

The future of AAL – ‘Ageing Well in a digital world’

Developing a prototypical process for an eco-systems building approach

1. Introduction

One of the central themes running through the AAL Forum 2019 was about the very future of AAL itself. As the EC considers options for future partnerships around the health challenge, which will include the active and healthy ageing topic, for Horizon Europe as of year 2021, delegates were asked to consider what AAL brings to the table. And how it should ensure its legacy will be part of this future partnership.

Of course, AAL is not the only programme working on Europe’s demographic change challenges as well as the opportunities this brings. This is why the forum’s partnership with the European Innovation Programme on Active and Healthy Ageing (EIP on AHA) as well as with the JPI MYBL (Joint Partnership Initiative ‘More Years Better Lives’) at the event was so important. This helps to ensure a wide variety of opinions being considered for the future and providing evidence that there is already an established wider ecosystem flourishing around active & healthy ageing.

Indeed, at the core of this discussion was AAL’s proposal for an eco-systems building approach for ageing well in a digital world partnership in the future as a way to capitalise on existing relationships, knowledge and experience around Europe and internationally. The idea is to be able to prototype future service offerings, to test and upscale them from the bottom up through collaboration between all concerned actors. At the same time a wider vision and strategic framework is required, in which to operate and support the future partnership.

How to build this ecosystem approach was a question posed in a key workshop hosted by AAL and moderated by Julie Arts of the Presencing Institute. Julie had already introduced the concept and concrete examples of ecosystems in her keynote address, urging a shift in mindsets with regard to demographic change.

The workshop was opened by AAL’s Klaus Niederländer who framed the discussion with a call for open dialogue based on shared experiences about the challenges and opportunities of active & healthy ageing. “We have seen many projects, many solutions and many frustrations over the years,” he said. “I believe the reason we are all here is because we are all concerned. We want to share experiences, be curious and look at how we can all work together to go further in dealing appropriately and timely with demographic change. And how we shall age well together in a digital world!

“We already see a number of vibrant local/regional ecosystems around Europe. What we need is learning from those experiences to activate similar eco-systems in other regions while taking into account the respective local socio-economic contexts. We want to stimulate further innovation in those existing and emerging eco-systems, explore approaches how we can share those innovations and upscale them together.”

Having set the agenda for discussion, Niederländer passed over to Julie Arts. Julie began by establishing that the participants came from a wide variety of countries as well as occupations: from business to research, health sector to NGOs. This, she felt, was an important factor – a discussion providing good ideas from a wide cross section of involved people. The questions she then posed were simple: “What is useful for you if you are shaping the future of AAL? How convinced are you about an ecosystem approach for AAL right now?” A simple show of hands at that stage indicated that most in the room were receptive to the idea of an ecosystem approach for AAL.

Before letting the conversation in the group flow, Arts pointed out that there are many elements to an ecosystems building approach and these resonate differently for different people – is it about the cells that exist and work together, is it about communication, is it about shared governance! The purpose of the workshop was, therefore, to listen to what people had to say and bring that into subsequent forward thinking about the AAL’s future.

The following quotations reflect the conversation that followed, during which many of the 55 people in attendance took the opportunity to talk about their experience with AAL. Why they care about it! Their thoughts of how the active & healthy ageing landscape is shifting. Their ideas about what type of future collaboration is needed to continue to develop ways to meet the challenges and explore the opportunities of our ageing population. To continue to grow a vibrant marketplace for products and services that do just that.

2. Conversations around eco-systems building in active & healthy ageing

Below you will find a summary of the different interventions during this fishbowl dialogue:

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We are part of an ecosystem on ageing well – yet we need to **define this ecosystem** and **how it works**.

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My vision for AAL is about **collaboration** – not doing everything on your own but connecting, networking with what you invented to try to realise that in the market.

Family care is the last resort of the care crisis in Europe. We have to make sure that there is no complete breakdown of this last reserve. That is why I like to frame this by using an analogy with car breakdown assistance which, as we all know, is well established. What I would like to see, therefore, is a **CARE breakdown assistance**. How can this be done jointly, what can be done in the next year to build an organisation serving local and hyper-local communities?

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I cared for my mother, who had dementia, for 20 years - I have walked in the shoes, so I set up the We! Foundation for family carers. I recognise that we are all in paid functions as we sit here today to talk about this theme. But when we are at home, we are just ordinary people. We should also sit at this table as normal people. We should bring our expertise into these discussions, but we should never forget that we are people who may need support as well someday. AAL is very important for us, but we should always think of the solutions we create from the bottom up, not top down.

We so often fail to ask what we may need in a particular situation. I want to encourage each of us to **put aside our function and give space for the person you are**. Bring **your personal experience** into your work.

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I have worked in this field for 13 years and facilitated partnerships between public municipalities, hospitals, clinicians, industry, researchers and private companies in developing products and services in this field. What we have seen in last 10 years is a more **human centric attitude towards technology**. That is **important to promote** in these ecosystems. **Change management** is also important. We need to **change the culture**. Perhaps in Europe we have an old idea about welfare and maybe we need to **rethink welfare**. We need a **change in our cultural mindset in how ageing, technology and welfare are connected**.

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The topic of AAL is too narrow. There needs to be a **step before** AAL and we refer to this step as "**technical inclusion**". We need to **remove the fear** some people have **to engage with technology** before they are ready to use it. **It's not about technology, it's about people**. We need to develop a **profound social process around technology**. People want to be with people and exchange with people - even if this exchange is about technology. We need to open up the way to AAL.

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The step before **AAL** is very important. I didn't know anything about AAL. How do I find out about AAL? Why should I use it? It **must offer something positive for me before I use it**. If people don't know what's on the market, how to use what's available? How can this be paid for? Or they won't use it. So, how can we **improve the interface between the users and those who want to help them**? That is a key question.

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Welfare is a very serious issue. After WW2, our **politics was centred around welfare**, providing services and privileges for people. But now there is no money for this type of politics anymore. But we have a generation of people who grew up with this approach, where votes were exchanged for goodies. So, we need **change of culture of politics** that moves towards a **higher level of personal responsibility**. That will

be very tough, this **change of culture** about how society is organised is very much needed and that **includes self-responsibility in age**.

Another **big issue is education** and, in particular, the lack of any teaching in our schools helping our children to understand what it is that mankind can do that is better than machines. **Our children need to understand the uniqueness of mankind** compared to machines, the beauty of mankind.

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I have been working in trying to **include technology in health and social care** and the built environment. This is **what people of all ages need** – not just older people.

Maybe there is not yet the change in structures happening that is needed, but **people from all sides**, technology, user, care providers etc, **are starting to talk** and seeing things from other viewpoints. This is the **only way for us to move on** and AAL needs to **be part of it**. But this will take time.

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Although we are talking about older people and technology for older people, we need to **involve everyone, starting with the youngest. Education is key**.

Take the advent of printing - it was a huge change. Now we have technology, again bringing huge change and we have not worked out how to handle this properly. It is very important, therefore, to **start with the young to see how we use these new technologies**.

My organisation has very innovative AAL projects and we develop innovative technology - but **as an organisation** we are not innovative ourselves and **we work as we did 30 years ago. We don't know how to implement the things we have done in the projects**. We don't work in an ecosystem, working together. **We work against each other**, all in different departments, all thinking they are the most important. Unless we learn to **work together properly**, then we won't be able to implement our solutions.

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The AAL gives us a light for the mist. In the future, the way we provide services to older people has to change and technology is the main way we can do this. **Technology has to be developed by people who understand it**. And it has to be **useful to people**. It can be one of the resources that supports family-based care, and also support people going through rehabilitation. I want to see **AAL as an association that follows each of its projects from the idea stage right through to implementation**. AAL needs to show the way.

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We need to **invest in the ecosystem**.

At the start of AAL we had too much of a push of technology. Now with the involvement of the end users, we are aligning things more with people's needs. So, we have the **user and the development capacity in place** – what we **need** now is a **third element – the financial instruments**, not to fund more research as we have enough of that, but **to get things going and into the market**. It is crazy that we understand the needs and have developed the solutions, but we **do not have the capacity to implement**.

There needs to be some positive discrimination for those who want to implement innovation.

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The idea that we need to push new technologies up there to make a difference is a problem, because we **don't have the system in place to implement new technology or the finance** in place to buy the products.

So, should AAL have an ecosystem approach? Yes. But my idea is that **each actor in an ecosystem needs to be self-reliant** and have their own goals in a system that makes sense to everyone. The big question is what should AAL do in an ecosystem like this? Should AAL be just one actor in a whole ecosystem or should it be the tree trunk on which everyone lives.

I think that **AAL should be just one actor in all this** but if it wants to pin an ecosystem approach to the area, it will need to invest heavily in being there, it **needs to be very present in the different regions of Europe** and will need to be **knowledgeable of the areas, helping projects** and **not just by putting money** into them.

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I have been working with older people and I am getting older myself. **There is no way out!** We need to understand technology, of course, but we also **need empathy**, so it is important for **older people to work together with younger people**. This is how we will get things done. With the birth rate declining and an older population, we need to learn.

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I have been involved with elderly people for 40 years in the nursing profession and have been involved with technology by running a community alarm system. I have also been involved in AAL for some time, too.

So, for me, this whole sector is a very familiar thing, but what I **don't know about is the ecosystem approach**, but what has **resonated with me is yes, we are all getting older** so we should not be looking at all this by looking at it as a problem to fix. AAL stands for Active Assisted Living.

I am two months away from retirement and there is no way that I see this as a problem. **Ageing is not a problem; it is part of life.** We have very fixed ideas on ageing as seeing people who need help. No. **People just need things to help them grow old as they want to live. And people take to technology if you allow them to.**

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Working in the European space, one often feels detached from the realities on the ground and how-to bring things together. There is such a **richness of concrete stories**, we can **make use of in people's homes, communities, regions and countries.**

The ecosystem is a **social space in which we can share, experience & develop projects, ideas, stories** - doing things together and overcoming difficulties.

There is an **emerging European space for these local & regional eco-systems**, which we can fill. It's all there and we have the capacity to do that. What we need to **define** are the **concrete next steps** forward from awareness creation to joint learning and experiencing – making it come alive and happen every day.

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We have methodologies to involve users inside the ecosystem and this is one of the gaps we need to fill. We are just learning how to do this. We have passed from the service to the focus groups but we need to **develop involvement and how patients are integrated into the system in order to build the ecosystem.**

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I have worked in AAL since 2007 and there has never been a year when we have not talked about financing a project after it finishes, but **we haven't changed how we do projects in the programme.** We don't plan from the start what to do with the results after the three years of the project. We focus on the results and **planning for afterwards is not part of the project.** No one knows what will be in three years. It is all too linear.

In our projects we have user involvement - but this is not good if you have a product and then ask them what they think.

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Whatever we do, whatever business plans we may have in place, at the end of the project there is no money left. If we go for investment, we **need to prove that the solutions work, but who will pay for testing, implementation?** It is a **chicken and egg problem** and I don't know how to combat that. **Good solutions just don't get to market.**

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We need to **build up pressure**. Involve politicians and when they are interested, the pressure goes back to the project to implement results.

The problem is that budgetary plans are often set out in the political cycle, so we **need to rethink roles. What can the city do** - public transport, for example? They not only provide the transport but also mobility apps, but many older people don't know how to use these apps. So, maybe they could **train older people** to use the apps. We need to be **innovative in implementation** and not just with the solutions we work on

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If we have to wait for money to do things, it will always be a problem.

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It is our money. We all pay taxes. So perhaps we need to talk about how our money will be best distributed.

In Germany we have World cafes and we ask people to come together to talk. Say what you need. **How do you want to care and how do you want to be cared for?** It was interesting that people didn't know what was available and what organisations were able to offer. People talk to each other and make their own arrangements and get advice on what help is on offer from friends, neighbours etc. We must **encourage people to say what they want, empower them and give them space to say what they want** out of AAL and involve them and give them **space** in which to **participate**.

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What are the ethics of AAL? **The ethics of equity**. For which generation are we working? Are we working for the older age group now or are we working for our own age group for when we will be older? The problem here is that if we work on apps now, in 20 years when we need them, they will be obsolete; there will be something better, while how many of the current older age group will be able to use those apps now?

Ecosystems have been around far longer than human life. **We have a dormant ecosystem for which we need to wake up.**

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The interest people have in this ecosystem approach is very important. We have to **do something different**. The **diversity of opinions** is exciting.

At 77 years old, **I am an old person** and there are **things that worry me**. **We are still talking about them and us in this ecosystem**. **Older people** are not people that should have things done for them. They **are part of the community**. **Everybody should be contributing to the to the best of their ability**. **Everyone is invested**.

I don't like the term end user – it decouples people from the creators.

In the AAL we talk a lot about **co-creation** – but we **need to walk the walk** where this is concerned. We need to **involve older people in everything we do**. We don't develop something and then show it to older people at the end. **We need to employ older people, pay them the same. They will give you what you need**, which is just as important as the software, the technology. **Involve older people directly**.

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In AAL a lot of new technology is being developed. This development costs money and time but bringing it to the market is even more complicated.

We had a project meeting with **an older user** and he said he didn't need all these interventions, didn't need this stuff. He **had real life solutions using what was available now. How can the experiences of people like this man be shared? To understand how existing consumer technology is being used? How can these be included in research?**

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I am an entrepreneur and also work in research and agree that older people need to be involved in the whole process.

If you try to **make arrangements** with governments or research organisations **about intellectual property and about implementing** after a project – it **takes a lot of time and money** just to get to an agreement and then **often nothing happens**. I want to **try to make money out of project outcomes**, but I am not allowed to because the project has used public money. But they want to involve me in next project.

So if you want to **build an ecosystem**, then **industry and the private sector needs to be involved** - to **benefit from public investment, to make money** from it and that the money they make can **be reinvested into implementation and more research. Entrepreneurs and researchers need to be involved in healthy ecosystem.**

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End users are also the carers. Lots of work to be done to enhance this care with tech. **How do we include carers in this ecosystem?** Problems now - lack of staff, money. Need to be involved in AAL projects

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End users are not just the older people. **Health care providers, informal carers and professional carers, are also users who should be involved.** How can we involve these care organisations?

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Considering the future of AAL, we should **consider lifestyle**. Lifestyle is the **root cause of almost any disease**. **Healthy ageing also linked to lifestyle**. AAL needs to include the **issue of lifestyle** in its different programmes and this **involves education**. We need **more education and not more technology**. Technology is important, but content is just as important.

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I like the **ecosystem approach**. We do practice this and implement part of this approach - **user involvement and co-creation** already happens although there is always room for improvement

But **who will be the orchestrator of the AAL community**? We are all at the forum and have good, inspirational talks - but **who will take them forward**. Who will be the director to finish our movie? Who will be the glue to bring ideas together? The **conductor of all the voices we hear to create the choir**?

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We are not developing for “others”. We are getting old, we have parents and grandparents. Ageing is not the problem. What **I miss** in this discussion is **any talk of intergenerational solutions**.

There is a **problem with loneliness** and **at the same time many parents in need of childcare**. There is **much knowledge in older generations** how can we bring these two together, for example? This is my challenge to AAL - **include inter-generational solutions**.

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Taiwan is an island of technology and AI. The government there puts a lot of money into it.

I work on how to prevent people with dementia getting lost through navigation solutions. AAL attracts me because **older adults with dementia are already assisted** - but **they must remain active, too, and technology is important for this**.

Ecosystems are like a garden, so we need gardeners, observers, keepers to ensure it flourishes.

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I work with **tech start-ups** making solutions for the older generation – and they **have a hard time getting close to users**, so we end up with solutions that are just not relevant. As part of this ecosystem thinking, AAL could help start-ups get closer to their end users and get closer to the people they are building for.

If we don't do this, other big companies will and we will end up with the big players like Apple and Google disrupting the market and having their solutions **without the ethical dimension or our European way of doing things.**

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We have many technology solutions and lots of knowledge we can share. We know, we need funding, but what are the **real needs of the people?** An AAL **ecosystem** can **make this sharing of what the needs are easier and possible.** We need to share needs - not only problems but challenges and **we need trust** for this.

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One element is missing - **how can AAL promote a cultural change in the funding bodies?** They should be **involved in the long-term sustainability of these ecosystems** or they will break down.

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AAL could **foster local ecosystems. Ecosystems need to work in the community.** People need to work together at that level and get to know each other. Then, an **overarching structure can coordinate these ecosystems** and then **impact on public policy.** AAL can **provoke and resource ecosystems** on the ground.

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I work for an **insurance company** and a few years ago we started to think how to manage the ageing population. Made an ecosystem with non-profit company and an assistance company. We funded a nursing home and got revenue from that and also worked with a company providing guidance systems. **For a company like ours, it would be very useful to be part of AAL ecosystem and learn how to implement systems like this into the care environment.**

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I am **critical of AAL in how it functions.** I believe **Europe sees itself less as one ecosystem but is in fact a collection of thousands of ecosystems.** We tend to develop solutions with the idea that they can be sold all over Europe. What I have discovered in my two AAL projects is that we are forced by AAL rules to work with partners all over Europe, define as problem in one region but **not all regions are the same and solutions don't all work everywhere.** They **work a little here and a little there,** but then fail as they don't do what they are supposed to do everywhere, because we are pushed to think on this scale

Now AAL wants to push solutions to market as many millions have been spent, but very few solutions have been successful on the market.

Our project developed a very good idea, but the market was small. So, to be more successful, we added partners and tried to make the market bigger - and it didn't work. Our solution just didn't work for all these markets.

So, the challenge is that **if we want an ecosystem approach, we need to think smaller and develop solutions for smaller areas and take part in learning from each other and sharing ideas.** We should **develop local solutions and have in place something through which we can learn.**

Closing Remarks and next steps

Julie and Klaus thanked all participants for their active participation in making this a very stimulating dialogue. They invited everyone to provide further ideas and comments before leaving by providing input to four questions posed in each corner of the room (see summary of comments in annex).

Klaus then informed participants that AAL will be back to everyone with a summary of all the inputs and eventually an action plan for next steps in building the prototypical process for eco-systems building support in Europe over the coming months. He encouraged everyone to take part in this exercise, which will help shape future partnerships and joint action.

Brussels, October 8, 2019