FACTSHEET: ENHANCING DIGITALISATION IN THE ALPINE REGION

Alpine initiatives and the European policy landscape

Smart Villages. Source: EU CAP Network

Digitalisation across the Alpine region continues to advance, yet significant disparities persist. Many remote and sparsely populated Alpine areas still face poor connectivity and high infrastructure costs, which slow the deployment of broadband and other digital services. According to the European Commission's Digital Decade report, only 64% of EU households currently have access to very high-capacity networks, underlining the urgency of improving rural broadband. The EU's Broadband Competence Offices highlight that high-speed internet access can transform rural communities by enabling telehealth, remote education, and precision agriculture. However, digital skills remain uneven: only 48% of rural adults have basic digital skills, compared to 62% in urban areas, limiting the uptake of digital services and tools. To address these gaps, EU programmes such as the Digital Europe Programme and the Common Agricultural Policy 2023–2027 provide funding for infrastructure, skills development, and digital innovation.

The Smart Villages concept

The Smart Villages concept is a policy-driven response to the growing gap between urban and rural development in Europe. Introduced in the 2017 EU Action for Smart Villages and reinforced in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023–2027, the initiative encourages rural communities to leverage digital technologies, local assets, and collaborative governance to address key challenges. A Smart Village is not defined by size or technology alone, but by its approach: inclusive, participatory, and innovation-oriented. It focuses on improving access to services, diversifying the rural economy, promoting sustainable energy, and fostering social innovation.

In the Alpine region, where geographic isolation, demographic decline, and climate pressures intersect, the Smart Villages model holds particular relevance. These mountain areas often struggle with access to healthcare, education, mobility, and high-speed internet. At the same time, they possess strong community ties, rich cultural heritage, and environmental resources—key foundations for Smart Village initiatives.

Several Alpine communities have already demonstrated what this concept can achieve. In Poschiavo, Switzerland, the entire valley is transitioning to a 100% organic economy, combining sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and local food systems to support ecological and economic resilience A pilot micro-grid in Vercors (French Alps) produces enough local renewable energy to power ~38 households, reducing blackout risks and stabilizing prices.

These examples show that when digitalisation is paired with community-led planning and smart investment, even small Alpine villages can thrive. The Smart Villages approach aligns well with the EU's long-term vision for rural areas and offers a scalable model for sustainable rural development in mountainous regions.

Enhancing digitalisation in the Alps

Digitalisation is a cross-cutting priority in the **EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP)**, supporting innovation, connectivity, and resilience across borders. It features prominently in **Action Group 1 (Research & Innovation)** and **Action Group 5 (Connectivity & Accessibility)**, where efforts focus on improving broadband coverage, fostering smart services in remote areas, and promoting digital transformation in SMEs. Action Group 3 (Labour Market, Education & Training) addresses the digital skills gap, while digital tools also support environmental monitoring under Action Group 7. EUSALP's cross-cutting focus links digitalisation to sustainability, governance, and territorial cohesion, emphasizing how technology can support balanced regional development.

In parallel, the **Interreg Alpine Space Programme** (2021–2027) explicitly promotes digitalisation as a driver of sustainable innovation and territorial cooperation. The programme funds pilot actions that bring digital solutions into practical use, from smart mobility and local e-governance to digital infrastructure in isolated Alpine communities.

The main key priorities tackled are:

- Build transnational digital communities to connect and empower rural and mountainous areas.
- Develop interactive digital tools such as civic tech, gamification, and matchmaking platforms to improve engagement and service delivery.

- Use digital solutions to improve work-life balance, including telehealth, remote work, and hybrid welfare services.
- Enhance mobility and accessibility through integrated, flexible, and digitally supported transport systems.
- Facilitate the transfer of health and care innovations by creating networks that support the adoption of advanced digital technologies.

Interreg Alpine Space projects

SmartCommUnity is focused on driving digital transformation in rural and mountainous areas. The project targets gaps in digital infrastructure, public services, and digital skills that contribute to depopulation and economic decline. In cooperation with EUSALP Action Groups 5 (Connectivity & Accessibility) and 9 (Energy Efficiency), it empowers local communities through capacity building, promotion of existing digital tools, and the development of new, interactive platforms such as civic tech and gamification. Using a "Lighthouse and Follower" model, test areas co-create smart solutions and share them across regions. The goal: build a digitally connected, socially resilient, and economically vibrant Alpine rural community.

APOLLO aims to stem rural depopulation by enhancing worker well-being and work–life balance through digital territorial welfare. The project supports remote working, telehealth, and e-services—tools that became vital during the pandemic—and adapts them to demographic challenges faced by small Alpine communities Aligned with EUSALP Action Groups 3 and 5, APOLLO builds a territorial network of pilot regions to co-design capacity-building initiatives, create a "GearingUP" toolkit for public–private welfare services, and develop regional policy recommendations. Running until August 2027, the project intends to leave a sustainable legacy via a stakeholder network and manifold digital infrastructure enhancements

DEGREE4ALPS addresses the mobility challenges in Alpine rural and urban areas caused by scattered settlements, low population density, and limited public transport options. The project aims to improve accessibility—especially for vulnerable groups—by integrating traditional transport with flexible, shared, and informal mobility services. It combines digital tools and social innovation, encouraging community participation in co-designing local mobility solutions.

HACK-IT-NET focuses on improving access to cutting-edge health and care innovations across the Alpine region. While technologies like machine learning and remote diagnostics already exist, many local health systems struggle to adopt them due to resource constraints and operational barriers. The project establishes a transnational innovation transfer network to bridge this gap, ensuring that best practices and tools are shared and adapted to local contexts. By aligning with digital and green transitions,

EUSALP EU STRATEGY FOR THE ALPINE REGION
www.alpine-region.eu