



European Rural Parliament 2013

# Report and Prospect



# European Rural Parliament

## Brussels 13 November 2013



MINGLE FOR EARLY ARRIVERS – TUESDAY NOVEMBER 12

### Programme (as sent out Oct 2013)

**Wednesday November 13** – The European Rural Parliament

At the European Economic and Social Committee, EESC  
Rue van Maerlant 2, Brussels. All in-plenary will be sent out via  
web streaming, [www.europeanruralparliament.com](http://www.europeanruralparliament.com)

- 8:15 Registration – security control etc.
- 9:00 Welcome – *Let's Talk Rural!*  
**Dilyana Slavova**, President of the EESC section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment opens the ERP and **Dacian Cioloș**, Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development will give the participants a video message.
- 9:20 From a *Glocal Perspective:*  
Changes, Challenges and Opportunities in Rural Areas,  
**Lucía Fernández de Soto**, La Noguera Medicaneli, Spain.
- 9:40 *All Europe shall Live!*  
**Michael Dower**, Visiting Professor of European Rural Development at the University of Gloucestershire, England.
- 10:00 The *Rural Community Movement* in Europe  
– the moving force in rural Europe  
How local people organise themselves to champion rural issues  
– an introduction by **Vanessa Halhead**, ERCA and **Goran Šoster**, PREPARE followed by contributions from rural people.
- 10:50 Break – time to *chill and chat*
- 11:20 *Think Tank* for cross-fertilisation of best practices, methods, new ideas and learning. From learning communities to think tanks.  
**Peter Backa**, Senior Expert and **Päivi Kujala**, Head of Finnish Rural Network Unit.
- 11:45 *Getting Down to Action* – the big issues  
Introduction of the proposals gathered from across Europe and the tasks for the workshops. **Inez Abrahamzon**, project manager ERP
- 12:00 *Lunch* – buffet
- 13:15 *Re-Balancing* Territorial Development in Europe  
Workshops on the proposals and preparation of statements for the plenary including: social enterprise, the rural voice, gender, local democracy, community-led local development, best practice, and others.
- 15:00 Break – time for a brew
- 15:30 *Let's Take the Next Step!*  
The European Rural Parliament and the Rural Networks:  
the future allocation of tasks – your opportunity to become actively involved and sign a “declaration of intent”.
- 16:50 *And to Conclude...*  
Concluding statements.
- 17:00 *That's All, Folks!*  
Closure of the first European Rural Parliament in history.



### **The courage and will to make a difference**

The first ever European Rural Parliament has been held. In May preparations began and the first invitations were issued. The Parliament - comprising key individuals from 30 countries representing over 70 organisations, more than 10 European networks and a vast number of local development groups - met in Brussels on November 13, 2013, to broaden their perspectives and identify how to boost rural development in Europe. Work on the issues highlighted and suggestions made has continued throughout the regions.

What is unique about a rural parliament is not the issues it raises but the form it takes. At its heart is the philosophy that everyone, from those working at grassroots level to decision-makers, meets on an equal footing in order to listen, discuss and understand. When wisdom, ability and resources are applied in depth and on a broad scale, real change can be achieved.

Issues have to be tackled head on if we wish to see change implemented by the people of Europe. If we do nothing, then rural areas face a future of increasing impoverishment, segregation and injustice. We must modify current trends and processes so that they encourage growth and greater cohesion and distribute resources as part of a more sustainable long-term strategy.

By bringing together individuals and bridging the boundaries that separate countries, organisations, ages and sexes, we can then create the necessary conditions for change. This movement will generate the means, the methods and, hopefully, the will to build a better future for rural areas in Europe.

*Staffan Nilsson*  
*Committee Chair*

*Inez Abrahamzon*  
*Project Manager*

## Summary

The first ever joint European Rural Parliament (ERP) was held in Brussels on November 13, 2013. The programme included talks and workshops and the formation of a series of policy-changing plans.

Prior to the Parliament, a massive effort went into spreading information, collecting motions and processing all the applications for the 150 available seats and, despite a relatively short period of preparation, organisers achieved their goal of broad representation within the European rural movement.

The overriding aim was to enable representatives from all levels, from grassroots personnel to decision-makers, to meet in order to strengthen the movement's identity, its ability to affect change and facilitate an exchange of ideas and experiences between different countries.

Participants were overwhelmingly positive towards the Parliament and convinced that it has an important role to play in the development of rural Europe.

They also believed that a rural parliament should meet annually or every other year. There is now a basic structure in place which will enable this to happen.

## Conclusions

- The European Rural Parliament has largely achieved its objectives and is important for the European rural movement.
- The democratic process and the rural parliament's "soul" must be protected and maintained. It is important that the grassroots perspective, from the bottom up, must be encouraged as to not do so will mean the continuation of processes that have already failed to tackle vital issues. Those nations with the necessary knowledge and experience should continue taking responsibility for establishing grassroots movements.
- Certain processes needing further development have been identified. These include effectivisation, improved credibility, the democratisation process, grassroots perspectives and equality issues. The optimal goal would be to establish the ERP as a platform for implementing and developing processes affecting local development. Support to strengthen, stimulate and effectively use local enthusiasm is also needed. Work carried out before, during and after the parliament must, therefore, identify its objectives and purpose for the local rural movement in general and for those who actively take part in the process.
- Long-term financial support must be secured and raised to a European level. It cannot be accepted that transnational co-operation, the very core of the European Union, is ineligible for funding.

*More conclusions can be found at the end of the report under "Results, Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Development"*

The European  
Rural Parliament



## Background

Following a seminar at the September 2012 Swedish Rural Parliament, delegates representing local, regional and national groups from various countries and several international organisations agreed that an important step forward for the rural movement would be to create a joint European Rural Parliament to complement the national rural parliaments of several countries.

Its purpose would be to demonstrate the rural movement's important role within civil society, the social economy and on a local, national and European level. The Parliament would also facilitate the exchange of ideas between national rural movements and various European networks working with local development initiatives. At the end of 2012, MEPs Kent Johansson and Jens Nilsson invited members of the Hela Sverige ska leva (All Sweden Shall Live) organisation to a meeting in Brussels. During this trip, the then acting Chair, Staffan Nilsson, also made contact with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC).

## Organisation

A lead group was established with representatives from three European networks.

- ERCA, European Rural Community Association
- ERA, European Rural Alliance
- PREPARE, Partnership for Rural Europe

Finland and Sweden agreed to organise the event through three organisations; Suomen Kyläoiminta (SYTY), Hela Sverige ska leva (HSSL) and Hela Norden ska leva (HNSL - covering the Nordic countries). Next to come on board were Winnet Europe, Winnet Sweden and Social Economic Business, national networks which represent local organisations throughout Finland and Sweden. During this period dialogue continued with five of the seven European parliamentary parties - EPP, ALDE, S&D, Green Party and GUE/NGL.



*"Rural parliaments are building bridges between civil society and governments, contribute to the urgent paradigm shift and give priority to peoples' visions."*

Goran Šoster, speaker from Slovenia

*"..... generating a deep and broad participation within the European rural development movement....."*

### Committee members

- Bert Broekhuis, ERCA
- Vanessa Halhead, ERCA
- Staffan Bond, HSSL
- Goran Šoster, PREPARE
- Peter Backa, SYTY
- Staffan Nilsson, HSSL/EESC



Lucia Fernandez de Soto, Spain

### Project Manager

In May 2013, Inez Abrahamzon was appointed part-time Project Manager and it was decided the event would take place on November 13th, 2013. Preparatory and follow-up work were devised, aimed at generating a deep and broad participation within the European rural development movement.

### Objectives

- To organise a rural parliament that will strengthen the European rural movement and support local democracy, civil society, social integration and equality. The parliament will also inspire the founding of new structures within the social fabric of society and a transformation to a sustainable Europe.
- To create a dialogue between representatives of national rural movements which will strengthen identity and local development, create an effective exchange of knowledge and skills and stimulate co-operation and development.
- To strengthen the links between decision-makers and rural movements/civil society.
- To influence national and European programmes by engaging in issues and strengthening democratic processes at local levels.
- To identify a structure that will enable the joint European Rural Parliament to meet at different locations across Europe.

## Funding

When work began on the first Rural Parliament only a fragment of the necessary funding was in place. Staff had the task of organising the event at the same time as sourcing funding for it. Initially, it was hoped to be able to help delegates with their travel costs but a Grundtvig application for finance was rejected and other sources of income ruled out due to varying restrictions. In many cases, national funding was unavailable if activities took place outside country borders. As a result, the original budget was reduced from just over one million SEK to 800,000 (€124 000).

*“Create a platform where those working at grassroots level can meet the decision-makers on equal terms”*

## Participation

To guarantee a wide geographical spread and representation of age and equality, applications were sought for each delegate's place, the numbers of which were limited to 150 due to the availability of suitable venues. Those wishing to attend, either as a representative of an organisation or as an individual expert, were consequently required to submit a description of themselves and their experience.

Taking steps up to the EU Parliament



## The Process Before, During and After

To ensure a “from bottom to top” perspective, a website, [www.europeanruralparliament.com](http://www.europeanruralparliament.com) was set up at the hub of the network through which messages and information were distributed and debate generated.

An application form for a seat at the Rural Parliament was created and also used for submitting motions, comments and debates that went on to become the programme contents, workshop topics and the draft for the Parliament's first Common Statement.

Motions sent before October 15 were prepared by a committee and guidelines issued for organisers holding the workshops and plenary sessions.

### The process

#### before, during and after the ERP

#### May – October

Information, mobilisation and submission of proposals

#### November 13

- The European Rural Parliament event:
  - Proposals processed and debated
  - A common statement for rural development agreed by participants

#### November 14

Summary, feedback and report to European Parliamentarians

#### Nov 14 – Dec 15

Work continues in working groups of those who express an interest at the ERP

#### December 15

Reports from working groups submitted  
– to enable implementation of the results and future plans of the ERP

#### January 2014

Final report and documentation disseminated

## November 12-13

The evening before the Rural Parliament met, delegates were invited to a European Parliament reception where over 100 took the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas and experiences.

The next day, the Parliament began with talks focusing on methods for local development, operations and organisation. Delegates were also able to choose to participate in a range of workshops based on previously submitted motions.

A Common Statement was drafted and distributed before being discussed with other motions at a plenary session that included conclusions and results from the workshops.

## Workshops

### 1 Local Needs for Place-Based Policies

– led by ELARD. Five motions considered

### 2 Good Business for Rural Communities

– led by Social Business Communication.

Four motions considered.

### 3 Rural Development on Equal Terms

– led by Winnet Two motions considered.

### 4 Think Tank for Local Development

– led by Finland's rural movement with a focus on methodology and forms for continued joint rural parliaments in Europe.

### 5 Democracy for Rural Communities

– led by PREPARE. Four motions considered.

### 6 Village Movements Building Society

– led by ERA/ERCA. Six motions considered.

## Work carried out before, during and after the workshops was based on the fact that:

- All the motions relevant to Europe would be written by committed individuals from Europe, even though this would mean that many would have to communicate in a foreign language.
- The motions prepared by the committee would be discussed in workshops and then summarised in a way for a decision to be made in plenum.
- Work and discussions surrounding the motions would continue in working groups after November 13, with the first reports submitted by December 15. The group could continue working with the motion if required.
- All rooms would be equipped with a computer and projector to ensure all participants could see the motions. Any changes would be added immediately to the document and shown in plenum.
- All motion decisions made at the plenary session would be published on the website.



*“There are great tools everywhere! But we need to make a treasure hunt for finding the gems!”*

Peter Backa and Päivi Kujala, Finland

## Work - post parliament

On November 14, several ERP representatives were invited to deliver the first report to MEPs Marita Ulvskog, S&D, and Herbert Dorfmann, EPP. The occasion ended with a resolution to keep in contact.

All decisions made on motions, the Common Statement, a summary of delegates' feedback and any press coverage were made available on the website.

More than 90 delegates, divided into 14 groups signed up to continue working on the motions, with several keen to work on more than one specific area of interest. On three lists there was only one name. This means that potentially there were 11 groups of committed people who wished to continue discussions internationally but working from home.

Within a week, all had been notified as to which group they belonged, and given suggestions on how to continue, even though each group was free to determine its own way of working. The individuals who were acting as co-ordinators with the committee were advised thus.

- To initiate the first meeting of the group.
- To discuss the motion upon which the group was focussed and present several ideas on how the work could proceed.
- To specify the target group, ie, decision-makers at EU level, national level, local level or other groups/individuals.

For the groups without co-ordinators, the committee identified and approached key people about taking on the role.

Two weeks before the submission date, reminders were issued to groups and group leaders. Their reports of their work were then included in Rural Parliament final report. Issues of interest to the general public, were made available on the website.

The collage features several documents from the European Rural Parliament workshops. At the top left is a 'Letter of intent, proposal Putting CLLD in Practice' form with fields for Name, Email, and a list of checkboxes. Below it is a 'Workshops' overview page with the text: 'All workshops start with work on received proposals. Each theme will be developed into an agreed statement, through dialogue and contributions from workshop members.' The bottom section contains six workshop-specific pages (WS1-WS6) with their respective pre-proposals and proposals. WS1: Local Needs for Place-Based Policies; WS2: Good Business for Rural Communities; WS3: Rural Development on Equal Terms; WS4: Think Tank for Local Development; WS5: Democracy for Rural Communities; WS6: Village Movements Building Society.

## Decisions and statements

Most of the motions were adopted but some were deferred as they were considered too extensive for processing by the workshops.

Motions immediately adopted include:

- IT-based tools and methods are necessary to facilitate discussions about policies affecting rural areas. A possible administrator could be the EU Contact Point.
- Groups should be formed at European, national and regional level with representatives from both Non Government Organisations (NGO) and authorities in order to evaluate regulations, projects and other decisions which affect development in towns and rural areas.
- NGOs and civil society representatives engaged in the development of rural areas must increase pressure on authorities to ensure that CLLD (Community Led Local Development) is carried out and used during the coming programme period.
- Stimulating and strengthening opportunities to start social businesses. Social enterprise should be made a priority in order to boost local development and welfare.
- Help for women and men to participate equally within the rural development programme. The initiative should aim to affect local policy and facilitate the exchange of experiences to ensure that equal opportunities are available at all levels of society.

### Common Statement

After a short debate, a Common Statement was agreed upon at a plenary session of the Rural Parliament. It emphasises that sustainable rural areas can only be created through enhanced partnerships and dialogue between rural policy decision makers and those who live and work in rural areas.

The ERP was held at the European Economic and Social Committee's Headquarters.



*"Even where governments have no intention to harm communities, their lack of understanding of rural areas may be seriously damaging."*

Michael Dower, England

# Results, Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Development

The first ever European Rural Parliament was, without doubt, a success. There was almost total agreement between the delegates, who represented mainly rural communities, and the decision-makers about the importance of its role and the need to hold a Parliament every or every other year. The foundations that were laid here can and should be built on.

The aim to create a common identity, assist exchanges of experiences and to identify forms of co-operation was realised. This, in turn, will strengthen the European rural movement. It is, however, difficult to ascertain if the delegates' commitment during and after the Parliament will affect national and European programmes. The delegates were satisfied with their participation and the information which they downloaded from the internet. The speakers were applauded and the workshops generated a very positive response, even though some delegates were unhappy with how work with the motions was carried out.

Those who attended the previous evening's reception were also satisfied with that event. Assessment carried out during the Parliament showed that delegates were clearly committed and they provided the organisers with many constructive comments. Several, however, complained about the lack of time and its negative impact on the workshops' effectiveness.

In addition to the review carried out on the day, further reflections were gathered afterwards through interviews, questionnaires to work groups and contacts through mail and telephone.

## Working together - reaching across regions

Being able to communicate over large distances is prerequisite in maintaining interest, participation and effect. It takes an extraordinary amount of effort to communicate with representatives of the European rural movement and the varying cultures, languages and conditions. When preparing for the event, contact was made with MEPs from five political parties and the EESC to establish co-operation and broad participation. The six months of preparation saw the creation of an infrastructure for information, dialogue and debate. Earlier contact lists provided only a low response while later contacts proved more active and interested. By November, 50% of the names on the list were new additions.

## Representation

The goal of bringing together 150 delegates at the ERP was achieved. Of the 140 individuals who applied, 68 were men and 72 were women. Some 8% were under the age of 25 and 8% were over 65. Several organisations were invited to take part which, when included in



Laura Velasco, IFOAM EU GROUP

*"...30 countries,  
70 organisations and  
at least 13 European  
networks..."*

the statistics, brings the total number of women to 74 and men 78. The MEPs, experts and others who participated but did not have to register, are not included in these figures. The delegates represented 30 countries, 70 organisations and at least 13 European networks. As some delegates represented more than one organisation/network we know that even more were present.

Younger delegates' interest in participating was stronger before the event compared to the numbers who turned up. Several cancellations were received due to problems in financing travel and accommodation costs. In one specific case, a woman was not allowed leave of absence from her municipal job. Funding problems were also cited as the reason for further cancellations from a number of organisations in other countries.

*Interest in participating in the next ERP will probably increase. It is therefore important to have clear criteria in order to secure a broad and equal representation as well as enabling delegates to attend from regions that do not have substantial resources.*

*The use of the website, blogs and newsletters should enable people to influence the contents, debates and statements well in advance. Rural parliaments should continue to be made accessible via the web and their work should be documented in other ways to ensure that those who cannot travel are not excluded from the process.*



*"This is the beginning of  
a silent revolution."*

Vanessa Halhead, Skotland

Work with the motions proved challenging for several reasons. They include:

Democratically respecting all the different interests within the short available timespan.

Not all of the motions' authors were present.

It became apparent that the guidelines set out by the committee had not fully been understood by all group leaders and delegates. All the process worked well for the majority, this issue must be addressed if the parliament is to become fully efficient.

Some 20 motions were adopted, rejected or deferred, but it was felt that each motion should have been given more time for proper debate; something which would have helped the decision-making process in the plenary session.

The next Rural Parliament could have a great many more motions and if they are to be handled properly, they must be prepared in good time.

This could involve preparing them at national level, identifying aspects with a European perspective which can be brought to the ERP. The process must be transparent, allowing the participants to be seen and heard.

The Common Statement was drafted on the same day the ERP met. Delegates were expected to agree, despite having a very short time in which to study the wording. Several delegates made their dissatisfaction very clear regarding this issue during the plenary session. If future statements are to be made at a rural parliament or the ERP, they should be prepared in advance and sent to delegates to enable them to make changes. Again, the process must be transparent and all the processes governing groups and participation must be given higher priority otherwise the movement's credibility will be affected.

*The leadership of ERP should be impartial. This is important not only during the run-up to Parliament's meeting, but particularly afterwards, otherwise credibility could again be affected. The conflicts between ambitious goals, time restrictions and the democratic requirement need to be managed carefully. Solutions include extending the ERP over two days and/or alternating the focus of each meeting between decision-making one year and the sharing of experiences the next.*

Workshop participants Guðrún Torfildur Gísladóttir and Lena Husén



*"We have come together here, not to talk about the value of diversity, but to join forces."*

Lucía Fernández de Soto, Spain

#### **Post ERP Activity**

Four of the 11 groups started working immediately after the Parliament and are continuing to do so. Other groups plan to start in spring 2014.

Time restrictions, lack of resources and issues concerning legality have been cited as the main reasons for a group not beginning work.

There has also been a lack of project leaders, sometimes because individuals have been refused permission from their own organisations to engage with the project while at work. There is certainly an interest to work within the movement, even though some are unwilling to adopt a project leader role. Greater support is needed if more work

is to be done.

There were cases where individuals had agreed to co-ordinate group meetings, only to discover that the committee had chosen another. Then, unfortunately, neither took up the reins.

Post ERP follow-up has also identified a need for clear objectives. It is felt that people would have been even more motivated to develop the project still further if they had been presented with circumstances based on real-life situations.

One delegate declared that work on one motion had been completed during the workshop and they wanted more time to focus on new ideas. Representatives from that group have since met MEP Mikael Gustafsson, GUE/NGL and arranged to meet the EU directorate to discuss the next step in implementing ideas. They have stated that they wish to start a new group in the spring.

Bodil Nilsson makes notes



The delegates have demonstrated the importance of the work carried out after the ERP, but they need more resources and support for it to continue. Current queries include:

- *Once a question has been debated and an answer/resolution achieved, what is the next step?*
- *Who will receive the groups' results?*

Discussions were held during a one hour workshop and then continued for one month over great distances with, in many cases, people who were unfamiliar with each other. It is therefore unreasonable to expect that this will result in well defined proposals for structural changes and models for European rural policies. One of the important objectives with the group work was therefore to find forms for continued dialogue in the period between rural parliaments that strengthen democratic processes and, in the long term, affect European policy.

### Success Factors

One of the most obvious reasons why the groups have started work is that the participants genuinely feel that they are deeply involved in the subject matter and they also know who will receive their results. Equally important is the knowledge that the movement remains high on the political agenda (CLLD) and that their work could affect decision-making through the European networks. The fact that somebody has taken responsibility for leading the process, and made a good job of it too, has proved to be a key factor. Participants' appreciation of the forums for dialogue via various online communications platforms, such as Padlet and Skype, have shown that it's necessary to have knowledge of IT and other creative solutions. Those working voluntarily have benefitted by co-operating with those who have managed to incorporate their involvement in the project into their normal jobs. The work involved before the Rural Parliament, and that which continues afterwards, presents great challenge and responsibility for the participants. There are no tried and trusted methods for individuals to

*"...it requires both resources and support..."*

work from home on cross-border projects covering the whole of Europe. They often have to develop their own methods.

Support is necessary for the work to continue as commitment and durability alone cannot drive the issues forward - especially when discussions have to cross several language barriers.

*In order to move from creative discussions between committed individuals from various levels of European society (which is a unique situation), to actually influencing international or national policy, a stronger, more influential movement is needed. One which utilises effective tools and models.*

### Future organisation and funding

ERCA, European Rural Community Association and PREPARE, Partnership for Rural Europe have agreed to be co-responsible for future European Rural Parliaments, working with other interested organisations a planning meeting is scheduled for early 2014.

The experience of the Nordic and Baltic nations has shown that it is important to find local (in this case, national) partners. Since rural parliaments are not organisations but a process, it is important that such uniqueness is retained and developed further. The creation of a platform where men and women of all ages and grassroots representatives and decision-makers can meet to discuss rural issues on equal terms is critical and must not be stopped.

It is important to try to discover the point at which the interests of financial and local institutions converge. Despite funding difficulties, the first joint ERP happened because a way was found to bring together the various interests of institutions, organisations and networks. One of the most important factors was the co-operation with the EESC which provided a venue, translators, lunch and the necessary audio visual presentation.

The pre-ERP reception was made possible by the support of Swedish and Finnish MEPs; Nils Torvalds, Kent Johansson, Anneli Jäätteenmäki, and Marit Paulsen of ALDE. Marita Ulvskog invited representatives to present their feedback the day after the event. Securing continued funding is important. The work required to maintain mobilisation, organisation and mass communication demands broad participation and commitment if it is to be effective and delivered in a professional manner. The EESC's purpose is to strengthen popular movements and it could become, the right circumstances, a most ideal partner.

*Co-operation between MEPs, European networks, organisations and representatives of national rural movements needs to be improved if all are to benefit from future rural parliaments. This is the way forward if ideas are to become reality and affect rural development. Development issues and needs raised at local level have to remain focal points.*

Staffan Nilsson and Dilyana Slavova led the plenary session



*“The work of addressing the sustainability of our rural communities can only be undertaken through vital local democracies and a strong partnership and between those who make policy affecting our rural areas, and those who live and work within them.*

*We are calling on policy makers at European, national and regional levels to join us in a functional partnership, and to enter into dialogue with us to enable our rural communities to live and thrive across Europe!”*

From the Common Statement of the European Rural Parliament



[www.eesc.europa.eu](http://www.eesc.europa.eu)



[www.ruralcommunities.eu](http://www.ruralcommunities.eu)



[www.preparenetwork.org](http://www.preparenetwork.org)



[www.europeanrural.eu](http://www.europeanrural.eu)



[www.helenorden.infoland.dk](http://www.helenorden.infoland.dk)



[www.helasverige.se](http://www.helasverige.se)



[www.kylatoiminta.fi](http://www.kylatoiminta.fi)



[www.landsbyggd.fi](http://www.landsbyggd.fi)



[www.landsbygdsnatverket.se](http://www.landsbygdsnatverket.se)



[www.gemenskapsforetag.nu](http://www.gemenskapsforetag.nu)



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