STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2027

SERN

VISION

SERN is one of the leading transnational networks of local and regional actors fostering North -South cooperation in the European Union.

MISSION

The network through its activities contributes to building a European Union driven by North-South collaboration where Italian and Swedish communities and their citizens are key drivers of change towards a more inclusive, sustainable, and digitalized society.

CONTEXT AND PRIORITY AREAS

The world in which the Network has been operating in past years has undergone important changes. Since its establishment in 2015, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for sustainable development has been acquiring a growing relevance both at global and EU level. Thanks to its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the Agenda has been playing a key role in attracting attention and action around a set of global themes which are highly relevant for our members. In particular, Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, Goal 4 - Quality Education and Goal 13 - Climate Action are strongly linked with the political priorities set out at local level by the members.

At the same time, the end of the 14-20 programming period at EU level has coincided with a new strategic approach developed by the new European Commission that began its work in 2019. Some of the driving strategies such as the European Green Deal, a European Union fit for the digital age, constitute a fundamental framework of reference for SERN in terms of priority themes and the concrete activities flowing from them.

The macro-strategies at EU level have been backed up by a set of new Programmes, recently coupled with the introduction of the Recovery Plan for Europe, but they have also been accompanied by several initiatives launched by the European Commission targeting local and regional authorities such as the Urban Agenda, the Intelligent City Challenge, the new European Bauhaus movement.

These initiatives will play an important role in the coming years and therefore they can represent for the Network in the broader European context a relevant component to connect with for additional opportunities and as a source of knowledge and inspiration.

On the basis of this evolving context the Network will aim to fulfil its mission by supporting its members towards the achievement of more

» **INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES**
» **DIGITALISED COMMUNITIES**
» **GREEN AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES**

INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

Reducing inequalities and social exclusion in local communities are crucial challenges for the future of Europe. At the same time, there is great potential for Europe through opportunities provided, for example, by new forms of innovation and by the engagement of citizens. Supporting inclusive, innovative and reflective communities is a prerequisite for a sustainable European integration.

By helping individuals and groups, to get a proper education, to find a job, to be actively involved in local decision and to have access to services designed to help them cope with their vulnerabilities, Communities part of SERN, ensure an inclusive and egalitarian way growth.

In the thematic area of Inclusive Communities SERN will focus on three priorities: Services for Vulnerable groups, Active Citizenship and Quality Education.

SERVICES FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS

Social exclusion arises when, for a variety of reasons, an individual, or a group, faces **difficulties or discrimination** in some aspects of their everyday lives. Vulnerable groups can be defined as persons in a fragile context, with a higher risk to be subject of discrimination, compared to the general population. Vulnerable groups include, but not limited to, ethnic minorities, recent migrants with poor language skills, people with disabilities, elderly people with physical and mental decline, and children. The vulnerability affecting these groups can be defined as physical, economic, social and environmental vulnerability.

The problems these groups experience can be translated into unemployment, low education, homelessness, and subsequently, the further **exclusion from society**. Social protection systems, all over Europe, are designed to provide protection against the risks and needs that vulnerable people face.

At local level different interventions can be implemented in favour of vulnerable groups and of more inclusive communities, the main actions are:

- increasing social assistance services;
- increasing employment and training services, eliminating the barriers to education;
- offering long- term care services of good quality, in particular home-care and community-based services;
- ensuring equal opportunities for men and women eliminating barriers to economic, political and social participation on grounds of sex and gender;
- increase the labour market participation of immigrants and to promote their participation in social, cultural and political life.

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Active citizenship is a way fostering democratic and civic participation at local, national, European and global levels considering that **civic and social participation are fundament of European values and democracy**.

Active citizenship acknowledges that in a **democratic society**, all individuals and groups have the **right** to engage in the **creation and recreation of the democratic society**, that means having the right to participate in all the democratic practices and institutions within the society and having the responsibility to ensure that no groups or individuals are excluded from these practices or institutions.

In order, to define better the possible actions to be undertaken within this theme, it is essential to highlight the **dimensions**, that should be measurable and distinctive, of active citizenship:

- participation and engagement in political life and civil society;
- participation and cooperation in the communities (voluntary work, volunteering in youth, environment, culture, sport, health, social sectors);
- values (democracy, intercultural understandings and human rights).

Active citizenship can be understood as also "**participated citizenship**" with a direct involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. It represents an important element for the growth of an **inclusive community** and a resource for local development and for the feeling of policies' ownership towards public policies. Citizens are not only customers in the public services market but active "builders" of the society.

This concept can be translated into actions pertaining the planning and design process of local policies in which citizens are the main actors such as:

- digitalization of public services;
- offer and planning of welfare services;
- green transition related services.

QUALITY EDUCATION

Quality in education has been playing a very important role in the cooperation among the members of the network and it will continue to do so also in the framework of this strategy. Quality in education is a very complex and multifaced concept covering all people's age (from pre-school to adult education) and a variety of modality of teaching (formal, informal, non-formal). Quality can be understood as:

- » the organisation of the education services as a public service;
- » the appropriateness of space and time of education;
- » the capacity of teaching process linked to the quality of human capital and of the technology used;
- » competences and skills acquired during the education process.

In particular, quality education can provide to young people with knowledge, skills and competences that can be useful during all their life and to enable them to cope with numerous and various challenges. In this light, it is essential to highlight some priority actions which can compose, on the one hand, the learning process for students, from early years education to adult education and on the other hand, the opportunity for teachers to have an innovative and complete training in a full European perspective.

Priority actions in the framework of network shall include:
- **mastering basic skills**, including digital competences, in order to cover those skill gaps which can have a negative effect on peoples' lives;
- **mastering transversal skills**, in order to increase critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity and civic engagement
- **fostering language learning and multilingualism**, in order to enable further and more skilled study and working opportunities and to benefit from a genuine European learning space
- **increasing inclusiveness and equality** in order to give access to learning paths also to underrepresented participants and to dismantle barriers related to disabilities, socioeconomic status, geographical location, gender. Indeed, dismantling gender stereotypes and providing the basis to become adults who are fully respectful of their own identity and that of other people are one of the main elements of a quality education.
- **supporting teachers** in managing diversity, in order to approach positively linguistic diversity and to avoid education drop-out.
- **boosting green skills**, in order to enable a profound change in people's behaviors as the education system can act as a catalyst in the process.

Finally, all these priority actions can be addressed under four transversal perspectives: inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, participation in democratic life and environmental sustainability.

DIGITALIZED COMMUNITIES

The digital transformation brings benefits and opportunities for all citizens in the communities belonging to SERN. With the aim of leaving no one behind, digitization is one of the six priorities of the European Commission, that aims at empowering and including citizens. In this context, the strategy "Shaping Europe's Digital Future" is the roadmap that for the next five years will be driving the efforts of the EU towards three key objectives: a technology that works for people, a fair and competitive digital economy and an open, democratic and sustainable society.

As digitization pervades every aspect of daily life, EU-level actions for a digitalized Europe encompass different fields: from education through the Digital Education Action Plan, calling for a high-quality, inclusive and digital education, to the Digital EU Programme, that will invest in advanced digital skills and technology.

Within Digitalized Communities, SERN will focus on two main thematic areas: e-government and digital skills. These themes are deeply connected to each other, as on the one hand there is the need of developing a continuous work towards open and efficient public administrations, and on the other, digital skills education for all is a key to both implementing and taking advantage of digital innovation.

E-GOVERNMENT

E-government is about the delivery of public services to citizens and business using ICT, thus leading to more efficient and effective services[1] However, e-gov does not just mean a different way of delivering services but rather stresses the high-quality of public services.

There are three main dimensions that could be considered by the SERN members when developing projects or processes of collaboration.

The first one is the **Organizational Framework** in the municipal organization. Cooperation could be developed on the way in which both decision-making processes and implementation inside the municipality is arranged.

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[1] Some of main principles stated in key EU documents underlying the digital transformation both at local and regional level are: *Only once* users need to provide data to public institutions. Local authorities can then use the data collected whenever needed. *Digital by default* public services should be preferably delivered via digital channels and through a one-stop-shop; Interoperability by default i.e., data needs to be exchanged between all administrative units in and across the EU member states to allow for the provisioning of seamless digital services, including cross-border digital services; *User-centricity*, the citizen perspective is key when developing and designing new e-gov services; *Accessibility*, e-services should be made accessible to everyone, including vulnerable groups such elderly and citizens with special needs. *Openness and transparency* i.e., administrations need to share data with each other but also with citizens and business who should have access to the data that administration holds about them. Security, questions pertaining privacy and data protection, should be considered and included when designing digital services.

It is important to make the political decision-making process transparent and available for all citizens. In this respect digitization of the public administration can provide a key contribution. The open data system is an important tool for providing access to the work of the public system and its decisions. In the case of smaller organizations, models of cooperation between municipalities could also be explored.

A second dimension pertains the **Technical Framework**. This does not relate only to the infrastructure but also to the way in which the local authority organizes the front-end (website and public interfaces) and the back end of its e-services (i.e. documents management system, information systems for planning procedures, financial and human resources management systems, registries including data on the services provided).

The third dimension pertains cooperation related to the aspects connected to **Maturity Level**[2] of the e-services: information (the municipality provides information on its website); one-way interaction (forms can be downloaded but no process can be initiated online); two-way interaction (a process can be initiated online through authentication); transaction (a service can be delivered completely online); personalization (the digital service is fully automated and the service is initiated by the local authority and no action is required by the user – for example the payment of a social benefit that a citizen becomes entitled to).

DIGITAL SKILLS

One of the main challenges Europe is facing is the digital upskilling of European citizens to enable them to take full advantage of the digitization process.
In this field, SERN members shall collaborate on three different areas.

The first area relates to the **digital education**. Here the strategic priorities stated in the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 are 1) fostering the development of a high performing digital education ecosystem and 2) enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation.
In the light of such priorities, themes on which members could establish cooperation processes are: the improvement of digital abilities among teachers and administrative staff, in order to achieve a better and innovative learning experience and/or develop innovative way of teaching through international cooperation, the production of digital tools to actively involve families and students in education issues, the strengthening of a "resilient" approach to teaching when facing crisis.
Other topics could be the improvement of digital skills among pupils and students of all ages paying particular attention to disadvantaged groups while contributing to mitigate the gender gap in the digital field.

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[2] UNe-Government Survey 2018: https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2018

The second area is related to a more **digital public administration** and it is strictly connected with the e-government priority. Indeed, in order to provide a more efficient and effective local public service, it is imperative that civil servants are equipped with advanced digital abilities and an open-minded attitude embracing new technologies.

SERN members should consider developing joint activities fostering skills development among the staff aimed at facilitating the transition from one maturity level of the e-services provided to another as well as the acquisition of skills needed, for example in the field of social welfare, to plan and manage innovative services, requiring the mastery of tools and data.

Other elements that can be considered are the following: digital communication skills to promote the local reality, communication skills in order to communicate with citizens and to build trust in sensitive issues such as data protection, cyber-security and new invasive technologies (storytelling).

The third area concerns the **local digital community**. Cooperation could be developed around several aspects:

» A **more Active digital community**: enhancing digital skills among citizens for both raising active participation in the democratic process and make them able to take advantage of digital public services and digital services at large;

» A **fairer digital** community where citizens are better equipped to recognize and face negative phenomenon such as misinformation and disinformation especially widespread in times of crisis; educating citizens on fair and respectful online behaviours and raising awareness on the consequences of inappropriate behaviours;

» A **more inclusive digital community**: e.g. addressing the digital divide that affects in particular elderly, "low-income" and "low-educated" citizens. Another issue on which to pay particular attention could be the need of skilling, up-skilling and re-skilling of the workforce. Indeed, digital transformation and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic, pose new challenges in the labour market, that can be addressed with no formal education for adult learners. E.g. providing digital literacy for workers at all ages.

GREEN AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

In order to fight climate change worldwide, initiatives have been contemplated by the international and European institutions. Above all, the Paris Agreement, the first binding international climate change pact, aiming at limiting the global warming to 1.5 °C by reducing the GHG emissions on one hand, and strengthen societies ability to deal with the impacts of climate change, on the other.

In particular, it is crucial for local, regional and national authorities to become more resilient, by decreasing their vulnerability to the effects of climate change and cooperate together at regional and international levels to achieve their climate action goals.

CLIMATE ACTION

At global level, under the label Climate Action, two type of intervention have been identified to reduce the effects of climate change: climate mitigation, i.e. reducing climate change, and climate adaptation, i.e. adapting life in a changing climate. At EU level these two dimensions have been included in the European Green Deal, the cornerstone of the EU policies in the field of climate action for the years to come. Local communities will play an important role in achieving the ambitious goals set out by the EU for 2050. In this light SERN members shall focus on contributing to the European Climate Pact [3] through cooperation in the following three areas:

» Strategies for a more sustainable **land use**. This means focusing on restoring, enlarging and protecting green areas in urban contexts and promoting **sustainable agriculture and forestry** in rural context.

» Mobilizing and raising **citizens' awareness** on climate change and invite people and stakeholders to connect and share knowledge, learn about climate change, develop, implement, and scale up solutions.

» Supporting the local ecosystems in the creation of **green jobs** and continue the EU's track record of cutting greenhouse gas emissions whilst growing local economy.

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[3] https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/eu-climate-action/pact_en

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Sustainable tourism is about taking full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities. As for many of the SERN members this sector represents a relevant aspect in their local economy the cooperation activities in the framework of SERN shall consider the following dimensions:

A common work on sustainable tourism, offer and products based on **local identities** of the communities preserving their cultural heritage and history, as alternative to mature tourism products connected to the seasonality and mass tourism phenomena. In this light, the protection, promotion, and rational use of local natural and cultural resources to develop a sustainable tourism offer is key to keep at minimum the use of resources, waste production and pollution when at tourism destinations.

The development or boosting of the local **place branding strategies** aimed at increasing the place attractiveness for tourists and business and contribute to the local development, so to enhance the uniqueness, authenticity, and distinctiveness of a place. The place branding strategies should consider the needs and inspirations of local communities: therefore, they should be co-designed - in a bottom-up perspective - with stakeholders and citizens who will share knowledge, develop, implement and scale up innovative place branding solutions.

Accelerating **innovation in the sector of tourism** through the opportunities offered by digitalization while developing innovative approaches through innovative technological tools. Aspects such as the promotion the digitalization of local events, through the creation of virtual events, hybrid events (including both on-site presence and digital presence), satellite events (taking place at the same time in many places in the country with smaller groups).

SMART MOBILITY

Urban mobility should be smart, sustainable, and resilient. In this regard, the EU aims to decarbonize the whole transport sector and cut the 90% of the emissions generated by this sector compared to the emissions produced in 1990. Smart mobility is therefore a key asset in reducing congestion and fostering faster, greener, and cheaper transportation options (in alternative to private cars).

In this light, cooperation among the SERN members shall be oriented towards:
Strategies aimed at **reshaping the urban environment** so to reduce the space for cars and extend the walking and cycling paths and areas while strengthening **multimodal mobility, digital mobility, accessibility** and responsible travel also in the light of what was outlined above in the section on sustainable tourism.

A promotion of sustainable and **active mobility** behaviors: it means to steer initiatives that have an influence on mobility choices in towns and cities so to encourage as much walking, cycling and public transport use as possible and minimize the use of private vehicles for journey choices.

ACTIVITIES

The success of the strategy will be based on the incremental development of a set of activities during the implementation period of this strategy 2021-2027 aimed at realizing the mission of the Network. The activities described below build on the work done in the past but they are also meant to offer members different ways through which benefiting from their participation in the network while contributing to the achievement of our vision. Members should look at environmental sustainability, digitalization and inclusiveness not only as a theme of collaboration but elements to consider when designing and implementing the collaboration processes. The activities of the network will be implemented four main areas:

» **PROJECT-BASED COOPERATION**

» **INFORMATION AND SHOWCASING**

» **LEARNING AND TRAINING**

» **POOLING OF EXPERTISE**

PROJECT-BASED COOPERATION

The network will continue playing an important role as an accelerator of project-based cooperation among its members. The central role played by the Secretariat in the process of matching the interests of the members across the priority areas will continue and it will be strengthened. Building on the results achieved by the Network during the past years the main methodology which will be used in order to foster project-based activities among the members will be the Project Cycle Management. The focus will be on the first two phases of the project cycle management: Indicative Programming and Identification. The support of the Secretariat will be primarily aimed at identifying interested members in joining proposals as well as supporting them in defining the main elements needed by the project groups inside the network in order to effectively formulate a project proposal in the framework of the relevant EU Programmes.

The participation of the network as a leader and/or project partners will be possible in those projects with a specific added value for the network and its members especially in terms of transferability of results. In the framework of project-based cooperation a key aspect will be played over time by the capacity of the SERN to take stock of the results and products achieved by the projects developed across the network and promote transfer of knowledge and innovation among the members.

LEARNING AND TRAINING

Mutual learning is a key feature of the network. In this respect, an additional area of activity will consist of a set of activities which will complement the project-based work and the information activities.
The network will continue to offer opportunities to activate bilateral or multilateral peer review activities among the members. In addition to that several training activities will be planned both online and face to face with two main objectives.

The first one will be to provide opportunities for strengthen the organisational capacity of the members to activate themselves in the framework of (EU) project-based activities. The second one will be oriented to increase the knowledge of the staff of the members in a limited number of thematic areas to be identified by the Secretariat biannually connected to the expertise achieved in past activities/projects or to themes of high relevance for the members in the thematic areas prioritized by the strategy. In order to cover specific themes through dedicated training activities, the Network will identify partners with the necessary expertise required.

INFORMATION AND SHOWCASING

The network can be a valuable source of information for its members. The Secretariat, through the SERN members' area will be providing information about major policy development at EU level in the priority areas as well EU calls relevant to the thematic areas prioritized by this strategy.

In connection with the previous area of activity, the network will be actively working to disseminate and transfer project results among the members through a set of dedicated activities occurring on a regular basis. The General Assembly will continue to be a key moment for sharing and learning about the best practices of the members, but additional opportunities specifically dedicated to deepening thematic aspects will be organised also during the year as specified below. The website will also be enhanced to showcases local best practices of the members related to the priority areas of this strategy.

During the implementation phase of the strategy the Secretariat will organize seminars to deepen the thematic areas identified above with the aim of creating additional opportunities of exchange and sharing of experiences among the members.

POOLING OF EXPERTISE

A new area of activity for the network, to be developed experimentally in the second half of the implementation phase of the strategy, will be the identification of expertise in the two countries that could be pooled together valorising the high level of competence present among the staff of the member organisations.

This process will be aimed at supporting the transfer of innovation/best practices inside the network across the members. Additionally, new opportunities will be considered in relation to initiatives and international projects addressing non-EU contexts/countries where complementarities between Italian and Swedish members could provide a unique added value in providing expertise in a set of policy areas where the network has been particularly active over the past years. This area of activity will complement the other areas and it will be strongly interconnected with them.

Contributing to the priority areas at organizational level

The work of the Network aimed at contributing to more digitalised, green and inclusive communities shall not only be a key element pertaining the cooperation among the members in the above-mentioned activities, but it should also actively permeate the organisational life of the Network.

It is in fact important that also the Network as an organisation takes a proactive stand and contributes across its institutional activities to the achievement of the goals the members will be working towards.

The SERN Secretariat shall progressively implement actions aimed at reducing CO_2 emissions connected to its activities, while fostering digitization of its working processes. At the same time, inclusiveness and diversity will be recognised as valuable elements in the management of the human resources. In the framework of the (face-to-face) meetings of the SERN Executive Board and of the General Assembly organisers and participants will be encouraged to adopt solutions which can contribute to environmental sustainability in relation to aspects pertaining travels, local transports, and subsistence during the meetings. In the same way, paper documentation will be reduced at a minimum with the objective of organising paper-less meetings.

Evaluation and reporting

The evaluation of the strategy will occur on a regular basis throughout the implementation period 2021-2027. A first assessment will be carried out in 2023 and a review process will be activated and completed by the end of 2024.

The Secretariat will carry out the assessment and report to the Executive Board about the implementation of this strategy. The Annual Report will include a section dedicated to the strategy and its assessment.

The assessment of the strategy will be carried out on the basis of a set of specific indicators to be approved by the Executive Board.

The areas of the assessment for the period 2021-2023 will be:

A) Consistency and Relevance of the project ideas/proposals to the priority areas and mission

B) Relevance of the information activities to the priority areas and mission

C) Engagement of the members in the activities
- Projects
- Institutional Activities (Board, Assembly)

D) Impact of the strategy on the Network
- Membership
- Organisational (Value of the strategy for the organization, Internal Consistency)
- External Consistency (Relations with the external environment)

E) Feasibility of the strategy and risks.

SERN

Italy and Sweden building Europe together