

(English version)

**Question for written answer E-006003/18
to the Commission
Sergio Gutiérrez Prieto (S&D)
(28 November 2018)**

Subject: Digitisation in rural and depopulated areas

Nowadays, everyone has a mobile phone and, in most cases, a mobile phone with access to the Internet.

However, depending on where the user is, mobile and 5G coverage will be better or worse, if indeed it works at all. This is a problem facing citizens in rural and depopulated areas in several regions of Spain, such as parts of Castilla-La Mancha or Castilla y León.

In certain areas there is still no coverage for many citizens, who either have no Internet access or for whom the Internet is tremendously slow.

In this respect, the Commission must continue to earmark significant funds from the EU budget to cohesion policy and do everything it can to support rural and depopulated areas in these regions.

What are the Commission's expectations regarding achieving fewer inequalities between citizens and between regions? Does the Commission intend to continue allocating ERDF, EAFRD and ESF operational programme funding after 2020?

**Answer given by Ms Crețu on behalf of the European Commission
(31 January 2019)**

Mobile telephone and Internet coverage in rural areas is an important policy objective for the EU. Despite the progress made on Europe's digital performance in the past years, there are still large differences between Member States and regions, as well as between citizens living in urban and rural areas, remote or sparsely populated areas.

Member States allocated around EUR 6 billion of European Structural and Investment Funds to finance high-speed broadband roll-out and other digital networks in 2014-2020. The funds would provide broadband access of at least 30 Mbps to more than 14.5 million additional households, and continue to help rural populations to improve their digital skills and to benefit from new or improved Information and communications technology services or infrastructures.

In addition, the Connecting Europe Broadband Fund launched in the second quarter of 2018 also supports smaller-scale and higher-risk broadband projects in remote areas across Europe with an expected leverage of EUR 1-1.7 billion. Further the Commission launched in 2017:

- The EU Action for Smart Villages which helps to explore new ways of revitalising rural areas through social and digital innovation, and to make better use of EU funds and other financing instruments.
- The Broadband Competence Offices ⁽¹⁾ Network, a voluntary initiative aimed at speeding up the deployment of fast broadband in areas lagging behind such as rural and remote.

For the next Multiannual Financial Framework, in addition to funding opportunities from Cohesion Policy and Common Agricultural Policy funds, the proposal for Connecting Europe Facility 2021-2027 provides EUR 3 billion in grants for different investments in very high capacity networks in areas of milder market failure.

⁽¹⁾ Broadband Competence Offices main task is to provide information and support on broadband roll-out to local and regional authorities, including ways to invest effectively in broadband projects with the support of EU funds.