



Employment and labour markets

**Remote work in rural and peripheral  
areas: Characteristics, challenges and  
initiatives to support it**

*Regional employment change and the  
geography of telework in Europe*

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# Introduction

Significant changes in European labour markets, notably the rise in non-standard forms of employment in the last two decades, and more recently the widespread adoption of remote and hybrid working arrangements (ILO, 2020; Eurofound 2023b)<sup>1</sup>, have produced the need for alternative workspaces to (central) city office locations. In this context, coworking spaces – intended as shared physical places where freelancers, people from different companies or organisations, as well as entrepreneurs, can work next to each other, and possibly collaborate with one another, while accessing dedicated desks and possible business services or amenities – have grown, especially across North America and Europe. However, because coworking is much more widespread in large urban areas in or around city centres with a concentration of skilled labour, innovation, and knowledge (Mariotti, et al. 2017), research on coworking in rural and peripheral areas, and its potential for local development, has been much more limited. Moreover, the rural coworking scene is also unevenly developed across Europe, and comprehensive information about it is not readily available (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2021a).

Nevertheless, the Covid-19 pandemic recently drew attention to more peripheral and rural working environments (Akhavan et al., 2022b; Mariotti et al., 2022). As the widespread opportunities to remote working made it easier for professionals to keep their jobs in the city, while living in a less expensive, less polluted and congested areas, there has been an increased interest in coworking spaces outside capital cities and major urban centres, notably in suburban and rural areas, as well as the role that intermediate or second-tier cities can play in the evolving geography of work and the workplaces (Burgalassi, 2023).

While home remains the main alternative location to the office for those in ‘teleworkable’ jobs, mostly in knowledge-intensive sectors and high-skilled occupations (Sostero et. all, 2020), collaborative working spaces can lead to new connections between locally dispersed workers. These represent not only new physical environments for work, but also new ways of working based on collaboration. They can be coworking spaces as well as ‘third places’, originally defined as spaces of socialization between home and the workplace, such as coffee shops, public libraries, bookstores, etc. (Oldenburg, 2001). While coworking spaces were already present before the Covid-19 pandemic, its impact on the world of work accelerated the need for a hybrid space between home, a shared office, and a community space (Manzini-Ceinar and Mariotti, 2021). Similarly, new forms of working spaces that already existed in public spaces, such as libraries, cafes/bars, hotels, and airport lounges, which were not originally planned to host productive activities, are increasingly being occupied as spaces for work (Mariotti et al., 2023).

There are several reasons why a coworking space close to the place of residence (related to the concept of ‘near working’ in the literature, see Mariotti et al., 2022) is a preferable alternative to a home office. These include for instance: to avoid isolation and lack of social and professional contacts, as well as to keep away distractions related to family and household responsibilities; to

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<sup>1</sup> The ILO (2020) describes remote work as ‘situations where the work is fully or partly carried out on an alternative worksite other than the default place of work’. Telework is a subcategory of the broader concept of remote work, which includes the use of personal electronic devices. Eurofound (2023) discusses the evolving concept of hybrid work and how it encapsulates elements over and above telework.

access high quality internet connection and office facilities, such as rooms for meetings and videoconferences, printers etc; to establish clearer boundaries and a better balance between private life and work. Rural coworking has also been shown to enhance user's wellbeing by fulfilling key psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Merrel et al, 2022). Akhavan and Mariotti (2022a) also explore the effects of these spaces on the coworkers' wellbeing, thus finding that it is higher in coworking spaces in rural and peripheral areas.

At the societal level, the use of remote coworking spaces can lead to fewer women working from home and having to cope with family responsibilities and thereby can help avoid the reinforcement of traditional gender roles<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, commuting to coworking centres closer to the place of residence, instead of the city centres, would result in travel time savings and changes in mode of transport leading to environmental benefits (that is significant decrease in the use of cars for work commute, an increase in use of active modes of transport including cycling and walking, as well as of public transport) (Caulfield and Charly, 2022).

Teleworking in a coworking space outside main urban centers has multiple benefits also for companies and for the neighbourhood, besides individual employees. For companies, it can be a strategy to decentralise their staff, for instance for cost reduction purposes linked with office building expenses, or to expand recruitment opportunities by accessing a wider pool of talents. At a local level, coworking in rural areas can help to retain people (especially young people) and economic activities, therefore reducing depopulation and contributing to the economic development of the areas. It also has a stimulating effect on local communities in terms of the regeneration of spaces which can positively affect the value of commercial properties in the vicinity and attract developers (Vogl and Akhavan, 2022).

As the coworking movement and practices, as well as the related literature, are still developing, definitions and concepts are also evolving and can be interpreted differently in various contexts. In the scope of this paper, a broad definition of coworking spaces is adopted. This includes both the mainstream and innovation-driven 'neo-corporate' coworking model (originally appealing to freelance workers, entrepreneurs and startappers, but also suitable to accommodate remote workers) as well as 'resilient' coworking initiatives which are increasingly present outside urban environment and seek to combine economic sustainability with social impact, and to develop communitarian ties within and beyond the space (Gandini and Cossu, 2021). This new wave of coworking spaces appear to bring coworking practices beyond their traditional boundaries.

Another important issue relates to the understanding of what 'rural' and different 'levels of rurality' mean, across countries. Different approaches can be used, as discussed by Bertelsmann Stiftung (2021a), such as for instance: considering places up to small medium-sized towns as rural; adopting a rather broad definition of anything "beyond big cities"; or include rural and intermediate areas that can be described as peripheral areas (rural areas close to cities). The interest of this study is primarily in rural, peripheral and marginal areas outside capital cities and large urban centers.

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<sup>2</sup> Quantitative data from surveys such as the global coworking survey ([Deskmag, 2019](#)) shows an increase of women in coworking spaces over the period 2012 -2018, although on average, women used coworking spaces less frequently than men across all weekdays.

## Characteristics of rural coworking

In the last decade, the coworking movement, that was initiated in urban environments, has been expanding to rural areas. While in both cases community dynamics are a crucial aspect, in rural areas the development of local communities and integration with the local socio-economic context is a distinctive feature (Capdevila, 2022). It can be said that the objective of rural coworking spaces is to develop and enhance community building and sustainability and to have an effective orientation towards local development (Capdevila, 2021). This integration helps create a sense of belonging and promotes sustainable growth in rural regions.

In this context, the role of a facilitator is paramount (Capdeville, 2022). The community manager, where present, can facilitate different intermediation activities including for instance work at developing relations and fostering exchanges between coworkers and with local actors, including by developing the appropriate environment and infrastructures. A study for Italy explores the positive indirect effects of coworking spaces in the local context, including the promotion of entrepreneurial milieu; knowledge creation by retaining knowledge workers; and the creative class, social inclusion, and spatial regeneration (Mariotti et al., 2021).

While building communities which share professional interests, and dynamic work environments where people can learn from each other, is at least as important as the establishment of physical facilities, user's critical mass is still limited in more peripheral areas and rural coworking spaces tend to be smaller operations, making it rarely economical in the short-term. This is an ongoing challenge for the development of rural coworking as it will be discussed in the next section. Given lower profitability compared to urban settings, the coworking spaces market is less developed in rural areas, therefore public sector involvement is more likely to be needed. Unlike in urban settings where more of coworking spaces are privately owned, the infrastructures in rural areas are more likely to be established and co-managed through the public sector (Merrel et al., 2022). A study on Denmark also highlights the need to mobilise urban coworkers in the pursuit of rural coworking, and to capitalise on their experience and competencies in establishing, developing, and running a coworking space (Fisker, 2016).

Coworking in rural areas is also more diverse than in the cities (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2021a). While most of the studies in the literature regarding typologies for collaborative workspaces focus on the urban context (see 'CORAL Glossary 2022' for a detailed review), some classifications have been proposed specifically for coworking spaces in rural areas. Bages (2021) identifies different types of coworking spaces according to their purpose (coworking, coliving, third places), location (fixed, pop-up coworking, virtual spaces), additional services of the coworking (fablab<sup>3</sup>, café coworking, accelerator, incubator), and users' professions (generic or specialised). All these options can be combined with each other into hybrid spaces. An alternative classification is offered by the study 'Rural Coworking'<sup>4</sup>, published by the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2021b), which distinguishes seven

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<sup>3</sup> Digital manufacturing workshop. Coworkers can use the machinery and managers are there to help or offer training.

<sup>4</sup> This study evaluated around 200 qualitative interviews with operators, users, and experts of rural coworking spaces. It thus represents the first comprehensive scientific examination of coworking in rural areas in Germany.

different business models in rural areas in Germany, including: the classic Coworking space, the Commuter Port, Bottom Hub, the Retreat space, the Workation space, the New Village Centre, and the Housing and work projects. Annex 1 provides definitions and descriptions of these various types of rural coworking spaces mentioned above.

In terms of users, the existing literature suggests that coworkers used to be mainly freelancers, but following an early grassroots phase, coworking largely turned into a neo-corporate model of work, appealing also to other subjects such as (social) entrepreneurs and startappers, predominantly in the tech sector (Gandini and Cossu, 2021). After the Covid-19 pandemic, remote workers and digital nomads became other potential users of coworking spaces (see Box 1). In their analysis of coworking spaces in Italy, Mariotti and Lo Russo (2023) found that, at the end of 2021, 45% of managers of coworking spaces in the South of the country experienced an increase in remote workers in the previous 12 months.

### **Box 1: Co-working and digital nomads**

Digital nomads refer to professionals who perform work digitally over the Internet to enable a lifestyle of constant traveling and expat living (Schlagwein, 2018). However, the term is increasingly used in ways that are broader or different to its original concept. Cook (2023) provides a new taxonomy which can help researchers and policymakers to better evaluate the phenomenon. It classifies the digital nomad model into five distinct types (freelance digital nomads - individual knowledge workers, who work freelance whilst travelling; digital nomad business owners - run registered businesses requiring more complexity than the skilled freelancer model; salaried digital nomads – employed by a company, with a salary and a contract; experimental digital nomads – aspiring digital nomads not yet earning or generating revenue; and armchair digital nomads – thinking of becoming a digital nomads in the next years).

Digital nomadism gradually expanded during the 2010s and has gained further traction since the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden expansion of remote work. While it is difficult to quantify the extent of the phenomenon, as the number of people able to work fully remotely continues to rise globally, the number of digital nomads can be expected to grow. A Google.com search on [“digital nomads”] in November 2023 generated 19,800,000 results. This is up from 1,300,000 in January 2019 and 5,700,000 in September 2020 (Herman and Paris, 2020).

Coworking spaces are emerging businesses in popular nomad destinations (Chevtaeva and Denizci-Guillet, 2021). A coworking space is the natural working environment for digital nomadism as it provides the physical and social infrastructure with all necessary amenities sometimes even in combination with coliving options. Akhavan et al. (2023) provide some case studies about digital nomads working in coworking spaces in France, Italy, and Portugal.

Another sign of growing interest in this lifestyle is the growth in the support services offered, ranging from coliving space to legal and technical assistance and so on (Herman and Paris, 2020). Note, for instance, some of the major platforms of accommodation services: Booking.com has a dedicated webpage on the best destinations for digital nomads, while Airbnb has published a guide on how to become a digital nomad. Among the key criteria for choosing the preferred destination country are typically a lower cost of living (relative to the country of origin), the presence of a diverse community, opportunities for various leisure activities, and the good weather. The website

[NordLayer](#) provides an overview of where each country in the world stands in terms of Global Remote Work Index, including safety, internet quality, tourism attractiveness, cost of living, and English proficiency. In Europe, the three most popular digital nomad destinations in 2023, as identified by Planet Nomad, were Spain, Portugal, and Estonia (Louis, 2023).

Several initiatives have been promoted in different EU countries to attract digital nomads and facilitate their stay in the destination country by offering a “digital nomad visa”. These include for instance Estonia, Greece, Malta, Croatia, Portugal, and Spain. In addition, other countries offer freelancer visas that may appeal to digital nomads (e.g. Germany and Czech Republic). A study by Sánchez-Vergara et. al (2023) explores how countries develop policies to attract digital nomads, support business development and position themselves as ideal territories for these knowledge workers.

## Challenges of establishing and running rural coworking spaces

According to the 2023 Global Coworking Survey, the major problem of coworking spaces in general is to attract new members and users (Foertsch, 2023a). For rural and remote regions which exhibit a declining and aging population, this issue can be even more prominent, notably due to a relatively poor access to a wide range of services. In Europe, the rural-urban gap in access to essential services (e.g. schools, hospitals, public transport) persist, both in terms of a considerably greater distance to travel to access such services, as well as the quality of the services provided (Eurofound, 2023a). Research shows that, besides landscape amenities and cultural dynamism, local services are a key factor of attractiveness for residential migration (Flipo et al., 2022).

Restricted access to reliable and high-speed internet in rural and marginalized areas can also limit the possibilities of remote work. While basic broadband access is almost universal across the EU, the same cannot be said about high-speed internet connections, with a stark digital divide persisting between cities and other areas within Member States (European Commission, 2022).

Besides attracting more (young) users, another challenge for rural areas is to profile the needs of remote workers and how to motivate them to visit and use coworking spaces more regularly. The lack of public awareness around the possibility to use remote working hubs and their potential can be a barrier on its own, which points to the need of actively promoting the initiatives among the local community. Connecting coworking spaces to the local population and adapting the business model to specific local needs is a significant challenge (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2021a). Enhancing the place-based distinctiveness of rural coworking spaces by ‘providing services to more isolated and marginalised groups, as well as the essential facilities and network brokerage demanded by rural coworkers’, is a promising avenue to ‘bridge spatial, social and skills divides while supporting local cohesion and integration’ (Bosworth et al, 2023 p. 557).

Building a critical mass of users in rural places is crucial for the development of coworking hubs. Funding and support from the public sector actors are key to make rural coworking spaces financially viable and to support their growth, notably during the initial phases. For instance, the renewal of premises or conversion of existing spaces into community hubs can be a complex and resource-



intensive process. For Italy, Mariotti and Lo Russo (2023) shows that coworking in peripheral and rural areas are mainly "public" or mixed (public-private), and this contributes to their economic sustainability. However, the complexity of the projects' financial reporting procedures, notably when different public and private stakeholders are involved, can be challenging especially in small territories due to smaller administrative capacities.

At the same time, a fundamental question could be asked on whether places of work should be subsidised by public funding, notably in a post pandemic context where many firms have decided to reduce their office surface and save on their buildings' expenses<sup>5</sup>, as noted by Flipo et al. (2022). It was also found that public subsidies can crowd out private operators from the local markets, when offering cheaper rates (Knapp and Sawy, 2021). This makes difficult for private providers to operate in peripheral regions, especially if the business is not the owner of the building and must pay rent accordingly. This poses a problem for the public authorities since, on the one hand, they have an interest in private investors operating coworking spaces, but on the other hand, they are themselves in the role of operator.

Bureaucratic delays and blockages due to inadequate political support from public administrations and local entities have also been identified as a challenge in some instances. Such support is very important notably in the initial phase, for instance in the identification of the appropriate legal instruments to launch the coworking spaces. An underlying strategic view on the opportunities of a deeper sustainable change in terms of attracting social and economic capital can contribute to the success of initiatives aimed at supporting rural remote work.

## **Box 2: European cooperation projects on collaborative workspaces in rural and peripheral areas**

Coworking in rural areas is an innovative concept that can potentially do a lot to encourage and enable people to live and work in rural areas. Yet, existing challenges might hinder its further development. In this context, sharing experiences and exchanging with partners across different countries offer valuable opportunities to better understand the key success factors for the development of coworking spaces in rural areas, the best practices in terms of creating and managing these spaces, and the potential economic, social, and environmental advantages. Some recent EU-funded collaborative initiatives and cooperation projects are presented here below.

### **CoLabora – European coworking project**

At the European level, one relevant example of transnational cooperation project aimed at further developing coworking in rural areas, through pooling of competences and experiences among seven partner countries, is the CoLabora – European coworking project. Launched before the Covid-19 pandemic in 2018 and ended in autumn 2022, CoLabora gathered seven Local Action Groups (LAG) across the European Union (from Spain, France, Germany, Latvia, and Wales), all located in rural areas. These different LAG were interested on working on the creation of coworking spaces in their territory or giving support to existing rural coworking spaces, as a tool for rural dynamization. The

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<sup>5</sup> Research from real estate agent Savills shows that the average European office vacancy rates increased in 2022, notably in Paris, La Défense (with a vacancy rate of 15.1% in Q2 2023), Dublin (14.9%), and Budapest (12.6%).

project was supported by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). As part of the outcomes of the project, a methodological toolbox was developed. This includes case studies of coworking spaces, a networking activities toolkit, training modules and a rural coworking guide.

### **European Cooperation in Science and Technology Action CA18214 'The geography of New Working Spaces and the impact on the periphery'**

Another example of EU-funded collaboration initiative, involving 160 research partners from 35 Countries, is the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action CA18214 '[The geography of New Working Spaces and the impact on the periphery](#)'. It focuses on i) sharing the scientific outcomes on new working spaces (definitions, typologies, and geographical distributions) ii) comparing the best practices and direct and indirect impacts with a particular focus on the periphery iii) sharing the policy tools across the countries. The activities started in October 2019 and run until March 2024. The first European Workshop was held in May 2022, and it gathered policymakers at the European and national level, stakeholders (e.g. practitioners), and researchers to discuss i) the research types and models of New Working Spaces, ii) the direct and indirect effects and mechanisms that the Action is going to promote, as well as iii) the conditions for the transferability of supporting policies to different European contexts. The last meeting took place in February 2024 when external researchers, practitioners and policymakers met and discussed the results of the project, in particular the impact of new working spaces on regions, individuals and on an organizational level, and the development of a toolbox for policymaking.

### **CORAL- ITN**

The European project [CORAL- ITN](#), a Marie Skłodowska Curie Innovative Training Network (2021-2024), is also of relevance in this context. The project aims to unpack the latent dynamics and impacts of collaborative workspaces in rural and peripheral areas and integrate them as development tools in local and regional policies to open up new potentials for socio-economic development. Pantheon University in Greece is the main proposer of the project, which provided grants to 15 PhD students. As part of the project, training is provided to young researchers to better understand and support the development processes of collaborative workspaces in rural and peripheral areas in the EU, their wider impacts at the local and the regional level, as well as at the level of the individual worker and the enterprise. Within the framework of this project, a survey was implemented in 2023 to understand the impacts and potentialities of Collaborative Workspaces, with an emphasis on the ones located in peripheral and rural areas.

### **CoWorCare**

The [CoWorCare project](#), also co-funded (ARPAF fund) by the European Union, was developed within the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region. Running from June 2022 to November 2023, the project aimed at creating an online information platform for coworking and coworkation spaces in the Alpine areas in combination with child and elderly care to enable especially young mothers and fathers, and more generally women who still do the vast amount of unpaid care, to work in a creative environment close to their homes or holiday stay and having at the same time their children/elderly cared for in or nearby the coworking structure. This would enable more young families and single parents to take part in the local labour market, reducing commuter traffic and establishing a more cooperative and open working culture also in (remote) alpine valleys. The lead organisation was Kmetijsko gozdarska zbornica Slovenije – Kmetijsko gozdarski zavod Maribor,

Slovenia. Other project partners included organisations from Italy (Plattform Land, Bozen and University of Milan - UNIMONT) and Germany (CoworkationALPS and CoWorkLand).

### **Rural Coworking project**

Another EU-level initiative is the [Rural Coworking project](#). Supported by the EU Coworking Assembly, the Official European Association of Coworking Spaces & Communities, the initiative intends to map and connect the community of Rural and Suburban Coworking spaces in Europe. As of October 2023, the Rural Coworking Project had completed its first development phase, which included identifying local ambassadors for rural coworking across Europe, and mapping rural and suburban Coworking spaces in Europe. For the second phase, the project aims at establishing “an online community to share experiences, best practices, and success stories; a place to develop our knowledge and skills, foster peer learning, and collectively enhance our ability to create sustainable and thriving ‘Rural hubs’; a grassroots, participatory organization which can enter into public-private partnerships, and collectively seek funding and support at the local, regional, national, and EU levels”.

## Publicly funded initiatives supporting the expansion of co-working spaces outside large urban centres

At the national and local level, several initiatives have been launched or received significant additional funding – as in the case of France – since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic to support remote work in rural, peripheral, or marginalised areas via the creation and expansion of coworking spaces. This section describes a selection of those identified by the Network of Eurofound Correspondents (see Annex 2), based on national sources (desk research and exchanges with relevant stakeholders) and information available up to January 2024. While all initiatives benefit entirely or partly from public funding, they are very different in nature, geographical scope, and actors involved. The amount of information available also largely varies, notably due to differences in the stage of implementation.

Some of the projects that were launched before Covid-19 have significantly contributed to the shift in working practices and the popularity of the rural coworking phenomenon in the recent years. Two notable examples are the Cowocat Rural project in the Spanish region of Catalonia and CoWorkLand in Germany.

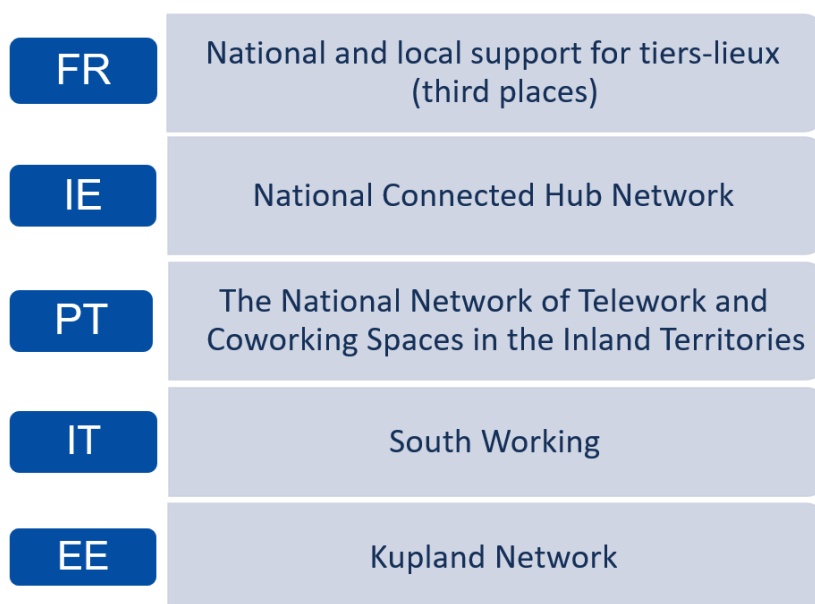
The cooperation project [Cowocat Rural](#) was founded in 2014/2015 to transfer an earlier pioneering experience of coworking to all rural areas in Catalonia. Currently, more than 40 coworking spaces are part of the network and 10 LAG are involved. The project, which receives funds from EU and from the Catalan Government, aims to boost the creation of employment and economic activity in rural areas and to promote the values of coworking and teleworking in the participating territories. It also promotes and facilitates the mobility of coworkers, between the spaces located in the rural areas of Catalonia and with urban spaces, via a RuralPass programme. While the project was born before the pandemic, several actions were implemented in recent years, including the launch of the first ever Coworkfest in 2022, a one-week long rural coworking festival, which was then repeated in 2023.

In Germany, [CoWorkLand](#) is another example of a well-established pre-Covid initiative. CoWorkLand is a cooperative for people who want to set up a coworking space in rural areas, which was officially established in 2019. The goal of the cooperative is to support its members in setting up and operating coworking spaces at all levels and to give its users the opportunity to work remotely in as many places in rural areas as possible. The CoWorkLand cooperative works with a decentralised approach (i.e. regional offices), so that there are always local contacts in the various regions of Germany who can understand local needs and provide specialist advice. Temporary pop-ups coworking are also used for a trial period to establish which kind of coworking space would flourish best in a certain area, based on interviews with users and local businesses. During the pandemic a number of initiatives were launched such as in September 2020, Lab4Land, a rural accelerator for sustainable start-ups in Schöppenstedt, born in cooperation between CoWorkLand, DSTATION and the district of Wolfenbüttel.

Next, five initiatives supporting the expansion of co-working spaces outside large urban centres in France, Ireland, Portugal, Italy, and Estonia are presented and discussed in detail (see Figure 1). While the selection is not intended to be exhaustive of all existing initiatives started during or post

Covid-19, these were particularly significant in terms of geographical scope, structured management and governance, and public funding support.

Figure 1: Initiatives supporting the expansion of co-working spaces outside large urban centres



## National and local support for tiers-lieux (third places) – France

### *Emergence and growth of the movement*

The term “*tiers-lieux*” (“third places” in English) defines physical places dedicated to a variety of activities, where the creation of economic value is linked with social utility, and work mixes with other aspects of collective life. They allow for social interactions and informal exchange, as well as promoting creativity, co-creation and collective projects. A tier-lieu can be for example a coworking space, a fablab, an “*atelier partagé*” (shared workshop<sup>6</sup>), a makerspace or hackerspace<sup>7</sup>, a “*garage solidaire*” (solidarity garage) or a repair café<sup>8</sup>.

Tiers-lieux participate in the economic development of a territory and animate a community of people who work and live there. They are spaces conducive to innovation and business development (by hosting entrepreneurs, project holders or self-employed workers) and alternatives to working from home, providing an appropriate setting, ensuring good material conditions, maintaining social links and better reconciliation between personal and professional life.

<sup>6</sup> Shared workshops allow the pooling of spaces and materials used for creation and manufacturing. In these places, we find artists and artisans working in the manual, artistic and digital professions.

<sup>7</sup> A makerspace is a community-operated workspace where people can come together to create or invent things, either using traditional crafts or technology. Often used as synonym, a hackerspace is a place where people with common interests, often in computers, machining, technology, science, digital art or electronic art, can meet, socialize and collaborate.

<sup>8</sup> Solidarity garages offer the sale or repair of vehicles at solidarity prices for people facing economic hardship. Repair Café is place where people gather and work on repairing objects of everyday life to reduce waste.

It is difficult to date the emergence of tiers-lieux. There are links with the "alternative places" created by artists of all disciplines and activists in the 1960s, where they occupied places to develop 'their activities, liberated as far as possible from norms, hierarchies, modes of recognition, divisions, established models...' while at the same time weaving 'collaborations with the residents of nearby neighbourhoods' (Simonot, 2019). However, it is between 2010 and 2015 that the concept of tiers-lieux was adopted. The tiers-lieux then began to come together in informal groups and to structure themselves to work with public players, marking the start of the first networks such as [La compagnie des Tiers-Lieux](#) and [La coopérative des Tiers-Lieux](#). It was also the start of the Tiers Lieux commons, with the drafting of the [Tiers Lieux Manifesto](#) in 2013 and the creation of [Movilab](#) (the Tiers-Lieux wiki).

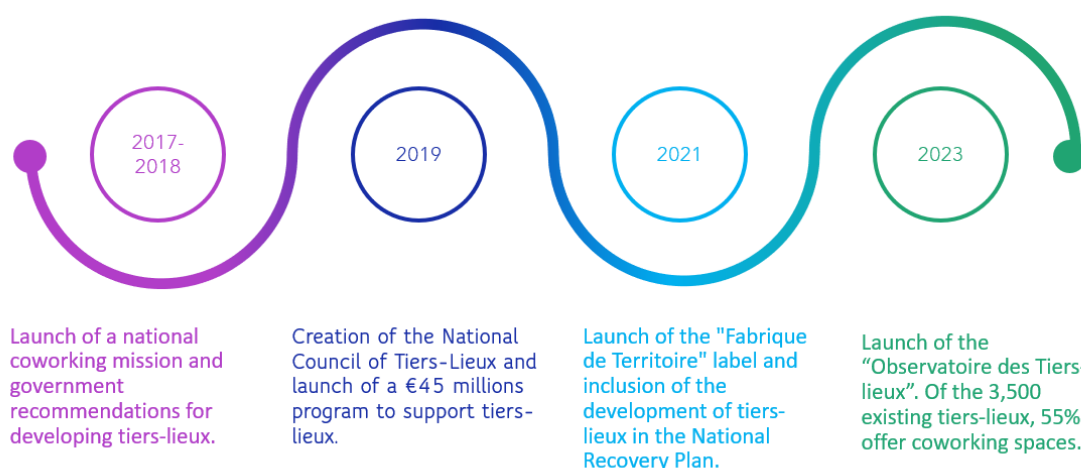
It took then years for the government to take an interest in this phenomenon, seeing it as an additional tool for regional planning and revitalising employment in certain areas. It was only in 2017 that it launched a national coworking mission with the [Fondation travailler autrement](#). The think-tank was entrusted by the Secretary of State to the Minister for Territorial Cohesion to provide an analysis of coworking spaces and their deployment, in conjunction with local players, local elected representatives, users, businesses and social partners. In the framework of this mission, an online public consultation was launched in 2018. It followed the publication of a report in 2018 which marked the official recognition of the Tiers-Lieux movement and proposed to the government recommendations for developing tiers-lieux (Fondation Travailler Autrement, 2018).

In 2019, the government announced the implementation of some recommendations, such as the creation of a [Conseil national des tiers-lieux](#) (National Third-Place Council), made up of tiers-lieux actors; the launch of the [Nouveaux lieux, nouveaux liens initiative](#) (New Places, New Links programme) managed by the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion (ANCT) and the 300 *Fabriques des Territoires*<sup>9</sup> Call for Projects with a budget of €45 million.

Figure 2: Timeline of national and local support for tiers-lieux

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<sup>9</sup> A *Fabrique de Territoire* is a resource centre for the network of third-places in the region, capable of increasing the effectiveness of other third places' actions in the communities they serve, particularly in medium-size towns and rural areas.



### *Financial support*

To finance the interministerial programme of support for tiers-lieux, led by ANCT, the government supported the creation of the France Tiers-Lieux association in 2019, which helped the structuring of the professional sector together with the Conseil National des Tiers-Lieux. A year later, the government included the development of tiers-lieux in the National Recovery Plan (*France Relance*) in response to the Covid-19 crisis, with the launch of calls for projects.

In August 2021, the Prime Minister announced a total budget of €130 million (Le Monde, 2021) - half of which came from France Relance recovery plan - which concretely translates into 5 measures in favour of the structuring of these tiers-lieux on the territory:

1. Creation of 100 local factories (tiers-lieux dedicated to production);
2. Support for the development of professional training in tiers-lieux;
3. Financing of 3,000 civic service missions<sup>10</sup> in tiers-lieux;
4. Training of France Services<sup>11</sup> digital advisors in tiers-lieux;
5. Strengthening the national and territorial network of tiers-lieux (with a budget of €4 millions over 3 years).

In addition to the increased support for the creation of tiers-lieux as part of the National Recovery Plan, the government launched the *Fabrique de Territoire* label in March 2021, which made it possible to finance the operation and support the development of tiers-lieux. In 2023, the government decided to launch a new wave of *Fabrique de Territoire* accreditations with 3 objectives:

1. To continue the territorial coverage already underway by concentrating on territories that do not currently have third-places with the *Fabrique de Territoire* label;

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<sup>10</sup> *Service Civique* is a programme funded by the French Government, which aims to give young people the opportunity to develop personal skills while participating in volunteering activities (see Service Civique on [www.youthcluster.org](http://www.youthcluster.org))

<sup>11</sup> France Services is a network of facilities that combine physical reception with digital support, bringing together several public services in one place.

2. To enable the deployment of places and services adapted to local needs;
3. To strengthen the development of third-places with a productive dimension.

Following a regional review by government departments, the ANCT, the GIP France Tiers-lieux (France Third-Party Places) and qualified individuals, 82 projects were selected to receive a lump-sum grant of €50,000 for one year to support their development. Most of these projects are led by associations or businesses and involve municipalities of all sizes (from 207 inhabitants for the smallest to almost 150,000 for the largest).

Other initiatives followed, including in 2023 the launch of the *Observatoire des Tiers-lieux*<sup>12</sup> (Observatory of Third Places), a tool for analyzing, producing and disseminating knowledge about third places. The observatory includes visualization and analysis of national data collected as part of the 2023 census of third places, which was launched in cooperation with many partners<sup>13</sup>. The census was completed at the end of April 2023 and results released at the end of 2023.

According to the 2023 report of France Tiers-lieux, 49% of tiers-lieux received funds from the State. Besides national government, tiers-lieux often also receive other public subsidies, mainly from regional and local level actors (including municipalities and EPCI - *Établissement public de coopération intercommunale* - departments or cities)<sup>14</sup>. Around one fifth of tiers-lieux (20% in 2023) receive funds from the EU. While there are not specific details about the use of public funds, these go mainly to the structure that manages the tiers-lieu (association, private company, etc.), and not to the users. The main expenditure items for tiers-lieux in 2023, according to the *Observatoire des Tiers-Lieux*, are: operating expenses, including rent and utility bills (for 91% of tiers-lieux); staff costs (81%); material investments (66%); communication (49%); and works, including painting, carpentry, etc. (41%).

Finally, for half of tiers-lieux funding comes from their own resources, which are mainly related to: rental of workspace (for 48% of tiers-lieux, which shows that coworking is an important element in the viability of these tiers-lieux); membership and subscription (for 44% of tiers-lieux, generally when the third place is managed by a non-profit association); and sale of services (for 40% of tiers-lieux). The other sources of income are marginal (France Tiers-lieux, 2021).

According to the France Tiers-Lieux reports, the number of tiers-lieux is increasing rapidly, from 1,800 in 2018, to 2,500 in 2021, and 3,500 in 2023. An online interactive map allows to locate tiers-lieux across different regions in France<sup>15</sup>. In 2023, the 3,500 tiers-lieux reached a turnover of €882 millions, which was 3.5 times higher than in 2021, according to the France Tiers-Lieux<sup>16</sup>. About 49% of the turnover comes from public subsidies. These public subsidies are provided mainly by the State (55%),

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<sup>12</sup> <https://observatoire.francetierslieux.fr/>

<sup>13</sup> In cooperation with regional networks, national networks (such as RFFLabs, the network of intermediate and independent places), Commune Mesure, all the ministries that support Tiers-lieux and the Agence Nationale de la Cohésion des Territoires.

<sup>14</sup> In addition to these main players, there are many other organisations involved in the funding of tiers-lieux, such as: public employment service (Pôle Emploi, Mission locale), public administrations (Directe, DRAC, DRJSCS...) and Family allowance funds (CAF).

<sup>15</sup> <https://cartographie.francetierslieux.fr/>

<sup>16</sup> France Tiers-Lieux, [Les tiers-lieux, acteurs incontournables de nos territoires](#), infographie, 2023



the regions (53%), the departments (43%), the municipalities (43%) or pool of municipalities (36%) and the EU (20%).

### *Governance of the third places*

Although there are no legal requirements for defining a tiers-lieu, the public authorities have adopted 5 criteria for defining a third place as part of their funding initiatives. In fact, these criteria come from the France Tiers-Lieux report "*Nos territoires en actions*" (Our territories in action) that has identified five elements of a third place:

1. A strong territorial base: these are places that respond to local needs and, to do so, engage in local cooperation, mobilising local players - public authorities, businesses, associations, universities, etc. Fully integrated into their local ecosystem, tiers-lieux adapt the services they offer to the needs and dynamics of the areas in which they are located.
2. A community of committed local players: tiers-lieux bring together a community of players (professionals, partners, local authorities, associations, etc.) who develop innovative projects for their area, by pooling facilities, resources and skills.
3. Shared governance: all stakeholders, and in particular users of the site, are involved in defining and guiding the local project.
4. Hybridization of activities: a wide range of activities and types of public (employees, self-employed, jobseekers, trainees, etc.) are catered for, and the models are balanced between profit-making activities (services, training, rental, catering, etc.) and general interest activities (digital inclusion, getting people back to work, social work, etc.).
5. A dynamic of experimentation and innovation: spaces dedicated to practical, do-it-yourself activities, tiers-lieux are scalable and adaptable, so they encourage the emergence of new collective projects.

According to data from the *Observatoire des Tiers-Lieux* in 2023, 23% of the existing tiers-lieux resulted from a citizen initiative and 26% from an association (NGO), but only 14% from local authorities. In terms of management, while 51% of tiers-lieux are managed by an association, the second most common form of governance is a private company (19%). There are three other forms of governance: 1) co-operative societies (SCOP) or co-operatives in the form of a Société coopérative d'intérêt collectif (SCIC), which bring together individuals or legal entities around a common project combining economic efficiency, local development and social utility (9%); 2) Établissement public de coopération intercommunale (EPCI), which is the technical name in France for inter-municipal structures (11%); 3) schools or universities (3%).

According to the *Observatoire des tiers-lieux*, the teams running the tiers-lieux consisted of 137,000 volunteers and 24,700 permanent employees in 2023 (4 times more than in 2021); 61% of the tiers-lieux have employees in permanent employment contract (among them 70% are women). Moreover, a majority (60%) of tiers-lieux have communication officers. They are followed by a "facilitator" (in 43% of tiers-lieux) who is in charge of running, organising and managing the space, administrative and financial assistants (57%), and project managers (50%) and event organisers (50%).

In terms of governance, the Board of Directors is the main body responsible for strategy. But unlike traditional organisations, in 32% of tiers-lieux, employees were involved in strategic decisions in 2021, and in 17% of cases they even took the main decisions. According to the France Tiers-Lieux 2021 report, this reflects the openness of governance and the cooperative way in which some tiers-lieux

centres operate. The occupants (users) also have a role to play in governance, and in 25% of tiers-lieu centres they are involved in it.

According to the France Tiers-Lieux report 2023, although coworking remains the most widespread activity, each third place is different and adapts itself to the local reality, around a diversity of activities, approaches, and services. Around 28% of tiers-lieux have a fablab, hackerspace or makerspace dimension, 31% cultural activities, 16% shared craft workshops, 15% living labs, 16% shared kitchens or culinary laboratories, 9% farmland or shared gardens. The share of coworking seems to have decreased, according to the France Tiers-Lieux report 2023: 55% of tiers-lieux provide spaces for coworking/shared offices, before cultural activities (31%), fablab, hackerspace or makerspace dimension (28%), shared craft workshops 16%), living labs (15%), farmland or shared gardens 10% and shared kitchens or culinary laboratories (6%).

According to the *Observatoire des Tiers-lieux*, third-places have also built partnerships: in 2023, 83% of third places have partnerships with public players, for example to provide a public service, which is the case in 14% of third places; 50% have partnerships with educational bodies and 47% have partnerships with job centres and employment inclusion structures. In addition, 58% of third places are developing training and apprenticeship initiatives; 31% offer digital mediation activities and 46% are involved in the circular economy and the re-use of materials.

The aim of tiers-lieux is to offer better working conditions and a pleasant (friendly and lively) and appropriate (equipped and functional) surroundings. The layout of a coworking space is designed to provide good working conditions and facilitate interaction between members. It is a mix of closed spaces, open spaces and convivial spaces or spaces dedicated to experimentation (fablabs, workshops). The emphasis is on modularity, allowing the space to evolve according to the needs of its community. The range of services on offer (cultural activities events, cafés, catering, training, leisure activities, etc.) and activities also contribute to the fulfilment of those who work there. Tiers-lieux also make it possible to maintain or even attract professionals who want to work close to home, for all or part of their time. According to France Tiers-Lieux report (2021), 68% of tiers-lieux are prepared to support companies in the deployment of telework for their employees in tiers-lieux, which underlines the significant potential for developing telework outside the place of residence of teleworkers. According to the *Observatoire des Tiers-Lieux*, in 2023 30% of coworking space users were teleworking employees (in 1,960 tiers-lieux).

### *The users and the use of third places*

About 2.2 million people came to carry out projects or work in a third place in 2019, and between 100,000 and 150,000 people worked every day in a tiers-lieu in 2021. However, by their very nature, tiers-lieux are used on a discontinuous rather than a permanent basis. According to the *Observatoires des Tiers lieux*, in 2023, 69% of the tiers-lieux sites were used by employees, followed by job-seekers (57%), people undergoing vocational retraining (52%), beneficiaries of minimum social benefits (46%), students (45%), family with children (43%), people in labour market inclusion process (37%) and refugees (12%). A developing phenomenon, which has been being tested<sup>17</sup>, is to allow employees of

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<sup>17</sup> In 2021, France Tiers-Lieux launched the experimental project "Simplifying teleworking in tiers-lieux", in response to ANACT's Fonds pour l'Amélioration des Conditions de Travail (FACT). The aim of the project was to

a company to work partly in a tiers-lieu rather than at the head office of their company or at home, by teleworking. The results of the experiment on the links between companies and tiers-lieux for employee coworking were published in September 2023<sup>18</sup>. In March 2024, based on this pilot project, the France Tiers-Lieux launched a handbook<sup>19</sup> which deals with the practical and operational aspects of setting up telework in third places in the form of three questions:

1. What are the advantages of telework in third places?
2. How can it be set up?
3. What steps should be taken to avoid the occupational risks associated with this type of work?

The handbook is aimed at the different actors concerned with telework in third places: employers, teleworking employees, staff representatives and managers of third places.

The diversity of tiers-lieux, their management methods, their location, their comfort and their services make it impossible to give precise and reliable rates for the use of coworking spaces, especially as a majority of these places (54%), according to the France Tiers-Lieux report (2021), are developing pricing policies adapted to vulnerable groups, thus offering accessible rates. However, the data collected by *Relais d'Entreprises*, the leading network of tiers-lieux of business in rural and peri-urban areas, gives a good indication of the prices charged. *Relais d'Entreprises* has carried out a benchmark based on a study of the offers and prices advertised on the websites of the 49 tiers-lieux of business consulted throughout France (*Relais d'Entreprises*, 2022). For instance, for very small municipalities with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, the daily rate for an individual office can vary from 12 to 72 euros (from 6 to 36 euros in case of an open space/shared office).

While 38% of tiers-lieux were in large urban centres in 2023 (54% in 2018), 62% of them were outside the 22 French administrative metropolises in 2023 (52% in 2021). It is in the heart of the suburbs, priority neighbourhoods, medium-sized cities, small towns, and villages that the potential of tiers-lieux is fully realised (*France Tiers-lieux*, 2021). In its 2021 report, the France Tiers-lieux association emphasised that tiers-lieux were a response to a strong desire on the part of the French people for a less urban living environment and for reducing travel time between home and work. In 2023, 34% of tiers-lieux were in rural areas.

As a tiers-lieu is defined by its target public and the specific needs of the community, those developed in rural areas tend to differ from those created in urban environments in several ways. A third place in rural area would generally be a small-scale structure that meets the needs of a local community, and with fewer potential users but potentially more uses and activities. Given the diversity of the needs of local areas, a rural third place could offer several services rather than necessarily seeking to achieve a form of specialisation. In rural areas, the "coworking only" model is not enough to ensure

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remove obstacles and define acceptable conditions for teleworking in tiers-lieux for everyone (companies, social partners, workers and tiers-lieux). To achieve this, France Tiers-Lieux has been monitoring tiers-lieu-company pairs experimenting with teleworking in tiers-lieux for 4 to 12 months. The 4 tiers-lieux and coworking spaces involved in this approach, with partner companies, are Le Moulin Digital in the Drôme, La Station in Saint-Omer, the Wojo spaces in Paris and the Abbaye du Valasse in Seine-Maritime. The experiment took place during the second half of 2021. The aim was to define the conditions for successful teleworking in tiers-lieux.

<sup>18</sup> France Tiers-Lieux (2023), [Le télétravail en tiers-lieux : une exception à développer](#)

<sup>19</sup> France Tiers Lieux, [Guide "télétravailler en tiers-lieux"](#), 15 March 2024.

the long-term viability of a third place, even if this service is relevant for some users who want to stay close to home and avoid travelling to major cities.

A strong support and increased financial participation by local authorities is particularly important for the growth of tiers-lieux in rural areas. A note published in 2020 by the *Banque des Territoires* points out that 'unlike tiers-lieux in urban areas, those located in rural areas are generally faced with the absence of a viable economic model for private players (Banque des Territoires, 2020). This is because there is generally not enough critical mass of users to generate enough revenue, for example from renting out coworking spaces or digital production tools, to fund one or more management posts on a long-term basis'.

In rural areas, the contribution of tiers-lieux to economic development appears to be closely linked to the area's dynamism and quality of life, essential factors in attracting workers and entrepreneurs and creating links (Banque des Territoires, 2020). As a result, tiers-lieux are increasingly becoming a major tool in the service of local development.

Although an evaluation of the government interventions in favour of tiers-lieux is not available, the financial support is likely to have had a positive impact on their growth. According to Patrick Levy-Waitz the president of France Tiers-Lieux, 'Tiers-lieux are now an essential part of our communities. Both in terms of their numbers, which are growing all the time, and their actions at the crossroads of digital, ecological, economic, and social transitions. This spectacular growth reveals the capacity of civil society to come up with practical, pragmatic, and operational responses to the challenges of the 21st century.'

## National Connected Hub Network – Ireland

Mapping and investing in a network of remote working hubs across the country is among the main actions taken as part of Ireland's National Remote Work Strategy<sup>20</sup>. Published in January 2021, and led by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETI), the Strategy's objective is to ensure that remote working is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace in a way that maximises economic, social, and environmental benefits. While many actions involved collaboration between Departments and State Agencies, specific actors took leadership of their progression and committed to their delivery.

The National Connected Hub Network and the ConnectedHubs.ie platform were launched by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) and Western Development Commission (WDC) in May 2021. The WDC's Connected Hubs team serves as the project management office for Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), the project sponsor, on the implementation of this nationwide initiative. The project is steered by a Government Interdepartmental Group made up of key government departments and government agencies.

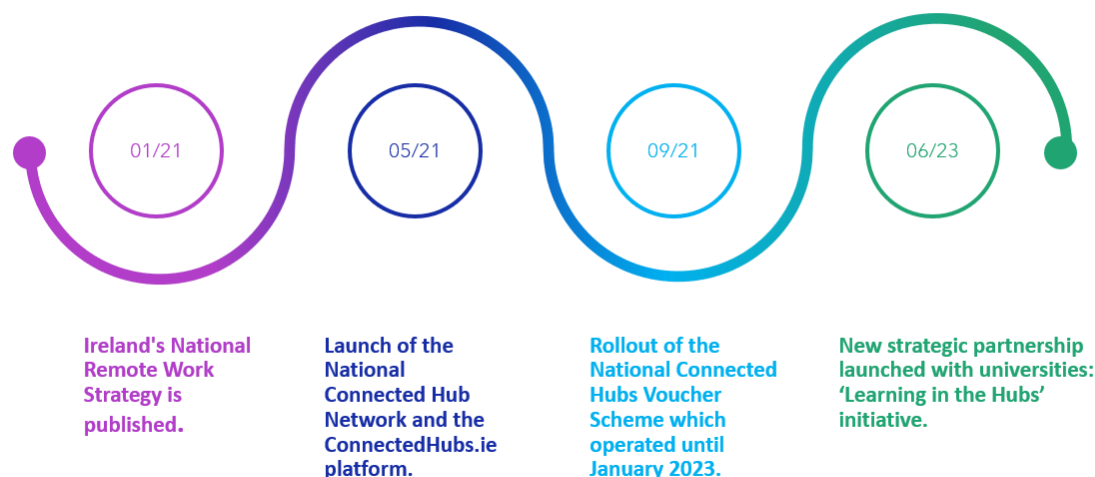
Government investment underpins the development of the National Hub Network. Two competitive funding calls were administered by DRCD with support from the Connected Hubs team in 2021 and 2022. Approximately €13 million was distributed to hubs all over Ireland to assist them with upgrades to their hub facilities. Another €1.2 has been invested in resourcing the Connected Hubs

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<sup>20</sup> <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/publications/making-remote-work.html>

team and developing the Connectedhubs.ie platform to accommodate the 400 hubs with mini microsites, a booking engine and other functionality to help manage their individual hubs. This 1.2 million includes staffing costs for the team of 5 employed to deliver the project.

Figure 3: Timeline of National Connected Hub Network



The National Connected Hub network aims to make remote working a reality throughout rural Ireland through facilitating workers' or employers' relocation away from large urban centres to avail of remote working opportunities in hubs. The initiative also provides a vehicle for individual hubs to come together under a shared identity to maximise the economic opportunity of remote working. ConnectedHubs.ie is Ireland's first ever digital hub network, and it is operated by The National Connected Hub Network. The platform offers a suite of booking, hub management and e-commerce applications to members of the Network.

The WDC Connected Hubs project team identified and mapped over 400 remote working hubs across the country. These hubs were then invited to join the Connected Hubs Network. The platform was designed to simplify and standardise the process of sourcing and booking spaces, desks, offices, and events in hubs for a day, a week, a month, a year or longer. Membership of the Connected Hubs Network is open to all existing and new hubs who wish to offer remote working services. As of January 2024, the number of hubs available on the network were 340.

Several measures have been taken to build the network, raise awareness and encourage use of the hubs. One of main actions taken was the rollout of the National Connected Hubs Voucher Scheme (NCHVS), which entitled everyone who registered to a total of three free days of hot desk/coworking in participating Connected Hubs in the Republic of Ireland. The scheme operated in two phases, and it ended in January 2023. In Phase 1 (Summer period), 234 hubs participated in the NCHVS, with 3,315 total number of bookings approved during this phase. In Phase 2 (Autumn / Winter period) 257 hubs participated in the NCHVS with 4,532 bookings approved during this phase. Since then, Connected Hubs have witnessed an increase in bookings, and following a survey at the end of December 2023, occupancy in the hubs stood at 76%.

In addition to this, Connected Hubs have continued to support the network in a number of ways: fortnightly network meetings since June 2021, the National Hubs Summit in November 2022 and November 2023, ongoing marketing campaigns (including supplying marketing material to hubs), regional knowledge sharing workshops (April – June 2023), as well as offering hubs the opportunity to participate in initiatives such as Learning in the Hubs (with TUS, the Technology University of the Shannon) and Art in the Hubs (with CIAS, the Contemporary Irish Art Society) and other similar initiatives planned for the future to encourage activity in the hubs. The Connected Hubs team has grown and provides support and advice on general queries with an IT support team available for more tailored 1-2-1 sessions for specific technical support.

Hubs are located throughout Ireland and a complete map is available online<sup>21</sup>. Excluding County Dublin, Cork City, Galway City, Limerick City and Waterford City, 81% of remaining hubs are in rural areas, based on data available as of February 2024 and based on a target of 400 hubs. This corresponds to 8,140 desks in rural hubs, of which 76% were in use on a regular basis at the time when information was gathered.

A classification has been developed by the Connected Hubs team to help to bring a level of understanding to the different categories of hubs that exist in the network<sup>22</sup>.

Five different types of hubs have been identified:

1. Enterprise Hub: Local enterprise driver providing space, facilities and services for start-up, High Performance Start-Ups (HPSUs), remote workers. Hosting events and acting as a connector for entrepreneur networks.
2. Scaling Hub: A step up from a general enterprise hub with strong focus on post start-up clients being supported through scaling and investment stages. High level services for acceleration and export development. Global entrepreneurship events and programmes.
3. Research and Development Hub: Specialist Hub usually attached to Higher Education Institutions (HEI) with focus on clients in early stages of Research and Development of new products and services. Provides office or desk space and access to meeting rooms, laboratories etc. A full-time manager and other staff are employed to support business development through incubation and acceleration.
4. Coworking Hub: Provides clients with private offices or desks with access to meeting rooms and event space. Offers clients plug & play facilities but not business support. Often co-located with other facilities and shared management.
5. Community & Enterprise Hub: A centre whose primary focus is to provide community services, and it has office space, dedicated and/or hot desks as well as meeting rooms available to clients. The business facilities will complement the community services and provide an income for the community. These hubs can be run by full-time managers, Community Employment staff and in some cases by volunteers. Some of these hubs drive innovative projects in the areas of sustainability and digitisation in their locale.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://connectedhubs.ie/hubs/search>

<sup>22</sup> <https://connectedhubs.ie/files/AECHubsClassificationSystem-Master.pdf>

Prices vary depending on the type of workspace and the hub. These prices are available for each hub on [connectedhubs.ie](https://connectedhubs.ie). For example, the Community Hub located in Clonmany, a village in Inishowen (County Donegal) in the northwest corner of Ireland, is among the hubs offering the most comprehensive range of facilities. Remote workers have access to office equipment such as reception, photocopying, printing, scanning, video conferencing and meeting rooms. There is also access to crafting facilities and workshops, state of the art gym, shower facilities, fitness, yoga classes, and community café. The digital hub also offers 24/7 access (keypad and fob access), standing desks, and 24-hour CCTV monitoring. The daily price for a hot desk is €12.50, while the monthly membership plan for a dedicated desk is €458.33. Meeting rooms can be booked for an additional cost of €10 or €20 for 30 minutes, depending on the room capacity (10 or 70 people).

In order to become a hub, the location must be providing services and facilities to support some of the following entities and potential users: SMEs, startups, remote workers, community groups and digital nomads. Hubs must also complete the National Hub Network survey as the first stage in registering to become part of the network. The information submitted is then reviewed by the Connected Hubs team, before suitability to join the Connected Hubs is discussed further.

There are an estimated 22,000 desks available in the National Hub Network nationwide, and 17,129 are in regular use as of the end of December 2024. Users work at the hubs on a mixture of temporary and permanent bases. A survey conducted in November 2022, with 526 usable responses from hub users, shows that most of them are employees (72%) and self-employed without paid employees (21%). Information and communication is the sector recording the highest hub usage (25%), followed by professional, scientific and technical activities including consulting (17%).

On 14 June 2023, Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys TD, and Minister for Further and Higher Education, Simon Harris TD, launched a new initiative that will allow third level students to complete college courses in their local remote working hub. 'Learning in the Hubs' is being rolled out initially in the Midlands under a strategic partnership between Connected Hubs and the Technology University of the Shannon (TUS). The pilot initiative is targeted at adult learners. The Connected Hubs team is also working on developing a corporate initiative aimed at educating employers on the benefits of using hubs as part of their talent retention and talent attraction strategy.

A key objective of the Connected Hubs project was to ensure that hubs became a permanent feature in government policy making. Over the past year, the DRCD, the DETI, and the Connected Hubs team in the WDC led the work on developing Ireland's first National Hub Strategy, through a series of consultation sessions carried out around the country. The process of drafting the strategy is now well underway with a target for publication set in 2024. The expectation for the upcoming years is to continue to promote rural regeneration and sustainability through the expansion of the network and the delivery of the actions that emerge from Ireland's National Hub Strategy.

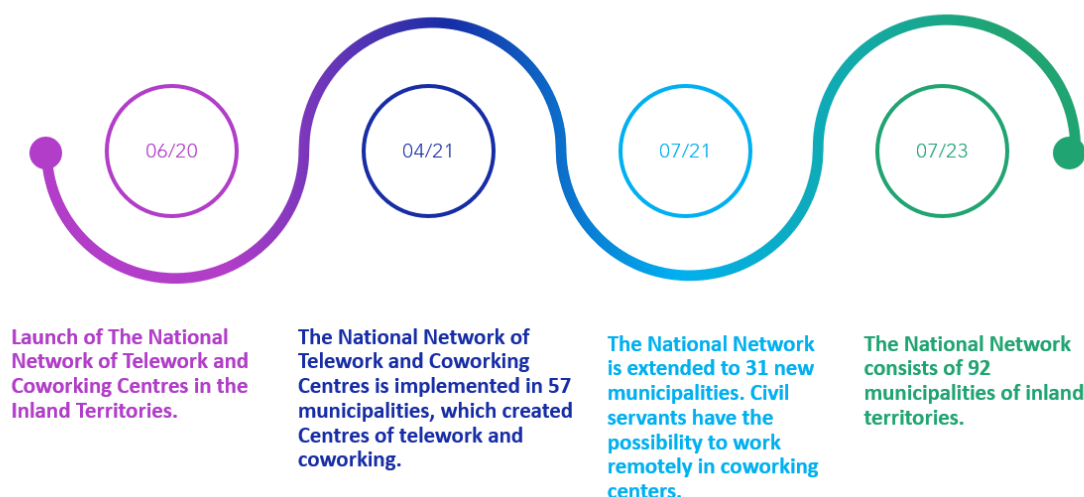
## The National Network of Telework and Coworking Spaces in the Inland Territories – Portugal

The National Network of Telework and Coworking Centres in the Inland Territories – “Telework in the Inland. Local Life, Global Work” (*Rede Nacional de Espaços de Teletrabalho e Coworking nos Territórios do Interior - “Teletrabalho no Interior. Vida Local, Trabalho Global”*) was launched in June 2020<sup>23</sup>. It is part of the Economic and Social Stabilisation Programme (*Programa de Estabilização Económica e Social - PEES*) approved by the Resolution of Council of Ministers 41/2020 of 6 June and is in line with the Programme for Inland Territories Enhancement (*Programa de Valorização do Interior*). One of the main objectives of the Network is to attract and retain people and companies in areas with low population density, with the ambition to contribute to reduce territorial inequalities.

Inland territories were chosen because i) rural areas are more vulnerable to economic fluctuations due to the low density of the active population; ii) they have strong advantages in responding to the current challenges, in particular congestion in large urban centres, traffic jams, high level of demand for some public services. Moreover, the pandemic showed the benefits of telework, making the inland territories even more attractive (Ministério da Coesão Territorial, 2021).

This measure was created by the Ministries of ‘Territorial Cohesion’ (*Coesão Territorial*) and Labour, Solidarity and Social Security (*Trabalho, Solidariedade e Segurança Social*) and its main objective is to promote and extend teleworking (measure 2.6), as a mean to support businesses in the interior regions. The implementation of this measure is based notably on the creation of Centres of coworking/telework in inland with the involvement of municipalities or technological infrastructure (2.6.2.2), for example technological centres, incubators, and other R&D infrastructures.

Figure 4: Timeline of The National Network of Telework and Coworking Spaces in the Inland Territories



<sup>23</sup> Government Press Release 30 June 2021 <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/gc22/comunicacao/noticia?i=rede-nacional-de-teletrabalho-no-interior-alargada-a-88-municipios-e-aberta-aos-funcionarios-publicos>



The initiative is supported with European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funds amounting to €20 million. The main beneficiaries of the funds are the municipalities and technological infrastructures of inland territories of Portugal mainland.

In the first phase of implementation of this measure, 57 municipalities signed the protocol (in April 2021) and created Centres of telework and coworking. In the second phase, initiated in July 2021, 31 additional municipalities joined the Network, thus representing 88 municipalities in total. Additionally, in the second phase, the possibility to work remotely in coworking centres was extended to civil servants, without any added costs for themselves or for the bodies or services to which they belong. This is part of the incentive programme for the relocation of civil servants to the Inland territories, provided by Decree-Law 40/2020 of July 17 (MTSSS, 2021). Box 3 illustrates this together with similar measures implemented across Europe to facilitate public sector employees to work outside main urban centres.

The operationalisation of the Network is carried out by the different Commissions for Regional Coordination and Development (*Comissões de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional - CCDR*) in close cooperation with Institute for Employment and Vocational Training (*Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional – IEFP*), whose commitment is based on providing support for the mobility of workers through the "*Trabalhar no Interior - Emprego Interior Mais*" Programme and on disseminating job offers located in inland territories through the "*Bolsa de Emprego do Interior*", aiming to promote the use of these spaces, both by self-employed workers and employees, under the terms of the national applicable legislation. Since June 2021, the General Directorate for Administration and Public Employment (*Direção-Geral da Administração e do Emprego Público - DGAEP*) operates the access by civil servants through the Public Employment Platform (*Bolsa de Emprego Público*).

The CCDRs monitor the implementation of the network in the different municipalities, with regard to compliance with the legislation in force (organisation of space, equipment, furniture). The commissions monitor this process through face-to-face visits, telephone contacts and questionnaires in order to be able to understand the needs and shortcomings of these spaces and report to the Regional Programme 2030, for possible framing in financing measures that will support the municipalities.

Municipalities from inland territories / Intermunicipal Community (comunidades intermunicipais - CIM) are the main actors involved. In the fourth quarter of 2023, the National Network covered 92 municipalities of inland territories: 21 from the North region; 37 from the Centre region; 19 from the region of Alentejo and 15 from the region of Algarve. A map of teleworking/coworking spaces in operation is made available on the government website<sup>24</sup>.

The municipalities are responsible for the operation of these spaces, accept use requests and define the annual calendar, timetable, and rules of use. All spaces should be properly equipped with computers, printers, and internet access. They must also be divided into differentiated work areas: private video call area, meeting areas and specific areas for presentations or training sessions.

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<sup>24</sup> Ministério da Coesão Territorial (2024) [Boletim trimestral do Programa de Valorização do Interior – 4.º trimestre 2023](#), p. 5.

Water, electricity, and cleaning service are provided by the municipalities. The facilities are covered by the municipalities' liability insurance.

These spaces are available to all citizens including foreigners, who want to work remotely, regardless of their employer, public or private, and of their status of employed, or self-employed. The Centres may be rented by freelancers and self-employed or companies, already in activity or in launching phase; associations or foundations, as well as any individual aged 18 and over and even individuals under 18 years, provided the authorisation is obtained from their legal representatives.

The agreed prices vary between municipalities. For example, in the municipality of Góis (Centre region), the rent for using the space is: daily €2; weekly €10; monthly €30 and annually €300<sup>25</sup>. According to the CCDR of Alentejo, in this region the average cost of using these spaces is between €20 and €50 per month, with internet, electricity and water included, and there is also the option of daily or weekly use. Meeting/training rooms have, in most cases, an additional cost. Civil servants may use the spaces without any cost.

According to the Head of Office of the Secretary of State for Regional Development (*Gabinete da Secretária de Estado do Desenvolvimento Regional*) it is not possible to characterise the users of these spaces. Many of these spaces are used on a temporary basis. In addition, it is not the intention of the network to register users or to impose a mandatory timeline for the use of the spaces.

Table 1 provides a temporary overview of the implementation of the network and its users. However, it is important to underline that the number of users is constantly changing since there is no obligation to frequent the centres.

**Table 1: Implementation of the National Network of Telework and Coworking Centres in the Inland Territories by regions, numbers of centres and number of users**

Regions	Number of municipalities that joined to the Network	Number of centres	Number of users
North	21	24	47
Centre	37	33	152
Alentejo	19	11	18
Algarve	15	10	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>249</b>

Source: Secretary of State for Regional Development (Gabinete da Secretária de Estado do Desenvolvimento Regional). Data relating to Q4 2023, updated in January 2024

For now, the National Network of Telework and Coworking Centres in the Inland Territories is an open-ended project. Additional municipalities are expected to be integrated in the network in the near future. The Commission for Regional Coordination and Development of Alentejo (*Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional do Alentejo- CCDR-A*) expects that this network will continue and evolve. At the moment, additional municipalities are interested in joining this network, one in the Centre Region in the municipality of Seia and three in the Alentejo Region: Azambuja, Barrancos and Cartaxo. Nevertheless, according to the CCDR of Alentejo, this measure still has a

<sup>25</sup>[www.cm-gois.pt/cmgois/uploads/writer\\_file/document/864/proposta\\_de\\_normas\\_de\\_funcionamento\\_coworking.pdf](http://www.cm-gois.pt/cmgois/uploads/writer_file/document/864/proposta_de_normas_de_funcionamento_coworking.pdf).

limited impact on the Alentejo region, whose demographic challenges are well recognised in Portugal.

### **Box 3: Measures to facilitate public sector employees to work outside main urban centers**

While most users of co-working spaces in rural areas are private sector workers, and primarily self-employed, a few targeted initiatives have been implemented in some Member States since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic to encourage and support public sector employees to work outside the capital region.

In Portugal, the Decree-Law 40/2020 of 17 July creates conditions to attract state employees to the inland by setting up coworking centres; by granting temporary monetary compensation; or by granting non-monetary compensation to state employees who telework in the inland, notably the increase of the duration of the holiday period by two days; the right to be exempted from work, up to five working days, in the period immediately before or after the beginning relocation, which is considered as effective work, among others. Adherence by civil servants is operationalised through a specific platform, in articulation with the Commissions for Regional Coordination and Development (*Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional - CCDR*) and the Telework Centres.

In Sweden, the [Samverket project](#) aimed at creating a national concept for co-working and innovation hubs for the public sector. Started in June 2021, this two-year project was funded by Vinnova, the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems, with the idea of finding new ways for government agencies to co-operate. The project owner is the County Administrative Board of Jämtland, and Gomorron Östersund AB, Niklas Huss AB and Vasakronan are the project partners. Two prototype co-working hubs have been run as part of the project, one in Stockholm and one in Östersund. Hub members include government agencies, municipalities, regions and municipal and regionally owned companies. Samverket's co-working model is built on four elements that jointly aim to enhance co-operation, learning and innovative power amongst members and their organisations: co-working, co-learning, co-creating, culture and community.

Another initiative is found in Malta, which recorded a very significant increase in the incidence of working from home among employees in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Eurofound, 2022). Despite the small size of the country, the Government move to remote working was heavily accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote workspaces were made available in the public service, to provide public officers with an alternative fully equipped office facility and to reduce their concentration in Valletta. By the end of October 2021, the Public Service had 15 remote workspaces within existing government buildings (Servizz.gov, the agency that brings all government services together, regional hubs). At the time it was announced that the number of such workspaces would double during 2023, but as of July hot desking was available in only 6 regional hubs due to lack of usage. The redundant remote workspaces were instead transformed into meeting spaces for Servizz.gov where one-to-one meetings with citizens could instead be carried out.

Some other initiatives of different nature, but with a similar ambition of attracting public sector employees to more peripheral areas, were launched after 2020. In October 2022, in Spain the Parliament approved a motion on the implementation of distance work scheme for the public sector

that contributes to territorial cohesion and fighting against depopulation (*Moción parlamentaria sobre la aplicación de un plan de trabajo a distancia para el sector público que contribuya a la cohesión territorial y la lucha contra la despoblación*). The motion urged the government to implement a remote work plan in the public sector to fight depopulation in rural areas by which all public workers living in rural areas and at high risk of depopulation shall be allowed to work from home up to 90% of their total working time, as long as they work in job positions in which telework is feasible.

In Italy, two separate initiatives were implemented at the local level in two of its largest cities. In Milan, the Municipality launched the “Milano Strategia di Adattamento 2020” (Milan 2020 Adaptation strategy) to cope with the Covid-19 restrictions. This strategy, which promotes the 15-minutes and the near-working concepts, sees “neighbourhood coworking space” as a service to inhabitants in the neighbourhood. The employees of the Municipality of Milan themselves were offered a place to work close to their home, by working either in decentralised branches owned by the municipality, disused offices of large local companies belonging to Assolombarda (the association of companies operating in the Metropolitan City of Milan and in nearby provinces), and in private coworking spaces (Mariotti et al., 2022).

The “SmartBo” network was launched in October 2019 through an agreement between Municipality of Bologna, Metropolitan City of Bologna and approximately 30 public and private organisations of the area. At the basis of this initiative there is, from the outset, the belief that remote working and “new ways of working” can contribute not only to a profound transformation of the world of work, but also to the sustainable development of Bologna and of its surrounding rural areas.

## South Working - Southern Italy

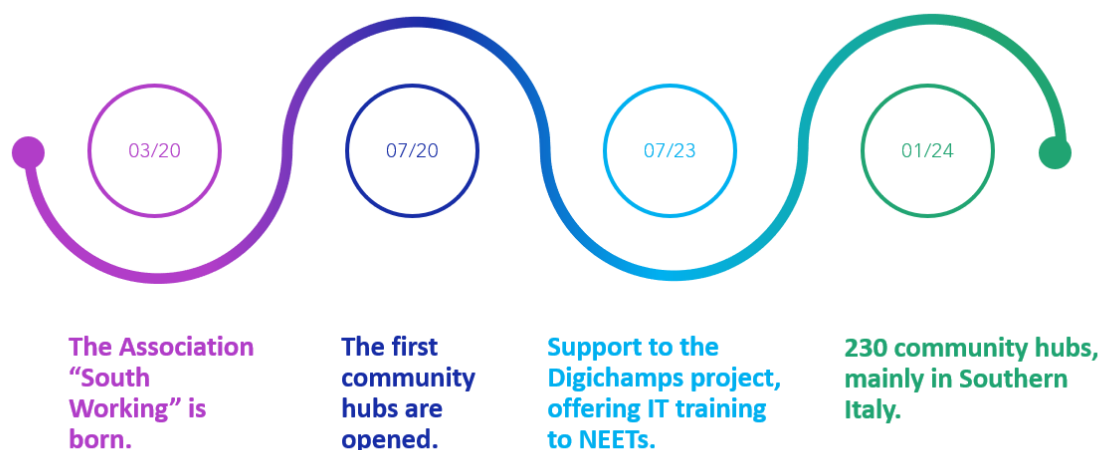
The South Working initiative is intrinsically linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the period of remote working imposed by the lockdowns, many people living in northern Italy or abroad had the opportunity to return to their home regions in southern Italy, often for extended periods. In this context, in March 2020, the idea and the Association 'South Working - Working from the South' («South Working – Lavorare dal Sud»)<sup>26</sup> was born.

The first reason for launching the initiative was to study, advocate, and create stakeholder networks to build sustainable remote working conditions in Italy. In particular, the project aimed at improving economic, social, and territorial cohesion by leveraging on the opportunities of remote to reduce the outflow of human capital from the South and marginalised areas of Italy and to contribute to the reduction of existing gaps in these territories and communities. Moreover, the initiative seeks to address the issue of underutilized or unused buildings and spaces in these territories. The long-term goal of the project is to ensure the possibility of working remotely, even after the end of the pandemic.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.southworking.org/>

Figure 5: Timeline of South Working



The pandemic brought about an increase in the need for collaborative workspaces, stimulating the establishment of this network of public and private spaces. These spaces, which were brought together to counter the 'brain drain' and strengthen 'brain gain', are extremely diverse. While some spaces existed prior to the pandemic and joined the South Working network in summer 2020, other locations started opening with the Association's support as of the same period. Most of the time, the Association provided consultancy and administrative support to municipalities, businesses, and local communities to repurpose or create such locations, which then became part of the network. During the summer of 2020 many hubs opened or joined the network at the same time. Among the first hubs of the South Working network ('Rete dei Presidi') are the 3 spaces allocated to smart working in the municipality of Castelbuono (Sicily), or 1 space located in Fontanigorda (Liguria).

The South Working initiative has been successful in securing funds from the Fondazione CON IL SUD<sup>27</sup>, numerous national calls for social and cultural innovation, and donations from both private entities and supporters. The amount of funds currently exceeds 100,000 euros since the foundation of the Association. These funds are allocated solely for non-profit projects, advocating for enhancements in sector regulations, and carrying out specific project tasks. Additionally, the funds support the upkeep of the Association.

To these funds, €6-7 million must be added from European and national level projects won in partnership, part of which is retained by the Association for research, communication, and project management activities to public or private territorial partners, and most of which goes into the renovation of spaces. To sum up, the direct beneficiaries of the funds are likely the municipalities, businesses, and local communities involved in creating or upgrading the remote workspaces. The entities that actually receive and use these funds for coworking spaces implementation are: public entities, private for-profit and non-profit entities, social cooperatives or social enterprises, etc. The Association does not directly manage or open these spaces, but it does support and guide the quoted stakeholders to do so. Then, users of these spaces (i.e. the remote workers) happen to indirectly benefit from the improvements brought by this funding.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.fondazioneconilsud.it/>

The minimum requirements<sup>28</sup> to become a hub in the South Working network are as follows:

1. An active and motivated community in the area: a committed group of individuals or organizations is needed to maintain the functionality of the hub;
2. A high-speed and secure Internet connection: as digital infrastructure development positively impact local communities and remote work relies heavily on digital connectivity, having reliable and fast internet is essential for a productive work environment;
3. Proximity to transportation infrastructure: the hub should be no more than two hours away from an airport or a high-speed train station. This ensures that the hub is accessible and connected to larger urban centres, while simultaneously providing the Association with the opportunity to promote the development of more widespread mobility infrastructure in underserved regions.

As of January 2024, around 230 ‘presidi di comunità’ (‘community hubs’) were part of the network. While a few community hubs under the South Working initiative are also found in northern and central regions, the majority are based in Southern regions<sup>29</sup>. Around 30% of the hubs are in rural areas, and compared to those in urban areas they have a stronger focus on fostering community connections. This emphasis on community is often a result of the smaller and more tight-knit nature of rural communities. In rural community hubs, users may benefit from a stronger sense of belonging and closer relationships with fellow coworkers. The smaller population and shared rural setting can facilitate increased collaboration, knowledge exchange, and networking opportunities among hub users.

The community hubs are not to be considered as mere workplaces other than the traditional offices, but as spaces for collaboration, innovation, and dialogue. It is worth noting that the most socially innovative projects are conducted in Italy's ‘Inner Areas’ (in Italian, ‘Aree Interne’), defined as “territories substantially far from centres offering essential services and thus characterized by depopulation and decline” (“demographic trends, access to healthcare and adequate education provision are just some of the essential criteria to define and classify Inner Areas<sup>30</sup>”).

In terms of type of spaces, the historic built heritage plays a crucial role in the South Working network, with types of community hubs that could range from ancient castles to ex-convents to ancient libraries etc. Regarding facilities offered to users in community hubs, these usually include workstations (desks and chairs) with high-speed internet, but can also include printers, communal lounge spaces, childcare facilities, maker spaces, exhibition spaces, event spaces, meeting rooms, and other important amenities like a kitchen.

Community hub users, i.e. ‘South Workers’, are remote workers, freelancers, municipal representatives, start-ups and SME businesses, students, and academics, community organizations, and cultural organizations. Community hub users tend to adopt a cyclical approach, both in terms of

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<sup>28</sup> These requirements were also identified through a survey addressed to hub users, with 1,860 respondents among people attending hubs in the period from 17/06/2020 to 28/09/2020.

<sup>29</sup> See hub locations here: <https://www.southworking.org/mappa-dei-presidi/> (last update: December 2022).

<sup>30</sup> “Inner Areas” are fragile territories, far away from main centres of supply of essential services and too often abandoned to themselves. They stretch over 60% of the national surface, and host 52% of Italian municipalities and 22% of its population (source: <https://www.agenziacoazione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/?lang=en>)

timing and location of their long-distance remote work. This means that there are periods of 2-3 months per year when people assiduously attend the hubs (especially between April and September), and then return to their physical places of work (northern Italy; abroad). It should be noted once again that for the most part (95% of the cases) these users have part of their family of origin in those territories as well as access to a property.

As for the uptake, no updated data is available for the entire South Working network. Single hubs have logs to monitor access, but these are complicated to integrate data due to GDPR regulations. The cost for the user to access the hubs and use the services and spaces is not standard and readily available but depends on the type of space and its management. In this framework, the South Working eCard<sup>31</sup> can be mentioned. The card, which aims to be a micro welfare system, can be obtained through a small donation (€5) with which the user supports South Working activities and accesses discounts of up to 30% on the services of the spaces that join the South Working circuit.

Even though initially the association consistently exceeded the expected results<sup>32</sup> in all project reporting phases, in the post-pandemic months the expansive trend slowed down and the association board has been reorganizing its governance to be more effective and bring a valuable contribution to the European coworking landscape, considering the changing post-COVID scenario. While the effect on local businesses, services and communities was positive, this needs to be stabilized and made scalable and economically viable.

In the upcoming years, the South Working Association is expected to continue its development, since it has won numerous national calls for social and cultural regeneration. This includes support for repurposing spaces for remote work, combating the digital divide, and advancing the education of individuals in vulnerable situations, such as for instance young people categorized as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). This is exemplified by the Association's current involvement in the 'Digichamps' project, which was launched in July 2023 and it is supported by the Italian Fund for the "*Repubblica Digitale*". The initiative focuses on training NEET individuals in IT subjects and facilitating their entry into the labor market through partnerships with companies. The trainings organised are for free and encompass a range of specializations, namely: Web Front End Developer, Full Stack Developer, Data Analyst, Cybersecurity Specialist and IT Specialist. The role of the South Working Association in the Digichamp's project is to disseminate and promote the project as well as recruiting companies to ensure the trained individuals get an employment in the technology sector. While the network of coworking spaces serves as a platform for training and work experience, it is also as a community support system for the participants. Coworking spaces collaborate also to offer internships, and job opportunities to the NEET individuals post-training. In its first edition, the partnership is training 330 NEETs, facilitating their entry into the technology job market. The Association believes confronting the pressing challenge of NEETs is imperative for national

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.southworking.org/sw-ecard/>

<sup>32</sup> Quantitative and qualitative targets were set in the initial phase of the project, under the control and evaluation of the Fondazione con il SUD, which financially supported the launch of the association. At all reporting stages, it emerged from the detailed calculations monitored by the impact assessment experts of the Fondazione con il SUD that the targets set initially were always far exceeded. This was verified in both interim and final project reporting. These results are, however, linked to internal reporting and therefore confidential, and cannot be shared in detail.

development. The program aims to equip these individuals with skills that align with the needs of the business sector.

## Kupland network - Southeast Estonia

Kupland<sup>33</sup> is a network that draws together local businesses and organisations that provide remote working facilities in Southeast Estonia, mostly in rural locations. While most hubs are local businesses (cafes, hotels, sports centres), there are a few exceptions, for example Võru Instituut, which is registered as research and innovation centre.

Southeast Estonia has long been described as a periphery in Estonia as it is located near the borders with Russia and Latvia. The concept of the Kupland remote working network originated during a social hackathon in 2019. One of the discussions focused on how to leverage the community and its unique characteristics, such as UNESCO cultural heritage sites, hilly landscape with skiing trails and smoke sauna culture, to improve the region's image and development. Concurrently, the Ministry of Finance, in collaboration with the local governments of Võrumaa, Põlvamaa, and Valgamaa (the largest counties in Southeast Estonia), initiated the Reputation Strategy for Southeast Estonia<sup>34</sup>. This plan designated each county with the responsibility of developing and promoting a specific field of tourism throughout the region. Põlvamaa was entrusted with enhancing the field of digital nomadism in Southeast Estonia.

The implementation of the Kupland network falls under the jurisdiction of the Põlvamaa Development Centre, a foundation established by local governments in the Põlvamaa region. A network coordinator was hired in March 2020 and tasked with bringing the idea to life and manage the network. The Kupland brand was then officially launched in July 2020.

In order to become a member and be promoted as a remote working location, a business has to sign a membership agreement with Kupland network. Each membership agreement includes a quality standard that sets certain requirements for remote working conditions the business must ensure. As of January 2024, there were three different quality standards: for individual remote workers, for teams and for families. The business and the network coordinator in collaboration agree on which quality standard would be most suitable for the business.

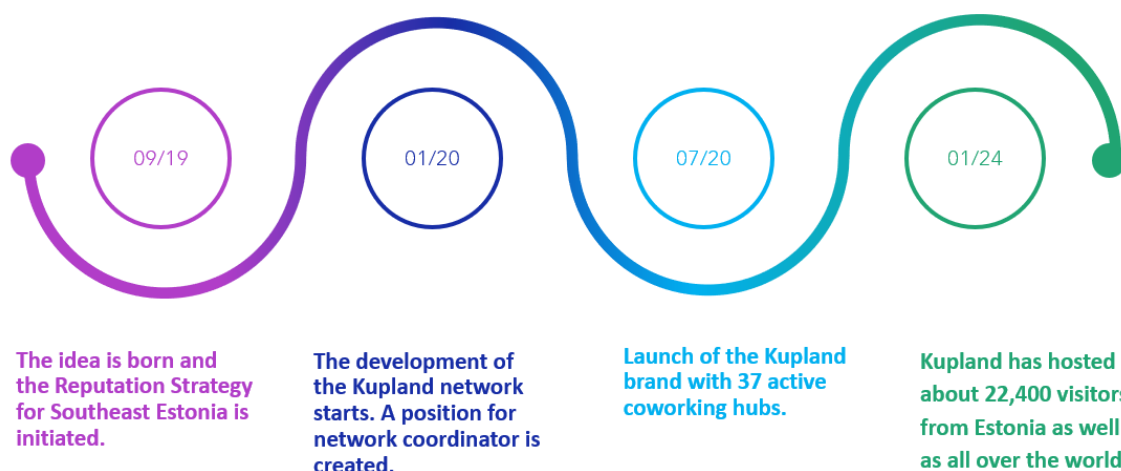
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<sup>33</sup> <https://kupland.ee/en>

<sup>34</sup> The Reputation Strategy was an action plan that focused on the main problems that research of the region pointed to: lack of well-paid jobs (which is the main reason for the dissatisfaction and emigration of the working-age population from the region) and fading tourism sector that is no longer sustainable without additional support. Available in Estonian for download here: <https://www.fin.ee/media/1380/download>



Figure 6: Timeline of Kupland network



Businesses themselves make the investments required to enhance their facilities for remote work, and some of them have applied for and received funding from the Estonian Business and Innovation Agencies (EAS). In June 2023, there were 37 hubs in Kupland network. This figure surpassed the target set out in the Reputation Strategy aimed to establish at least 30 hubs within the first three years. However, in 2023, a small membership fee was introduced and consequently the number of members dropped to 27 (as of January 2024). The sum from the membership fees contributes to a joint marketing budget to promote Kupland network and the locations. The funds are used for promotion on social media platforms and advertisements on the browser. The total sum from membership fees amounts makes up about 10% of the total budget.

The network has been funded by Ministry of Finance (67% of the budget) and the counties of Põlvamaa (11%), Võrumaa (11%), and Valgamaa (11%). Since the launch of the initiative, the total budget has been amounting to €50,000 per year. The budget breakdown per year is the following:

- 2020 Ministry of Finance + Counties of Põlvamaa, Valgamaa, Võrumaa - a total of 90,000 euros (in other words, the Ministry of Finance contributed an additional 40,000 euros for the 1st year of operation)
- 2021, 2022, 2023 Ministry of Finance + the Counties – a total of approx. 50, 000 euros
- 2024 Ministry of Finance target funding 50,000 euros, plus a symbolic membership fee from 27 network members.

The budget for the coming years has not yet been confirmed. However, in 2024 the members' agreements were concluded to be valid until 2028, so it can be assumed that similar funding will continue. This funding has been utilized for various purposes such as the network coordinator's position, organizing network events, brand development, and other administrative support.

The network coordinator has been overseeing the management of Kupland since its inception, allowing for centralised responsibility and providing a stable focal point for the network's growth. The network coordinator is supported by an advisory body that includes directors of local development centres, owners or managers of local businesses (members of the network) and other

experts. The network coordinator consults with the advisory body on matters related to the network on an ad-hoc basis, about once every three months.

Before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic and work on Kupland began in early 2020 (creating the brand, finalising the concept, etc), the main target group was foreign digital nomads. However, due to international travel restrictions imposed in response to COVID-19, foreigners were no longer a viable target audience during that period. The new target groups became local IT-sector workers, public sector employees, and self-employed individuals. The digital international nomad target group was reintroduced in 2021-2022 when the restrictions eased. Despite the need to alter the initial plan due to COVID-19, the widespread adoption of remote working culture during the pandemic was a crucial factor for Kupland's success.

Kupland's mission and vision revolve around promoting remote work as an opportunity to improve working conditions and well-being for employees. Indeed, the value of Kupland lies in its hubs being located in picturesque countryside settings, providing opportunities for sports and leisure activities amidst nature during work breaks, therefore offering a high-quality “workation” experience. The network comprises various types of hubs, including informal new working spaces such as cafes, rentals, hotels, community centers, studios, holiday homes, museums, art studios, and sports clubs as well as coworking spaces (such as Entrepreneur’s Forest<sup>35</sup> or Loovusait<sup>36</sup>). In 2022, the number of workers who visited Kupland locations reached 7,670 and in 2023 the number exceeded 10,000. This is a significant increase compared to the first year of activity (1,400 visitors) and the second (3,352 visitors). As of January 2024, Kupland has hosted about 22,400 visitors from Estonia as well as all over the world.

The businesses independently manage their respective locations. All the hubs were already operational and established venues and businesses before the network's creation, making it relatively quick to adapt the environment and resources to the needs of digital nomads. When a business expresses interest in joining the network, the network coordinator visits the location and provides suggestions for improvements, if necessary. Once the criteria are met, which typically takes up to couple of months, the Kupland network and the business sign a membership, which includes a quality standard that caters to either individual remote workers, teams or families based on the preferences of the cooperation partner. This standard ensures a consistent level of service quality for visitors and facilities that are specifically tailored for different users.

While different locations offer varying facilities, they all provide workspaces with desks, plugs, chairs, and other necessary amenities (internet connection, good lighting, comfortable room temperature and printing services). Some spaces also provide accommodations (hotels, Airbnb rentals), large seminar rooms with projectors, food, and beverage services, or catering. Certain facilities are more directly targeted at the international digital nomad community, such as the Entrepreneur's Forest, which requires an application for stays and offers social events in the evenings, including networking activities, sports games, and sauna sessions. Different locations offer varying facilities and price ranges. Some establishments have hourly rates, while others have daily rates. Certain amenities may be included in the cost, while others may be available for an additional fee.

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<sup>35</sup> <https://kupland.ee/kaugtookohad/ettevotlusmaja-entrepreneurs-forest>

<sup>36</sup> <https://loovusait.ee/en>

Overall, the Kupland network brought other significant benefits to the region and the local economy, notably in terms of network, collaboration and sharing experiences among locations/businesses. The network meets every month for an event at one of the members' venues to discuss ideas. Moreover, some member businesses have expressed their desire for Kupland to have more political influence as a network. They expect the Kupland brand and the network coordinator to represent their interests in public debates and engage in dialogues with the state concerning remote work and tourism. This demonstrates the potential for leveraging the network to have an impact on regional politics and development. Another significant result is positive feedback from clients regarding the concept of the network, with many who reported experiencing improved well-being as a result of working in close proximity to nature.

In 2023, Kupland called for an interregional peer-review of the project conducted through Interreg, in which representatives of other similar initiatives in the EU developed policy recommendations for the next steps for Kupland. The policy recommendations included widening the geographical scope, improving and expanding communication, and offering more support to the network members.

# Private companies offering co-working spaces outside major urban areas

## Firms specialised in renting out coworking spaces

Private firms providing coworking spaces is already a developed phenomenon in Europe and is present in every country. However, these tend to be located mainly in capitals as well as in other big cities, both in the city centers and less often in the suburban areas. In other non-urban areas, private operators tend to be less present due to lower profitability. The Global coworking survey report that small coworking spaces, as well as those in small towns and rural areas, struggle to find enough new members and users (Foertsch C., 2023b).

Differences exist across countries in the availability of firms providing coworking spaces outside of urban areas. There is no European data available, but as an example in 2021 in Spain the most densely populated provinces of Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia concentrate the largest offer of coworking spaces (60% of all working spaces), while the rest are distributed in other territories<sup>37</sup>. In Spain, the share of coworking spaces located outside the cities tend to be higher in less populated provinces (for instance, only 37% of total coworking spaces in Alicante are located in the province's capital, and this figure is around 60% in the provinces of Málaga, A Coruña and Balearic Islands). In Germany, in mid-2021 only 19% of the coworking spaces were in small regional towns and even fewer were in peripheral areas (8%) (Vogl and Micek, 2022).

Corporations offering coworking spaces are of different size, ranging from multinational coworking operators to companies that own only one coworking space. An example of a big corporation offering coworking spaces in rural areas is the American multinational coworking operator, IWG which owns Regus, Spaces, HQ, Signature, and Copernico spaces. This company is also the largest provider of coworking spaces in France operating just over 130 sites in 78 cities, some of which are in very small cities. Another relevant example is the Dutch Seat2meet, which also offers a number of locations in rural or peripheral areas. Notwithstanding the few big coworking corporations, most of the coworking operators in rural areas are of a very small size, owning one to three coworking spaces.

An interesting and recent trend is the increasing offer of private coworking spaces in holiday destinations such as holiday resorts, for instance [Levi Innovation Home](#) in Lapland, Northern Finland, which is primarily known as a winter sports location. Summer locations are also offered with remote hubs at walking distance from the beach, such as by the online platform intermediary [Coworkbooking](#), in Portugal, Spain and Croatia.

In addition, a number of private companies offer in remote locations not only a place where to work, but also a place to sleep, eat or relax. These places are suitable for teams of coworkers to carry out brainstorming and team-building activities. However, these coliving places are also often marketed as places for individuals working around the world such as the digital nomads, who can stay several months in these hubs (an example is the Hungarian [Potus](#), started in 2020). As for most services, there are several websites that provide a platform for multiple coworking operators and for the companies offering spaces in their premises to gain visibility and perform the booking of the spaces. These websites can be a business themselves or an association of coworking operators. Most

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<sup>37</sup> <https://coworkingspain.es/>

websites offer spaces only in capital cities, but there are also a number of online platforms that have partnership with various coworking and coliving operators and offer a number of locations in rural areas, such as [Workin.space](#) and [Befimmo](#).

## Companies owning coworking hubs for their employees

It is not common for companies to own remote co-working hubs for their employees and the majority stipulates agreements to rent office spaces with existing coworking operators. Indeed, renting coworking spaces has several advantages, notably in terms of physical (i.e. space configuration and building location), functional (i.e. flexibility in terms of variety of settings for different users), and financial flexibility demands (i.e. short-term lease agreements) (Echeverri, 2021). A screening of existing national evidence from the Network of Eurofound Correspondents did not find many recent examples of this practice. While in some cases companies claim to offer such spaces, it seems these are in fact just secondary offices or part of the office space used for other activities. However, the difference between a secondary office and a company remote working hub has not been defined in the literature.

One notable example comes from Bank of Ireland, a public limited company and the oldest bank in continuous operation in Ireland, which in July 2022 opened 11 new hybrid working hubs in Dublin, Kildare, Louth and Wexford, in addition to four already existing before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (two in Dublin city centre and two outside). Bank of Ireland sees office space as a place being used primarily for meetings, collaboration, and building connections, while hubs in remote locations more suitable for work that can be progressed individually or that is more task based.

The Bank of Ireland hubs are primarily located outside of the major urban areas. Ballycoolin, Newlands Cross, Santry, Swords, Balbriggan, Northern Cross are all located on the outskirts of Dublin, easily accessible for employees living both within Dublin County and in Dublin adjacent areas. Hubs are also located in other counties such as Dundalk (Louth) and Kildare (Naas and Newbridge). Three new hubs are also planned for Cork, Galway and Limerick to extend the network to the southern and western provinces, while situating themselves within reach of the major towns of those areas.

Depending on the employee's role, Bank of Ireland employees can work from a combination of home and central office locations, as well as the network of 14 remote working hubs. The Irish bank engaged with employees for the selection of new hub locations through a "Ways of Working" employee survey in June 2020, and locations were selected based on suitability of the property and the best geographical match to where employees stated they would like to work.

Another example of a company using remote hubs comes from Eurobank in Greece, which in 2022 adopted a new hybrid scheme. In addition to its central offices, in 2023 the company provided its employees with two co-working hubs in the suburbs of Athens: the 'Organisation retail hub' in the Piraeus Port Plaza and the 'Technology & Digital Hub' in Nea Ionia. The employees book a different office position every day depending on the project they are participating in, so that the entire work group is in the same space. Employees can also work with their laptop, from anywhere via wifi and move freely within the building, without having to commit to a specific position. They also have the option of choosing a floor and office within the building, depending on mood or needs, using an electronic reservation system for offices and parking, and there are specially designed spaces for both group work and personal gathering. Some employees work in the hubs full time, while others three days at the workplace, and two days at home.

## Conclusions

While a post-pandemic ‘urban exodus’ did not materialise and national level evidence, where available, still indicate mostly marginal trends, the spread of remote work opportunities undoubtedly placed more emphasis on the potential to allow an increased number of professionals, self-employed and entrepreneurs to migrate from traditional urban setting to other locations, whether to the countryside or to attractive regions in other countries. In this context, rural coworking has gained significant traction in Europe over the past few years, as demand for alternative work environments and rural living is growing. From the perspective of businesses, it is also seen as a way of expanding recruitment opportunities by accessing a wider pool of talents, irrespective of their location.

The emergence of rural coworking is also an important response to existing regional development challenges, as it is pictured in public policy narratives as a way to promote dynamism and diversity of rural economies, by attracting knowledge-based workers and entrepreneurs to more peripheral areas and investing in digital infrastructures as a fundamental enabling factor. However, while the positive impacts of coworking in rural settings can extent to local communities, some potentially adverse effects are also to be recognised and addressed. These are related, for instance, to the relocation of remote workers from urban areas to rural ones, notably when these are on a temporary basis and without the desire to become embedded in the local community - a phenomenon described in the literature as “invasion of urban hipsters” (Ciccarelli and Mariotti, 2024). Indeed, the influx of new incomers in rural and peripheral areas is expected to drive up demand for housing and land, therefore putting upward pressure on prices, with the potential long-term effect of crowding out locals and leading to gentrification (Morgan, Woodriff, 2019). Public service infrastructure might also struggle to cope with rising demand.

In this context, supporting resilient co-working spaces (as defined by Gandini and Cossu, 2021) which address local needs, rather than merely offering a service to a restricted group of remote workers, can positively contribute to the community wellbeing. The hybridisation of activities can for instance include offering training or learning opportunities the wider local community can benefit from.

Public policies are at the forefront of these dynamics and the financial support of national and local public actors is instrumental to the creation, growth, and economic sustainability of coworking spaces outside main urban areas. Indeed, while the availability and extent of coworking spaces in rural areas may vary significantly across countries, they share common challenges. Building a critical mass of users in rural places is crucial for the development of coworking hubs, to ensure their profitability and to make them a viable economic model for private players, which are less present compared to urban settings. Promoting remote working spaces is a key factor in raising awareness among potential users, as well as encouraging the use for instance via voucher schemes.

Moreover, building communities which share professional interests, and dynamic work environments where people can learn from each other, is at least as important as the establishment of physical facilities. Facilitators/community builders can help establishing connection with local players (public authorities, businesses, associations, etc) and developing a strong territorial base. This is a key factor for the success of coworking spaces. Collaboration between public and private actors is also beneficial. Hybrid management types, that is when spaces combine public investment

with private management, can bring together the strengths of both models. In case of large networks, a dedicated coordinator can provide a stable focal point.

At the national and local level, several initiatives have been launched since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic to support remote work in rural, peripheral, or marginalised areas via the creation and expansion of coworking spaces. Most of them are still ongoing, at different stages of implementation, which makes it challenging to assess the economic, social and environmental benefits they bring to workers, companies and local communities.

While the selected initiatives are very different in nature, geographical scope, and actors involved, sharing experiences and exchanging with partners across different countries offer valuable opportunities to better understand the key success factors for the development of coworking spaces in rural areas, as well as the best practices in terms of creating and managing these spaces.

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## Annex 1: Rural co-working types

### Definitions according to the *Rural Coworking Guide* (Bages, 2021)

#### According to the space's purpose

<b>Coworking</b>	100% workspace, with open area and private spaces such as meeting and training rooms
<b>Coliving</b>	Workspace + housing, either for rent or vacation. Coworkers share workspace, housing, and experiences
<b>Third places</b>	Workspace + socialization and social inclusion activities

#### According to the space's location

<b>Fixed</b>	These are the most common. They are located in a permanent space with fixed equipment.
<b>Pop-up coworking</b>	Sporadic, ephemeral or mobile. Usually located in different spaces and managed by a separate company. An office on wheels!
<b>Virtual spaces</b>	They offer online services. They are mostly meant to supplement a physical space

#### According to additional services of the coworking

<b>Fablab</b>	Digital manufacturing workshop. Coworkers can use the machinery and managers are there to help or offer training.
<b>Café Coworking</b>	Café to work and meet. The cost is usually per day or hour and includes consumption
<b>Accelerator</b>	Supports the growth of the project developed in the coworking location
<b>Incubator</b>	Supports the creation of a project in the coworking area and its introduction to the market

### Descriptions according to the *Rural Coworking* (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2021a)

<b>Coworking Classic</b>	The basic ingredients of any successful coworking space are having diverse spaces, a productive working atmosphere and an inspiring community. The original model from the metropolises is on the increase in rural areas, albeit with some special features.
<b>Commuter Port</b>	For many people, the daily journey to the office is normal, which is increasingly supplemented by opportunities for mobile work. This is how commuter harbours are created – New Places of Work along popular commuting routes, which address the needs of companies and employees with tailor-made offers.
<b>Bottom Hub</b>	The establishment of new coworking spaces in smaller communities is often the result of private initiatives. Started on a small scale, these people activate further comrades-in-arms to create an initial offer and from there to develop it further
<b>Retreat</b>	New Work thrives on innovative ideas and inspiring places to work. The classic office space is not included. This has led to diverse creative places coming into being – especially in the rural areas. Here too, people brainstorm, work and laugh – an ideal breeding ground for moments of inspiration and strong teams.
<b>Workation</b>	Bali, Bangkok, Lake Constance – it is not only young people who travel the world as digital nomads, combining their stay in beautiful places with mobile work. In Asia, entire regions are geared to the needs of this special target group, but now it seems there is something happening in Germany
<b>New Village Centre</b>	Multifunctional places stand for flexible use concepts in villages and communities. They are meeting places, market places and event spaces with promising synergies for coworking spaces.
<b>Integrated housing and work projects</b>	In rural areas, a wide range of community projects are being developed, whose residents combine the basic needs of living and working in one place. Mobile working and new lifestyles make exciting projects possible – not only for the younger generation

## Annex 2: Network of Eurofound Correspondents

### Names of national correspondents who participated in the research

Country	National correspondent	Organisation
<b>Austria</b>	Bernadette Allinger	Forschungs-und Beratungsstelle Arbeitswelt (FORBA), Working Life Research Centre
<b>Belgium</b>	Dries Van Herreweghe Anne Guisset	HIVA – Research Institute for Work and Society, KU Leuven
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Gabriela Yordanova	Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (IPS-BAS)
<b>Croatia</b>	Predrag Bejaković Irena Klemenčić	University of Split University of Zagreb
<b>Cyprus</b>	Alexandros Perdikes	Cyprus Labour Institute of the Pancyprian Federation of Labour (INEK-PEO)
<b>Czechia</b>	Renata Kyzlinková	Research Institute for Labour and Social Affairs (RILSA)
<b>Denmark</b>	Louise Fabricius Nathalie Diana Kjærgaard Knudsen	Oxford Research Denmark
<b>Estonia</b>	Miriam Lehari	Praxis Centre for Policy Studies
<b>Finland</b>	Vera Lindström	Oxford Research
<b>France</b>	Frédéric Turlan	Consortium IR Share & Association Travail, Emploi, Europe, Société (ASTREES)
<b>Germany</b>	Sandra Vogel Marc Breitenbroich	Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft Köln (IW)
<b>Greece</b>	Elena Kousta	Labour Institute of GSEE (INE/GSEE)
<b>Hungary</b>	Nóra Krokovay	KOPINT-Tárki Institute
<b>Ireland</b>	Rosanna Angel	Industrial Relations News
<b>Italy</b>	Michele Faioli Ivana Pais Silvia Sansonetti Sofia Gualandi Alessandro Similari	Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini
<b>Latvia</b>	Raita Karnite	Economic Prognosis Centre (EPC)
<b>Lithuania</b>	Julija Moskvina Inga Blaziene	Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences
<b>Luxembourg</b>	Franz Clément	Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER)
<b>Malta</b>	Luke A. Fiorini	Centre for Labour Studies, University of Malta
<b>Netherlands</b>	Thomas de Winter	Panteia
<b>Norway</b>	Kristin Alsos	Fafo
<b>Poland</b>	Hanna Cichy	Polityka Insight
<b>Portugal</b>	Paula Carrilho Heloisa Perista	Centro de Estudos para a Intervenção Social (CESIS)
<b>Romania</b>	Nicoleta Voicu	Association Centre for Public Innovation
<b>Slovakia</b>	Zuzana Turkovič Martina Mičicová Ľuptáková	Institute for Labour and Family Research

<b>Slovenia</b>	Barbara Duvnjak	Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana
<b>Spain</b>	Juan Arasanz Díaz	Consortium Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona (UAB-QUIT), Notus Investigación Social Aplicada, and IKEI Research & Consultancy
<b>Sweden</b>	Nils Brandsma	Oxford Research

**WPEF24034**

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