Digital Alps: Partnering with Broadband Competence Offices to build a digital connectivity roadmap for the Alpine Region

1. Connecting mountains: the mandate and the money

Mountain regions have much to gain from digitalisation and broadband connectivity. There is great potential for Smart Villages, SMEs, and access to online services in healthcare, education and much more. Mountain communities, however, face greater obstacles than most in becoming full participants in the European Union's Digital Decade. Their remoteness, in terms of distance and topography, combined with smaller populations, make them technically and financially challenging to reach with broadband infrastructure.

The EU has newly placed a very strong emphasis on the need to invest in digitalisation as a means to ensure the inclusion, recovery and resilience of all of Europe and its citizens. Combined with a significant new wave of EU funding, both the mandate and the money are fully aligned in the objective of connecting all citizens, everywhere.

Within this context, the European Network of Broadband Competence Offices (BCO Network)'s Support Facility was invited to speak at the Digital Alps Conference (27-28 May 2021) on the topic of future-proof digital infrastructures for the Alpine area, and how BCOs can be high-value partners for mountain regions in overcoming the planning, funding and implementation hurdles of their broadband infrastructure projects.

Jan Dröge, the BCO Network Support Facility Lead, spoke alongside speakers from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology and Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development; EU-Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), the Torino Piemonte Internet Exchange (TOP-IX) Consortium; the CARPE DIGEM project (for Digital Innovation Ecosystems); and the University of Ljubljana, among others.

2. Gigabit ambition, digital gap

The EU has very ambitious targets to achieve a 'Gigabit Society', with 100% of citizens having access to gigabit-speed broadband as well as full 5G coverage in all populated areas and major transport paths by 2030.
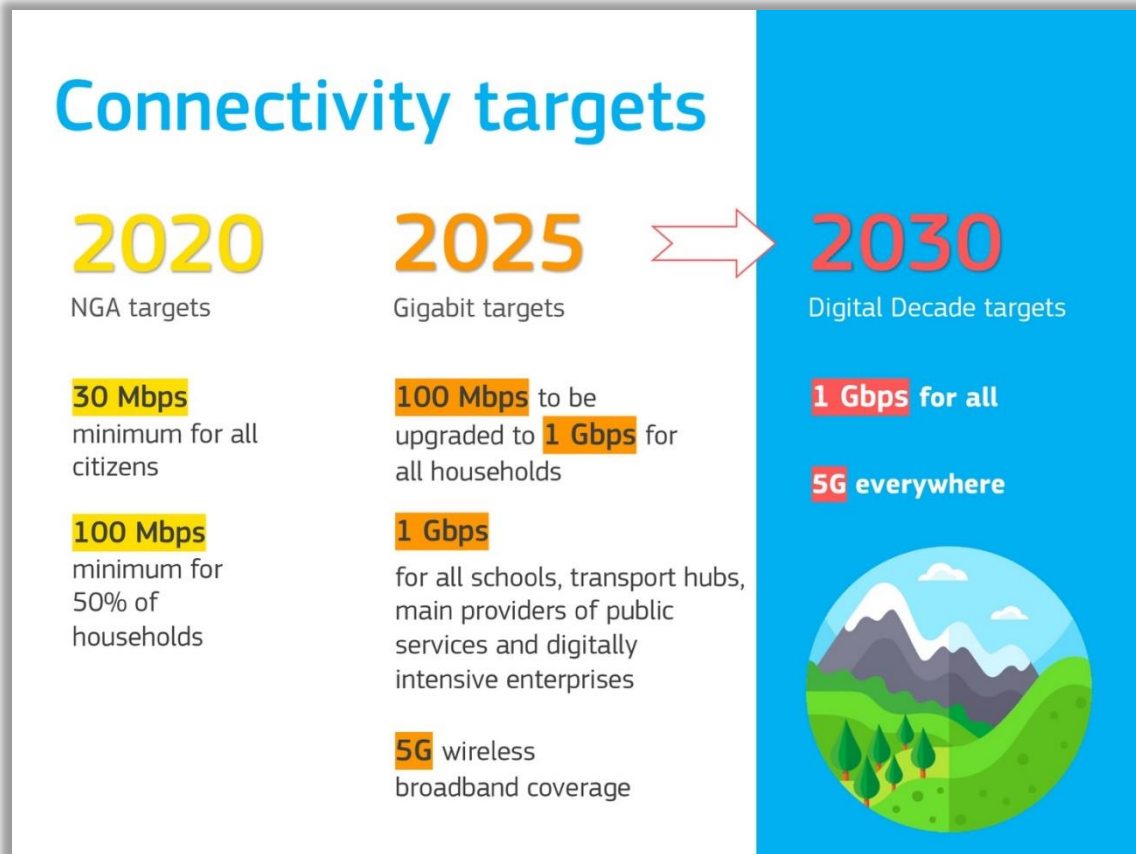
While market forces will play a major part in delivering on these targets, particularly in urban areas, 83% of EU territory is rural and 30.6% of the EU's population lives in rural areas, according to the EU's [Long-term Vision for Rural Areas](). The simple realities of rural and remote area geography and population densities have a significant dampening effect on investment. We see this clearly in the persistent digital connectivity gap between rural and urban areas – which is also a services and opportunities gap, directly affecting the development of rural communities, citizens and businesses, and their sustainability.

The EU's Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) for 2020 reports that 41% of rural households had no Next Generation Access (NGA) access at all in 2019, although the overall EU average was 86% NGA coverage. The illustration below clearly shows that this disparity increases significantly in remote areas.
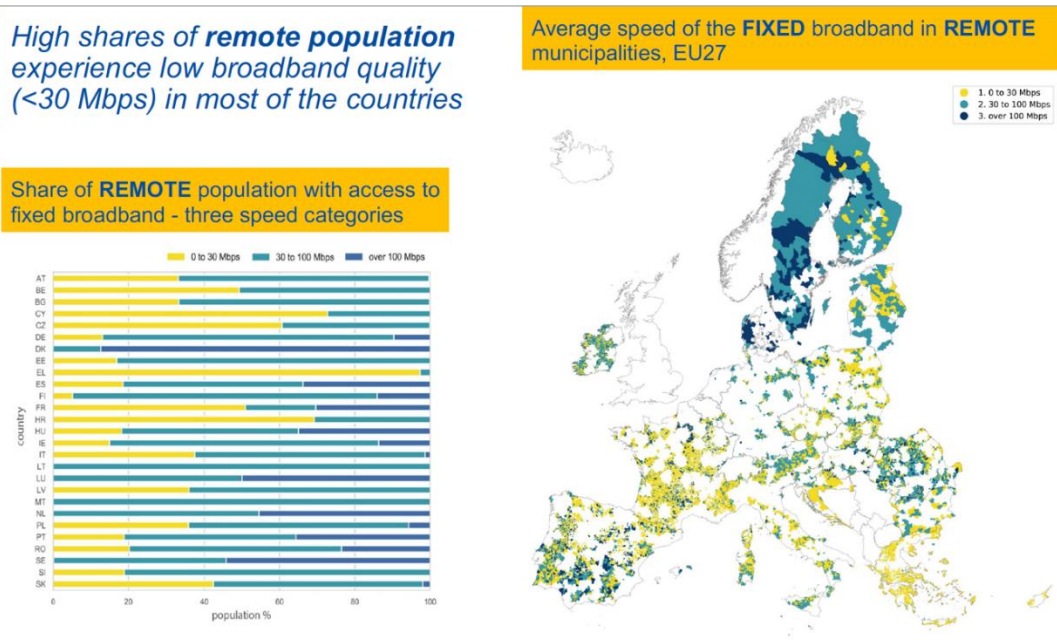
Source: European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC)

3. Partners and advisors: Broadband Competence Offices

In order to ensure that the EU's connectivity objectives will be realised **for citizens living where the market will not reach**, the European Commission launched the **European Network of Broadband Competence Offices** in 2017 (see also our previous article on Euromontana's website: [EU Support to Broadband in Mountain Regions, in September 2017](#)). This initiative encouraged Member States to identify a single point of contact for broadband within their governments – a national Broadband Competence Office.

These BCOs come together throughout the year, in discussion with experts and representatives from the European Commission, to exchange good practices and build their capacity to overcome the many hurdles of bringing high-speed broadband access to rural and remote area citizens. Ranging from **technical and financial solutions to legal and regulatory knowledge**, BCOs bring this back to their countries, where they work to accelerate broadband infrastructure deployment, in part through **advising policy makers, project promoters, investors, municipalities and citizens**. BCOs also exist at regional level in many countries, where they provide critical insights on the challenges and needs in different situations at ground level.

As mentioned, the majority of telecom infrastructure investment is undertaken by the private sector, which is how 86% of Europeans households overall had access to NGA broadband as of 2019, but only 59% of households in rural areas. In order to address 'market failure areas', BCOs perform a number of actions in country, including providing technical assistance to project promoters, mapping investment needs, streamlining access to funding and also supporting the programming of funds.

This last activity is particularly topical in this moment, as significant **new funding** is coming through the pipeline from the EU's Structural Funds and the new **Recovery and Resilience Facility – 20% of which should be allocated to digitalisation**. This emphasis on the role of 'digital' in the recovery and for the ongoing sustainability of our economy and society will offer many opportunities – among them, the possibility of **ubiquitous digital connectivity**, no matter where you are.

When it comes to using these funds, BCOs will again be key partners. Projects seeking public funding are very carefully regulated, therefore setting up a project with this in mind from the start can make all the difference in securing funding and implementing a successful project.

All countries in the Alpine region have been very active in supporting broadband investments, particularly in the past two years. With the arrival of the new wave of funding, **the potential for transformative projects dedicated to reaching mountain area communities is greater than ever**.

4. Innovative solutions and good practices

As the Alpine region prepares its digital connectivity roadmap, there is inspiration to be found throughout Europe, from countries and regions implementing a range of innovative projects to bring high-speed digital connectivity to their rural and remote area citizens.

In Lithuania, they combine funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) to provide wholesale access broadband to rural areas. The project has progressed in stages, going back several years, in order to achieve nearly complete coverage over all Lithuania. (Find out more in these project videos: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#))

Catalonia took the approach of using public sector socio-economic drivers as 'anchor clients', bringing fibre to town halls and schools, among others. By building this infrastructure, a large part of the core investment was done, facilitating operators' access to the backbone to provide their services to private customers. This is an interesting example of how you can leverage public funds to serve a wider community.

In Greece, they are implementing another interesting combination, using new funds to invest in supply-side infrastructure while combining this with demand-side stimulation. On the supply side, this involves rolling out fibre optic cables, including submarine cables, to ensure that connectivity is brought to rural areas including mountainous areas and islands. On the demand side, they are offering vouchers to end users in order to encourage those segments of the population that are less active in the digital economy, to bring money into the economy and ultimately create a market for investors in the infrastructure. This virtuous circle has been a very innovative approach from Greece, and Italy is in fact employing a similar approach. (Find out more in these project videos: 1 and 2)

Estonia, while a small country, has one of the highest percentages of the population living in one city, with very sparsely populated rural areas, which is a real challenge. To help address this, the government encouraged the private operators to create a kind of cooperative where the operators share infrastructure to reach underserved areas where there would not otherwise be investment. The first stage is done together on a cost sharing basis, and market competition comes in at the last stage, to connect the end user. (Find out more in this project video)

Part of the BCO Network's work is collecting and sharing such inspiring examples of innovative good practices for overcoming rural and remote area connectivity challenges. Many more of these can be explored through the BCO Network's video series and publications such as the Rural Broadband Handbook, as well as through the European Commission's database. For specific advice and in-country examples, national and regional BCOs are the essential go-to partners.

5. Working together

BCOs serving populations in mountainous regions, in particular, have an important role, as these are among the most challenging to reach with broadband infrastructure. Working with local communities' knowledge of the terrain as well as the particularities and needs of the area, is especially important in these contexts. For local communities, working with BCOs also brings invaluable guidance and learning from others who have dealt with similar challenges.
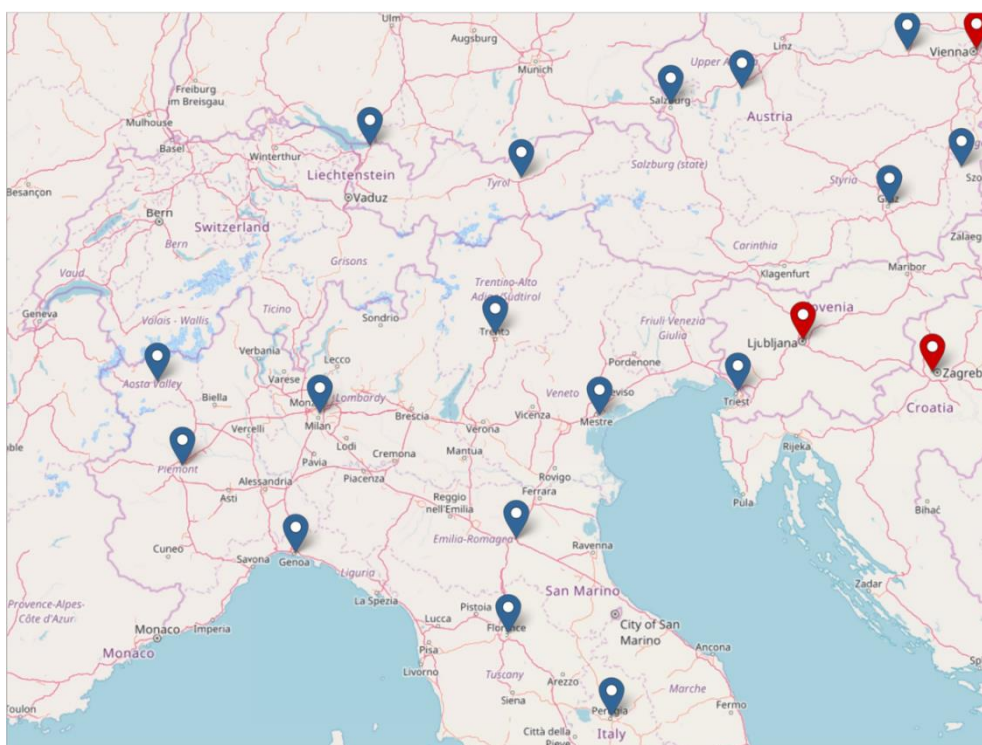
Source: European Commission website, BCO Network Directory map

> *"We have many BCOs in the Alpine area. As you are thinking about developing and deepening your strategies in connectivity and infrastructure, I encourage you to reach out to them to **make sure that they are embedded in your strategy development**."* – Jan Dröge, BCO Network Support Facility Lead, speaking at the Digital Alps Conference

More information

- [BCO Network on the European Commission website](#)
- [BCO Network Support Facility](#)

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