape architecture, rural and urban planning and related fields. The group visited a teacher of the Agricultural University of Iceland. She gave the delegates a short class in colouring wool with products from Icelandic nature. Thereafter the group worked on the project outcomes. Next day SMART visited Lýsuhólsskóli, one of three schools in Snæfellsbær municipality. This community school has a very strong environmental policy and sustainability is integrated in the general curriculum. Parents are actively involved in the projects, so young and old learn a lot about sustainability by doing. After this inspiring visit the group went to the Town Hall of Stykkishólmur where a presentation was given about their eco tourist certification Earth Check and its significance for the inhabitants. There was a discussion with three mayors of the region about the main sustainable challenges they face and about the commitment and active engagement of the inhabitants in sustainable measures. After these visits the project coordinators continued their work on the project outcomes and dissemination.

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