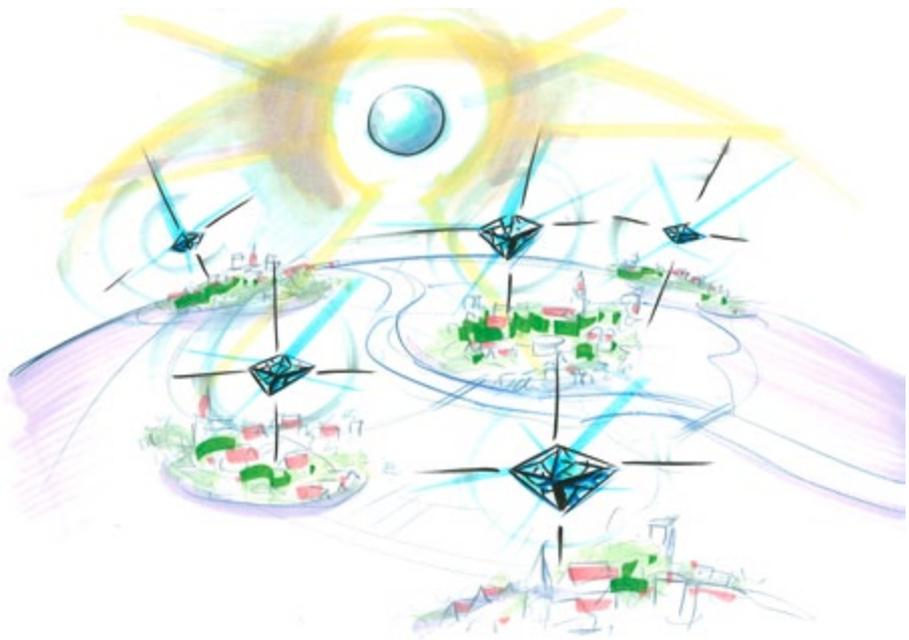


RURAL PARLIAMENTS – Emerging participative democracy



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FOREWORD BY MICHAEL DOWER¹

LET US TAKE OUR FUTURE INTO OUR OWN HANDS

I have been travelling around rural Europe for 25 years, as an enthusiast for rural development. I have met rural people and their representatives and leaders in all the 27 countries within, and some countries still outside, the EU. If I had to choose one word as the root of effective action in rural development, it would be this – PRIDE.

Pride is sometimes thought of as a sin. Perhaps it can be, in an individual. But I am talking about the collective pride of a village, a community, a district, an ethnic group. If people have pride in their place, their traditions, their language, their trades and crafts, their customs, food and drink and religion, they are the more likely to act together to sustain their collective well-being.

Europe – and particularly rural Europe – is still a continent of incalculable variety and richness in places and in human cultures, and still full of distinct and self-aware local communities. But this diversity, this localness, took a terrible battering in the 20th century, because of two world wars, the growth of totalitarian or centralist regimes, the forced or spontaneous movement of peoples, and then the rise of a global culture purveyed through the mass media and increasingly powerful global commerce.

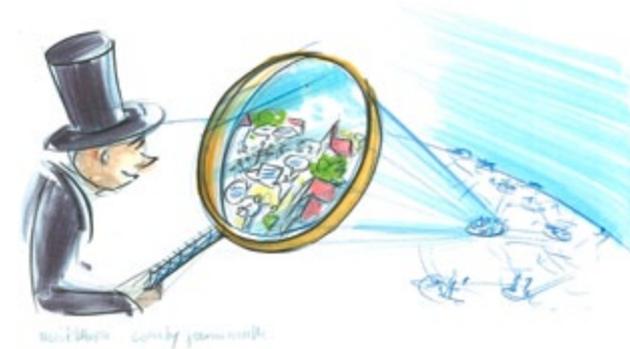
In the face of these forces, many rural communities have suffered grievous weakening of their services, of their economies, of their population (as young people move away) and hence of their morale and their pride. Other communities fell into apathy because of centralist or communist government, and became dependent, expecting action to come from government rather than

from themselves. Others again lost their ‘roots’ because of forced movement of population, so that people arrived in places which carried no collective memory for them.

Such weakness, such apathy, such disconnection do not offer fertile ground for efforts to strengthen rural societies and communities, which is what rural development aims to do. If all the action lies with government, that action will be guided by what government thinks the people need or want and that may be way off the mark. More important, the results of that work will not be truly ‘owned’ by the people.

Over the last 25 years, there has been a growing realisation that rural development will only truly work if it is done, not to the people but by the people for the people. Government alone cannot make it work. The people must be involved, not simply as receivers of government action, but as prime movers of their own development.

That is the realisation that lies behind the Rural Parliaments. They are driven by pride, by assertiveness, by a willingness to act, by a sense that ‘we can do it, we do not need to be told by government what to do, we will raise our voice and be heard, we will take our future into our own hands’.



¹ Prof. Dr. Michael Dower is one of the most visible personalities in the European civil society, initiator of the Prepare Network and promoter of the fair dialogue between governments and nongovernmental organisations striving for integrated rural development.



PERSPECTIVES OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN EUROPEAN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Goran ŠOSTER

Coordinator of PREPARE network – Partnership for Rural Europe

Now more than ever, the perspectives of civil society in European rural development are dependent on the programmes of leading nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and the ability to implement them. The majority of NGOs have come to the conclusion that they have to act in alliance with similar organisations from other countries. Different international and transnational organisations are emerging as extensions of local, regional and national associations. The path toward a sustainable and integrated rural development is paved with a variety of bottom-up initiatives. These initiatives form an invisible network which grows stronger with each passing year. After decades of strengthening this unavoidable part of modern society, national states have acquired a potent social partner to consult with on the matter of strategic decisions concerning our common future. Since modern society faces an array of significant problems, nongovernmental networks are gaining ground in the political arena. The voice of civil society has become stronger also due to the appearance of Rural Parliaments.

The century of dramatic changes

The 19th century brought the decomposition of an obsolete agrarian society. Modernisation in the 20th century broke the obsolete industrial society, and in the 21st century, the information society is facing decomposition trends before it has even had the chance to be built up entirely.

The political map of the world has changed rapidly in the last decades. Compared to the previous century, this time the dramatic changes do not affect national borders. The main political changes appear beyond national states as well as beyond the concept of traditional political parties. Spurred by the process of globalisation, new actors have entered the political arena, not overly burdened with traditional political attributes such as state, party or class.

The daily rhythm used to be perceived through the dynamics of natural light, the alternation of day and night. The exchange of seasons determined the behaviour and eating habits of all civilisations up to the present one. Such a nat-

ural rhythm underlay virtually the entire history. Today it seems that civilisation can survive in a different way. Modern society seems to strive for stronger rhythms, determined by artificial light, video signals and electronic links in real time. Satellites and the internet enable one to perceive the whole world in a moment's time. The world has shrunk to an area of common concern; it has become much smaller than before. The consciousness of modern society is manipulated through the flood of information and the artificial world created through mass media suddenly seems to be the human being's primary environment. Every day, technology offers new products and services to the consumers, and the endless possibility of choice pushes all into the domain of virtual reality. To the badly informed citizen, it may seem that food and natural resources are part of this virtual reality. The assortment of food on offer in big cities, for example, where population density is high, does not allow for temporal or spatial distinction. At any given time, a wide variety of foods from all over the world is available to the consumer. Due to the process of industrialisation and the competition among the most fruitful areas of the planet, the food is relatively cheap. As the market keeps prices as low as possible, it influences the economic and social position of a particular part of society, the one producing the food. Only the industrial way of food production remains economically viable. Small farmers, subsistence and semi-subsistence farmers fight for survival. With each season, the number of those who persist dwindles. Being a farmer in the 21st century is all but a privilege.

The link between the urban and rural way of life changed dramatically. At the beginning of the modern era, the information society seemed like the urban privilege. Citizens of urban areas had access to information, to the satellite video signal and the internet, while people living in rural areas were denied most of those benefits of modern society. This gap between urban and rural areas is melting as the infrastructure intended to convey information progresses into rural areas. At the same time another gap between two poles of society is growing: the gap between the rich and the poor.

In nearly all countries, unemployment rates are growing, which pushes more and more people into the arms of poverty. Social margins are therefore crowd-

ed with people from all ages and professions, regardless of whether they live in big urban conglomerates, suburban areas or remote rural areas. The gap between the rich minority and the poor majority of the world grows wider every decade. The hidden cause for that change lies beyond eternal international adversaries, beyond class struggle and beyond all traditional antagonism.

Modern science allows an accelerated exploitation of natural resources, regardless of the environmental damage. The exponential growth of new economic sectors, supported by science and the policies of most developed countries, influenced by multinational companies, has changed the image of the world radically. The development rate of urban areas exceeds the development rate of rural areas. Globalisation has fuelled the expansion of the rich minority, which possesses most of the wealth in the world. All streams leading toward a concentration of wealth have avoided rural areas from afar.

The unequal distribution of wealth has also added to the unequal distribution of risks. Both require social changes all over the world – in rich and in poor countries. Of course, situations in countries of the developed world differ from those in the poor south, but globalisation is indubitably designing a new political map of the world. This map now also boasts the new dimension of time, not of great importance earlier. The inconsiderate exploitation of limited resources and stepping into the uncertain future taking permanent risk brought forth the issue of solidarity between generations. Relationship between generations became more important for political decisions than class struggle.

Civil society had to react to the abovementioned trends. One of the answers to growing inequality was to raise the voice through new social movements and networks. From the diverse initiatives, rural parliaments emerged as one of the options of political confrontation with said inequality.

Positioning rural parliaments on the political map

It is important to emphasize that rural parliaments do not represent any political party. Rural parliaments are an expression of a social struggle with no obvious clear-cut protagonist. Small farmers, intellectuals, inhabitants of rural areas, workers and entrepreneurs, young people and adults, all of them are represented in rural parliaments. Particular roles and interests are interlinked and the views of specific social groups are often in conflict. In most cases, rural parliaments are events lasting a few days, gathering various stakeholders and respected politicians. Rural parliaments are similar to the organisations from which they sprang. They gather rural people regardless of their religious, political or class affiliation. The demands of rural parliaments include looking beyond the trade union interests of different regional, national and European farmers' organisations. The common aspiration of all actors involved in rural parliaments is to protect the interests of rural areas. This leads towards a territorial rather than class-based positioning of the social movements involved, a general feature of globalisation. Rural networks, initiators of rural parliaments, represent an important part of the new social movements, moving from urban areas to rural ones.

Positioning rural parliaments on the political map is impossible without an overview of the trends regarding classical parliaments in modern parliamentary democracies. A superficial comparison would proceed as follows: rural parliaments are an expression of contemporary social movements, increasingly gaining in importance, whereas the importance of classical parliaments, the cornerstones of parliamentary democracy, the places of confrontation of political parties, diminishes with time. This bold thesis needs to be proved.

Parliaments were the central point of political decisions in parliamentary democracies. However, the direction in which democracy is headed has reduced their political power. Let us analyse where this political power has moved instead.

Without any changes to the legislative regulation of parliamentary democracies having been made, huge changes in the crucial decision-making process appeared in the last decades, whereby the majority of political decisions are adopted behind parliament, in the leading political parties and political coalitions. Parliaments usually simply pass these decisions, with no significant changes suggested from the opposite political parties. Rarely are decisions adopted by a political party which holds a majority in parliament rejected.

A significant share of political decision-making moved from parliament to government and even further to the state administration. The strengthening of the political power of state administration to the detriment of parliament is one of the biggest burdens of modern democracy. The permanent growth of administrative and sub-governmental institutions offers interesting and safe jobs, hardly dependent on the economic situation in the country. The administration shoulders an increasingly greater chunk of political decision-making at the expense of parliament. The demarcation line between political and expertise argumentation in the process of decision-making is blurry, so it is difficult to determine when responsibility extends to the democratically elected representatives, i.e. the parliament, and when this responsibility can be the privilege of the administration machinery. The complexity and the sheer size of the problems encountered by modern society favour the pragmatic decisions taken by the administration. Frequently, the political will of the parliament is neutralised by the complexity of rules and regulations holding sway on the lower administration level. Most attempts to simplify the complicated system of different policies result in new administration traps for the targeted stakeholders.

The public media have become the third pillar of the political decision-making. Providing an efficient control mechanism of political parties and governments, they can also launch certain political issues and themes into focus. Parliament often only then reacts and reflects on the political themes which were considered less important for the members of parliament and of great importance for the public. Public sensitivity for social, environmental and political dilemmas is often more adequate than that of the parliament and amplifying it, mass media are intensely involved in politics. In many cases the parliament is thus pushed

to debate on an issue which would otherwise never have appeared on its agenda. Of course, political parties need to pay attention to their sensitive publicity, which is a positive aspect of the democratisation process.

The prime cause for the changes in modern society is economic growth and the liberalisation of the world market. The shift from national to transnational economies happened behind parliaments. In the time of national economies, parliaments played an important role designing the key elements of the economy: taxes, the level of social welfare, protecting the prices of resources, the national currency etc. The largest companies were mostly dependent on the national economic and social policy regulated by parliaments. The process of globalisation and the liberalisation of the world market led the strongest companies into a race for lowering the production costs. Avoiding taxes and expensive labour by transferring production to countries with considerably lower prices and overall production costs has become the rule in company management. The most “progressive” transnational companies dominate the world economy. No national policy could stop the process of exponential growth supported by the efficient application of modern science, which was sold out to rich multinational companies.

The process of market liberalisation had a destructive impact on the environment and on the social structure. The main ally of multinational companies in the process of concentrating the world’s wealth in the hands of a tiny minority is the consumer. There is no political force anymore which could take away the rights to spend, to travel, and to move freely from the individual. The individual consumer is pushing the economy to produce cheaper products, to exploit limited resources and to increase the general risk for society. No parliament can influence this unavoidable process. The paradox of modern politics is even so deep that the political parties, and through them the parliaments, in many aspects serve the interests of the capital concentrated in the hands of the richest individuals.

All these trends have diminished the role of the parliament as the central political body and dispersed political power into broader society. The process of democratisation has made modern states much more politicised, since the power

of political decisions is spread among diverse social groups. In the new political culture, new sub-political centres are emerging. Nongovernmental organisations, associations, alliances and networks belong among important political stakeholders. Placing environmental issues and the interests of farmers into the political arena, the defenders of rural areas have also been taking part in the political process in the last decade. Different nongovernmental organisations and networks are raising their voices for rural areas. The interests of rural areas are also articulated in rural parliaments, which are a specific form of gathering with a clear political motive. Rural parliaments emerge as one of the inventive tools of modern democracy, with a good prospect to evolve into an important social force.

The role of civil society in European rural development

Without underestimating the main challenges in the field of rural development, let us first provide a brief overview of the situation from the systemic viewpoint.

Today, we can hardly imagine a democracy without the involvement of civil society. Long term trends show a decline of the traditional role of the nation state and at the same time the increasing importance of several international organisations, such as the World Bank, the United Nations, the WTO, the European Union, OECD etc. Simultaneously, nongovernmental organisations are growing as international networks, e.g. Greenpeace, Birdlife, WWF, and others on the environmental scene, IFOAM in organic agriculture, or PREPARE (the Partnership for rural Europe) and ELARD in the field of rural development. Their political positions are respected and are gaining in importance.

It is hard to make global estimates, but as far as the European Union is concerned, it should be admitted that the main representatives of civil society are involved in the formal policy process. In the field of rural development, the European Network for Rural Development (EN RD) was established to help coor-

dinate rural areas and to improve connections between actors in the rural development on the European level. It is a fact, however, that the rural areas and the stakeholders acting there are not well connected, one of the reasons being the diversity of rural communities and a wide range of needs from different social groups.

Within the frame of the EN RD Coordination Committee, there are 12 seats reserved for the most influential European NGOs or networks in the field of rural development and agriculture. The PREPARE Network is one of those. Next to the 12 representatives of civil society, there are 27 seats reserved for the representatives of the Ministries of Agriculture (one per each member state) and 31 seats for the National Rural Networks. Of course, at the EN RD Coordination Committee meetings there are representatives from the European Commission and from the EN RD Contact Point, which acts as the secretariat of EN RD. Other bodies of EN RD include the LEADER Sub-committee, Thematic Working Groups and the European Evaluation Network.

It is true that these bodies do not have a direct impact on European policies. This remains in the domain of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council. The consultation of EU bodies with the most influential representatives from civil society is just a good starting point for now. It gives hope that the inferior position of the civil society in relation to European authorities will improve with time.

At a formal level, this is a good example of a fruitful exchange of political views, positions and needs between the EU, its separate member states and civil society. Besides the formal level of interaction, there is the spontaneous level, an important ingredient in the workings of civil society. A good example of how civil society can organize and mobilize its human resources is the debate about the Common Agriculture Policy after 2013. The most visible initiative in the field of designing the future agriculture and rural development policy is the initiative called the Agricultural and Rural Convention – ARC. More than 130 NGOs and networks expressed support of the communication ARC has launched after the long process of negotiation between various NGOs active on the European, national, regional and sub-regional levels. The European Commission

headed the main demands of the broadest coalition in the field of rural development so far. The ARC was also invited to attend the hearings in the European Parliament and in the European Economic and Social Committee.

At present, numerous social and economic problems persist, but only few can provoke civil society to step into civil disobedience. To ignore the political system or even destroy it is the last option civil society has at its disposal – it resorts to it only when all other methods to influence political decisions have failed. The tolerance of the civil society in the European Union is relatively high. However, the permanent growth of social and economic disparities, the economic decline of rural areas, the existential distress, the moral crisis and social injustice could provoke civil society to step over the limits of tolerance, conquer the streets and demand justice in a radical way. None of the European-wide networks active in the field of rural development have displayed tendencies towards civil disobedience until now, although most of them have the potential to encourage their members to articulate their interests in a more assertive manner. As long as the dialogue between social partners promises results, there is no need for civil disobedience.

Rural parliaments as a tool for a shift toward participative democracy

Rural parliaments are regular annual or biannual gatherings in five European countries: Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Estonia and Slovakia. Four of them are organised by Prepare member organisations. In addition, other Prepare member organisations have expressed an interest to apply the methods or events called “rural parliaments” in their countries.

The discussion about rural parliaments as some of the most significant tools for integral rural development is a great challenge for the Prepare network. Countries with rich experience in this field are striving to improve the quality of these events. Countries without such an experience are willing to learn

from the best practices and exchange relevant experience. They would profit tremendously from a discussion on rural parliaments and prepare themselves to start with similar action on their own turf. The transfer of the rural parliament as a methodology to new countries broadens the possibility of the effectiveness of the Prepare network as it reinforces the positions of its member organisations.

Rural parliaments are an innovative way to gain broader consensus about rural development policies on the national level and to strengthen the civil voice in favour of sustainable rural development. In recent years, rural parliaments have proved an excellent opportunity to make the efforts of the Prepare member organisations visible in the national context. Rich experience was gathered all around Europe. Each country organising such an event faced situations similar to and different from those encountered by another country. So far, there has been no explicit exchange of experience among them. In 2010, the Prepare network launched an initiative for the international exchange of experience on rural parliaments. First an international workshop was organised, where several topics pertaining to the organisation of rural parliaments were discussed. The main objective of the workshop was to exchange information about different events bearing the same name in five countries. Clarifications as to the definition of a rural parliament were needed, as well as its supposed structure, the roles of partners and the logistics of different rural parliaments. The workshop was carried out as part of the Swedish rural parliament in May 2010. At the second stage, deeper insights into rural parliaments were provided at the seminar on rural parliaments organised by the Prepare network in Slovakia in the same year. Several topics were discussed: the organisational side of rural parliaments (partnership, choosing the proper area/accommodation, reservations, timing, guests etc.), the financial aspect of rural parliaments (sources, fundraising, expenses, participation); the visibility of rural parliaments (public relations, media plan, costs); and the preparation of a book on rural parliaments. One of the outcomes of the conference was the need for international exchange of rural parliament methodologies. This and other needs concerning the development of the tools expressing the will of the people living in rural areas are a good basis for further actions regarding this innovative approach to rural development.

Rural parliaments definitely belong among the constructive methods for putting important themes on the political agenda. The comparison of themes discussed at various rural parliaments yields similarity across all countries. It also shows that the Prepare network and the ARC are mapping the issues from bottom up, issues which are in effect relevant on all levels, from the local and the sub-regional to the national and European. Up until now, rural parliaments have been organised within the framework of national borders, while their organizers have already been active on the international level for a long time. It is reasonable to expect that rural parliaments will expand into some other Prepare member countries and evolve from national to European events.

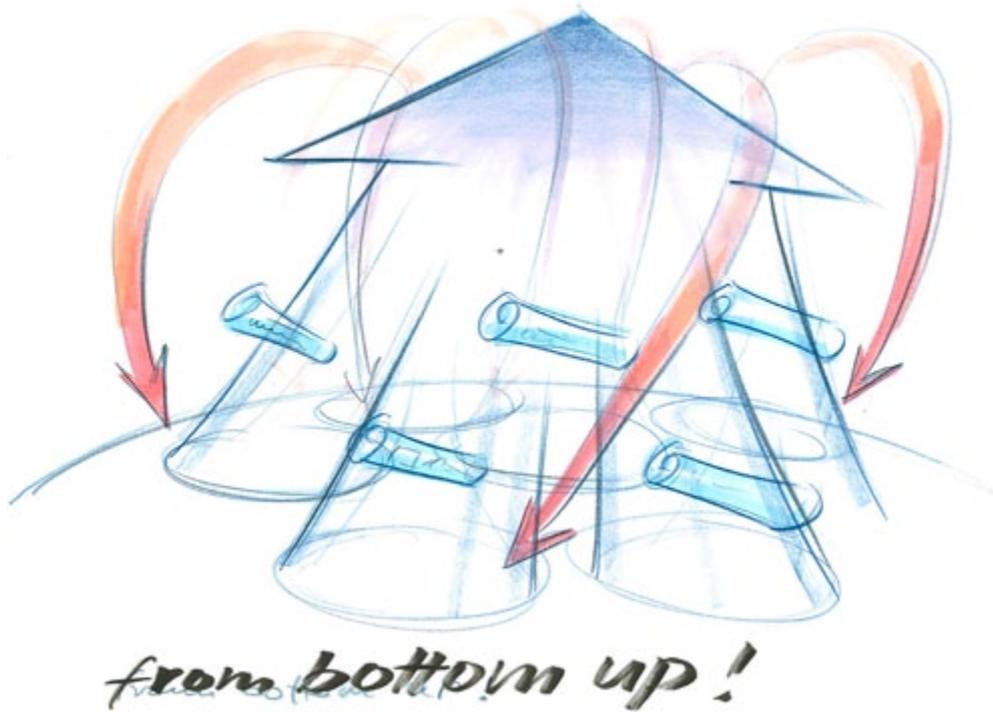
There are significant differences among rural parliaments in terms of duration, size and especially in the organisational approach taken by each, while the contents are more or less similar. Rural parliaments are putting relevant issues on their agenda. Discussions in rural parliaments often also offer answers and solutions. In general, rural parliaments express the needs from local areas, trying to satisfy them according to the “from the bottom up” principle. Until now, the most visible European programme which systematically supported local bottom-up initiatives has been the LEADER programme. Its Local Action Groups (LAGs) build partnerships to design local development strategies and implement them. Despite its evident benefits and measurable results, the LEADER programme is in danger of being cut down or even cancelled. There are stakeholders in the political arena who claim that the LEADER programme eats away at the resources intended for agricultural purposes. On the other hand, there are nongovernmental organisations and experts active in rural areas forming a broad coalition to support the idea of LEADER, while defending the need to expand the LEADER programme and apply the LEADER method also in other European funds seems to be accepted at the level of the European Commission. Still, uncertainty whether the LEADER programme will be one of the measures present in the future Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) remains. By the end of 2010, there were more than 2.200 Local Action Groups registered in the European Union. All rural parliaments emphasised the importance of the LEADER programme. Continuity of the successful measures in CAP is one of the preconditions for the vitality of rural areas and one of the focal points of discussion at rural parliaments.

There are further arguments in favour of a continued systematic support of rural development and the internationalisation of rural parliaments. First, there is the need to strengthen the international capacities of civil society, which has to be able to take part in a fair political dialogue with the European authorities and other multinational organisations influencing life in rural areas. Second, there is the need to raise the voice from rural areas at all levels, from the local and sub-regional to the national and European level. Strong and transparent nongovernmental structures with clearly articulated programmes should be in the best interest of all parts of society since they offer the model of a working participative democracy. According to the interest several countries have voiced to introduce rural parliaments, we can expect an ongoing growth of the civil initiative and better prospects for many Europeans living in the rural area.

There is no modern democracy without a strong civil society, organised and involved in the decision-making processes. The importance of civil society in the political structure of a modern state is increasing. As policy-making shifts from the national to the transnational floor, civil society is following and sometimes even leading, efficiently organised. Articulating the interests of groups on the margins of society has become one of the most urgent needs of an unbalanced society. Rural parliaments and rural networks carry a huge responsibility to articulate the interests of rural areas.

In the century of dramatic changes, relationships between different social groups are blurred in complexity. Despite the flood of information, or perhaps because of it, several remote areas can easily be disregarded and excluded from society in the globalised world. Rural parliaments enable voices from rural areas to be heard and respected. Rural Parliaments are the real pioneers of participative democracy.

Looking for appropriate governance structures at all levels, rural parliaments can make a significant contribution to the open and balanced society, which should be one of the main goals of the future Europe.



THE RURAL MOVEMENTS IN EUROPE

Vanessa HALHEAD

*Secretary of the European Rural Community Association ERCA -
the network of the national rural movements*

The Rural Parliaments are closely connected with the Rural Movements that are active across much of Europe.

The Rural Movements of Europe are non-governmental organisations (NGO), working at a national level, or regional in the case of countries with federal states or autonomous regions. They represent an organised approach to providing networking, capacity building and a voice for the rural areas, their people and the many organisations working for rural development. Most have a strong grass-roots involvement from the rural communities.

The formation of the movements has been motivated by such issues as the loss of rural livelihoods and population, centralising administration, reduction in public funds, regional inequalities, entry into the EU, lack of integrated rural policy at national and EU levels, EU emphasis on 'subsidiarity' and the need for a 'rural voice' in increasingly urban societies.

The rural or village action movements, as we now know them, began in Finland in the 1970's, in response to rural change and rapid depopulation. The idea has since spread to all of the Nordic countries and most of the EU accession countries. The longest established are in Finland, Denmark and Sweden. Similar organisations developed independently, but for similar reasons, in other parts of Europe, especially during the 1980's. These organisations have evolved and developed to meet the challenges facing rural communities within the differing national contexts.

Sweden and the Swedish rural movement '*Hela Sverige ska leva*' has been particularly influential in exporting the ideas and working models for the rural movements to other countries, especially in the Central and Eastern Europe. Significant work has been carried out in these countries to equip them to enter the EU and to organise their rural communities to enable rural people to have a voice. In this context *PREPARE* was developed as a project in 2001 to promote this work.

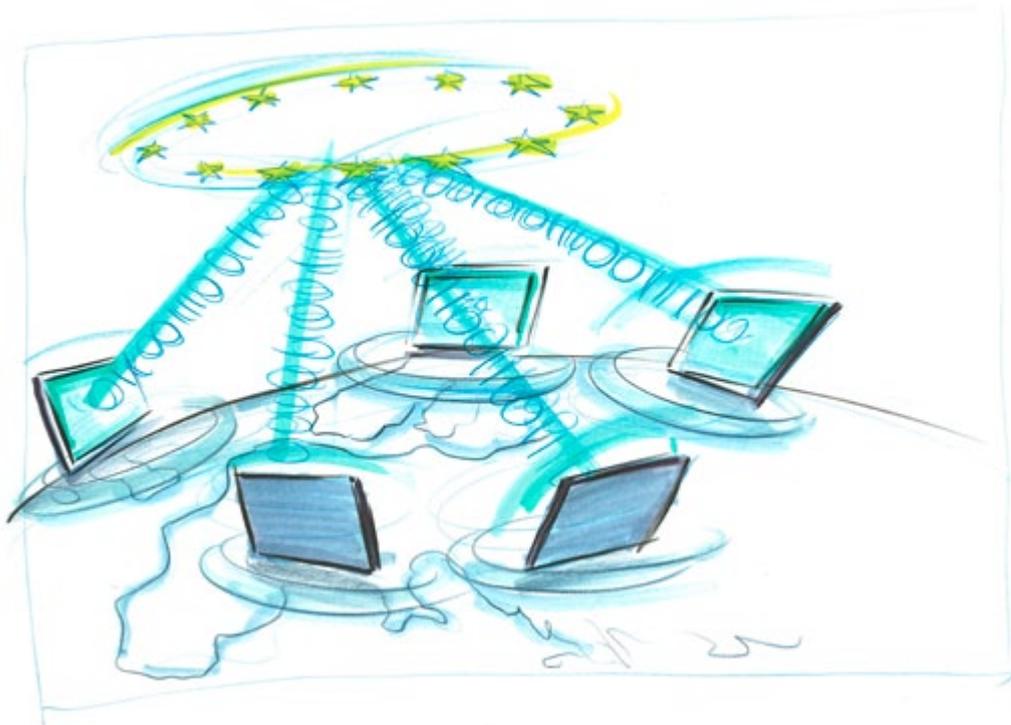
Research into the rural movements was carried out in 2003-2004, and published by *PREPARE* in 2005². This revealed, at that time, 18 national rural movements. We now know of 23 national and regional rural movements, in the following countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden and Wales.

United small villages influencing government policy is just one outcome of the rural movements in Europe. They also support, train and network thousands of rural communities. This is a quiet revolution, taking place in rural communities across Europe. The rural movements are mobilising rural communities to address their own futures, to work together to help each other and to influence policy at local, regional, national and EU levels. They represent an organised approach to providing a voice for rural areas, their people and the organisations working for rural development.

An important tool in this work is the 'Rural Parliament'. The Swedish model for the Rural Parliament was the first example of this particular type of event, aimed at raising the voice of the rural areas. It is still the 'gold standard' in Europe. It has inspired and influenced many people in many countries, who have since worked to establish their own version of the Rural Parliament. Some of those examples are documented in this publication.

The national and regional rural movements have now formed their own network at a European scale – *The European Rural Community Association (ERCA)* – to enable mutual connections, learning and voice for the rural communities of Europe. This organisation is working closely with *PREPARE*, and other European networks to promote the needs of the rural people and sharing the methods whereby rural communities can influence their own development. This publication is one of the tools developed for that purpose.

² Halhead V. (2005) 'The Rural Movements of Europe', *PREPARE*



SWEDISH RURAL PARLIAMENT³

*Staffan BOND,
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and Berit FOLKESSON*

³ Sources: Folkhälsoinstitutet Hela Sverige ska leva. "Bygderörelsen, Historia och framtid" (1998)
HSSL webpage. <http://www.helasverige.se> (29 september, 2010)
Reports from Rural Parliaments 2006, 2008
Overgaard Jörgensen, Andersson, Hans. "Belysning av landsbygdsriksdagar arrangerade av Folkhälsoinstitutet Hela Sverige ska leva" (2004)

CONTEXT

Country: Sweden

Organisation: Hela Sverige ska leva / All Sweden shall live

Name: Landsbygdsriksdagen / Rural Parliament

About Hela Sverige ska leva

The mission of *Hela Sverige ska leva* is to support local development towards a sustainable society. We stimulate cooperation, advise and support local groups, and furnish them with tools to help them succeed in working with local development. Our objective is also to influence public opinion and rural policies - in order for all Sweden to live!

Organisation

Hela Sverige ska leva has a membership of 4.700 village action groups and 40 larger NGO rural organisations. The village action groups directly involve about 100.000 individuals and their work effect about 3.000.000 people, which is equivalent to a third of the Swedish population. The organisation is run by a board of 14 people, elected from the membership. *Hela Sverige ska leva* has its national head office in Stockholm, with a staff of 5-7 people, plus project managers. It also has 24 county networks and 100 municipal networks, many with their own staff.

What is a village development group

The village development groups are spread all over Sweden and deal with all sorts of matters. They run shops, organise childcare, set up wind power plants and improve roads. They do local planning, work on the transition to sustainable development, handle the local economy, work on getting broadband to their community and organise local financing of projects.

They often start with a local crisis, for example, a factory shutting down or a school closing. The villagers recognize the need for collective action. Usually

a few dedicated persons take the lead – in Swedish we call them ‘fiery spirits’ – and others follow. It is not unusual that it is women, people returning to the area or new-comers who are the ones to lead initiatives.

Village development groups (as we define them)

- Work on a broad basis to promote local development;
- See to the common interests of the district and represent it in various contexts;
- Are open to all and work publicly;
- Are appointed and work in a democratic way, often as non-profit associations;
- Operate in a district – the village or the parish – defined by the inhabitants themselves.

HISTORY

Origins: The beginning of Rural parliaments

Hela Sverige ska leva was established in 1989 as the result of a campaign with the slogan ‘All Sweden shall live’. The depopulation of the Swedish countryside formed the setting for this campaign. Especially the sparsely populated areas in the northern inland regions faced a troublesome situation with a lack of jobs and service facilities. The ones who moved away were mostly young people. The villagers felt abandoned by the authorities.

The aim of the campaign was to mobilise the people in the rural districts and to change the attitudes of the general public and the decision makers. Last but not least, the objective was to improve national rural policies.

The campaign was very successful. Letters were sent from across the country filled with suggestions, ideas and demands from individuals and various organisations, levelled against the government. When the official letter was handed

over to the politicians, it contained approximately 6.000 suggestions and demands that treated the rural issues!

At the end of the campaign around 1.000 village action groups had formed.

Why was there a need for a rural movement? (1950's–1980's)

From 1950's to 1980's the population in rural areas in Sweden decreased by about 50 %. In the 50's people still had significant social and economic cooperation around machines, flour and saw-mills, and different tasks within agriculture. The introduction of machines diminished the need for cooperation by eliminating or simplifying farming tasks. Many farmers bought their own machinery.

Civic society organisations were still active and vibrant during the 50's. Then a decline of rural areas started in the 60's. Smaller food stores closed because they were considered not profitable enough. In 1971 there was a big structural change that amalgamated 2.500 smaller municipalities into less than 300. This structural change reduced the number of local political actors, and it became harder to politically influence the development of the local villages. The 60's was a dark decade for rural regions in Sweden, with depopulation, failing economy and social inactivity. During the 70's public opinion changed somewhat and the migration away from rural areas was for a while lessened. The beginning of the 80's was again a set-back for rural areas.

Specifics: The start of the movement (1987–1989)

The campaign 'All Sweden shall live' started in June 1987 and went on to September 1989. The initiative came from the *Council of Europe*. At the same time the *Delegation of Sparsely Populated Areas* considered making a special effort or campaign in Sweden for the rural areas. Within the civic movements there were thoughts about starting a campaign for the preservation of the cultural landscape in rural areas.

The government asked the *Delegation of Sparsely Populated Areas* to coordinate the Swedish campaign and their work was done in close collaboration with the newly formed *National Civic Movements Committee*, which had 98 participating

NGOs. At a regional level there were county committees with representatives from authorities and civic movements. Almost all municipalities participated in the campaign.

The campaign was a significant success. The local mobilisation went above and beyond the already high expectations. Authorities and national administrative boards supported the work and a number of concrete pilot projects were initiated. Also in the media the message of the campaign came through clearly.

There were a few areas where the campaign was not as successful. There was not good support from the business sector and national media coverage was too weak for the message to reach the big cities. While the mobilisation of people in rural areas was successful at large, it often failed to include and involve the youth in the local work.

Development: Collecting views and the first Rural Parliament (1988–1989)

In the spring of 1988 the *National Peoples Movements Committee* initiated a major project aimed at collecting the views of rural people. 110 scrolls were sent out to travel across Sweden. On these scrolls people were urged to write down their suggestions, ideas and demands. Civic and public organisations cooperated in getting the scrolls around. By summer the scrolls had reached about 1.200 different places in 23 counties and 197 municipalities. Local development groups, organisations and individuals were encouraged to contribute.

The scrolls were presented to representatives of the political parties at a big event in Stockholm in the autumn, and the minister of industrial affairs promised that the government would try the ideas listed in the scrolls. The collected 6.000 suggestions filled 30 binders at the headquarters of the campaign.

The finale of the campaign was the first Rural Parliament in Umeå, April 1-2, 1989. About 650 delegates got together to discuss the content of the scrolls. The result of the meeting was roughly 300 demands directed at around 60 different bodies, and it was decided that the movement for rural areas should continue. The following autumn (1989) the popular movement *Hela Sverige ska leva*. was formed.

The most important mission of Hela Sverige ska leva was to:

- Follow up on the work initiated by the campaign;
- Stimulate and support local development;
- Facilitate cooperation/coordination between the different local development groups;
- Coordinate the political stance of the various civic popular movements;
- Bring forth the issues of rural areas and act as lobbyists towards the government;
- Run projects like ‘the village politics project’ and ‘young in the countryside’.

Politically Hela Sverige ska leva works towards:

- A clear goal for rural strategy where the regional balance includes all parts of Sweden;
- A unified strategy for the development of rural areas;
- A central governmental body for coordinating and a new comprehensive view of regional and rural development;
- Better cooperation and coordination between civil service departments, authorities, and organisations.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The most important objective of *Hela Sverige ska leva* is to coordinate and unite the voice of rural areas in order to be able to influence politics. The Rural Parliament is like a manifestation of the whole movement. It is a place to catch up on the latest regarding what is going on, and a place to expose current issues, worked on in rural areas, to the authorities, the Government and the National

Parliament. It is also an important forum for exchange of experiences, a meeting place and a source for inspiration. We want the Rural Parliament to always be in the forefront of current issues.

ORGANISATION

Frequency

Every second year. 11 Rural Parliaments since 1989.

Duration

3- 4 days

Location

Hela Sverige ska leva County Networks who are interested in holding the Rural Parliament apply to *Hela Sverige ska leva*. The board presents the alternatives at the yearly general assembly and a decision is reached there. We try to get a good spread over the whole country.

Participants

Invitations are sent to all local development groups, to other NGO's, the Government, the Parliament, county administrative boards and municipalities. The number of participants varies, but around 1.000 people come, of those 70-100 are international.

Responsibilities

Hela Sverige ska leva is responsible for the whole event. Co-organisers are the selected *Hela Sverige ska leva* county network, the municipality at the selected place for the Rural Parliament. For the past two Rural Parliaments, 2008 and 2010, the *Swedish Rural Network* has also been a co-organiser. The project leader is hired by *Hela Sverige ska leva*. Partners are national and regional agencies

and other parties that are actively involved in running the Rural Parliament and that support the event financially⁴.

Involvement

The reason for why the *Hela Sverige ska leva* county networks want to be involved is because it is an opportunity for their area to be seen. It is an opportunity to show good examples, and to raise rural questions. It is also an opportunity to mobilise people / activists in rural areas.

One reason for the *Swedish Rural Network* to be involved is because they are obliged by EU to arrange a large event every other year and in 2008 and 2010 they chose to fulfil their requirement by co-organising the Rural Parliament. Their motive is to spread information and to get better implementation of the Rural Program in Sweden.

The municipality help with planning, time from personnel, facilities like schools and meeting rooms and sometimes also financially. The reason they want to be involved is that it is an opportunity to be seen. Being involved can also help the people at the municipality to become better informed about local issues.

Financing

The average cost of Rural Parliament is 7.000.000 SEK (700.000 euro). Funding comes from *Hela Sverige ska leva*, different regional bodies, the *Swedish Board of Agriculture*, the *Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth* and participant fees. Banks, businesses and NGO's contribute as well. EU-programs including LEADER are other possibilities for help with financing.

Communication

Communication between organisers is done via meetings and telephone conferences, email and phone calls, both in early stages and later on.

⁴ For a detailed description of the various responsibilities see Appendix 1.

Communication with policy makers – by inviting them to the event, via TV, radio, newspapers and by ambassadors (well known people that show public support of the movement). Communication with the public – through webpage and newsletters, and the same way we communicate with policy makers.

METHODS

Preparation

The date for an upcoming Rural Parliament is set two years before the event. The practical planning starts 1 ½ years before the event. The booking opens ½ year before the event. The program has to be set before the invitations are sent out and the booking opens.

We work on creating publicity around the event in the county where we hold it, and then work on spreading the word across the whole country, via word of mouth, webpage, newsletters, at meetings and conferences. At the very start an executive committee is put together consisting of *Hela Sverige ska leva* and national as well as regional and local partners. The role of the executive committee is to make decision about things like the budget, media plan, theme for the Rural Parliament, follow up, reporting etc.

Under the executive committee there is a project group. The responsibility of the project group is to come up with suggestions on budget, organisation, content etc. The project group is made of some people from the partners and from the various working groups: sponsoring, good examples, transport, food, entertainment, building/construction, media contact, seminars, program etc.

Typically the organisation comprises:

- 1 executive committee: 10 people
- 1 project group: 10 people
- 8-10 working groups: 8-10 people in each

Content

The theme of the Rural Parliament is the first subject discussed. It is up to the executive committee to decide on the theme. It is important to keep a focus. Last time the theme was cooperation across generations. Examples of themes for other rural Parliaments are local planning, youth, rural service, energy, and regional / rural politics. A permanent sub-theme at every Rural Parliament is international cooperation. We continuously follow the political debate and have discussions on current issues.

Method and Process

There are several different elements that make up the Rural Parliament. The content varies every time a new Rural Parliament is held.

Political speeches / Ministers, at times also the Prime Minister, visit the Parliament and give their view on Rural Policies.

Introductory speaker / A researcher or some publicly known person – an appropriate ‘celebrity’ is usually invited to hold an introductory speech.

Exhibitions / Can be NGO’s – including All Sweden shall live, local development groups, political parties, national agencies, interest groups, municipalities, banks and businesses. The exhibition area can also be a market place for communities and organisations.

Speaker’s corner / sometimes we’ve had a designated a spot without a scheduled program where anyone can choose to speak about whatever they like.

Plenary sessions / the earlier plenary sessions were held in the conventional way with a chairman and a secretary. Lately it has been more common to have panel discussions – or as in Sunne, a ‘sofa discussion’. More or less public figures from various areas get together and discuss current issues before the audience. The technique is very important for plenary sessions. If people have a hard time hearing what is said the plenary sessions will become extremely boring. It is important that the speeches are not too long and that the speech is not delivered by reading from a paper. A good large plenary hall is important. Everybody has to fit in.

Workshops / The workshops are held in many different ways. Something that is important to all is to not have too large groups. Experienced workshop facilitators help the process. At some Rural Parliaments we have held a short education for all workshop facilitators on how to lead a group, how to avoid only a few people talking etc. At others it is up to the different seminar leaders to run his or her session in whatever manner they see fit. Some workshop facilitators use the ‘Opera method’ which is a dialogue based method used in groups of up to 48 participants. It is created to ensure that the opinion of every participant is taken into account, and is a method suitable for making strategies and action plans. At some Rural Parliaments we have placed computers in all seminar rooms containing instructions on how to hold the workshop and a report form for the workshop facilitator to fill out afterwards. The form was then sent to the board of *Hela Sverige ska leva* and sometimes also presented to the Government /Parliament. At others we have had experts present in addition to the workshop holder so that the participants would get help sorting out questions on the spot.

Some workshops are especially aimed at young people. In 2010 we used a method called ‘Rural Areas 2.0’ to inspire young people to be actively involved in their communities. The work is done in smaller groups with preferably youngsters from the same village. They work through a set of 10 questions and end the session by creating a half-year plan for how they will achieve their goals.

Field visits / field visits are a very popular part of the program. People want to see what other people are doing. It is important that the hosts at the local place are informed beforehand about the purpose of the visit. Bringing a guide that can describe what is seen and who makes sure that the purpose of the trip is achieved is a good idea. The projects visited should be run by local development groups, and the focus should be to discuss progress, problems and solutions.

OUTCOMES

Evaluation

After most of the Rural Parliaments we have produced a report, presented in booklet form. The booklet is sent to various ministries and other relevant bodies.

The delegates also get a chance to evaluate the event via an electronic questionnaire. There is one for national delegates and one for international. The national electronic questionnaire is placed on the *Hela Sverige ska leva* webpage. The international electronic questionnaire is sent via a link in an email to the delegates on the participation list. The evaluation is presented to the board and staff of *Hela Sverige ska leva* and is discussed there.

The executive committee for the Rural Parliament meet to evaluate the event. The *Hela Sverige ska leva* County Networks do likewise. At the Rural Parliament in 2010 there was a big event afterwards where all the working groups met together with representatives from *Hela Sverige ska leva* and the executive committee. It was a combination of evaluation and thank you dinner.

Outcomes

Aims / Looking back at the original aims and objectives of *Hela Sverige ska leva* mentioned in the background section, and the first Rural Parliament one concrete example of outcomes is that we have gone from 1.000 to 4.000 local development groups. We work to stimulate local development groups, to facilitate cooperation, to bring forth issues and lobby the Government in several ways, one of the venues for this work is the Rural Parliament. In order to facilitate coordination we have stimulated the development of *Hela Sverige ska leva* county boards and we have worked together with other NGO's to coordinate a common stance in various important political questions. All in accordance with the original aim of *Hela Sverige ska leva*

Outcomes for rural communities / The event helps to lift the spirit. People experience that they are many who work towards the same goal, and that they are part of a big movement. The Rural Parliament gives the communities a chance

to display their work, which can be inspiring to both themselves and others. They get ideas for solutions and are better informed. (One example is sharing experience on how to run a local elder care cooperative). People, who do a lot of work without getting particularly noticed, get a chance to meet others who do the same thing, and return home with renewed strength. For the communities who get to show their work it is of course very positive. Sometimes a local development group may choose someone to send to the Rural Parliament as a reward for the work that they have done for the local community. It is also a time to enjoy the company of new and old friends and have a good time.

Outcomes influencing rural policy / The Rural Parliament sends an important signal to the rest of society that the rural movement is strong. The local influence on politics has increased. The politicians pay more attention to the local development groups. The status of rural issues has increased. One sign that the Rural Parliament is seen as an important event is that the number of Ministers and Members of Parliament attending the event has increased.

Regarding the political aims mentioned earlier, one of the results is that a national Rural Programme was accepted by the national Parliament in the mid 2000's, and that the *Delegation for Sparsely Populated areas* was incorporated into the regular national administration by becoming a National Agency/board. Most recently, a positive political change is that the *Swedish Ministry of Agriculture* changed name to *Ministry of Rural Issues* in October 2010, which reflects an *Hela Sverige ska leva* long-time stance that the rural areas are so much more than agriculture.

Outcomes influencing social change / One outcome, that may or may not be influenced by the Rural Parliaments and the work of *Hela Sverige ska leva*, is that there is an increase in cooperation with other local groups. This means that instead of working in groups within one's own organisations, there are local development groups that are inter-political and who work across interest borders to solve specific questions. People may also have become more inclined to take matters into their own hands, rather than to try to solve problems with political methods.

By participating in democratic workshops the participants get experience of

democratic meeting techniques that they themselves can use in their own community.

Outcomes for organisation / Holding Rural Parliaments makes the organisation *Hela Sverige ska leva* known to the public in a way that could not have been done in any other way. It helps us to move our positions forward, and give the political statements *Hela Sverige ska leva* makes greater impact on politics. The Rural Parliament strengthens the identity of the village movement and creates an 'us' that is working together towards a common goal.

International outcomes / Our Rural Parliaments have inspired other countries to hold similar events. Cooperation projects have been initiated or confirmed, new contacts have been made and experiences shared.

LESSONS

What worked

We feel that we have been successful in coordinating and uniting the voice of rural areas with the purpose of influencing politics. The politicians, at all levels, pay more attention to the local development groups.

Something that has been particularly successful is going out to the villages and seeing other people's projects and meeting those involved in them. There is a great interest to know what other people are doing.

We feel that we are successful in the sense of covering many issues and having many seminars.

The social aspect is also successful. The dinners and festivities at night are important.

It is a well organised event that draws a lot of people.

Coverage of rural issues is very good in the local media, but not good enough in national media.

Challenges

To find financing to cover the costs for arranging a Rural Parliament is always a great challenge. It is costly to arrange a Rural Parliament.

The logistics of handling large groups of people is always a challenge. To find big enough facilities in the country side, to arrange transport and food. Finding rooms for everyone is often a problem. People want to sleep in single rooms, something that is rarely possible. It is also not appreciated to stay far away from the centre of the action.

It may be a good idea to avoid controversial exhibitors / subjects. But since it can be important to lift a controversial / highly emotional subject it is a good idea to make sure that the opposing view is represented as well. An example in Sweden at the most recent Rural Parliament was the 'Dare to oppose wolfs' project, where people have very strong opposing views. It created some upset and strong comments.

Be sure to map the presence of concurring events. Some Rural Parliaments have coincided with other big events. This has proved not to be successful. People chose one event to go to. They do not take time to drop in on both events just because it is nearby. Neither did we find it successful to have other events in close conjunction with – right before or right after – the Rural Parliament.

Something to keep in mind is that there is a danger in collecting suggestions and demands from delegates if they are under the impression that the board of *Hela Sverige ska leva* or the government shall act upon these issues and solve the problems. If people's expectations are too great, or unrealistic, it can lead to a set-back in good, forward moving energy instead of boosting the morale.

Another challenge is to make as many people as possible feel that their voice is heard. This challenge can be tackled by trying different methods in workshops and on field visits, and by creating a program and physical setting that gives opportunity for many informal meetings and discussions.

It is important to create a program that enables people to meet, that the whole set-up inspires discussions both within and in between the regular program.

It is a challenge to get good coverage and attention in national media.

FUTURE PLANS

Plans for future

A lesson learned is that volume is not everything. It can be worth it to lower the number of attendants in order to secure quality. We plan to limit the number of delegates to about 800 and instead raise the quality of both seminars and the travelling workshops.

There has been discussion about splitting into regional events with some kind of national summary. Using digital technology to gather people instead of just meeting physically is another option discussed.

A few years ago a survey was done among the participants on ideas for the future, and it turned out that most people wanted the Rural Parliament to be organised the same way 'as usual'.

In the past two Rural Parliaments we experimented with having an external project manager. We found that we prefer to have the project manager in-house in order to have more control of the event. So for the future we will use internal project managers.

Is there need for exchange among actors of Rural Parliaments?

Yes, it is a good idea to have exchange. This is already happening between national Rural Parliament actors both informally and formally.

European Rural parliaments?

Yes it would be a good idea. But it should start as a rather small / modest event. There is a risk that this would become more of an 'elite' event though, since it is expensive to travel.

Regional Rural parliaments?

Yes, absolutely a good idea. We have also discussed the possibility of having a Nordic as well as a Baltic Rural Parliament, but have not had the resources to realize such an event.

COMMENTARY

There is not set formula for the best way to hold a Rural Parliament. The event is constantly evolving and we are still looking for the best way. Every Rural Parliament is unique, also because of the varying local conditions. One example is the unusually high number of seminars at the Rural Parliament in 2010 – a result of the local facilities; we had many rooms but very small.

It is important to create a program that enables people to meet. When we manage to create a program that inspires discussions then we have achieved our goals. And it is also important that the participants feel and believe that the event makes a difference. That Rural Parliaments are needed to move issues forward, and that it is a good place to meet.

LINKS

- All Sweden shall live: <http://www.helasverige.se/kansli/in-english/>
- Buy book on Opera method: http://www.innotiimi.se/site/?lan=3&mode=shop&product_id=66



ESTONIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT

Sirje VINNI

Kodukant Board member

CONTEXT

Country: Estonia

Organisation: Kodukant / Estonian Village Movement

Name: Eesti Külade Maapäev⁵ / Rural Parliament of Estonian Villages

About Kodukant

Kodukant (born at the beginning of 1990's, and officially formed on 9 October 1997) is an association of non-governmental organisations (about 5.000 people altogether). The aim of the organisation is to support rural communities and their enterprising spirit in their local initiatives, to create, support and maintain networks on different levels (from local to international) and to influence rural policies, opening up the views and needs of small rural communities to the distant policy-makers. The greatest rural problems are usually raised at Rural Parliament (biennial gathering of Estonian villages), where the bottlenecks to rural development and their possible solutions are discussed, and proposals sent to the Estonian Parliament, Government and local authorities.

Everyday life means project based activities (training, special events, international cooperation etc) for member associations in 3 main strategic directions – rural youth, community entrepreneurship, village heritage and living environment.

HISTORY

Origins

The idea was taken over from Sweden. When, after restoring independence, closer contacts were possible with other countries, partnership with Sweden at county level was started in Rapla County. Soon Viljandi County followed. They

were the piloting counties who began calling village people together to speak about how the acute problems in the countryside can be solved by themselves. Swedish partners came to talk about their village movement and soon several initial village organisations were established. They had seen the poor state of our villages and also their sceptical attitude about changes. They managed to convince us that, after the time when we had not been allowed to speak our mind and were continuously waiting for somebody else to make the decisions for us, it is our time – time for changes and making our own decisions.

Once again we have to thank the Swedish partners from *Hela Sverige ska leva* who had faith in us, helped us mentally, practically and financially, taught us and took us around in Swedish villages, so that finally we had the courage to invite people together.

Some people had had the chance to visit a Rural Parliament in Sweden. The form of it seemed suitable for us as well. But still, only after several discussions and spreading the ideas in different counties, municipalities and villages, it finally took off.

The first Rural Parliament was organised by East-Viru County village and municipality people and it took place in 1996. But there were many more helpful 'enlightened' people all over Estonia who had followed the call of 'moving' the villages.

There was no *Kodukant* organisation yet. No slogan 'All Estonia Shall Live!' (which we copied from Sweden), and even the name of the event *Maapäev* or Parliament was quite cautiously used. But there were enthusiastic people who thought that when a village movement is working well in Sweden, why can't it happen in Estonia?

So, the first decisions were about organisation: a council was elected (a representative from each county) whose task was to form and register *Kodukant* and summon the next Parliament the following year.

It was also decided that the tradition of Rural Parliaments should continue and that they should be held every two years.

⁵ Maapäev – The Estonian Parliament was called this way at the beginning of the 20th century (during our "first republic")
Eesti Külade – of Estonian Villages

The next important decision was to negotiate with the Government about establishing a fund for NGOs in rural areas. The example was again brought from Sweden where the support to the villages was rather impressive compared to our situation. The fund was opened the same year.

Specifics

When the first Rural Parliament was organised it was clear we could not have it the size the Swedish have (about 1.000 people). We had a little more than 300 people, but we took care that all the counties were represented and with about the same number of delegates.

Those people who had been to the Swedish Rural Parliament had been impressed by the fact that all three levels had been represented – grass-root level, local government and state. We gave this idea a practical value – all the problems were discussed in 3 dimensions – what could be done by villagers themselves, where the local authorities could give a hand and where help is needed from the government.

One more thing was new for us – simple rural people had never been the centre of attention, nobody had asked them to think about something, but now they could speak freely about their life and make suggestions to the decision makers about problem solving. This, and meeting other village people with the same problems, certainly gave them courage to start changes in their home place.

Development

The first Rural Parliament of Estonian Villages took place in Ida-Viru County, Narva-Jõesuu, from 20-21 April 1996. The first Parliament showed the possibility and need for cooperation between grass-root level, local government and state.

The second Rural Parliament was organised by Viljandi and Valga Counties on 17-18 October 1997. Prior to the parliament, on October 9th a constitutive meeting for The Movement of Estonian Villages and Small Towns *Kodukant* was held in Otepää. The second rural parliament obliged *Kodukant* to activate cooperation with other European rural development movements.

During the third Rural Parliament held on 29-31 July 1999 in Hiiu County the work groups also used the hot spots of rural development of other European countries as discussion topics. The Rural Parliament in Hiiu County obliged *Kodukant* to contribute to the formation of a collaborative forum between the political parties and non-profit organisations.

The fourth Rural Parliament, 'A developing village' held on 14-16 June 2001 in Kehtna, was seeking the means to promote healthy food, relieve stress and unite the local communities. New elements at this Parliament were a fair of local food and craft and a sport contest between the county delegations.

The fifth Rural Parliament on 21-23 August 2003 in Lääne-Viru County focused on the rural people and the most important things connected with them – community, environment, health, entrepreneurship and learning. For the first time we had a large number of foreign guests - 57 from 14 countries. Exhibitions showed the history of Estonian village associations. A video was made about the preparations and the event itself.

The sixth Rural Parliament, held on 21-23 July 2005 in Pärnu County on the theme of 'Sustainable development and co-operation' brought out the need for including more young village people in our activities; and also employment problems in rural areas. Discussions on the rural development strategy for 2007-2013 were started in the workgroups of this Parliament. A fair of local products ended the event.

The seventh Rural Parliament 17-19 August 2007 was in Jõgeva County, Kuremaa. Services, life-long learning, rural youth and village 'engines', were the main topics of that Rural Parliament.

The eighth Rural Parliament in Tartu County, Rannu: 7-9 August 2009, focussed on Active villages help to guarantee the sustainability of rural areas. This examined the role of village associations and communities as service providers, preserving and passing on national heritage, advocacy and development strategies in *Kodukant*, LEADER (changing and innovative entrepreneurship in rural areas) and youth in the countryside.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The Rural Parliament of Estonian Villages is a biennial forum that brings together village people and representatives of different organisations, authorities and decision-makers. It plays an important role in setting overall strategic direction for village movement organisations and making links with the membership and Government.

The main idea and aim of the Rural Parliament is to evaluate the achievements of rural people and *Kodukant*, discuss the development needs for the next period; make suggestions to the *Estonian Parliament*, *Ministries* and local governments about rural development.

Advertising rural problems and success-stories to the wider audience, directing the public attention to them will raise the awareness of general public about them. One of the important aims is to involve governing bodies and decision makers.

People come to seek solutions to their burning rural problems, meet other rural people and organisations and to get new ideas.

The overall aim has always been the same, the short-term objectives change depending on *Kodukant* strategy. To reach your long-term vision you have to move step-by-step, actually year-by-year. Strategy is usually looked over every year, so while making plans for the next Rural Parliament we revise the topics dealt with at the last Rural Parliament and decide whether the theme needs still to be discussed on some other (or 'higher') level. Sometimes it has lost its acuteness for the moment, and some other topical themes have come up instead.

The aims are always achieved. It might be that we succeed better in some fields and have not been so good with other things, but the Rural Parliaments have never been a failure. They tend to get better and better by years. It is too important an event to underestimate the organisation of it.

ORGANISATION

Frequency

The Rural Parliament of Estonian Villages is held every two years. The first and the second being the exceptions.

Duration

It usually lasts 3 days (the first and the last being shorter).

On the first day the delegates of the counties arrive at a village of the host county about noon. The hosts show them around, introduce their projects and they have lunch together. Which county out of 14 goes to which village is usually decided by the hosting partner. Sometimes it depends on the geography (which is the closest). In the afternoon they arrive together at the venue of the Rural Parliament and 'check in'. The opening is about 5.p.m. The Village of the Year is announced at the opening. The first day usually ends with the '(Holy) Communion' and an evening entertainment (performances of local artists).

The second day is the day of working in different villages in theme groups. Members of work groups have their lunch on the spot and depending on time they can have a tour introducing the village. Workgroups are usually over by 5.p.m. At the end of the day there might be some competition between the counties and a party. The moderators, though, have to prepare their summaries, also in the evening.

The third day starts with summarising the work group's ideas and approving the decisions (declaration). Sometimes we have had forums with politicians on this morning and a Handicraft Fair (with workshops). During the closing ceremony the next hosting county is usually announced and the hosting county organisation and County Government together hand the right over to the next ones.

Location

We have never wanted to have the Rural Parliament in a big town. The hosting county organisation will make the decision about the place that they think might be worth introducing.

It has to be a region that is ready to host 400-450 people (including opening and closing ceremonies), where villagers have some experience to share with other participants and have a number of volunteers to help.

The county organisation which has applied for the right to organise the event has to introduce all the important aspects of organising a Rural Parliament – place, logistics, accommodation and catering capacity, financing possibilities, cooperation with local and county governments etc. in their application. (Once there was a sort of contest - 5 counties competed - where all this information had to be involved in a cultural/entertaining show).

The location is usually visited by the *Kodukant* team and board, soon after the previous Rural Parliament is over, to help the organisers get acquainted with the place and also find out what kind of resources will be needed.

Up to now none of the Rural Parliaments have been held in the same location.

Participants

The invited participants include: about 20 representatives from member organisations (15 county associations, decided by themselves according to the topics under discussion; representatives of the other 5 member organisations), guests – Members of parliament, ministers and officers from different ministries, representatives of local authorities and county governments, other NGOs, our partners and funders, international delegates from rural organisations

The capacity has been about 400-450 people – 300 from the counties, 40-60 foreign guests, around the same number of Estonian guests and 30-70 volunteers.

In everyday life they are farmers, entrepreneurs, teachers, local government officers, members of municipality councils etc. But they all are fans of *Kodukant* and the village movement, and they are active volunteers in their region. As a rule, they usually take part in the work of some village society.

Sometimes, depending on the year and projects, we might ask some special people to be included – participants of our projects, village elders (voluntary mayors of the villages), young people, LEADER members, representatives of the nominees of The Village of the Year contest etc.

Responsibilities

Up to now the organisers have been the *Kodukant* Team and Board in cooperation with the county organisation which has applied for the right to organise the event.

The tasks of the Team and Board are general management, working out the themes, writing the biggest and main applications, cooperating with partners.

The hosting county has to introduce the activities of their villages, local culture and find finances for these activities.

Involvement

Representatives of the *Kodukant* county organisation are responsible for receptions in the villages on the first and the second day, also evening programmes.

Representatives of County Government help with opening and receptions.

Representatives of local authorities –assist with receptions in the villages and municipalities (the first and the second day).

A representative of the venue organises accommodation and catering.

The motive of all of them is to introduce their region, activities and culture; it improves their image and advertises them.

The Estonian Rural Economy Research Centre helps with finances and moderators, especially for LEADER work-groups. Their aim is to get new contacts, ideas from other countries, and cooperation with *Kodukant*.

The newspaper *Maaleh*, writes about the Rural Parliament as a whole, about the hosting villages and the Village of the Year contest.

Financing

The average cost the recent years has been about a million EEK (€ 60 000-65 000) and it usually comes from different sources: *The European Commission*, *European Parliament* (DG AGRI, DG INFO), *The Estonian Ministry of Agriculture*, *The Estonian Rural Economy Research Centre*, *Estonian Civil Society Foundation*,

Open Estonian Foundation, county governments, local governments, associations of local governments, sponsors/local entrepreneurs.

Communication

We usually have meetings (team and working party) about once a month. With other partners than the host we meet about 3-4 times before the Rural Parliament. But as the organisers are scattered around Estonia we do a lot of work by e-mails, skype, phone calls. We also organise ourselves with meeting memos and a common time schedule (action plan, which we keep changing as the work progresses, so everybody knows what has been done). *Kodukant* has 'its own' Local Initiative Group in the Estonian Parliament (consisting of all parties represented in the Parliament). *Kodukant* team and board meet them usually once a quarter just to inform them about our activities or to discuss urgent problems that need solving on the highest level. Invitation to the Rural Parliament is sent to all political parties in the Estonian Parliament, also to the ministries we have cooperation and closer contacts with.

The President of the Estonian Republic, the Speaker of the Parliament and Ministers are usually asked to make speeches at the opening and closing the event.

A few times we have had forums before the end of the Rural Parliament where participants have the possibility to listen to the representatives of political parties and ask questions about their issues concerning rural life. All counties have Members of Parliament elected from their region, so our members usually have closer contacts with them before and after the event.

In Estonia there are associations of local authorities where our members introduce the coming RP and where the invitations are given to the county governments and mayors of the municipalities.

Our main possibilities to advertise the event before and after are a rural newspaper *Maaleht* (Rural News), radio, TV, *Kodukant* bimonthly *Külakiri* (Echo of Villages), electronic newsletter (every 2 weeks).

Media plan

The topics and the results of the Rural Parliament are usually introduced in the biggest newspaper *Maaleht* (rural news), also on the different radio and national TV channels. The information is also published in local county newspapers.

A special edition of *Külakiri* (*Kodukant* bimonthly) is published (3000 copies).

On the last day of the Rural Parliament a press conference is held.

Before and after the Rural Parliament press releases are sent to different media channels.

The information is also put on our web site www.kodukant.ee

1500 copies of booklets with the outcomes of the Rural Parliament (1.000 in Estonian, 500 in English)

Newsletters of different European rural development organisations (*PREPARE*, *Forum Synergies*, etc).

The booklets are distributed by *Kodukant* county organisations to the network of participants and village leaders. Also to all the ministries, Members of Parliament and organisations dealing with rural problems.

METHODS

Preparation

The preparations for the next Rural Parliament start soon after the previous Rural Parliament is over and the new host announced. The last and the next organisers have a meeting to deliver all the good ideas and speak about problems that had come up. Members of *Kodukant* Team and Board meet the organisers and put down the draft programme of the next Rural Parliament and the size of the Rural Parliament team. During our history there have been 5-12 different working parties that have one person responsible for the particular field. Every working party might also have 2-5 members. Every working par-

ty has representatives of both – Team-Board and the partner (county association). They prepare the draft budget of the activities they are responsible for, deal with the problems that need to be decided by the Board or Team, and also take care of the volunteers who will be involved in the Rural Parliament (in 2009 there were about 70).

There is one person who is a ‘general manager’ and coordinates the working parties.

The very active period of preparations usually lasts a year.

Content

The themes are suggested by the Board according to the problems raised by members between two Parliaments (at General Assemblies, training, meetings etc). But it also depends on our strategy. The strategy is revised every year and the tasks that need to be dealt with are proposed for the Rural Parliament. Then the basic ideas are sent to the members to be discussed and finally the themes will be confirmed at the General Assembly (usually in autumn, a year before the Rural Parliament). During the winter and spring the counties and villages discuss and select the topics and identify the most urgent problems in their home place. For that reason many county organisations have their own Rural Parliaments to prepare the platform on all or some of the themes.

At the beginning of summer the summaries of the discussions are delivered to the moderators for preparation of the handouts on the topics to be forwarded to the Rural Parliament workgroups

In July a special issue of *Kodukant* newsletter *Külakiri* introducing topics and the Rural Parliament will be published.

Summaries of the discussions will be also put on the *Kodukant* web site www.kodukant.ee

Method and process

Methodology of workgroups: to handle the topics from different angles – what the villages can manage themselves, what can be done in cooperation with lo-

cal authorities, what to ask from the Government and Parliament (also, what are the possibilities for the EU).

Main discussions will take place in the workgroups on the second day of the Rural Parliament. There will be a key-speaker (introducing *Kodukant* projects and strategy on the topic) for every group and a mediator who will moderate the discussion.

After workgroups the moderator and the key-speaker will summarise the discussion and prepare the input for the declaration.

We want to give the people the opportunity to speak about the problems in their villages, listen to the experience of others in similar situations, in order to try to find the ways forward, all together. But also we want them to suggest to *Kodukant* what they expect the Board should do to solve the problem (seek help from the Government, start projects on the theme etc).

Our aim is to get input for the projects for the next 2 years. Thus moving also towards the implementation of our strategy.

The moderator and the *Kodukant* key-person put down all the ideas and summarize the work by the next morning. They also choose the most urgent argument for the declaration. This way we are quite sure that the ideas and problems of the participants reach the Board and also through the declaration to the people making decisions.

The declaration is approved by the participants on closing the event and will act as a strategy for *Kodukant* for the next 2 years.

OUTCOMES

Aims

So far all the Rural Parliaments have justified their organisation. *Kodukant* has got the input for the projects and guidelines for the next 2 years, participants have approved of the implementation of the decisions of the previous gather-

ings, and they have also shown their satisfaction about the event in their feedback sheets.

When people keep coming to the event (some of them have taken part in all 8 of them), then it means it hasn't lost its importance. And there is always more demand than there is space. People feel that this is the right place to speak their mind and find new contacts or experiences. It also shows they have faith in *Kodukant* and they gladly participate in shaping it.

Evaluation

The declaration of the previous Rural Parliament is always reviewed at the opening of the next Rural Parliament. The Board reports what kind of projects has been carried out and which activities done to implement the last decisions. That means the participants evaluate the work of *Kodukant* during the past 2 years.

Evaluation of the event:

At the end of the RP all the participants are asked to fill in a form to assess the event (usefulness of the topics dealt with, effectiveness of the workgroup discussions and the decisions made, and the organisation) that will be the basis for the project manager to analyse the organisation of the Rural Parliament. The results will be also reported to the funders and the team.

In 3 weeks after the end of the Rural Parliament the project team, the members of the board and the representatives of the organising county association usually discuss results, and suggestions will be made for the next Rural Parliament.

Reports to the funders and their feedback (as participants when they are present – and also as readers of the report)

Outcomes

Outcomes for the rural communities/ The main outcomes are the opportunity to exchange experiences and best-practices (but also learn from the failures of the others), and to gain ideas for their own community, the possibility to make suggestions for changes and bring your village/region problems to a higher

level to be solved (e.g. legislative proposals), getting new contacts and planning co-projects (e.g. study-trips) for the future.

The Rural Parliament will boost the development of social capital of villagers. They go back home feeling full of energy and readiness to take an active part in their village life. It has also been a training for them: they have learned to argue their ideas, got new impulses for managing their projects and new contacts for future cooperation. They also have the obligation to share the information with other villagers and thus training them as well.

Outcomes in influencing rural policy / After the event all Estonian Members of Parliament and Ministers of Agriculture, Inner affairs, Education and Science, Economy etc. are given the booklets with the decisions of the Rural Parliament and several common meetings are planned to introduce them and jointly find the ways to implement them (co-projects, financing projects, taking part in the work of different committees etc).

Politicians have taken part in the workshops and forums at the end of the Rural Parliament, so they have already got the idea of what kind of problems are under discussion, and it is easier later to go to them with our proposals and questions.

There are a number of achievements that have been 'pushed' into life with the help of *Kodukant* involvement:

The very first Rural Parliament decided that we should negotiate with the Government to create a fund for rural communities. It was opened the same year (1996) and was increased year by year (as we could report that the number of village societies was rising rapidly). It turned out to be one of the most successful national programmes of regional development. And it is still functioning. *Kodukant* fought for it when it was threatened to be closed down. It was comparatively small money but big things were done in the villages for that (renovated village greens with swings, other traditional places where people could come together and socialise – community houses, clubs etc, village reunions, publications about village history, training). This was also the place where our village people got to know how to start projects and write applications.

Our opinion was also asked when the Government decided to increase the money and extend it on towns as well.

It all has happened thanks to involving different high level decision-makers into our strivings at the very beginning.

Several decisions have been made at the Rural Parliaments about international cooperation. As we had got great help from Sweden to begin the village movement, *Kodukant* was also asked to look for more ideas and widen the cooperation with other similar movements. But also tell the other countries about our activities and help them to start their movements. So we started activities Europe-wide.

Feedback of the 1998 international travelling exhibition (to 8 countries) from abroad made us also more famous in our own country. It was easier somehow to negotiate with the ministries after that.

Through our international contacts we have tried to influence rural policies also on the EU level.

International cooperation gave us a chance to also influence the creation of the SAPPARD programme (international workshop in 1999 in Estonia and Sweden).

Having got the task to watch the writing and implementation of the Rural Development Strategy and being a valid power in the countryside we take part in the monitoring committee and follow the law-making process in the *Ministry of Agriculture* (a relatively big contribution to LEADER and village development measures).

Kodukant has also been obliged to help to develop the whole third sector in Estonia. We have been partners to other different umbrella organisations and state institutions while working out the Conception of Estonian Civil Society, establishing Civil Society Fund and some other funds for NGOs, changing the Law of Civil Society etc.

Outcomes in influencing social change / As the media (newspapers, TV, radio) always show a very positive light on the Rural Parliament event and The Village

of the Year contest, which is connected with it, quite a lot of villages are introduced to the public and thus the awareness of the wider audience is raised about rural areas and their success-stories and problems.

The politicians like to point out that they have attended the Rural Parliament because it is a very well-known and prestigious event. They get the authentic ideas and feelings about concrete themes on the spot. They meet their voters and quite often have to promise them something which binds them to these rural people. Many of them use to consult us about different tasks they have to solve in the *Parliament* or ministries also after the Rural Parliaments.

For several Rural Parliaments running we have had special groups for young people (about 40-60). It started when we initiated a special Rural Youth Programme in *Kodukant* and involved more youngsters in our activities. In 2011 we won't have a special youth group as they themselves thought they were well engaged in our activities already and want to join 'the older and wiser'. Young people usually have good ideas from different angles that help to make decisions that challenge the routine.

Two good examples of mixing different ages and knowledge and skills are the '(Holy) Communion' and Handicraft Fair. The 'Communion' being the task of the nominees of The Village of the Year contest to organise a buffet of local products on the first evening of the Rural Parliament. Both cases contribute to honouring local masters and exchanging innovative ideas and knowledge. The producers go home prouder and full of courage for the future.

Last but not least – evening parties are always enjoyed by all of us, whether young or old, experienced village 'mover' or a newcomer, civil servant or an NGO member!

Outcomes for organisation / *Kodukant* gains an overview about the needs in the villages. Analysing them we get the input for different projects to solve the problems. We consider the results also while annually reviewing our strategy.

The media will usually show a positive light on the rural life and activities in the villages during the event.

Having important people who are really interested in our deeds at the Rural Parliament (President of the Estonian Republic, Speaker of the Estonian Parliament, different Ministers, heads of the funds etc) adds to the image of *Kodukant* and rural life as a whole

International outcomes / Through the foreign guests the ideas of the village movement will be sown in very many different European countries. They get to know a unique event – parliament of villages – a very democratic way of finding solutions to the rural problems and influencing the decision-making processes. The Rural Parliament will help them to find motivation in their own country to start or strengthen their civil society organisations – tools to help to implement the European Rural Strategy;

International guests bring their experiences and take ours back home. As all the foreign guests usually participate in the different work groups, they have the good opportunity to speak about the same things as Estonians.

They also get to know the whole organisation of the Rural Parliament. They take a piece of our culture home and share their knowledge and experience about the Rural Parliament – what to take home and what to avoid.

Sharing the best practices and knowledge of different NGOs in the countryside who are able to 'spend' the EU money would only be good while we are looking for more finances to support rural life.

Sharing ideas also helps to found new NGOs or their associations

LESSONS

What worked

The method of working groups has been successful. This way people can see that the very first thing they can do is to think about what they themselves are able to do, and for very small money or usually without money at all. They also learn that some problems need cooperation with local authorities, and that

they can send their messages, e.g. about regional development, straight from the Rural Parliament to the Government.

The duration of the Rural Parliament (3 days) has also justified itself. People like the first day when the delegations are received in the different villages of the organising county. The host villages show guests around, tell their success-stories, have dinner together. Several traditions have been started during this kind of visit (planting trees, some short workshops etc).

In the evenings there is the possibility to socialise, exchange experiences, make new contacts. Even during the hardest times the hosts have not agreed to shorten the duration of the Rural Parliament. Though, we have changed from Thursday-Saturday to Friday-Sunday.

The 'Communion' - *buffet* of local food has also turned out to be very successful.

People are also looking forward to the 'Bread Village' which was first made at the 5th Rural Parliament. It is a cake made of bread, sausages, cheese, eggs, fish, chicken, soft-cheese, butter, cucumbers, tomatoes, spices etc. And has cottages, churches, pubs, rivers and lakes on it - a real village.

'Shadowing' interpreters turned out to be a good find at the 9th Rural Parliament in Tartu County – they were the volunteers 'fixed' to the foreign guests.

Handicraft Fairs

What did not work

We haven't managed to convince the politicians to participate during all 3 days. The parties send their representatives, but they usually like to come on the first or the last day. They are not so keen on the second day – workshops. Or sometimes there are different people on different days.

It is very important to find the right moderators and train them before the Rural Parliament to be sure they all have a common understanding about leading a group. You might not get good results when the group is not well managed. They should also know the background and activities of *Kodukant*.

Sometimes the people who come to the Rural Parliament are not at home with the themes they have to discuss, so the message of this county might not reach the declaration. Very often these people have just heard that the Rural Parliament is 'fun' and really come for the company. This is where the member organisations have to deal more with their members – bring them together and discuss the local pain-spots.

FUTURE PLANS

There have been some changes year by year – every host thinks about some new 'tricks', but as a whole it has been mainly quite the same.

Our Rural Parliament is an important part of the organisation's democracy that is why it can't be underestimated. When all those people come together and one day say that we are doing the wrong thing, then it means it is so, and we have to change. On the other hand, this kind of event always draws a lot of attention from the part of policy makers, so it is a good place to speak our minds. This is a sort of 'winners fair' – everybody gets more information about *Kodukant*, rural problems, but mostly about a lot of good and positive things that are going on in the countryside. Why give it up?!

It might be a good idea to 'exchange parliamentarians' who 'shadow' the organisers during the preparations in different countries to learn new 'tricks'.

It is also not impossible to bring together a European Rural Parliament. Maybe this is something we are missing at the moment? All people, who are worried about our rural areas, under one roof – a working tool for umbrella organisations. This needs strong, well-educated organisations, sharing good experience and dedicated actors.

COMMENTARY

It would be good to discuss all the themes before the Rural Parliament e.g. in web site forums. We haven't succeeded in this.

It is also important that the decisions you make for the declaration are real and give you ideas for the next projects. Don't try to change the whole world with one Rural Parliament.

During the Rural Parliament several exhibitions have been set up, like introducing the success-stories of village associations implementing the rural development strategy of Estonian Republic, how cultural heritage can be used in different new forms in rural areas, youth activities, history of *Kodukant*, media coverage of *Kodukant* activities, *Kodukant* Training Centre etc.

Village of the Year / The Estonian Village Movement *Kodukant* has organised the contest Village of the Year since 2005. There are usually 15 nominees (one from each county) – excellent villages or village regions full of energy and strong sense of identity of place. The Village of the Year has to be an example of positive development and good cooperation; enterprising, active, well-maintained, known at county or national level. It is not easy for the jury to make the decision – whom to choose as a good example for the others to follow, they are usually very equal. The work of the jury is led by the Speaker of the *Estonian Parliament* who also announces the winner at the opening of the Rural Parliament. The winner gets a financial prize and its name is put down in the honours book of *Kodukant*. All the nominees get a special metal plate and a gift from the head of the jury (a painting).



Wir sind das DORF

THE SWEDISH RURAL PARLIAMENT IN FINLAND

Peter BACKA

Secretary of European Rural Alliance - ERA

CONTEXT

Finland is one of the most rural counties in Europe with 5.4 million inhabitants. According to the OECD classification only the Helsinki area is urban – the rest is rural. In Finland we have another classification that also recognizes other cities as urban. We divide the rural areas into three categories: the rural areas around the cities (with perhaps the best living conditions, combining the best of urban and rural) the rural heartland (where agriculture is important) and the sparsely populated areas (with the most challenges).

Finland is considered to be a Nordic welfare state with a strong state and strong local government, the municipalities. The administration is relatively strong and strictly divided in sectors but there are also attempts to develop multi level and multi sector governance. The most successful governance body is the Rural Policy Committee.

Finland is a bilingual country. A little less than 6% or 300.000 people are Swedish speaking. (There are emigrants in Finland too but not as many as in other EU countries.) The Swedish speaking population is mostly living in a strip on the west and south coasts, across in several regional areas.

The process of urbanisation in the 60's was strong and many rural areas felt left behind. As an answer to this the village movement started in the 70's as a grassroots movement. There was in the beginning no national organisation, just the villages trying to make their voice heard. This movement was in the early days supported by researchers, later by a council formed by municipalities and NGO's. In 1997 the *Finish Village Action Association (SYTY)* was founded. Today SYTY is a strong umbrella organisation for the villages with all the LEADER groups and many national NGO's as members. The Swedish speaking villages are members of SYTY but also have support from the *Swedish Village Service* – a part of the SYTY structure.

In Finland you might consider three phenomena as 'Rural Parliaments'. One would be the 'Village Days' organised by SYTY and its predecessor. It started out as a large gathering with several hundred people. But as the movement got more

organised, with regional village days, the national event became less interesting. Today it is organised as a seminar combined with a more formal gathering.

The second is a newcomer. In recent years the Rural Policy Committee has arranged something called a Rural Parliament. That event is mainly targeted at the decision makers.

The last of the Rural Parliament phenomena in Finland is an event organised by the *Swedish Village Service* for the rural Swedish speaking population. This case study is about this event.

The reason for choosing not to focus on the first two lies in my definition of the phenomena Rural Parliament:

- A Rural Parliament is a several day event, not an organisation or a movement,
- it is organised by a rural (national or regional), grassroots movement,
- the Rural Parliament is broader than the annual meeting of the organiser, more stake holders and activists are invited (also governmental bodies), but the basis is the grassroots,
- the goal of a Rural Parliament is mainly to influence policy making or put rural questions on the public agenda, but it is also an event for learning, sharing good examples, networking and mobilisation,
- participatory methods are used during the Rural Parliament (for example workshops, seminars, open space working groups),
- because of the broad and heterogeneous base there is no single body responsible for carrying out the decisions made, there has to be some kind of agreement at the Rural Parliament how to continue, perhaps in a partnership,
- the Rural Parliament is open to anyone interested but there might also be some kind of system with delegates to make the decisions more representative,
- the Rural Parliament is often a tool to start up or renew a rural movement.

HISTORY

In the beginning ...

In the late 80's there was a regional depression in Ostrobothnia, where most of the rural Swedish speaking population lives. As a continuation of the European rural campaign the Swedish study centre organised a campaign using study circles to find new ideas for local development and to organise local activities. At the end of this campaign the study circles gathered as a Rural Parliament in 1990 to exchange experiences and to make common demands to the decision makers. Ole Norrback, Minister of Defence at the time, was giving a presentation and listening to the demands of the Rural Parliament. There were 120 people, representing mostly study circles and NGOs, who took part in the first Rural Parliament. The co-organiser for this event was *Svenska Österbottens landskapsförbund*, (now *Svenska Österbottens förbund för utbildning och kultur*) a union of municipalities in Ostrobothnia with Swedish speaking population.

The word Rural Parliament was borrowed from Sweden; they had just started their successful Rural Parliament tradition that has become a model for so many rural movements in Europe.

Many ideas came up and many demands were made. (Some of the hopes/demands were perhaps unrealistic, some of them are unfulfilled, even now 20 years later.). Perhaps the most important decision made at the first Rural Parliament was to start up a project to organise the villages into village action groups. The project was partly funded by the *Rural Policy Committee* and the finally of the project was to arrange a new Rural Parliament.

The second Rural Parliament was held at the same place as the first one, Vörå in Ostrobothnia, and it was still an event for the region of Ostrobothnia, but not quite. There was also an active village group from Uusimaa sharing their experiences. This led to a decision to make the next Rural Parliament a national, but Swedish speaking, event. The reason for having a special event for the Swedish speaking population was, and is, that many people in rural areas do not speak Finnish. If they are to take part in a debate and get their voices heard it has to be in Swedish.

To facilitate the organising of the rural parliament the Swedish Village Service was set up in 1994 as a partnership between the *Study Centre* and the municipalities.

The next Rural Parliament was organised in Ekenäs, Uusimaa. It also had nearly 100 delegates. The main local organiser was the *Nylands landskapsförbund* (now *Sydskustens landskapsförbund*). This organisation was a union of municipalities with Swedish speaking population, in that way it is a sister organisation of *Svenska Österbottens landskapsförbund*.

By this step a new tradition was born: Swedish Rural Parliaments in all of the Swedish speaking areas.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The start of the Rural Parliament was to try to deal with a difficult situation in one region. But the concept developed in to a tradition that has lasted for 20 years – and counting.

This means that some of the aims and objectives have changed over time. But some are always present. These are really process aims.

Giving voice to the rural people – putting the rural issues on the agenda / This aim was important from the very start and it has been a part of all the Rural Parliaments. Rural people do not have a strong voice, not in politics nor in the media – relatively speaking. Compared to many other countries the rural voice is strong in Finland, but not compared to the voice of the growing cities. There is a constant and even growing need to get rural issues on the agenda. For the Swedish areas in Finland, organising a big happening is a good way to do this. And of course, calling it a parliament is a part of that strategy.

Learning by dialogue / Working on village level with horizontal development is, in the same respect, a new method of working. Even if the villages have a longer history than the municipalities and the welfare state, the methods for work-

ing in rural areas in an urbanised and industrialised country are quite different from working in an agricultural society. (Not to mention the situation in a nomad society, such as the Sami.) People working at the village level need new tools and new strategies that meet the challenges of an information society.

The village movement is fairly young. It has just recently developed supporting structures on national and regional levels. This means that there is a need for forums where people can exchange ideas. This need was especially obvious in the late 80's and the 90's.

The Rural Parliament is one of the answers to that.

What's new / The Rural Parliament has always, at least tried to, introduce new ways of thinking, new ways of looking at the world. This has been done by having keynote speakers from research or from other countries. In this case we have had speakers mostly from Sweden, but also from other countries further away, once all the way from Oregon, USA.

The Swedish Rural Parliament has also learned a lot from Finnish keynote speakers. This might sound a little strange but it is a fact that not only national borders are obstacles for communication and learning, language borders can also be difficult for an easy flow of information.

Nordic connection / There has always been some kind of Nordic connection at the Rural Parliament. The secretary of *All Nordic Shall Live* was at the first Rural Parliament and there has always been a keynote speaker or some Nordic guests at the Rural Parliament. Estonia has also been represented at some of the Rural Parliaments.

Showing off / Introducing the region where the Rural Parliament is held is part of the program. The local organiser tries to give as good an impression as possible of their region and village. This follows from the fact that Rural Parliament is organised every second year in one of the five regions that have a Swedish speaking population. Theoretically you have a Rural Parliament in your region once in ten years. And when that happens the organiser grabs the opportunity to show off.

Beside the process aims there are themes that are decided before each individual Rural Parliament. Some themes seem to come up again and again. One of them is democracy, which is understandable because the Rural Parliament is about democracy, giving rural people a voice. So it is natural that democracy is also theoretically discussed.

Another theme that often comes up is the future. Often there has been a keynote speaker trying to say something about new trends or even trying to show a broader vision of the future.

Small schools are often discussed during the Rural Parliament. This is a reflection of the fact that small schools (or the closing of them) are often debated at local level.

We usually also have had someone from the Government, a Minister or a Member of Parliament, to talk about what new programs are about to start.

This was especially important when Finland joined EU in 1995 and there was a totally new toolbox available for rural development, but also new rules and challenges. (It might be noted that the rural Finland mostly voted against membership).

ORGANISATION

As already mentioned the Rural Parliament is arranged every second year. It is always a two-day event, not starting too early the first day, and not continuing late the second day because of communications. The tradition of rural parliaments is 20 years old and we have had 11 of them.

The Rural Parliament is held in different locations every time. But of course we stay in rural areas. We have a rotating system so that every region gets to host the event. At the end of each Rural Parliament the next local organiser is stepping forward and wishing people welcome to the next parliament. At this point the organiser has no idea where to have it or what the program will be.

Usually we try to find a place that can accommodate 100+ participants in the same complex to make practical arrangements easier and the work more effective. At the same time we are looking for inexpensive alternatives, the combination of this is not always possible. Sometimes we need to use busses for transportation during the event, sometimes we use hotels, and that is not so cheap.

The model for planning and hosting the Rural Parliament is a little different every time. The general model is that the *Swedish Village Service* takes care of the program planning and the local organiser takes care of the practical arrangements. But in the end we work as a team and the division of work is decided as we go along. The Village Service is always there and represents some kind of continuity but the local organiser is always new. Even when the Rural Parliament, after ten years or so, comes back to the same region there might be a new local organisation or at least new people doing the job. This does not mean that the local organisers are not experienced; they might have a lot of experience of organising large events anyway.

Villages are the focus when we invite people to the Rural Parliament. In the early days most of the participants came from the village councils or associations. (Except for the first one, when it was study circles). Over time other NGOs have become more interested in the Rural Parliament. Another trend is that project workers are attending the Rural Parliament more than the people working voluntarily. This has been seen as some kind of a failure, but it is also rather understandable. The same people, who previously worked only voluntarily, have had the opportunity to work with EU projects, and then they are not volunteers any more.

Municipalities have always been represented, in much greater numbers in the last Rural Parliament.

The goal for the Rural Parliament is to have more than 100 participants. This is often reached but once we were down to about 50 participants.

The invitation to and information about the Rural Parliament is complex. The basis is still sending letters. But e-mail has become more and more important. Before the last three Rural Parliaments we have published a newsletter with articles of the keynote speakers, information about the Rural Parliament, articles

about the region where it is organised and so on. This is spread by post and through our networks, but also distributed to filling stations in the Swedish speaking areas. This newsletter is made in co-operation with a small firm specialising in this. It is financed separately by advertising. Internet, Facebook and other social media, are also getting used more and more.

We try, with only some success, to use the media.

The financing of the Rural Parliament is partly ad hoc and partly a fixed model. The *Village Service* (upheld by the *Swedish Study Centre*) is contributing around 3.000 €, but that is not nearly enough. The costs differ a lot depending on location, accommodation and what key note speakers we invite. (Organising the Rural Parliament in Åland was a special challenge because of the ferry trip needed to get there.) But the local organiser is responsible for the budget. And usually they don't have much money of their own. But they have a lot of creativity. Mainly they are applying for money from different foundations. Usually some kind of project money is also used. There might be a project targeting tourism, the Rural Parliament is a good tool to make the region known to a lot of people. But to do this the Rural Parliament usually has to be mentioned in the project plan. Usually the local municipality is chipping in a little to the budget too, so might some local bank and firm.

The time of year to organise the Rural Parliament has been debated. On the one hand it is beautiful weather and scenery in the early autumn. On the other hand the tourist season makes the prices higher. We have not found the one perfect solution for this; it differs from location to location.

METHODS

Preparation for Rural Parliament starts more than one year before the event – usually a little too late.

The long preparation is needed mostly for getting project money, the projects have to be ready and working when the Rural Parliament happens. And most of

the time the Rural Parliament is just an integrated part of the project, so you need to think bigger than just the Rural Parliament. You need to analyse what kind of project is needed for other reasons but still can include the Rural Parliament.

Even if we start early we try to predict what kind of issues might be 'hot' when we are having the event. (We have not always been right in our predictions so we try to keep it a little open in the beginning of the preparations.)

Usually the topics of the Rural Parliament are decided by the board of *Village Service*, but the local organiser is heavily involved. There have never been any disagreements between the two partners on the topic. This is because there is a broad discussion in our networks preceding the decision. The Rural Parliament in 2010 was prepared even wider; there was a call for ideas to the villages and organisations, on the net and over e-mail.

The division of work is discussed between the *Village Service* and the local organiser. We usually don't have formal groups but close connections. (The Swedish speaking rural people are spread over a big area but it is still a rather small group.)

The Rural Parliament has some standard elements:

It all starts with a rather formal opening ceremony. We invite the local municipality to bid the Rural Parliament welcome to their community, we might have some regional authority as well plus, of course, the local organiser and the *Village Service*.

Guests are also invited to say some words, like the national village organisation SYTY and Nordic guests.

We also have keynote speakers. They are politicians, usually a Minister or Member of Parliament and professors or other famous people, like the bishop for instance. We have keynote speakers on both days. We always leave some time for discussion and the debate is often lively.

The Rural Parliament is always, but in different ways, divided into working groups. They have different themes, matching the keynote speakers.

But we also try to use other participatory methods like 'bee hive', 'open space' or interactive panels. We think that it is important that all the participants are active in the process some way, not only listening.

We also try to leave room for networking, for instance by having long coffee breaks. At the end of the first day we have a dinner party with cultural programme and dancing – also a part of the networking.

Sometimes we had excursions to look at what villages have done in practice. For some reason that was not so popular, so it is no longer in the programme.

At the end of the Rural Parliament we agree on a statement. This is to highlight the message from the RP. Sometimes the statement is more like a press-release, sometimes it is a longer document.

The weak spot here is that the Rural Parliament is an open conference, meaning that anyone can join. So one can ask; how representative is the Rural Parliament for the rural people?

OUTCOMES

The word 'Parliament' is quite demanding. It sounds like a place where big decisions are made. This is not really the case with the Rural Parliament, not yet anyway.

As mentioned earlier the first aim is to influence decision makers and to set the agenda. I think we do that to some degree, but it is impossible to evaluate. The Rural Parliament is a part of a process; a lot of other things are done, some in the same direction as the Rural Parliament, some in other directions. How can anyone tell what influenced what?

But I think that by meeting the decision makers they get a better understanding of rural questions, and that helps in the long run.

The learning process is visible after a Rural Parliament, and even during it. People are getting enthusiastic and learning new ways to work. You can also ob-

serve networking between people from different regions and different sectors. The Rural Parliament is also offering international contacts and inspiration. The threshold for starting up international cooperation is high for many reasons, it does not happen very often.

The outcomes for the organisations behind the Rural Parliament are that the regional organisations are benefiting more than the *Village Service*. They are getting most of the publicity and the credit – and they are also doing most of the work.

LESSONS LEARNED

The first lesson is that meeting people face to face is crucial for building a popular movement. Paper, e-mail, Skype is not enough. This means you should arrange real meetings, even if it costs time and money. But you should use the time together well. Don't use one-way communication when you can use two-way! This means involving the people actively in the process. Use their experience! In a room with 100 people, with an average age of 50, you have 5.000 years of experience. Can one researcher top that? The trick is only how to free the knowledge and the power in that room.

The media are not very interested in rural issues. If you get an editor to the Rural Parliament you are lucky, because then they might understand what you are doing and spread the word. Sending press releases is, at least in Finland, a waste of time.

FUTURE PLANS

The Rural Parliament in 2010 was perhaps a new beginning. We had a new approach to the arrangements. Firstly we asked villages, municipalities and rural organisations to send delegates. One per village and municipality, three per national or regional organisation (for instance LEADER group.) But everyone was

still welcome to the Rural Parliament; everyone could take part in the discussions and working groups. But if we voted, only the delegates could vote (we did not need to vote).

By doing this we made the Rural Parliament a little more representative. We can, with some confidence, say that the Rural Parliament represented the rural population in at least some way. That would not have been possible to argue if the Rural Parliament had been totally open. This will be used by organisations carrying out the messages from the Rural Parliament.

Next Rural Parliament is planned to be in the south-west corner of Finland in Åboland, near Turku. You are welcome in 2012!

LINKS

All the important documents we have are on the web:

- www.bya.net or
- www.landsbygdsriksdagen.fi. In Swedish.



PLATTELANDSPARLEMENT IN THE NETHERLANDS

Koos MIRCK

Coordinator of Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen

CONTEXT

The Netherlands Rural Parliament (PlattelandsParlement) was held for the first time in 2005, to raise the voice of the inhabitants of the rural areas. In the Netherlands some 35 % of the inhabitants live in the rural areas.

In the Netherlands there are three levels of government: National, Provincial and Municipal. There are 430 municipalities. Each municipality consists of some cities or greater villages and a lot of small villages.

In 2.200 small villages in the Netherlands there is a nongovernmental organisation of inhabitants to influence the policy of the municipality; to develop policy plans about the future of the village; to organise local events and to create organisations and structures for the benefit of the inhabitants, like schools, shops, places to play for the children, crèche and so on.

Most of these nongovernmental organisations ('dorpsraad') are organised in the *Provincial Organisation for Small Villages*. All the twelve Provinces in the Netherlands have a Provincial Organisation. Most of them have 2-5 professionals to help the local organisation to make their plans and to create their projects. They also help in the contacts with the local government.

The twelve Provincial Organisations are the mother (and father) of the *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* the National Organisation for Small Villages.

The task of the *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* is:

- to give the signals and trends of the rural area to the national level: Government and politicians and also to the other import organisations like healthcare insurance companies, healthcare companies, companies for building houses (also in the social sector) and so on.
- to influence national governments policy to the benefit of the inhabitants of the rural areas.
- to exchange knowledge and good experiences and to make the

knowledge useful for the inhabitants of other villages with the same problems

- to research trends and to help to find solutions for new problems.

It is the *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* which is the main organiser of the Rural Parliament. The objective was to give a voice to the people in the rural areas in times were it seems that all interest and money goes to the cities and where politicians don't know (or don't want to know) about the problems and possibilities of the rural areas.

The manifestation is called 'PlattelandsParlement' (Rural Parliament), in order to follow the Swedish who organised such events long before the Dutch. It creates an opportunity for all inhabitants of the rural areas to make direct contact with politicians and policymakers. In these contacts the agenda is made by the inhabitants of the rural areas and not by the politicians.

The 'PlattelandsParlement' is not a parliament in the sense that there are chosen people and that they are going to make decisions. Everyone is allowed to participate in the 'PlattelandsParlement' and you are there as a person living in the rural areas of the Netherlands, not as a delegate from a village or an organisation. Some participants see themselves as a delegate from their village, but they are not.

It is a place to meet politicians and to talk with them about opinions and possibilities in the rural areas.

HISTORY

The idea to organise a 'PlattelandsParlement' was directly imported from Sweden. Some members of the board of the *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* visited the 'Landsbygdsriksdag' and were so enthusiast that they wanted the *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* to organise such an event in the Netherlands.

The *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* has contacts with more than 1.500 non-governmental organisations in the small villages, so it would be a very good occasion for the active people in the villages to meet politicians and policymakers.

The *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* want to let the voice of the people in the rural areas be heard. They want to show to politicians that people have great possibilities to solve their problems by themselves, facilitated by the Government.

By organising the event the *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* had good contacts with the national Government. The Department of Agriculture (which is responsible for the policy of the rural area) has written in a report that the contact between citizens and Government has to be improved; that the distance between Government and citizens is too wide and that new efforts are needed to make a new contract between citizens and Government.

The *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* made contact with some organisations to become their partners in organising the 'PlattelandsParlement'. This was accepted by the organisation *KNHM* (which is the part of the great company that historically cultivated big parts of the Netherlands, and wanted to give something back to the rural areas) and '*Netwerk Platteland*' which is a network of all organisations who are involved in the rural areas.

The first National 'PlattelandsParlement' was held in October 2005. There were 300 participants. Ten themes were discussed in groups of 30 to 40 people. The groups produced statements and recommendations to the politicians. These were offered to the Chairman of the Dutch Parliament and to the Minister of Agriculture.

The second National 'PlattelandsParlement' was held at October 6th 2007. Once again there were 300 people. There were four major themes. In groups of 50 to 70 people (yes there were too many people to have good talks) there were talks from experts and recommendations to discuss. The statements and recommendations were offered to the Chairwomen of the Dutch Parliament and to the Minister of Agriculture. One of the most important recommendations was the request for a test for all new policy: what is the special effect for the ru-

ral areas? The reason for it was the concern that in many decisions politicians don't realize the impact for the rural areas.

The third National 'PlattelandsParlement' was held on October 10th 2009. Like the events before there were some more than 300 participants. Before the event the organisers had talked with some politicians about the themes. Organisers had chosen to invite representatives from villages with very good practices, to come to show their success. They talked about the factors that made their success and the factors that were difficult to overcome and discussed with the politicians what they need from the politicians to make the results even better. There were four main themes and most themes were divided in subgroups with related themes.

The themes were:

1. Changing population composition and decline of population; how to work as an NGO in the village to keep the village alive and to prepare for other needs in the future.
2. The sustainable village. Mostly interpreted as the village which makes its own energy (by biogas or wind).
3. Decentralization of power to the inhabitants of the village.
4. Participation of the inhabitants in large farming or national park projects.

The last National 'PlattelandsParlement' was in 2009. The next National 'PlattelandsParlement' is probably in October 2011.

Besides the National 'PlattelandsParlement', since 2008 many of the organisations for small villages in the Province, also organise a 'Province PlattelandsParlement'. They decide to do it in the years in between the years when there is a National 'PlattelandsParlement'. In 2010 there are 6 provinces organising their PlattelandsParlement; in February 2011 there will also be one. In this article we just deal with the National 'PlattelandsParlement. Themes which are very important in the Province PlattelandsParlement are chosen also as theme on the National 'PlattelandsParlement'.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The general objectives were the same for all the three times 'PlattelandsParlement' has been held. The methods change however and the direct results which are the goal of the meeting have changed also.

The general objectives are for all the three 'PlattelandsParlement':

- To give the opportunity for the people of the rural areas to rise their voice about what they find important to talk about with policymakers and politicians. Direct contact with politicians. Participants from the rural areas decide which themes are going to be discussed.
- To give the opportunity to influence policy on the national level.
- To exchange information between active people of the rural areas; to inspire each other with good results.
- To give an opportunity to meet each other and to network.

The objectives have changed somewhat after the first 'PlattelandsParlement'. The organisers concluded after the event that there were very many people from the small villages and they had many frustrations about the policy and the attitude of the politicians. As a result, most recommendations were quiet negatively formulated and were kind of orders to the politicians.

As a result the organisers wanted for the second 'PlattelandsParlement' that there was more dialogue and for the third 'PlattelandsParlement' that there was more dialogue and more time to talk about good practices and the conditions required to good experiences.

There was a much better energy then, when people talked about good results of their efforts and when they could concretely show to politicians that they can do very good things in their village, and that just some facilitating of (national, provincial or municipality) Government is needed.

After the 'PlattelandsParlement' we maintained contact with the politicians who

visited the event and we went to talk with some Commissions of Parliament about the recommendations we gave them and what they are doing with them ...

When talking about the achievements, the first thing to say is that in such a case achievements are always a long-term journey. Although organisers think the achievements are better from each new 'PlattelandsParlement'.

We achieved that, in some cases, politicians really realize the effects of their measures for the rural areas and sometimes they made special rules for the rural areas.

- We achieved that in some cases politicians ask Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen for advice when they work on new laws.
- We achieved that some of the media pick up our themes and write or talk about them. In many more cases than earlier the media ask for our vision.
- Politicians are aware that we follow them when talking about issues which are important for the rural areas.

ORGANISATION

The Dutch 'PlattelandsParlement' has been organised three times. Each time the event took place in just one day; a Saturday, with real working time from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Participants don't have to pay to attend (just their own travel costs). The event is always in the center of the country, at the same location. There have been thoughts to change location and there were invitations from some municipalities to organise it with us. But while they are located in the south of the country, and travel time and travel costs for people from the north would be high, organisers decided to reject that offer.

All 1.500 NGO's are invited to come and so are politicians and some policymakers. At each 'PlattelandsParlement' there were some 300 participants.

The organisation of the 'PlattelandsParlement' is a cooperation of the *Landel-*

ijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen (which is the owner of the project) and the *KNHM* and the 'Netwerk Platteland'.

There is an Advisory Committee of three persons (with one person, a board member, of each organisation) and a working group of three professionals, also one from each organisation.

The working group manages the whole event: they make the decision about the themes; the people who are invited to come to talk about their experiences; they have all contacts with the politicians; they have the practical organisation.

The organisation of each 'PlattelandsParlement' is cheaper than the version before! The first has a budget of 340.000 €; the last of 170.000 € and the plans for 2011 need a budget of around 160.000 €.

It is important that we have a lot of experience now of organising the event; the plan of action is there. Because now for some years the same persons from the three organisations are responsible for the 'PlattelandsParlement' they know each other quite well, and a lot of their talks are by telephone conference.

Half of the funding comes from the *Ministry of Agriculture*. The other half comes from a major bank (RABO-bank, this was historically the bank of the farmers and is still very strong in the rural areas; it is a cooperative bank) and from the *KNHM*.

The communication about the 'PlattelandsParlement' is done in several ways.

- To invite all the NGO's in the villages, we send them an invitation, some half a year before the event.
- All participants of the previous 'PlattelandsParlement' receive an invitation.
- Approximately half a year before the event we make a digital and a physical 'Newsletter' which we send to all earlier participants. In the newsletter are the results of the last 'PlattelandsParlement', what has been achieved and what is going on, and an introduction of the themes for the next 'PlattelandsParlement'.
- Approximately two months before the event we make another digital and

physical 'Newsletter' with the complete program of the day. Last time this was a full-color magazine with articles about the themes and interviews with speakers of the next 'PlattelandsParlement'. This is also the opening of the registration.

- The first contact with politicians is also around April. They are invited by letter.
- In May there is a phone call with all politicians who are invited.
- In September we have a meeting with the Committee of Agriculture of the Parliament. We talk about the results of the earlier 'PlattelandsParlement' and about the themes of the coming event.
- Mostly there is also phone contact during the last weeks or days before the event.
- Press releases are given in April, June and September.
- A month after the event there is a third 'Newsletter' for all participants with the reports of all theme groups and with the recommendations and some photos of the event. In this newsletter are also the most important statements of the politicians.

METHODS

The Dutch 'PlattelandsParlement' is a one-day-event. There are no excursions.

The schedule is: First a plenary start with all participants and the politicians with a looking back to the results of the earlier 'PlattelandsParlement'. Then there were main themes which are discussed in groups in the morning session and then after a break for lunch and discussion of other themes, again in the afternoon sessions.

In the lunch break there were discussions of subthemes and at the end of the afternoon sessions people vote for the statements and gave their recommendations to the politicians. The end of the day there is a plenary discussion with politicians.

Preparation for the 'PlattelandsParlement' starts around one year before by writing the Project Plan. At that time already decisions are made about the rough schedule for the day.

In that first step of preparation there are decisions about the amount of themes and the amount of subthemes which are discussed in the parts around lunch.

When the project Plan is ready and there is a strong probability that the money needed to organise the event is confirmed, the working group start thinking about the themes. All three organisations come with ideas. The *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* therefore has contact with its provincial coordinators to hear which themes are important now and eventually which themes were popular on their Provincial 'PlattelandsParlement'.

Members of the working group and the Advisory Group talk with each other and always there is a unanimous decision to select the themes.

When themes are chosen, the working group decides how to organise the sessions about the themes. Each organisation (*Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen*, *KNHM*, *Netwerk Platteland*) is responsible for one or two themes and goes to research what is the best approach of that problem and who is the best to invite for the starting speech. The members of the working group discuss each idea and decide for all themes what the best approach is and who to invite.

Also they choose the method for how to handle the 2 x 2 hours that the group is discussing.

The person from the working group who is responsible for a theme is also the person to talk with the people he invites to come to speak, and to organise that the content of the speech is according to the aim of the group session. In a certain way that person is also responsible for the recommendations that are made in the group session. Of course that responsibility is shared with the speaker and the members of the group session.

For the 'PlattelandsParlement' 2007, a group of younger people of the rural areas were invited to participate specially, because the organisers felt angry

that the role and vision of younger people is not heard. A group of 20 young habitants of the rural area, coming from different organisations for younger people, have prepared their themes and are trained to present them at the 'PlattelandsParlement'. In the last 'PlattelandsParlement' there was no follow-up to this initiative because organisers were not satisfied by the results of 2007.

Around lunchtime there are other, secondary, discussion groups. There also is a speaker to introduce the theme. The objective of this group is to exchange opinions with each other and to hear about the subject. There are no recommendations for the politicians about these themes.

Around lunchtime there is also one hour in which people can have direct personal contact with the politicians. People can indicate that they want to talk with politician X and one of the organisers makes a schedule so that everyone can talk for 5 to 7 minutes. Many people are happy with this possibility and use it to ask for attention to very concrete problems in their region. The method is very simple.

In the 'PlattelandsParlement' in 2009 we made some change in the methods. We decided to invite people from villages which had done very good work in tackling the problems in their village, or who did a very good job in using the talents of the inhabitants of their village to create new possibilities.

Their 'good cases' were the starting point of the discussion. We want to show to the politicians and to all participants of the event, that there are a lot of good examples and that it is possible to learn from each other. We talked about the methods they use in their village; the opportunities they see; the problems they had to face and how they did it. That approach gives much better energy; it refers to possibilities; it shows the expertise of the people in the villages.

The main work is done by the 3 people in the working group responsible for the 'PlattelandsParlement'. The time they have to spend is round 150 hours each on the preparation of the themes. The preparation of the 'lunch themes' takes about 15 hours each. Besides this there are around 200 hours in total for the practical organisation and the meetings of the working group, and 100 for the updates of the website and producing the 'Newsletters'.

The host of the day for all three events has been a well-known Dutch television presenter. Some weeks before the 'PlattelandsParlement' the working group has talks with him how to do it. The start of the day is always a looking back with politicians to the results of the last 'PlattelandsParlement'.

OUTCOMES

At the first two events, all participants filled in an evaluation form. The last time it was there, but the organisers forgot to distribute it! In general all people are quite satisfied; an important aspect in the evaluation is very often meeting with other active people and networking.

The last time organisers heard more about the purpose/ meaning of the 'PlattelandsParlement'. People identified that the outcomes are better each time the 'PlattelandsParlement' is organised but also want to improve it further. They want concrete output to policymakers and politicians and better monitoring after the day of the event.

Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen, KNHM and Netwerk Platteland evaluate the 'PlattelandsParlement' one week after the event. Besides many practical things, the most important conclusions were that the content now was very good and that we have to improve the follow-up after the event. Therefore organisers talked twice in 2010 with the Committee of Agriculture of the Dutch Parliament and with a Member of Parliament who is specialised in sustainable energy and the possibilities for villages to make their own energy.

In general the three organisations which are responsible for the 'PlattelandsParlement' are satisfied with the outcomes. But we want to improve the outcomes each new 'PlattelandsParlement'.

From the first 'PlattelandsParlement' there were statements to the national politicians.

From the second 'PlattelandsParlement' there were six recommendations. They are quiet generally formulated and not so clear.

The talks with politicians after this 'PlattelandsParlement' were 1½ year after the event when we started the preparing of the last 'PlattelandsParlement'. We conclude later, that our biggest mistake was that we don't stay in contact with the politicians and that we have to invest in that contact; to make it more sustainable.

Although there was one great improvement: Most politicians and also the members of the administration learned from the 'PlattelandsParlement' that they have to realise the consequences of their intended plans for the rural areas! An outcome was also that the *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* was invited by some departments to gave their opinion when they were working on new laws and arrangements. They really began to realise that they can use the knowledge of the *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen* to make better rules and laws.

There are also concrete outcomes for the rural communities. They see at the 'PlattelandsParlements' that other villages have created their own solutions and that they can do the same. That they can use the knowledge of the other communities. That they can refer to those communities when their municipality says that their wishes are impossible. When people know what the possibilities are and when they know where they can find help to realise these in their village, they feel strengthened.

For the national, provincial and municipal government the result was that the inhabitants of the villages are strengthened and that they have to take the inhabitants of the rural area/ of their villages more seriously.

LESSONS AND TRENDS.

By organising the 'PlattelandsParlement' three times, there are lessons. The most important are:

- The four main objectives stay the same: it is very important to give signals to national politicians and policymakers; it is important to influence the policy in a direction that is good for the rural areas and in which there is attention to the things people in the villages can realise themselves; it is

important to share knowledge; it is important to meet each other on such an inspiring day.

- Give much more attention to the follow-up after the event. Stay in contact all year with politicians and policymakers; try to have attention in the media for the problems and the possibilities of the rural areas.
- Create a positive atmosphere on the day of the event; don't focus on problems but focus on possibilities; focus on achievements; focus on the qualities of the inhabitants of the rural area. Let them say what they need from government in order to create themselves what they need in their village or region.

The main four trends of three 'PlattelandsParlement' in the Netherlands:

1. From: Saying what is not good, to: Constructive thinking about solving problems.
2. From: Statements, to: Dialogue.
3. From: One day event, to: One day event followed by two years intensive contact with politicians and policymakers.
4. From: 85% of participants are inhabitants of the rural area and active in their village organisation and 15% are professionals,
5. to: 60% of participants are inhabitants of the rural area and active in their village organisation and 40% are professionals.

The first three trends are welcomed by the organisers. The last trend is probably an important one and there is a danger that the voice of the rural inhabitants is less heard. So-called experts take over the voice of the rural inhabitants ...

FUTURE PLANS

In general the organisers still find it very important to have an event like a Rural Parliament. The reasons for starting it in 2005 still exist! Its influence is growing and organisers are sure there is a future for the Rural Parliament.

The three organising partners have all decided to participate in organising the fourth 'PlattelandsParlement' in October 2011 and already started making the Project Plan.

Maybe some other organisations also participate.

An important change is probably going to be the activities before the event in October. There are plans to choose 4 major themes and to install, at the end of 2010, for each theme a group of experts (theoretically and practical from the villages!) who study the possibilities of improvements and solutions in relation to that theme. They should then write proposals which are discussed with the participants at the 'PlattelandsParlement'. The final proposals and recommendations are going to be discussed at the final section of 'PlattelandsParlement' with the politicians and policymakers and offered to the Chairwomen of Parliament.

Thinking of a possible European Rural Parliament, the first question is what are the objectives of such an event and is it going to be an expert meeting or a meeting of the grass-root people or what is the correct balance between these groups.

APPENDICES/ MORE INFORMATION

All information about the past Rural Parliaments in the Netherlands are just available in Dutch. Some of these documents are available at www.platteland-sparlement.nl.

For more information you can always mail to the writer of this article: kmirck@lvkk.nl.



RURAL PARLIAMENTS IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Maria BEHANOVSKA

President of Videcky parlament na Slovensku

CONTEXT

Country: The Slovak Republic

Organisation: The organisation responsible for the Rural Parliament in the Slovak Republic is an NGO: *VIPA* (*'The Citizen Association Rural Parliament in Slovakia'*).

VIPA was established in the year 2000, as a platform, and in the year 2001, when there was a need to give it a legal identity, the NGO Citizen Association Rural Parliament in Slovakia (*VIPA*) was established. Activities of *VIPA* are focused on rural development. The Rural Parliament defends and promotes the interests and needs of rural development through various tools and methods. Most of the activities are directed at rural areas, with the priority to promote new innovative approaches for endogenous development. *VIPA* is an organisation actively participating in the formulation of rural policy in Slovakia. A vision of Slovak rural areas was created through many public debates and forums:

“By the year 2015, the Slovak countryside should be an area with a clean and healthy environment, with a technical and social infrastructure, which provides enough employment opportunities and favorable conditions for small and medium businesses, based on the sustainable use of local resources, such as farming and forestry, agro- and eco-tourism, crafts, and using modern technology to create the highest added value. Development of the Slovak countryside will be built on the good cooperation among different sectors and the educated and active inhabitants, who have an interest in public affairs and respect for their ancestors and traditions.”

The Mission of *VIPA*:

is to promote quality of life in rural areas and to support rural initiatives in the management of rural development.

How to fulfill our mission? It could be accomplished by realizing the following activities:

In promoting quality of life in rural areas:

- pressure to create favorable conditions;

- promotion of international solutions that brought success in rural development;
- defense of rural interests against the activities and resolutions which damage the countryside and its development.

In support of rural initiatives in the field of rural development management:

- education, advice and recommendations of quality educational institutions;
- technical assistance in creating and implementing development strategies, programs and projects;
- involving volunteers in projects and activities of *VIPA*;
- communication through the biennial meeting of Rural Parliament Forums, workshops, meetings, a magazine and a web portal.

The Structure of *VIPA*:

VIPA is an association of individuals and organisations wishing to realize the needs of rural residents, aimed at improving the quality of life in the Slovak countryside. The highest authority is the general assembly (a meeting of all the members), which is organised every year. Every three years, at the assembly, members of the organisation elect the President and the Presidency. We have 89 members, who are individuals, municipalities, micro-regions and organisations on the local, regional and national levels. In between assemblies, the activities of *VIPA* are managed by the Presidency, which consists of 14 elected members, while professional activities are supervised by our Committees. The Regional Rural Parliaments are NGO's with a regional character. After 2002, there was a need to establish seven Regional Rural Parliaments (RRP). The target groups of RRP are micro-regions, rural communities, rural initiatives and associations, communication centers and Local Action Groups. In the case of a dysfunctional RRP, *VIPA* replaces any activities in that region. The target groups of *VIPA* are public law authorities, institutions, international organisations for rural development and partner organisations.

Name: The Rural Parliament Forum

From the IV Rural Parliament Forum onwards, the event is organised under the auspices of the President of the Slovak Republic.

Terminology:

- The Rural Parliament Forum (RPF) – the event known in Europe as the “Rural Parliament” – an open meeting of representatives of rural associations and initiatives, and serves to shape the requirements of rural areas;
- CA Rural Parliament in Slovakia (VIPA) – the organisation responsible for the event in question;
- Working Group – the group of people who focus on a common topic in the event of RPF;
- Regional Rural Parliament – an organisation (NGO) with a regional character;
- Committee of ... – a group of specialists who work on resolutions passed by the Rural Parliament Forum
- Micro-region – a group of municipalities within a geographical area with common historical, natural and cultural characteristics, a common vision and with a legal identity.

HISTORY

The first idea of establishing the Rural Parliament Forum in Slovakia emerged in the year 1999, after the speech of Swedish specialist Kjell-Roger Karlsson. On that day the Preparatory Committee was assembled, which drafted the basic documents and at the end of the year 1999 the Rural Parliament of Slovakia was established as an informal platform.

After a time it became clear that an informal platform was suitable for identifying needs and generating goals, but an executive was necessary to establish an organised structure. Thus *VIPA* was created. This new NGO was registered on 5 June 2001. A more appropriate organisational structure, as well as easier access to grants, led to other activities, which brought increased responsibilities and authority to *VIPA*.

The role of *VIPA* has always been determined by the resolutions passed by the

Rural Parliament Forum, which specified the goals for the next two years and ensured their implementation.

The Rural Parliament Forum

The informal platform of the Rural Parliament, the Preparatory Committee, took the responsibility for the following tasks:

1. start the work of the Preparatory Committee;
2. become familiar with the Swedish experience and apply it to Slovak conditions;
3. summarize the needs of the Slovak countryside and rethink activities to address them;
4. prepare and run the first meeting of the Rural Parliament.

Results of the work of the Preparatory Committee included:

- the preparation of a draft of *VIPA* statutes;
- the development of principles for the establishment of *VIPA* communication centers in micro-regions (Regional Rural Parliaments);
- the transformation of the Preparatory Committee to a Slovak NGO with a legal identity called Citizen Association Rural Parliament;
- the creation of the *VIPA* statute;
- an elaboration of the *VIPA* policy statement;
- participation in the Swedish Rural Parliament (1-4 June 2000);
- the main aim of this period was to fulfill the purpose of the *VIPA* Preparatory Committee and organise the first assembly of the Rural Parliament Forum in October 2000.

The first Rural Parliament Forum (12-13.10.2000, Levoča)

At the first Forum there were four working groups, encompassing the following themes: Landscape, Policy, Economy and the Human being.

Results achieved in between the first and the second Rural Parliament Forum:

The setting up of VIPA and development of 5 projects, the most important being the PHARE Special Preparatory Program (SPP) priority B, in which:

- 30 Communication Centers were established,
- the website of VIPA was created,
- 30 facilitators / local development managers were trained,
- a partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture was established,
- two specialists from Sweden, Kjell-Roger Karlsson and Berit Folkesson, provided support.

Positive results arrived at by Rural Parliament Forums:

- good promotion through official web-site, printed materials, media and conferences,
- international study tours (Austria, Ireland, Sweden, Brussels, Lithuania, Estonia) and representation in international forums in Hungary and Sweden,
- media strategy adopted,
- participation of representatives of VIPA in Committees of the Government and the National Council of the Slovak Republic secured,
- acceptance of the representatives of VIPA in political bodies and clubs,
- international position of VIPA strengthened,
- capacity for the LEADER approach in 5 regions of Slovakia (by TA-SAPARD) being established,
- on the international level: VIPA became a part of the European Rural Network
- on the national level: VIPA became an accepted body of work groups for the preparation of programming documents,
- implementation of important projects.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The Mission Statement of The Rural Parliament Forum is to increase the quality of life in rural areas and to support rural initiatives struggling for rural development.

The Priorities of the rural development programme stated by the Rural Parliament Forum are as follows: advocacy, education, promotion and public relations, international cooperation, environmental protection, regional development support, equality of opportunities and network cooperation.

ORGANISATION

Frequency: every two years

Duration: two days, starting and ending with lunch

Location:

Events take place in different regions across Slovakia, the location is selected by the Presidency of VIPA, in cooperation with LAGs or Public-Private Partnerships – a region is selected which can provide good practical examples for all participants of the event.

Participants:

We regularly invite participants who are competent in the field of regional development.

We can divide the participants into the following groups:

- organisations: the organisation at the national as well as the regional level – specialists and experts from the area of rural development, the countryside, the field of environment and agriculture (the Slovak Environmental Agency, the Association for village renewal, the Association MAGNA VIA, the NGO Academia Istropolitana Nova, the Farmers Association of Sheep and Goats in Slovakia, and others);
- the public sector: municipalities, micro-regions, LAGs – participants who directly affect regional development (from rural areas);
- the political sector: politicians at local, regional and national levels – participants who redistribute money for use in rural development (Ministry of

Agriculture and Rural Development of Slovak Republic, Ministry of Environment, Self governing regions of SR);

- international guests – VIPA partners in international cooperation.

Every event (Rural Parliament Forum) is attended in average by 100 participants.

Responsibilities and methods of preparations:

The party responsible for organising the Rural Parliament Forum is *VIPA*. In charge of the organisation is the President of *VIPA*, alongside working groups.

Working groups include:

- the organisational working group: responsible for the organisational part of this event (accommodation, boarding, booking a conference room,...)
- the public-relations working group: responsible for promotion (media, web-site,...)
- the communications working group: responsible for invitations and communication with potential participants
- the technical working group: responsible for the programme, lecturers and working groups at the event.
- All working groups communicate with the President, the Presidency and the Members of *VIPA* by e-conference, personally and in writing.

Involvement:

VIPA cooperated with all partners on the preparation of the Rural Parliament Forum. Every partner has their own role in the preparation and running of the Rural Parliament Forum. Their specialists cooperate in the preparation of the programme, they participate as lecturers at the event itself. After the Rural Parliament Forum, and in cooperation with *VIPA* members, they try to summarize the conclusions arrived at the event. The conclusions are commented on via e-conference.

Main Partners:

The Slovak Environmental Agency – The Centre for Landscape Creation and Environmental Education. The main subjects of cooperation concern: the Programme of village renewal, Village of the year awards, the European Landscape

Convention, the development of the Slovak countryside and Rural Days in the National Council of the Slovak Republic.

The Association for Village Renewal – The main topic of cooperation is the Programme for village renewal.

Association MAGNA VIA – The main topic of cooperation is the building of the cultural and tourist path Magna VIA and the promotion of the natural, historical and cultural heritage of the Slovak Republic

NGO Academia Istropolitana Nova – The main topic of cooperation is education.

Farmers Association of Sheep and Goats in Slovakia – The main subjects of cooperation concern traditional products on the regional and national levels.

Platform of 4NGO – The primary aim of the cooperation with 4NGO is to achieve a higher level of mutual cooperation between the areas of rural development and business background in farming, as well as to promote traditional values and interests of landowners in political, legislative and administrative bodies of the Slovak Republic. An open public debate took place, with the competent parties and media present, where the representatives of 4NGO expressed their demands, highlighted positive effects and local financial benefit from the ‘Sale from the Farm’, and the idea that farmers are not inherently dependent producers and traders.

LAG, Public-Private Partnership and Local partners (municipalities, schools, NGOs, and others) – *VIPA* cooperate with LAGs, which were established in the LEADER approach process (in Slovakia we have 29 LAGs), and also with Public-Private Partnerships, which were unsuccessful (there are more than 35 unsuccessful LAGs – not supported by the Programme for the Rural development of the Slovak Republic for the years 2007-2013).

Financing:

Financing of this event is multi-sourced and occurs by way of grants, subsidies, project funding, own resources, sponsorship, financial donations by local partners and participant fees. Local partners based in the area where the event is

organised are our sponsors, and many financial needs are supported by them. *The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic* partly contributes to the event. We are able to organise it with minimal financial resources (invitation by emails, minimization of travel costs, low cost accommodation, board directed by partners in the area, and higher fees) if raising funds to finance the Rural Parliament Forum should prove unsuccessful. All organisational security is based on the voluntary activity of the members and sympathizers of *VIPA*.

Real costs of the event amount to about 20.000 €, but official costs paid for by *VIPA* are only 6.000 – 8.000 €. This is due to donations, sponsors and voluntary activities.

Communication (before and after the event):

Communication before and after the event is handled by the VIPA Committee for promotion and public relations. It proceeds through the following channels:

- the magazine 'Náš vidiek' (Our countryside), the official web-site www.vipa.sk, promotional events, such as the Rural days in the National Council of the Slovak Republic, and press conferences held in order to keep people in rural areas informed and engaged, propagate examples of good practice and promote results achieved by our partners as well as offer services and help to rural areas.
- with partners: every day communication - implementation of projects
- with policy makers: personal communication with policy makers (events, open days and Special Interest Groups established by the National Council of the Slovak Republic) and in writing (by letters and email) on a daily basis.
- with the public: communication takes place not only before the event, but throughout the year. We communicate by means of seminars, educational activities, workshops and the magazine 'Náš vidiek', which is published quarterly.

METHODS

Content:

The main themes of the Rural Parliament Forum are proposed by the Presidency of *VIPA*. They result from the requirements of members, partner organisations and societal needs. Themes for working groups in the Rural Parliament Forum are formulated during periodic meetings of the *VIPA* Presidency, which are organised in the period between Rural Parliament Forums. Responsibility for the themes is defined at these meetings and the lecturers are confirmed.

Methods and processes of the event:

Parts of the event:

- plenary session – (all participants) providing a summary of the previous forum and the implementation of the passed resolutions (positive and negative effects included)
- workshops – ordering participants into four or more working groups. It starts with an excursion into a rural area – positive examples of rural development are demonstrated (each working group focuses on a particular topic), introduction of the topic by lecturers, work in the working groups – participants exchange opinions, there is an interactive lecture and a discussion
- evening reception with a cultural programme, an informal discussion among the Presidency, the *VIPA* members, policy makers and all participants
- working groups (continue) – discussion and proposal of resolutions of the Rural Parliament Forum
- the event includes an accompanying exhibition of traditional folklore, cuisine, historical background, as well as the natural and cultural heritage of the host region.

After the event the Presidency communicate with participants and the resolutions of the Rural Parliament Forum are passed. Thereafter the Presidency and the *VIPA* members define the funding, resources and implementation of projects, with the aim to comply with the resolutions passed by the Rural Parliament Forum.

OUTCOMES

At first, the Rural Parliament Forum in Slovakia was just an idea. But following the first efforts to implement the outcomes from this event, a lot of complications with its legal identity occurred (the Rural Parliament Forum was only a platform, which means no projects, no seriousness in negotiations with policy makers etc.). There was an impulse to create a non governmental organisation – a citizen association with a legal identity – called *The Citizen Association of the Rural Parliament in Slovakia (VIPA)*. We would like to emphasize that this event could not exist without *VIPA*. The relationship between *VIPA* and the event is too close. The main outcome of *VIPA* being established is that *VIPA* became an acceptable institution on the national as well as the international level, which is reflected in our partnerships. Our members are involved in the formation of rural policies, in expert groups, in EU projects evaluation, in the implementation of EU and national projects, in the evaluation of candidates for the Village of the year awards and the Chotár of the year awards.

Important projects in addition to the Rural Parliament Forum:

The Rural day or the Day of the countryside in the National Council of the Slovak Republic. On this day a specific rural area (micro-region, LAG) is presented in the castle area, in the presence of our politicians. There are exhibitions of natural, historical and cultural heritage as well as of typical cuisine. This event is organised twice a year (in summer and in winter), in cooperation with the Slovak Environmental Agency, who present the Programme for village renewal and the Village of the year awards, and the National Council of the Slovak Republic – the Committee of agriculture and environment. There is space for informal talk with policy makers about rural problems in Slovakia.

The ‘Women leader awards’ are a competition comprising 4 categories: Women-activists, Women in business, Craft-women and Women-politicians. These awards were first awarded in the year 2002 in cooperation with *VOKA* (the Rural Organisation for Community Activities), as a small project. Since 2007 the main organiser has been *VIPA*. Within the scope of this project, *VIPA* started to collaborate with the Self Governing Region of Slovakia and established the ‘Regional Women leader awards’. The winner of the regional competition advances to the national competition.

‘Sale from Farms’ is a project based on the platform of 4NGO (*VIPA* is a member). It concerns the process of the legalizing sale of farm products on the production site. ‘Methodology for Farmers’ is a result of this collaboration.

The main activities of *VIPA* are focused on education. Public awareness and environmental education must be oriented toward an exploitation of natural resources which does not harm the countryside and its ecological stability. It must support efforts to improve the environment and raise public awareness of activities detrimental to the environment. It promotes economic and social sustainable development in order to preserve the value of the countryside and to prevent rural depopulation. *VIPA* has implemented many projects with a focus on education. The target groups are members of *VIPA*, partners, municipalities and micro-regions.

Projects with educational and informative themes:

‘The *VIPA* Information days’ is a 2-day seminar on an actual issue in rural development. It deals with the environment, rural tourism, and the LEADER approach (2009–2010). This project is an outcome of the 5th Rural Parliament Forum and the main aim of the project is to create an effective tool for the dissemination of current information and knowledge, to promote rural development in different regions of Slovakia and raise the awareness of the rural population about the significance of education and knowledge. This project will take place 6 times, with a frequency of once every four months. The topic of the educational programme has always been different, selected according to current needs.

‘*Náš vidiek*’ is a magazine promoting good practice in rural development, which presents LAGs, Public Private Partnerships, rural areas, protected areas, as well as natural, historical and cultural tourist attractions. In the past, the magazine was published in cooperation with *VOKA*, but now *VIPA* is the only publisher.

‘Development of human resources in *VIPA*’ comprises 26 educational models for members of our parliament – including ICT, management skills, communication (2009).

The project ‘Health check of CAP’ consists of seminars on Common Agriculture Policy (2010) held across regions of the Slovak Republic.

LESSONS

What can others learn from your experience?

How to cooperate in the creation and assessment of legislation and strategic documents in accordance with the needs of the countryside on the national, regional and local level.

What worked?

Communication with partners and inhabitants of the countryside, propagation of their activities and everyday talks with policy makers. 'About the countryside and for the countryside', an exchange and dissemination of experience and knowledge of rural development at the international, national, regional and local levels, and educational activities.

What did not work?

'Fragmentation of our common strength in the countryside'. In this time, obtaining structural funds from the EU is highly competitive and many organisations and institutions want access to the funds to implement their programs. If we want to be successful in sustainable rural development, we must cooperate and pull together.

FUTURE PLANS

The Rural Parliament Forum has a very close relationship with *VIPA*, because its people (volunteers, lecturers, experts and enthusiasts of rural development) have worked together at the Rural Parliament Forum and other common projects. Members of the Presidency and members of the organisation closely cooperated with partners, politicians and citizens with the common aim to implement the resolutions passed by the *VIPA* Rural Parliament Forum. In future, *VIPA* plans to increase the efficiency of its activities by means of:

- coordinating the work of the members in the monitoring committees and other governmental organisations operating at the national level,
- negotiating with government authorities on all rural issues and, whenever possible,

- establishing routes of communication and a sense of partnership when addressing the issues at hand,
- helping, supporting and offering advice to organisations in favour of rural communities and regions, municipalities and LAGs.

International cooperation:

The involvement of *VIPA* in international cooperation significantly increases the efficiency and the success rate of its activities. Through membership in pan-European organisations and networks it is involved in shaping European rural policy by performing various functions in international organisations and projects, establishing contacts and going on study visits to assist in organising an exchange of experience, discovering examples of successful practice in other countries and attracting foreign partners to development projects. International cooperation and international recognition of *VIPA* play an important part in building a favorable image of the entire network. Inspiration and exchange of good practice among similar international organisations are very important to *VIPA*. We need to exchange the know-how with other organisations to improve the quality of our activities.

LINKS

- www.vipa.sk

Partners:

- www.sazp.sk
- <http://www.zchok.sk/>
- <http://spod.szm.com/>
- <http://www.ecotrend.sk/zvaz-ekologickeho/>
- <http://www.zpd.sk/>
- www.obnovadediny.sk (website about the Programme for Village renewal)
- http://www.prezident.sk/?spravy-tlacoveho-oddelenia&news_id=8944 (article)
- <http://www.landentwicklung.org/website/output.php?idfile=1520> (power-point presentation)
- <http://www.vipa.sk/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=229> (Our Countryside – magazine)
- <http://www.euractiv.sk/regionalny-rozvoj/clanok/vidiecky-parlament-overuje-program-leader> (article)
- http://www.krupina.sk/index.php?stranka=vidiecka_zena_roka (article – Women leader awards)



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