

Session 4. Networks and Rural Parliaments

Summary report

Rationale – why the topic is important

How can national rural parliaments positively contribute to rural development activities? Rural movements exist in most countries in Europe. They represent the many local communities that are working to develop their own areas. They help to strengthen their work and raise their voice at local, national and European levels.

The European rural community movement is growing stronger. In some countries, the rural movements have recently organised themselves, in others they are many years old. The social change and economic challenges that every nation faces makes the need for new solutions ever more obvious. The common challenges call for creating opportunities where the national rural movements and European rural networks meet and where the grassroots meet the decisions makers.

Speakers and contributions

The aim of the session was to explore the possible synergies and positive effects that the cooperation of national rural networks working with other networks and rural parliaments can have on communicating rural development.

Goran Šoster was one of the leaders of the alternative movement of civil society in Slovenia in the late 1980s. He is one of the forefathers of the Slovenian Rural Development Network and works as the coordinator of the Pan-European PREPARE Network – Partnership for rural Europe.

Focus of the presentation: Non-governmental networks and bottom-up initiated events are trying to build bridges between governments and civil society.

Lucía Fernández de Soto has been involved in the first European Rural Parliament. She started a cooperative with 5 other colleagues dealing with rural development and sustainable farming.

Focus of the presentation: What can be transferred from the first European Rural Parliament to the local level?

Inez Abrahamzon is the project manager of the first joint European Rural Parliament.

Focus of the presentation: The first European Rural Parliament – results and next steps.

Guoda Burokienė is the chairperson of the Lithuanian Rural Communities Union, member of the PREPARE Network and ELARD working groups. She oversees various transnational rural development projects.



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Focus of the presentation: How is the Lithuanian Rural Communities Union working? How communications tools are being used to build networks and disseminate information?

Participants

The number of participants was 10, including representatives of Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies and National Rural Networks.

Concept questions and key points discussed

- In what way is a rural parliament different from a seminar or conference on rural development? Participants are meeting on equal terms; there is no hierarchy, only various stakeholders discussing the same topic. The role of National Rural Networks and local politicians is significant in supporting rural parliament movements.
- What is the added value of a rural parliament in comparison with other methods? The word "parliament" suggests more implication from all levels of society and can be organised everywhere. A rural parliament attracts more of a cross-section of rural society, including decision-makers, experts and local people involved in rural activities.
- How can you convince the national administration to be part of the rural development design process? Rural actors need first to be recognized at the personal level with their work and positive results, establishing a long-lasting relationship based on trust and collaboration.
- Most participants agreed that rural actors should not depend on other bodies: it's a bottom-up participatory and democratic process.
- It is important to keep in mind that different cultures and countries encounter different challenges and deal differently with the process.

Conclusions

A rural parliament is not simply an event, but also a special method to engage civil society in a democratic way, to create a strong common voice of local actors to become rural development "agents of change". Nevertheless, the support of managing authorities cannot be ignored. It is a crucial component to create a transparent two-way process. Greater attention should be paid to the dissemination of information about rural parliaments and networks to the broader public (i.e. brochure explaining the method, results and steps forward).



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Key lessons learned from participants

- Rural parliaments are not only events, but a method through which participative democracy can be practised.
- In a rural parliament, politicians and rural people have equal rights.
- If you join forces, the common voice is stronger.
- It's a grassroots perspective but in some cases the Managing Authority should support the process.
- Networks are important for rural parliaments.

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