

PROJECT CODE: H2020-RUR-2018-818194
CALL: H2020-RUR-2018-2020
PERIOD: 48 MONTHS
BUDGET: 4,994,156.25 € (TOTAL)
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: MARÍA DEL MAR DELGADO SERRANO

The idea that digitalization can solve socioeconomic problems existing in rural areas is gaining strength. However, it is also true that there is still little information about the real impact that new technology will have on the rural world. Is digitalization really what it needs? Who wins and who loses in this process? Who is against this idea?

The European project DESIRA came into existence in order to give answers to these questions. Made up of a consortium of 28 partners from 18 European countries, DESIRA aims to analyze the socioeconomic impact of digitalization on rural areas, by identifying the positive and negative aspects of this process.

Project DESIRA aims to understand the social and economic impacts of new technology on forest, agricultural and rural sectors

“One of the key starting points of this project is to understand how digitalization is coming into rural areas, how it is being accepted and what needs these areas have. It is not so much about analyzing technology, as it is about performing an analysis of how this technology affects social and economic aspects in the rural world, and also an analysis of the necessary policies to develop all the positive potential of this technology, aspects that have practically not been studied in the field of science”, explains María del Mar Delgado, lead researcher on the University of Cordoba project and member of the WEARE (Water, Environmental and Agricultural Resources Economics) research group. With her, Professor Julio Berbel (also



in the WEARE group), Professor Rafael Navarro and researcher Guillermo Palacios make up the team. Navarro and Palacios also belong to the Assessment and Restoring of Agricultural and Forest Systems (abbreviated to ERSAF in Spanish) research team at the university.

Project DESIRA will begin by developing a conceptual and analytical framework to identify the impact that digitalization has on the rural world. To do so, a series of indicators will be created that allow for analysis of the present and future situations. An inventory of existing technologies in different rural communities will be drawn up and the so-called game changers in the sector will be identified, meaning those technologies and digital tools that truly are changing the rules of the game and those that will do so over the next few years.

One of the project's keys is the analysis of possible future scenarios. To do this, what is known as Living Labs will be put into operation. These labs are spaces for experimentation and innovation where experts and people directly affected by each of the technologies and realities that the project is tackling will participate. Specifically, the University of Cordoba will be in charge of the Living Lab that analyzes digitalization in the field of forest fires. Academic and scientific institutions, government agencies, technological companies and regional representatives who have been affected or who may be affected by forest fires will participate in these labs. “With this methodology, we will try to involve everyone so they can each give

their perspective on the matter, and these will probably be different perspectives”, clarifies researcher Guillermo Palacios. Besides the forest sector, the project will assess the impact of new technology on the farming and rural sector.

Project DESIRA also aims to assess the policies being implemented in the rural world. Once the analysis is done, a Policy Roadmap will be mapped out. The idea is for the roadmap to be a guide to implementing rural, farming and forest policies, on a national as well as a European level. “We believe that digitalization is facing important issues such as who owns these data, who can access them and what they will be used for, something that is still not regulated”, explains María del Mar Delgado. In this vein, an Ethics Code for digitalization in different rural environments will also be included.

On many occasions, the scientific community perceives the rural sector as being opposed to change. However, the Project DESIRA research team sees it another way: as caution. In rural communities, salaries are lower and there is little margin to try out a new technology, make a mistake and turn back. “What is more, for a long time now, many initiatives have been peddled that haven't gone anywhere because we haven't actually been concerned with understanding what the real needs are”, acknowledges Guillermo Palacios. Project DESIRA seeks to correct this specific tendency and get an overall vision of the digitalization process in the rural world, one that integrates technological, social and economic perspectives.

