

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS TO COPE WITH AGEING IN RURAL EUROPE

EVENT REPORT

THE ROLE OF THE SILVER ECONOMY

21 April 2021
Online

SILVER SMEs
Interreg Europe




SILVER SMEs held its online mid-term conference on "[Challenges and solutions to cope with ageing in rural Europe: the role of the Silver Economy](#)" on 21st April 2021. The event discussed demographic changes in rural territories and showcased inspiring initiatives collected from all over Europe. By giving the floor to European and regional policymakers, SILVER SMEs conference also explored how rural and mountainous areas can cope with ageing through the development of the Silver Economy.

Session 1 - Context: challenges and specificities of ageing in rural Europe

The conference was opened by Mr **Manuel Rando López**, President of the Provincial Government of Teruel, Lead Partner of SILVER SMEs. *"Many municipalities in the Province of Teruel count less than 300 people and we have a high share of older adults in our population"* stressed Mr Rando López *"and well-being is essential for us, in particular as the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the issues occurring in rural nursing homes"*.



Based on the interviews carried out at the beginning of the SILVER SMEs project, Mr Rando López pointed out that 90% of interviewees in the Province of Teruel (Spain) called for more investments in the Silver Economy sector to develop more products and raise awareness among businesses. *"The Silver Economy is a great solution for our territory, our older adults and our villages and we believe our SMEs should take this new opportunity"* he concluded.



At European level, these issues are placed in the hands of Ms **Dubravka Šuica**, European Commission's Vice-President and EU Commissioner for Democracy and Demography. As special guest at the conference, Dubravka Šuica reaffirmed the urgent need for rural Europe to find solutions to cope with ageing and highlighted the opportunities in these territories. *"Addressing ageing as both a challenge and an opportunity can harness the full potential of this key demographic trend, including when it comes to rural areas"* stated Vice-President Šuica before encouraging rural and mountainous territories to *"grasp the economic opportunities and innovative character of the Silver Economy"*.

The European Commission's public consultation on the Green Paper on Ageing closed on the same day of the conference, 21st April 2021, and reminding the audience of that Commissioner Šuica highlighted that the Green Paper which should trigger a debate and help to find solutions to issues like loneliness, lack of services or long-term care but also boost innovation to offer more adapted goods for assisted living or senior tourism.

The issue of ageing in rural Europe will also be addressed in the forthcoming Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, which is expected to be published in June 2021. The Vision should help to tackle different interconnected issues such as demographic decline, lack of infrastructures, bad connectivity, by offering “a toolbox to enable rural areas to transform into vibrant, attractive and dynamic places” announced Ms Šuica, also noting that the actions carried out will be supported by the new fundings under the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework.

Session 2 - Get inspired by SILVER SMEs results

Why developing the Silver Economy in rural and mountainous areas? **Dr. Helen McGuirk**, Head of Hincks Centre for Entrepreneurship Excellence, at Munster Technological University (Ireland), outlined the main results of the [SILVER SMEs' composite SWOT analysis](#) (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). The analysis was based on 160 interviews with stakeholders in each region in four categories: SMEs, social partners, researchers and policy makers. Dr McGuirk noted the results shows that “overall, people had a broad understanding of the Silver Economy, but in reality, there is not a strong knowledge of what it entails or means” and “at the same time, half of respondents said there is a strong potential for development”.

A summary of the strengths included: positive policy provision encouraging active ageing; sufficient encouragements for older adults to remain economically active and suitable cohort of SMEs to develop products and services. Dr McGuirk also presented the weaknesses which the interviewees provided including the low engagement from older adults, few training opportunities for SMEs and a strong focus on care issues. Based on these findings from 2018, the report developed by the Hincks Centre for Entrepreneurship Excellence presented 11 recommendations. These included: the value of older people's views in policies, increase the awareness of the value of the silver economy for businesses, and include the topic of the silver economy in all entrepreneurial training.

Furthermore, to better understand the existing opportunities to design future solutions, SILVER SMEs partners collected more than [70 good practices](#) linked to the Silver Economy in their region. Of these, 23 were deemed as best practices that can inspire partners and other rural and mountainous areas. Eight of these success stories were presented by partners during SILVER SMEs conference.

Among them, the [Age-friendly town programme](#), an initiative implemented in County Cork, Ireland. This local authority supported project creates more age-friendly environments in 4 rural towns in the region. The programme provides funds to voluntary age-friendly committees who provide training to local businesses in order to raise awareness on the needs of older adults.



Victoria Tortosa, founder of the small business [La Exclusiva](#), in Spain, presented how her business delivers essential goods to older adults in 24 villages of the Soria Province. Since 2014, this SME supports seniors in their daily needs in this depopulated Province of Spain. “Soria is now the only place that does not have supplies’ problem thanks to La Exclusiva” underlined the entrepreneur.

The third best practice presented was [Senior-Senior](#), an app connecting older adults from the same area in the region of Normandy in France.

Older adults can propose or search for a service or an activity directly on the app. The SME works in close cooperation with local authorities to develop the service. **Julien Champain**, President of Senior Senior, explained that *“our model is a public-private cooperation, mayors decide to use and promote Senior Senior on their territory and municipalities pay membership fees, so the app is 100% free for users”*.



[Byggdialog Dalarna](#), another best practice from SILVER SMEs was also presented. This housing initiative brings together different public and private actors (real estate industry, municipalities, associations representing older adults) to design new wooden buildings for older adults. *“In Sweden, the competence for elderly care relies on the local level so the role of municipalities is crucial on housing and care”* explained **Nils-Åke Norman**, Project Manager at Dalarna Region. Wood is also a crucial economic sector in the country and research demonstrated the positive benefits of wooden residences for seniors’ health.

Also from Sweden, [Smarter Homes](#) was introduced to the conference participants. Smarter Homes is a show flat located in Falun in Dalarna region. Managed by public authorities and stakeholders, it provides Silver Economy businesses with a place to exhibit their products and helps them to reach out to end users. Healthcare organisations, local authorities and older adults can visit the show flat to discover the innovations available on the market to support seniors in their independent life.



Similar to Smarter Homes, the [HIPÅ](#) show flat from the region of Hauts-de-France was also introduced during the conference. Created in 2018, it showcases 81 solutions and smart devices to support seniors’ autonomy. Located in a nursing home, the show flat enables care staff, older adults and their families to discover innovations. *“We had 200 visitors in 2019 and there will now be virtual tours”* noted **Alexandra Bertrand**, Silver Economy Officer at Eurasanté.

To conclude the exploration of SILVER SMEs’ best practices, two initiatives to accelerate businesses were presented to participants. [Health Day](#) is a Slovenian network supporting the development of innovations in the health sector. Each year, Health Day select up to five innovative SMEs and provide them with mentoring to develop their product.



The last best practice presented has largely inspired SILVER SMEs partners to design suitable solutions in their regions. The [Social Entrepreneurship Programme of region Aragon](#), in Spain, provides training to SMEs from the social economy. Developed by the Aragonese Institute of Development, the programme runs each year from September to April and accelerates the selected businesses through mentoring. *“Each edition costs around €20.000”* explained **Laura Gascon Herrero**, European Project Manager at Provincial Government of Teruel, *“and since the beginning 11 companies focusing on the Silver Economy sector were created thanks to the programme”*.

Session 3 - Regions take action for the Silver Economy!

The best practices collected by SILVER SMEs partners illustrate the key role played by local and regional authorities in the development of the Silver Economy sector and in the provision of adapted goods and services for older adults.

To explore their role in more details, SILVER SMEs' conference gave the floor to **Florent Cholat**, researcher at Grenoble Alps and Milano Bicocca Universities, Founder of the consulting company 45.5 Sustainable Engineering and Mayor of Champagnier.



Having studied ageing in the Alps, Mr Cholat referred to the region as a laboratory with specific natural constraints, including steep slopes and sometimes difficult weather conditions creating mobility constraints in a region where services are often scattered and where private cars remain the main mobility option. *“Mobility is a key area of action for local authorities in the region because of the natural constraints and because mobility is essential for social inclusion”* stressed Mr Cholat.

Due to the natural constraints in mountain areas and to the vulnerability and loss of autonomy of some older adults living there, goods and services must sometimes be delivered directly to older adults – a concept that Florent Cholat named ‘reversed mobility’. Yet, these reversed mobilities have social, environmental, and economic impacts that territories must also consider. For instance, governments now want to maintain older adults at home as long as possible to avoid over-demand for housing and depopulation but in some areas 40% of the traffic is due to home services, illustrated the researcher. *“My company 45.5 Sustainable Engineering provides support to local companies; we develop models of mobility flows to pool travelling by working on the logistics from the first to the last kilometre”* Mr Cholat explained.

To illustrate the opportunities for action in regions and to present some of the measures that will be implemented in the next two years through SILVER SMEs' regional Action Plans, the conference participants heard from four regional representatives and stakeholders.

Grégory Tempremant, member of Hauts-de-France Regional Council in charge of the Silver Economy (France), pointed out that the increase of the share of older adults in the region of Hauts-de-France requires a specific approach of the regional economy, territorial planning and innovation.

Questioned about the new incubator and accelerator planned to be developed in the regional Action Plan of our partner Eurasanté – regional development agency for health and nutrition in Hauts-de-France – Mr Tempremant welcomed the initiative, stating that such accelerator *“will help to experiment products and co-create innovations with end users and will facilitate the marketing of the final product”*. The Regional Councillor also underlined that such a structure is the ideal place to bring together the different actors: private companies, project leaders, health professionals, older adults.

The Hauts-de-France region is committed to this inclusive approach, recalled our speaker, with the participation of academics from the University of Artois in structuring the Silver Economy at regional level by providing training to future professionals on the new needs of older adults, for instance on well-being, quality of life and adapted housing.

Joaquin Crespo, Project Manager, at the Aragonese Institute of Development, outlined the main future actions to be carried out in Aragon region (Spain). The Institute of Development of Aragon is in charge of the Social Entrepreneurship Programme, which was selected as a SILVER SMEs best practice and presented during our event and manages in total four entrepreneurship programmes for the agri-food sector, the creative and cultural industry and the research and innovation sector. *“Our idea is to include training and awareness raising activities on the Silver Economy in all existing programmes”* explained Mr Crespo.



“Well-being is the focus of our smart specialisation strategy in the region, and we believe that digital innovation can contribute to enhance the well-being of local populations” stressed Mr Crespo. As digital innovation is not a sector in itself but more a segment, many companies can develop a business line to offer digital tools facilitating daily life and, in the future, all companies supported by the Aragonese Institute of Development will be introduced to the opportunities offered by digital tools and to the benefits for older people. The idea, stressed Mr Crespo, is to encourage the development of goods and services for older people outside the health sector, by integrating the ageing perspective into other economic sectors.



Very inspired by the Social Entrepreneurship Programme of region Aragon, the Regional Development Agency of Zielona Góra (Poland) intends to develop a similar initiative to support SMEs in its regional Action Plan, as explained by **Dorota Bazuń**, PhD at the Sociology Institute of the University of Zielona Góra. *“In region Lubuskie we face a lack of social services, and the COVID-19 pandemic is making things worse”* noted Ms Bazuń, *“so the idea of our Action Plan is to create new spaces for socialisation, in particular in our remote villages, for seniors living at home who could join other people from their community”*.

To achieve this goal, the regional Action Plan will include support measures to local SMEs, especially to raise awareness on the Silver Economy market and the needs of older adults. *“Social entrepreneurs will be our main target, as they are already more aware of social needs, they are usually small and medium businesses, and they are already involved in the life of local communities”*, specified Ms Bazuń.

Reflecting on the best practices presented during the conference, **Birgitta Sacrédeus**, member of Dalarna Regional Council (Sweden) and member of the European Committee of the Regions, concluded *“what we saw from region Dalarna with Smarter Homes is the future, digital innovations is the future for the Silver Economy and we need the enabling digital infrastructures and broadband”*.



Rapporteur in 2019 for the European Committee of the Regions’ opinion on Active and Healthy Ageing, Ms Sacrédeus welcomed some initiatives developed for older adults, like free museum entrance to support mental health and the intervention of the social economy to offer services outside health care and encouraged seniors to remain active.

Speakers also pointed out the importance of cultural differences in developing the Silver Economy, with some countries where elderly care for instance often relies on the family and in other regions on care institutions. *“Some cultures are truly family oriented”* noted Ms Sacrédeus *“and still there are opportunities to support them, in Malta for instance cities lower the costs of electricity and water for families taking care of their elders”*.

The issue of competence was also raised, as political competence for housing, health, mobility and economic issues is distributed at different levels in European countries. *“Within the European Union, we need to set up a common framework but also to consider the competence specificities”* stressed Florent Cholat. The Hauts-de-France region for instance wants to use its multiple competences to also work age-friendly towns, on decreasing the presence of cars in cities which can also be a barrier for the mobility of older adults and on territorial planning as a whole at County level.

Discussions also focused on alternative care models, in particular in areas with low income and low pensions. In this regard, Dorota Bazuń mentioned that within the Action Plan of the

region Lubuskie a support will be granted to care farming to enable older adults to benefit from the natural environment of the region.

Participants and speakers at the event also raised the need to develop digital infrastructures to enable older adults to benefit from digital innovation. Apart from infrastructures, digital skills were also identified by speakers as a key element for the uptake of such innovations and concluded that digital training for older adults is crucial to bridge the digital divide.

Isabel García Muñoz, Member of the European Parliament, concluded the conference by highlighting that the COVID-19 pandemic raised awareness on the many challenges that rural Europe is facing but also helped to identify the opportunities existing in rural areas in terms of quality of life.



MEP García Muñoz also welcomed the next budget for 2021-2027 and *“the importance of Interreg programmes and of the European Regional Development Fund of the Cohesion Policy, which are crucial for the development of rural areas”*. European funds will be essential to support connectivity and the development of infrastructures in rural areas, explained the MEP also referring to the benefits of digitalisation for the quality of life in rural territories, in particular for older adults who should be trained to use digital tools.

Ms García Muñoz also welcomed the new European strategies for mobility and tourism, which are crucial for rural areas but also for the Silver Economy in our regions. Talking about the Silver Economy sector, MEP García Muñoz invited stakeholders to share their views during the Conference on the Future of Europe *“we want Europeans to contribute and say what they want for the future after the pandemic and the issue of ageing in rural Europe and the need to develop the Silver Economy must be represented at this conference”*.

Before closing the event, MEP García Muñoz shared a last positive message for the future of rural Europe: *“we need to use all opportunities to develop our territories and to change the mindset when talking about rural areas: we should not only mention the challenges but also the positive views and advantages of living in rural areas, like the proximity to nature, quality gastronomy and possibilities for sustainable and circular economies”*.

EVENT RECORDING



VICE-PRESIDENT VIDEO SPEECH



EVENT PRESENTATIONS

[Presentation of SILVER SMEs' SWOT analysis – Dr. Helen McGuirk](#)

[Presentation of Byggdialog Dalarna – Nils-Åke Norman](#)

[Presentation of HIPA - Alexandra Bertrand](#)

[Presentation of the Social Entrepreneurship Programme - Laura Gascon Herrero](#)

[The role of local authorities to address ageing in rural and mountainous areas - Florent Cholat](#)

SILVER SMEs RESOURCES

[SILVER SMEs' factsheet results](#)

[Best practices videos](#)

[9 interactive infographics on ageing in rural Europe](#)

STAY IN
TOUCH



SILVER SMEs
Interreg Europe