

## SmartCommUnity Project

### D1.2.1 Smart Community in itself and in relation with other strategies and projects

#### The INTERREG Alpine Space SmartCommUnity project | APRIL 2025

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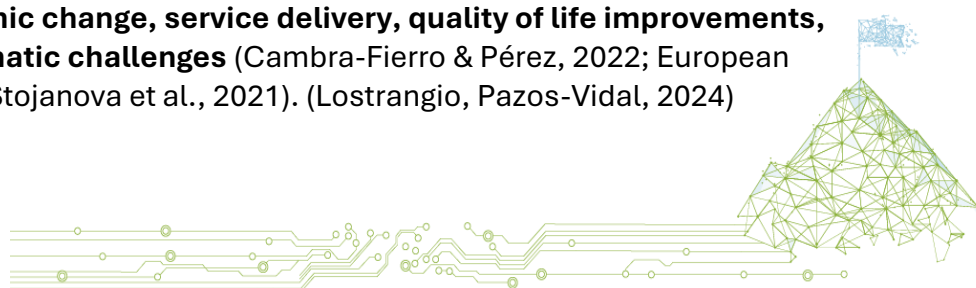
## Introduction

This report first defines the **concept of Smart Communities** and explores how a **shared understanding of this approach** has been developed within the framework of the **Interreg Alpine Space SmartCommUnity project (ASP0100041)**. It also outlines the **activities undertaken by various project partners to exchange with similar projects across the Alpine region**. The report concludes by reflecting on the **role and significance of Smart Communities in the smart transition of rural areas**.

## Definition of Smart Communities

Smart Communities are part of a broad spectrum of projects, programs, and initiatives operating at local, regional, national, and international levels. While the definition of Smart Communities varies, a widely referenced one comes from the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD, 2021) and the Smart Rural 21 project (Smart Rural 21, 2023), which states: **“Smart Rural Communities are territories and communities that leverage their territorial strengths and assets to meet local needs and enhance resilience and well-being.”** Although the concept of smart rural areas is closely related to the Smart City model, **a separate body of literature and working documents focusing specifically on smart rural communities is emerging** (Mishbah et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022). According to current research, **smart rural areas are defined by a holistic, human-centric, flexible, and multi-sectoral approach** (Zavratnik et al., 2018; Mukti et al., 2021).

In these areas, **community-driven solutions often take precedence over technological innovations**. These solutions are typically designed to tackle complex issues, such as **demographic change, service delivery, quality of life improvements, and environmental or climatic challenges** (Cambra-Fierro & Pérez, 2022; European Commission & E40, 2025; Stojanova et al., 2021). (Lostrangio, Pazos-Vidal, 2024)



The SmartCommunity partnership built upon these literature sources and, in a dedicated workshop held at the start of the project (February 12, 2023), led by Gianluca Lentini from Poliedra Milano, **developed three versions of the project's understanding of what constitutes a Smart Community. These versions were later refined in subsequent workshops with the SmartCommUnity test areas.**

### Short definition:

“Smart communities are those that make the lives of their citizens better, using information, communication technologies and data to provide new opportunities”.

### Long definition:

“Smart communities are communities of people, in mountain or rural areas, that are proud and aware of their identity, their territory, their craftsmanship, their products and their close-knit social fabric, and that want to become active players in determining their own future, owning and driving the changes that the future, and any digital transition, may entail. Smart communities are open to innovate, to learn and to inspire, and to work holistically towards smart and green rural and mountain areas, that are lively and lived, that aim to become carbon-neutral and that can be or become attractive to live and work for all age groups.”

### Compromise definition:

“Smart communities are communities of people, that want to become active players in owning and driving the changes that the future, and any digital transition, may entail. Smart communities are open to innovate, to learn and to inspire, and to work towards smart areas that make the lives of their citizens better.”

The project partnership **chose to develop three versions of the Smart Community definition to effectively address different target groups and contextual frameworks.** Each version was tailored to suit varying levels of detail and understanding, depending on the audience and setting. However, **in most cases, the more comprehensive, long-form definition was used**—such as during the workshop on Smart Community issues held as part of the Mediterranean Coast and Macro-



Regional Strategies Week 2025 in Izola, Slovenia (see figure below).



Fig.1 wordcloud for introducing the concept of Smart Communities during the Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week 2025 in Izola, Slovenia (P. Niederer SAB)

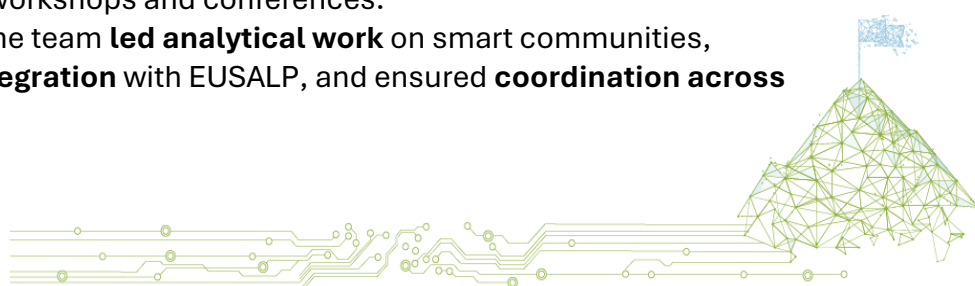
## Outreach and exchanges with other strategies and projects

The following section is structured according to **outreach and exchange activities** of different project partners with strategies and projects of similar scopes:

### University of Ljubljana (PP1, Slovenia)

The **University of Ljubljana (PP1)** played a leading and visible role in the SmartCommUnity project. It **launched the project** with a high-level kick-off meeting involving the Minister of Digital Transformation and presented the initiative in various national and international workshops and conferences.

Throughout RP1 and RP2, the team **led analytical work** on smart communities, **supported policy-level integration** with EUSALP, and ensured **coordination across**



**work packages**, particularly WPTAN and WPIT. As co-lead of the **Test Areas Network (WP2)**, University of Ljubljana coordinated “Lighthouse” and “Follower” sites, chaired monthly coordination meetings, and **delivered key outputs**. It also **co-organised major project meetings** (Valle d’Aosta, Lienz) and supported SmartAlps Network webinars and AG5 meetings.

**Dissemination** was extensive: two SmartCommUnity newsletters reached **184 municipalities** and **331 stakeholders**, while the project was **featured at major events** such as the Digital Alps Conference (Izola and Lienz), Synergy Days Barcelona, and the European University Institute conference. University of Ljubljana also contributed to **mid-term review preparations**, moderated sessions, and **aligned SmartCommUnity with macro-regional strategies**.

Finally, University of Ljubljana **coordinated reporting** on the expansion of SmartAlps and WPIT, and continued to **promote SmartCommUnity** at the 2025 Digital Alps Conference, engaging policy authorities and macro-regional stakeholders.

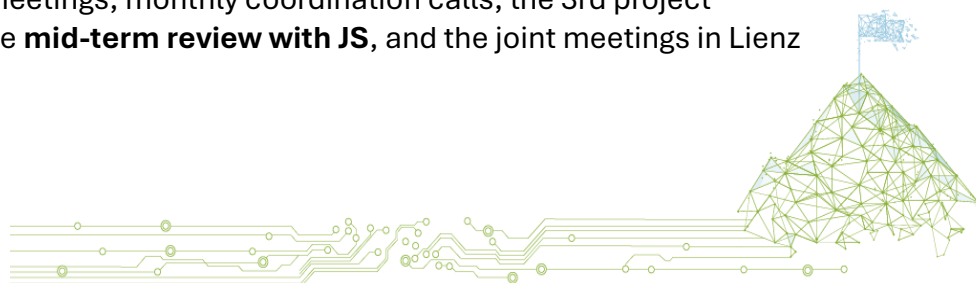
### **Poliedra Milano (PP2, Italy)**

Poliedra (PP2) has been a key actor in SmartCommUnity’s **policy, internationalisation and dissemination** work. It substantially supported **WPEU** by preparing and co-hosting **SmartAlps webinars**, reinforcing links with **EUSALP**, and facilitating **trans-national and inter-WP cooperation**, including the Inter-WP workshop in Willisau. It also contributed to **WPIT** and **WPTAN** by supporting test areas on stakeholder engagement and methodological aspects. A strong focus was placed on connecting SmartCommUnity with other **EU-funded initiatives** such as “More than a Village” and SMART ERA through dedicated exchanges and events, including an ad-hoc meeting in Aosta.

Poliedra ensured broad **outreach** by informing **Italian regional and local institutions**, universities, NGOs and interest groups, as well as **10 high schools** in the Italian Alps and youth representatives. It linked the project with the **Montagna 4.0** initiative, engaging **250+ students** in dialogue on smart and sustainable Alpine enterprises. Additionally, Poliedra **presented SmartCommUnity** in national and regional seminars and conferences, including the **RRN seminar**, the **EUSALP AG5 Digital Alps Conference**, and a **Horizon ERA** event, and maintained constant presence in internal project meetings, including the project meeting in Valence. It contributed to **scientific dissemination** through a **co-authored paper**, **workshops**, a **book proposal**, and to an upcoming **Springer volume** on Smart Villages.

### **ANCI Liguria (PP3, Italy)**

ANCI Liguria (PP3), with support from the University of Ljubljana, **initiated and coordinated communication activities**, including planning sessions and the preparation of communication materials. ANCI Liguria **actively participated** in SmartAlps webinars, AG5 meetings, monthly coordination calls, the 3rd project meeting in Valle d’Aosta, the **mid-term review with JS**, and the joint meetings in Lienz and Valence.



As the **responsible partner for its work package**, ANCI Liguria **improved and maintained the project website** by publishing news and outputs. It contributed to **dissemination** by promoting SmartAlps through social media, **organising a booth** for the Interreg Alpine Space 25th Anniversary event, and participating in the **4th SmartAlps webinar** on digital platforms. It also **supported visibility of the Digital Alps Conference** and **promoted the SmartAlps Network** among LTA and FTA municipalities within its territory.

#### **Standortagentur Tyrol (SAT, PP4, Austria)**

**SAT (PP4)**, the Planning Association of Lienzer Talboden, engaged its **network of 15 municipalities** and played a **central role** in advancing the SmartCommUnity activities in its test region. A major milestone was **hosting the 4th partner meeting** in the Lienzer Talboden area, where infrastructure progress, sensor data usage and next steps were presented, helping to refine and disseminate the Smart Community concept. SAT also **fostered national and regional alignment** by connecting leading and follower test areas and **supporting Regional Stakeholder Groups** to strengthen coordinated action across local actors and networks.

On the **international level**, SAT **participated** in the partner meeting in Valence and **contributed to the Digital Alps Conference** in Lienz, showcasing pilot outcomes and initiating dialogue with stakeholders across the Alpine Space. These engagements **increased project visibility** and **supported convergence** of regional networks into the EUSALP AG5 SmartAlps framework.

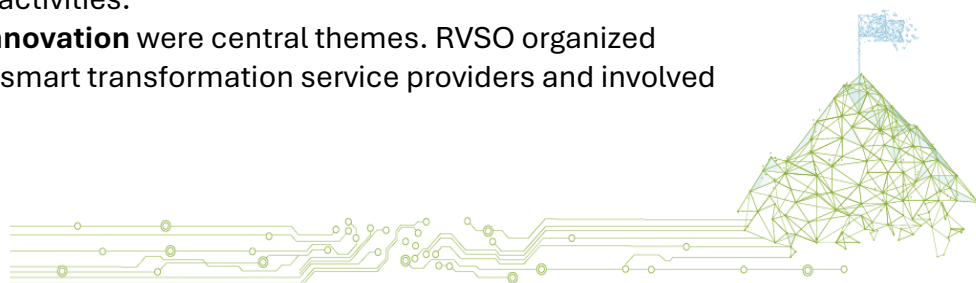
In parallel, SAT **ran interviews and workshops** with local decision makers and providers to **co-create a user-centred requirements catalogue** for the regional data platform, **reinforcing municipal cooperation** and **building shared understanding** of smart governance tools.

#### **Regionalverband Südlicher Oberrhein (RVSO, PP5, Germany)**

RVSO (PP5) implemented a **comprehensive engagement strategy** to involve key regional stakeholders in the SmartCommUnity project. Local public authorities, including mayors, municipal councils, and administrative staff, were actively integrated into the process through direct consultations and participation in the Regional Stakeholder Group. These authorities played a crucial role in aligning project ideas with local priorities and ensuring feasibility at the municipal level.

**Educational institutions** were engaged early, with school representatives invited to workshops during the first reporting period, becoming part of the stakeholder network. Similarly, SMEs were invited to join the **Regional Stakeholder Group**, with invitations serving as a channel to disseminate project objectives and foster collaboration. To ensure broad citizen participation, approximately 200 residents per functional test area were invited to on-site workshops, complemented by continuous outreach through events, media, and project activities.

**Knowledge transfer and innovation** were central themes. RVSO organized consultancy meetings with smart transformation service providers and involved



digitalization experts from research projects to build awareness and share expertise. **A significant milestone was the launch of the “Innovation Lab” co-working space in Elzach**, which included identifying key actors, securing a suitable property, and preparing tenders for feasibility analysis and operator concepts. Additionally, a series of digital education events for adults—particularly older citizens—was planned, with moderation services tendered in the second reporting period.

Cross-border and interregional cooperation was strengthened through exchanges with **municipalities in Austria and participation in EU-level events, such as the bilingual Euro-Institut session on macro-regional strategies**. Political anchoring was ensured by presenting SmartCommUnity to the Regional Assembly of the Regionalverband Südlicher Oberrhein and maintaining close contact with the **Gemeindetag Baden-Württemberg** to elevate project outcomes to the political level. RVSO also participated in key conferences and meetings, including PSC sessions in Aosta and Valence and the **EUSALP AG5 Digital Alps Conference**.

Finally, tourism associations were engaged as multipliers to support the dissemination of project ideas and promote implementation initiatives. These combined efforts ensured that SmartCommUnity activities were **well-integrated across governance, business, education, and civil society, fostering a collaborative approach to regional digital transformation**.

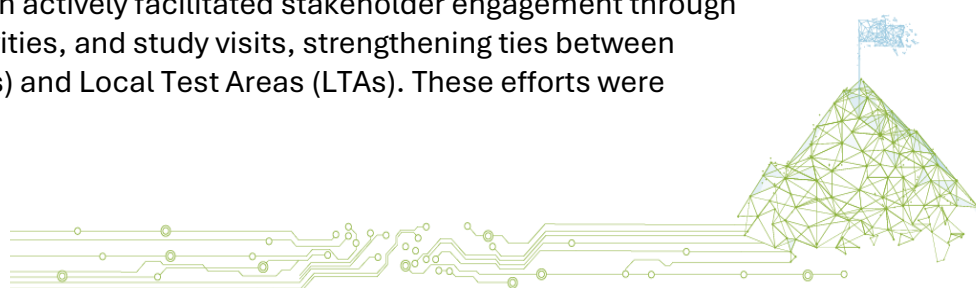
#### **Innovation Technology Cluster Murska Sobota (ITC, PP6, Slovenia)**

ITC (PP6) has established a strong **multi-level collaboration framework to drive smart community development and digital transformation in the Pomurje region**.

At the local level, the Murska Sobota Municipality was engaged as an observer, ensuring active involvement of local actors. Strategic partnerships were formed with the **Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Food and the Ministry for Digital Transformation, aligning project activities with national priorities**. ITC also worked closely with the Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia, the Pomurje Chamber of Commerce, and relevant SMEs within the agricultural and emerging bioeconomy clusters.

Academic and research collaboration played a key role, with **ITC partnering with the University of Maribor’s Faculties of Electrical Engineering and Civil Engineering, Transportation Engineering, and Architecture** to develop technological solutions. Lecturers and students from the School of Economics, Tourism, and Agriculture were engaged through study visits, fostering knowledge exchange and future-oriented skills development. Additionally, **ITC collaborated with the Murska Sobota Health and Development Center and local food banks to address regional socio-economic needs**.

On the operational level, **ITC worked closely with more than 70 farmers and rural SMEs within the Green Point test area**, promoting innovation and sustainability in agriculture. The organization actively facilitated stakeholder engagement through workshops, Living Lab activities, and study visits, strengthening ties between Functional Test Areas (FTAs) and Local Test Areas (LTAs). These efforts were



complemented by the promotion of the SmartAlps network, which ITC successfully introduced to regional stakeholders, resulting in the inclusion of its LTA as a network member.

**ITC's involvement extended to major strategic and international events. The organization co-organized and moderated sessions at the EUSALP AG5 Digital Alps Conference (DAC) in September 2023**, focusing on the potential of data and AI in the Alpine Space. ITC also participated in EUSALP AG5 meetings, contributing to policy alignment and the development of a shared vision for smart communities. Through these engagements, ITC promoted best practices, supported policy development for smart transitions, and facilitated the integration of regional networks into the AG5 SmartAlps framework.

Further, ITC showcased its Living Lab and innovative solutions at regional and international conferences, including a major agricultural event in Pomurje and an international bioeconomy conference in Brussels. These activities reinforced ITC's role as a key facilitator of knowledge exchange, innovation, and sustainable development, ensuring that LTAs and FTAs benefit from enhanced connectivity, shared resources, and coordinated smart transition strategies.

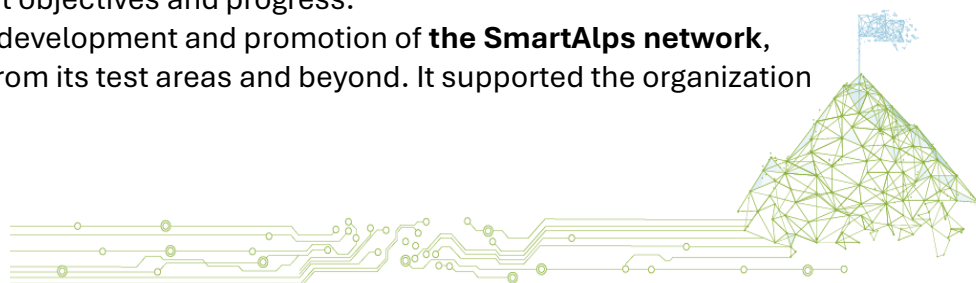
#### **ADRETS (PP7, France)**

ADRETS (PP7) played a central role in **stakeholder engagement, dissemination, and strategic alignment for the SmartCommUnity project**. At the local level, ADRETS organized multiple meetings with representatives of LTAs and FTAs, including mayors, municipal officers, and inter-municipal associations, to clarify priorities, explain methodologies, and validate planned activities. These efforts ensured strong local ownership and effective implementation of project actions.

At the regional and national levels, ADRETS engaged with **key institutions such as the mountain departments of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes and Sud-Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, CEREMA, and the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion (ANCT)**. It also maintained regular communication with the **Alps Massif Committee, the political body steering public policies in the French Alps**. ADRETS actively contributed to policy discussions, including presenting the project during the **development of the Digital Strategy 2024–2028 for the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region**.

**Dissemination and advocacy were major components of ADRETS' work**. The organization promoted the SmartCommUnity concept through national and European events, such as the **Digital Meetings of Sud-Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Ruralitic, the Forum of French Connected Territories, and the European Week of Regions and Cities**. It also participated in thematic webinars, including those organized by **UNADEL and Alpine Town of the Year, and co-organized SmartAlps webinars on coworking spaces and other topics**. ADRETS leveraged its communication channels—social media, newsletters, and its website—to inform stakeholders and the general public about project objectives and progress.

ADRETS contributed to the development and promotion of **the SmartAlps network**, encouraging participation from its test areas and beyond. It supported the organization



of study visits, including the European visit in Valence, which facilitated exchanges on good practices and megatrends. The organization also showcased innovative approaches during events such as the Digital Alps Conference and macro-regional strategy sessions organized by Euro-Institut.

Through these activities, ADRETS strengthened regional cooperation, fostered knowledge sharing, and ensured alignment with national and European strategies. Its efforts contributed significantly to building a shared understanding of smart communities and promoting sustainable, inclusive digital transitions across Alpine territories.

### **Regione Autonoma Valle d'Aosta (RAVA, PP8, Italy)**

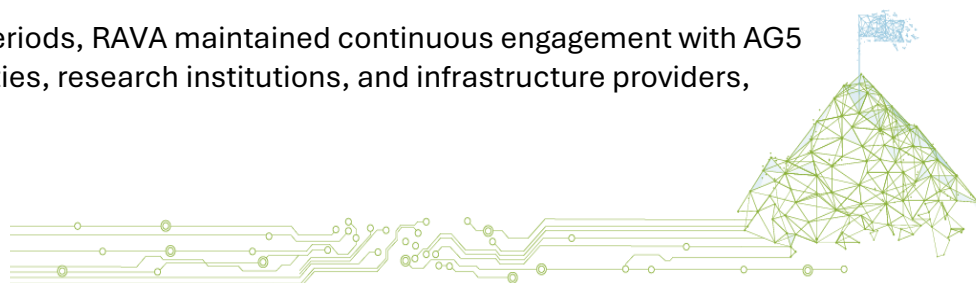
RAVA (PP8), as leader of EUSALP Action Group 5 (AG5) and co-leader of Work Package WPEU played a leading role in **integrating the SmartCommUnity approach into the EUSALP framework and promoting digital transformation across Alpine regions**. At the **local level**, **RAVA engaged 13 mayors from Val di Sole through a webinar on digital transformation** and presented the SmartCommUnity project to mayors of test areas during Regional Stakeholder Group (RSG) and WG5 meetings. These sessions facilitated dialogue on project objectives and implementation strategies.

At the **macro-regional level**, **RAVA ensured strong policy alignment by co-leading Work Package WPEU with SAB (PP9), focusing on EUSALP uptake and integration**. RAVA organized and moderated the flagship **Digital Alps Conference (DAC) 2023** in Courmayeur, Italy, which served as the main communication event for EUSALP Action Group 5 (AG5). The DAC featured thematic workshops, participation from the EUSALP Youth Council, and contributions from SmartCommUnity partners. **RAVA also co-organized the Lab on Civic Engagement for a Smart Regional Transition during the EU Week of Regions and Cities in Brussels, reinforcing the project's visibility at the European level**.

RAVA actively promoted the **SmartAlps** network through two thematic webinars, RSG meetings, and dissemination events such as Futuralps – Montagna 4.0 and the Annual Forum. These efforts included engaging youth, SMEs, and academic institutions, such as the University of Valle d'Aosta and Zurich University of the Arts, in discussions on smart communities and digital innovation. The organization also integrated the **SmartCommUnity approach into EUSALP's Cross-Cutting Priority on "Promoting the Digitalization of the Alps," ensuring its inclusion in strategic policy frameworks**.

**To strengthen transnational cooperation, RAVA organized the project's first study visit in Valle d'Aosta**, which connected SmartCommUnity with related initiatives like More than a Village and SMART ERA. The visit included workshops on evaluation methodologies, integration with SmartAlps, and exchanges with 200 young participants from the Montagna 4.0 project, fostering intergenerational dialogue on smart mountain development.

Throughout the reporting periods, RAVA maintained continuous engagement with AG5 members, national authorities, research institutions, and infrastructure providers,



presenting project updates during AG5 meetings and other high-level events. These activities **positioned RAVA as a key facilitator of policy integration, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge sharing, driving forward the SmartCommUnity vision of sustainable and inclusive digital transformation in Alpine territories.**

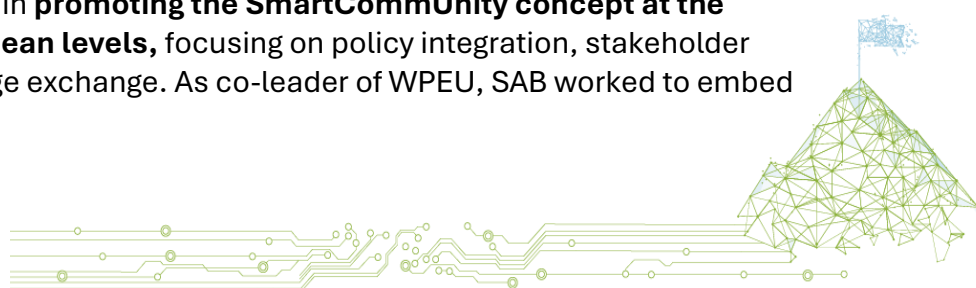
During the **21st and 22nd AG5 meetings**, RAVA presented project updates and **facilitated discussions on how SmartCommUnity contributes to the “Smart and Sustainable Communities” pillar of EUSALP Cross-Cutting Priority 1 (CCP1) “Promoting the Digitalisation of the Alps.”** These discussions focused on disseminating good practices and policy recommendations from the project and preparing contributions for the **Digital Alps Conferences (DAC) 2024 and 2025.** As a flagship activity, RAVA organized **Digital Alps Conference 2024 in Izola (Slovenia)** as part of the Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week under the Slovenian EUSALP Presidency. The event featured SmartCommUnity partners as speakers and moderators, participation from the EUSALP Youth Council, and sessions highlighting synergies with related projects such as SMART ERA. The conference included a workshop on digital transformation in marginal territories, presenting SmartCommUnity and the SmartAlps network as best practices. **Similarly, DAC 2025 was organized in Lienz (Austria) under the Austrian and Liechtenstein EUSALP Presidency, reinforcing SmartCommUnity’s role in shaping digital strategies for Alpine regions.** Both conferences attracted a wide range of stakeholders, including ministries, universities, enterprises, EU institutions, and youth representatives. RAVA also organized thematic workshops, such as “Opportunities for Digital Transformation of Rural Territories: The Role of Macro-Regional Strategies,” and ensured continuous engagement through monthly WPEU coordination meetings with partners (UL, Poliedra, eNU) and regular reporting to the Project Management Board. Additionally, RAVA contributed to WPIT by supporting civic engagement initiatives and expanding the Smart Villages platform.

To strengthen local and transnational cooperation, RAVA organized a **study visit in Lienz**, supported by external expert « Skopja », which included workshops with students and local stakeholders. These sessions aimed to foster knowledge exchange, evaluate actions in test areas, and explore integration with SmartAlps and other digital transformation initiatives.

Communication and dissemination remained a priority. RAVA shared project updates through newsletters, presented SmartCommUnity at major events such as the EU Week of Regions and Cities, and promoted the SmartAlps network to expand participation. The outcomes of DAC 2024 and DAC 2025 will feed into EUSALP CCP1, consolidating SmartCommUnity’s contribution to building smart and sustainable Alpine communities.

### **SAB (PP9, Switzerland)**

SAB (PP9) played a key role in **promoting the SmartCommUnity concept at the macro-regional and European levels**, focusing on policy integration, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge exchange. As co-leader of WPEU, SAB worked to embed



smart community approaches into the **four EU macro-regional strategies**, through **targeted lobbying and strategic meetings with DG REGIO, DG AGRI, and Members of the European Parliament**.

A major achievement was the organization of the **Policy Lab “Civic Engagement for a Smart Regional Transition” during the European Week of Regions and Cities (EWRC)** on 10 October 2023, co-hosted with ARPA Consulting. This event featured contributions from ADRETS and other partners, showcasing local stakeholder engagement practices. SAB also participated as a panelist in the Lombardy Region workshop and held bilateral meetings to enhance the visibility of smart communities. **SAB strengthened the SmartAlps network by organizing four thematic webinars:**

- **Smart Villages (June 2023)**
- **Coworking Spaces (October 2023)**
- **Mobility (March 2024)**
- **Digital Communication Platforms for Municipalities (November 2024)**
- **LoRaWan for municipalities (June 2025) (see Fig. 2)**

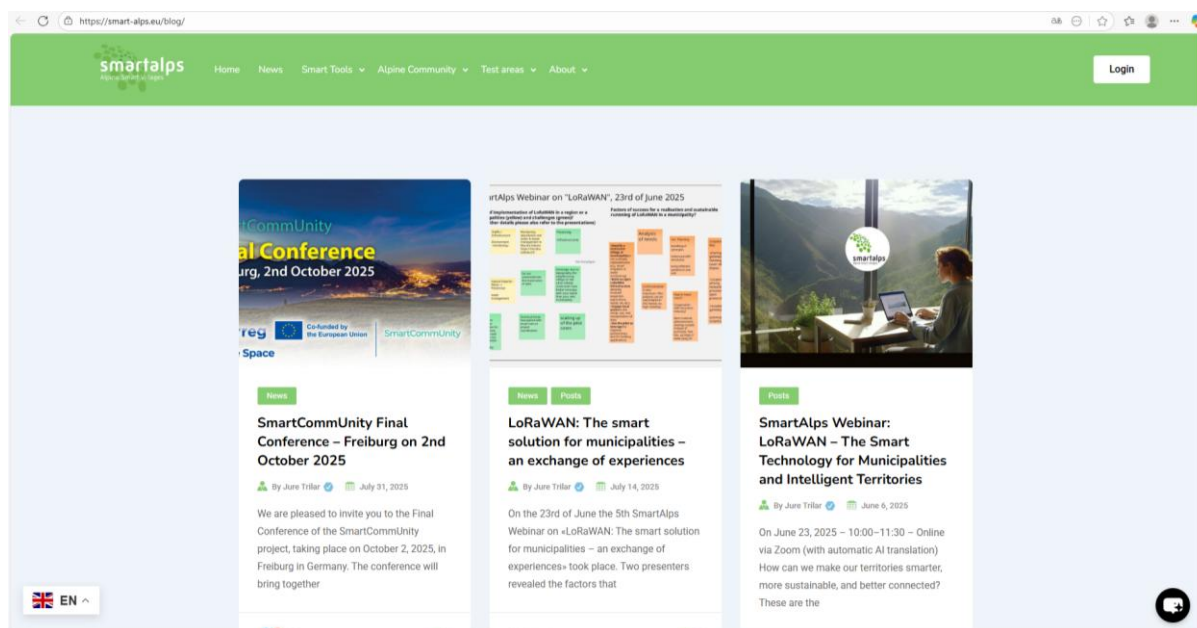
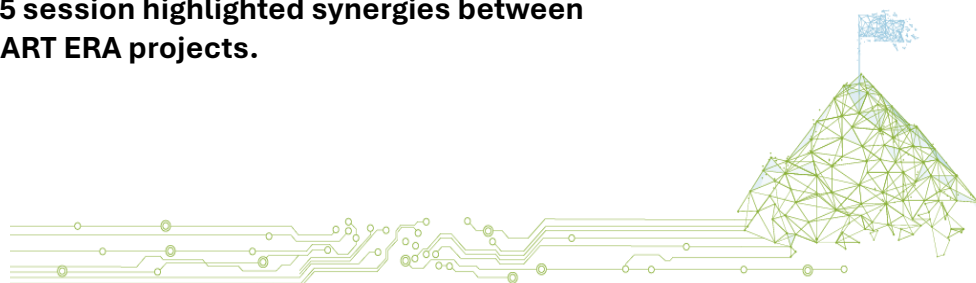


Fig.2 The results of the webinar are depicted on the <https://smart-alps.eu/> website (P. Niederer SAB)

These webinars attracted diverse participants and facilitated knowledge sharing across Alpine regions. SAB also **promoted the SmartAlps network at major events, including the Digital Alps Conferences (DAC) in 2023 and 2025**, where SAB staff moderated workshops on digital transformation and cross-macroregional perspectives. **The DAC 2025 session highlighted synergies between SmartCommUnity and SMART ERA projects.**

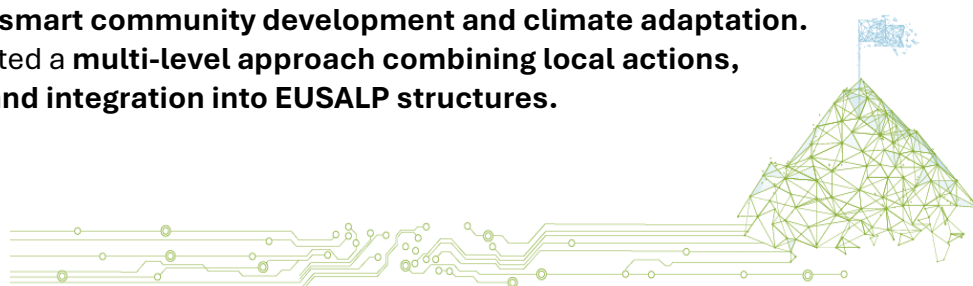


To foster inter-macroregional cooperation, SAB convened representatives of all four EU macro-regional strategies (EUSALP, EUSDR, EUSAIR, EUSBSR) in joint meetings and videoconferences, developing a comparative analysis on the implementation of smart community approaches. This analysis, coordinated by SAB, aims to identify best practices and policy recommendations for broader adoption. SAB actively contributed to project dissemination by presenting SmartCommUnity and SmartAlps at numerous events, including the **Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week (Izola, 2024 and Izola 2025)**, the **RURACTIVE Forum (February 2025)**, and the **Horizon SMART ERA partner meetings in Mallorca and Milan**. It also engaged in consultations for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to integrate smart community priorities into future EU funding programs. Through these activities, SAB positioned itself as **a central facilitator of policy dialogue, network expansion, and strategic alignment, ensuring that SmartCommUnity's outcomes influence both regional development and EU-level digitalization strategies.**



Fig.3 The SmartCommUnity project has been presented together with the SMART ERA project in a workshop during the DigitalAlps conference 2025 <https://smartera-project.eu/smart-era-at-the-digital-alps-conference/> (P. Niederer SAB)

**Energie- und Umweltagentur Niederösterreich (eNu, PP10, Austria)**  
eNu (PP10) focused on **engaging municipalities, regional managers, and citizens in Lower Austria to promote smart community development and climate adaptation**. The organization implemented a **multi-level approach combining local actions, stakeholder networking, and integration into EUSALP structures**.



**At the local level, eNu organized numerous activities in its Functional and Local Test Areas (FTAs and LTAs).** These included the “**Climate & Me**” exhibition, displayed in vacant shop windows and public spaces across several regions (KLAR! Göllersbach, KLAR! Südliches Weinviertel, KLAR! Waldviertel Nord), often involving local public authorities. eNu also held multiple project meetings with regional managers and NGOs, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange. Additionally, it delivered keynote speeches at events such as “**Europe in My Region**” in Krems, **addressing strategies for overcoming the climate crisis and advancing sustainable energy transitions, with contributions from the EUSALP Youth Council.**

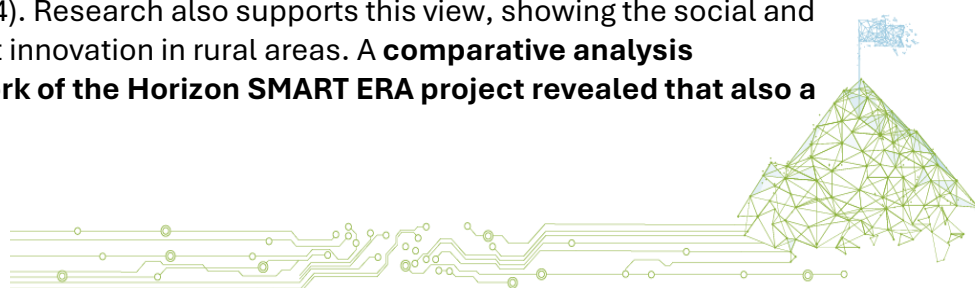
To strengthen regional cooperation, eNu developed a **climate adaptation best practice platform, linking municipalities and test areas and providing development opportunities for FTAs.** Regular engagement with local stakeholders was maintained through newsletters, municipal lectures, and direct support for KLAR! managers. At the macro-regional level, **eNu actively integrated SmartCommUnity into EUSALP Action Group 9 (AG9), presenting project updates during AG9 meetings and contributing to the group’s work plan.** The organization ensured continuous exchange of experiences and insights between the project and AG9, positioning SmartCommUnity as a key contributor to EUSALP’s objectives on climate adaptation and sustainability.

eNu also participated in major international events, including the **EUSALP 9th Annual Forum in Brdo pri Kranj**, where it showcased the “Climate & Me” exhibition and SmartCommUnity project to stakeholders from seven Alpine countries. Furthermore, eNu presented the project to **the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK)**, reinforcing its relevance for national and regional policy frameworks.

Through these activities, eNu successfully combined local implementation with strategic policy integration, promoting climate resilience, digital innovation, and sustainable development across Alpine territories.

## Conclusions

Smart Communities are **at the heart of transformative changes. This approach gives local communities the power to manage their area’s development and create solutions that fit local challenges. It makes sure that innovations—whether technological, social, organizational, or economic—are useful and meet real user needs.** For digital solutions, involving local community leaders and facilitators during development helps ensure these tools are **user-focused, not just technology-driven.** Across Europe, there is growing agreement among policymakers and civil society on the need to support Smart Communities and rural innovation. Making rural areas “smart” is seen as **a positive and necessary step to revitalize these regions by using local strengths** (Lostrangio, 2024). Research also supports this view, showing the social and economic benefits of smart innovation in rural areas. A **comparative analysis performed in the framework of the Horizon SMART ERA project revealed that also a**



**large majority of interviewed representatives of the four EU-macro-regional strategies are considering Smart Communities approaches as decisive** for rural development and the smart transition of rural areas (Kokkonen et al., 2024). **All macro-regional strategies integrated Smart Villages/ smart communities approaches in their action plans.**

The European Commission acknowledges that rural areas are **key actors in Europe's green and digital transitions**, contributing significantly to a wide range of EU objectives (EC, 2021). In particular, their role in strategic sectors such as the bio and circular economy, renewable energy, and sustainable resource management is well recognized (EC, 2021). This demonstrates the essential contribution of rural territories and their communities to the EU's 2024–2029 **political priorities on competitiveness and innovation.** (Lostrangio, Pazos-Vidal, 2024)

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