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CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE MOBILITY IN RURAL AREAS: THE SMARTA PROJECT

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Short Description

The presentation discusses the key findings from the SMARTA Project, highlighting the need for a new vision of rural mobility from different aspects, including, among the others, institutional, regulatory and financial framework, organization and key responsibilities on rural transport, and integration of shared mobility services and related policies.

Main part

The challenges in rural areas around Europe are different in one sense, depending mainly on the geographical characteristics of the areas, but are also based on common problems. Depopulation, social exclusion, unmet needs in terms of healthcare services and transport provision, high unemployment rates are only some of the several issues faced by people living in remote and rural areas. In addition, the low provision of public transport services often means a high level of car dependency and more difficulties in accessing goods and services located in urban centres.

SMARTA-Smart Rural Transport Area project is a direct initiative of the European Parliament funded by the European Transport General Direction (DG-MOVE), which explores ways to ensure sustainable mobility and efficient public transport services across different European rural areas. The particular focus of SMARTA is shared mobility that connects rural areas with the public transport network and hubs in order to allow people to benefit from improved access both to the extensive public transport network and to the services at local hubs.

During 2018 and 2019, SMARTA has profiled for each of the EU-28 (plus selected other countries) the framework (institutional, organisational, regulatory, financial, etc.) within which shared mobility services in rural areas sits and related policies. It has produced a set of Insight Papers (IPs) that are available on the SMARTA website. Based on these IPs, the Consortium focused on the characteristics of the frameworks, and in particular where and how they vary across Europe.

In parallel, the Consortium made a comprehensive overview of Good Practices in rural shared mobility in Europe and beyond. Good Practice covers a very wide range of aspects, including such things as the mobility solutions themselves, how they may be targeted to specific/vulnerable user groups or societal/community goals, operational practice, intermodal coordination, use of established and/or innovative technologies, new business models, governance models and engagement with the community, strategies for developing and increasing ridership, customer relationships.

The presentation will highlight the key findings from these two strands of activities with a twofold purpose. From one side, to discuss the current situation at the policy layer in each of the EU Member States, highlighting that it is time to rethink rural mobility; from the other to illustrates key findings, lessons learnt and transferability issues of a wide range of Good Practices in rural shared mobility from around Europe and beyond.

What is new?

The SMARTA project is focused on rural mobility and, in particular, on rural shared mobility. We can observe the many programs, projects developed and great outcomes achieved over the last 20 years for urban mobility, but nothing similar happened to European rural areas. The presentations set out a factual mapping of the current situation on mobility frameworks in Europe, which had not been yet done before. Moreover, it shows that despite rural mobility issues, there are cases where good transport services are

currently operating, including community-based solutions, shared taxis, carpooling and other forms of shared mobility.

What is transferable to other cities and regions?

Good practice examples inspire mobility stakeholders and avoid reinventing the wheel. Rural communities have limited resources which should not be wasted on developing from scratch what they could easily learn from others taking into account the context peculiarities. Very importantly, sharing of the results from successful initiatives can be the key to overcoming scepticism, gaining political backing and unlocking funding. The presentation aims to be an inspiration for authorities, mobility and public transport operators, local administrations and other relevant stakeholders that would like to understand the possible transport solutions for improving rural mobility.

What are outcomes and conclusions?

In most of the EU, there is a lack of explicit policy on rural mobility that combines a vision with obligations on mobility services provision, specified targets/objectives, assignment of responsibility or the role that local actors can play. The efforts on the promotion of sustainable mobility for urban and metropolitan areas have not been matched by any such effort for rural mobility, although more than a quarter of Europe's population lives in rural areas. Strong efforts should be spent from stakeholders, at different level, for improving shared mobility and reduce the high level of car-dependency that currently affects rural people.

Who are the main target groups?

SMARTA aims to address three different target groups: i) Practitioners (e.g. PT operators, mobility service managers) on business cases, operational aspects, technical aspects, optimisation aspects; ii) Local, regional authorities, on which services help to make rural areas more accessible and to sustain or restore their liveability, findings to convince local and regional authorities on the importance, how do we develop a context/support conditions to make services feasible and working; iii) National and EU Authorities, on which aspects do they have to focus, how can they push the implementation of efficient that make the difference.

And what now? - what will change? - what is the relevance for the future?

The transport sector is subject to lot of uncertainties at the moment, in terms of mobility behaviours, transport offer and demand, and overall transportation system. On the demand side, in several countries the National Governments are prohibiting movement in public places except for justifiable work reasons (commuting, public services and commercial transport is allowed), basic necessities (i.e., food shopping), and health emergencies. On the offer side, public transportation including airlines, trains, and buses continue to operate, but with reduced frequency.

What about mobility in rural areas? Mobility is one of the vital enablers of any community, especially of rural communities where many essential things are located some distance away. Now people are encouraged, or in some cases obliged, to stay home as much as possible: work from home, study from home and avoid all unnecessary interactions and events. People are obliged to avoid proximity to each other, sensitised to view themselves and others as potential sources of disease. This is an important aspect, but there is more. In different countries, rural transport services are not being restored due to lack of resources, personnel and because vehicles are used in the high demand routes in urban areas. Shared mobility schemes are not operated due to people unwillingness to share space (feeling of insecurity and social distances problem). Issues such these are the other side of the coin. The low transport offer that has always characterized European rural areas could become even lower due to COVID-19 crisis.

SMARTA aims to record the experience of rural shared mobility during and after the COVID-19 restrictions, working with a network of more than ten sites in different European countries. The purpose is to (i) track the extent to which mobility services are restored after the crisis; (ii) identify any new challenges emerging; and (iii) see what lessons can be learned in case mobility restrictions need to be applied again

at some future point.

As the months progress, stakeholder opinion will be solicited on whether the situation will return to normal or whether there will be some fundamental change to the provision or funding of rural shared mobility, or the willingness of people to share mobility services as before. Particular attention will be paid to potential impacts on elders, vulnerable people and those at risk of social exclusion, who have always been a key target of rural mobility services.

In a scenario where people are obliged to avoid proximity to each other, sensitised to view themselves and others as potential sources of disease, the SMARTA project aims to give a reliable contribution to questions such as: What are the impacts of these restriction measures for rural area? How will rural people respond once that the situation will, hopefully, start to be solved? What will be the attitude of people toward shared mobility? Will people be willing to share their vehicle?

Link to the project

ruralsharedmobility.eu/