

THE ADDED VALUE OF THE RURAL MOVEMENTS AS A GOVERNANCE APPROACH FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS.

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SUMMARY

This paper explores the evolution of rural movements in Europe and highlights the increasing importance of their bottom-up development approach. More specifically, the study draws on the experience of rural movements in the Nordic and Eastern countries and their gathering within the Rural Parliaments with a focus on the Scottish Rural Parliament in order to establish the implications of their practices and their added value to the implementation of European and national rural development policies. It has the aim to highlight how rural movements can represent a great challenge for the countries with rich experience in this field to improve the quality of their events and for the countries without such an experience like Italy, that could profit from a discussion on this theme and prepare themselves to start with similar action on their own territory.

1. Introduction

The European rural areas are experiencing a deep decline in terms of decreasing importance of agriculture in the rural economy, the globalization, the urbanization, remoteness and isolation of many rural communities. These factors contributed to the depopulation of rural communities which brought to rural-urban migration of young and educated people, regional inequalities and loss of rural services and hence of their identity.

Governments are, by definition, remote from rural communities and cannot have their detailed knowledge. Moreover, the EU and national policies are more focused on the role of agriculture and less to the different characteristics of rural areas, their economies and societies. In this framework and over the last thirty years, there has been a growing realisation that rural development can only work if it is done not to the people but by the people for the people as prime actors of their own development. It has become widely accepted that there is a need to promote diversified and integral rural development with a strong emphasis on local solutions for local problems. European and national governments institutions cannot solve rural development problems alone.

One response to the process of rural decline but also to the inadequate response of governments and the EU was manifested in the formation of rural movements since 1970s (Woods M. (2003). They are non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working at a national level or regional level depending on their administrative profile. Rural movements have become common practice in supporting the governance of rural areas by implying consensus, openness and an invitation to participate with the aim to contribute to the implementation of rural development policies at various levels, supplementing decisions taken at various levels.

A rural movement can be defined as a *'linking of rural people and interests who wish to create change in rural areas by working together'* (Hakhead, V. et al., 2004, page. 6), by providing the most supportive and appropriate frameworks and policies which government can work at all levels and with the most important following functions: mobilizing, networking and supporting action for local development; linking local actions to the policies and funding of authorities at local, regional, national and European levels; building a rural network at European level to strengthen the position of rural areas in the EU. They provide capacity

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building and a voice for rural areas, their people and the many organisations working for rural development (Lee J., 2005)

‘The formation of the movements has been motivated by such issues as the loss of rural livelihoods and population, centralizing 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 (Söster G., et al, 2011).

They are driven by a pride and 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’* (Söster G., et al., 2011, page 7).

The rural movements mainly developed in the European Nordic and Eastern countries in 1970s where they organized themselves to raise the challenge of a new rural Europe working to make the voice of the rural people is heard at all the decision-making levels (Halhead V., 2005). Similar organisations developed independently but for similar reasons in other parts of Europe especially during 1980s. The response of governments to the development of the rural movements has been variable. In most cases they have been marginally involved, often disinterested and sometimes hostile in the early stages.

We now know there are 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 (Söster G., et al, 2011).

2. An overview of the rural movements in Europe

The movements of the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and United Kingdom) were the earliest to form. They have started through the mobilization of the local communities and in the later stage a rural forum at national level has been set up (Halhead V., 2005).

The first of the rural movements was created in Finland in 1976 where some rural villages formed committees to tackle local development issues. In 1989, the villages recognized the importance of the regional level in national and EU policy and regional associations were established. Finally ‘The Finnish National Organisation for Village Action’ was established in 1991 with a rural focus on the interests of the national organisations in supporting village action. In 1997, the ‘Village Action Association of Finland’ replaced this structure.² It has a membership of more than 130 organisations, including 19 regional village associations, 58 LEADER Local Action Groups and the main regional and national organisations in the rural field. This tiered structure at each level of government has the aim to enable the rural society to link more effectively with the authorities. As associations, they provide a vehicle through which the rural communities can carry out planning and project implementation at each level to prioritise and implement their activities in a more effective way, to provide an agreed working agenda of the associations and to influence programmes produced by the authorities (Halhead V., 2005).

A similar movement arose in Sweden during the 1980s where the villages started to form associations in advance of any national movement. The ‘Swedish Village Action Movement - *Hela Sverige ska leva (All Sweden shall live)*’ is the largest developed in Europe and it is also the only movement to receive funding from the government. For these reasons it represents a model for many others. The movement has assisted the formation of over 5,000 village associations grouped at local and regional level and about 40 national NGOs as members. The organization provides practical support to the local actors and develops rural development programmes. The biannual gathering of the movement which is called ‘Rural Parliament’ involves over 1,000 village representatives and provides a direct voice to the national government.

In Denmark, the rise of the rural movement was attributed to an influx of educated urban migrants in the 1970s who sought to reestablish the rural way of life and traditional values and a need to seek a new rural development model relevant to the post-industrial age (Svendsen, G., 2004). The ‘Danish Village Association’ was the first national organization established in 1976 to undertake a wide range of projects to support village action and lobbying government on behalf of rural communities. In 1997, a strategic body -

² www.kylatoiminta.fi/en

the 'Council of rural Districts – *Landdistrikternes Feallesraad*' - was formed as a rural forum of national rural NGOs which works closely with government to provide a focus on the diverse interests of rural development. A breakaway organization, the 'Villages in Denmark Association – *Landsbyer i Danmark*' was established in 1998.³ The three organisations together tackle the work of individual organisations in other countries and there are no regional structures.

In the United Kingdom, currently there are two rural movements: 'Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)'⁴ and the 'Northern Ireland Rural Community Network'.⁵ Previously there were three other rural movements: Rural Voice in England, Wales Rural Forum and Scottish Rural Forum. They are now no longer active, though work is taking place to examine the need for new rural movements in Wales and in Scotland (Halhead V., 2005).

ACRE is a national charity with the purpose to support sustainable rural community development. It provides a wide range of services to its members, the 38 Rural Community Councils and for other bodies and individuals who work in England at local, county, and national level in support of community development, communications, research, policy development and practical support.

The Northern Ireland Rural Community Network was formed in 1991. It is a membership organisation with over 500 members, and managed by a voluntary committee along with voluntary organisations, statutory bodies and other interested representatives to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and community development in Northern Ireland. It is core-funded by the Ministry Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DEFRA), with the rest of its resources coming from membership fees, charitable trusts and projects.

The movements in Eastern Europe (Estonia and Slovakia), have started from the top down with the formation of a national organization and later with local and regional structures.

The first movement to be formed at national level was the Village Movement of Estonia, 'Kodukant' in 1992, following independence from the Soviet Union. Early development focused on the base of the Swedish and Finnish concept of a village action movement. There are now independent associations in all 15 Estonian counties and a number of other rural NGOs. This has created an impressive level of commitment and activity in the rural communities and a high profile with the government supported by a process of strategic planning and providing a basis for lobbying.⁶

The factors promoting the movement in Slovakia are common to the other Eastern Europe countries in which independence brought to a decline of the agriculture and an out-migration to urban centres. In 1994, the Slovak Rural Development Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture organized an annual Rural Forum between the rural organization which lead, in 2000, to the establishment of the 'Slovak Rural Parliament'. In the movement there are no village associations but it is concentrated on supporting partnership at regional level and a network of 48 Communication and Information centres around the country.⁷

What emerges from the previous analysis is that the character of each rural movement responds to the national context in which they operate reflecting different stories even if there are many similarities. In all countries there is a disparity in the relative wealth of rural versus urban areas where wealth and employment are concentrated in the urban areas, there is an agricultural decline and rural-urban migration is strong. The rural movements are based on the idea of promoting the formation of village associations which link the local groups and work with the authorities to develop village plans and to undertake local development. The regional associations draw their membership from the village associations and other local NGOs. They support villages with training, advice and contacts. They also develop regional plans, which draw on the village ones and work in partnership with the regional authorities linking their regional plans to statutory regional plans.

The movements at national level are composed of representatives from the regional village associations and national rural NGOs. They have the role to link the regional associations, to develop a national strategic plan

³ www.ruralcommunities.eu

⁴ www.acre.org.uk

⁵ www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org

⁶ www.preparenetwork.org/kodukant-estonia

⁷ www.preparenetwork.org/vipa-slovakia

based on the regional and village plans and to work in partnership with the governments to define rural development policies. They organize national meetings including biennial Rural Parliaments which bring together the villages and NGOs to agree rural policy plans and address the governments directly.

At international level, the rural movements are gathered through networks⁸ to become a respected partner with government and to promote multi-national exchange in rural development, with a main focus on the new EU member states and pre-accession countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Through these, they share events, organize joint projects, receive information and develop common agendas for the EU (Halhead V., 2005).

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 with the aim to mobilise them to address their own futures, to work together to help each other and to influence policy at local, regional, national and EU levels.

3. The Rural Parliament as a gathering tool of the rural movements

The Rural Parliament are closely connected with the rural movements. As we have seen in the previous section, the term 'Rural Parliament' was first used by the Swedish rural movement to describe their biennial gathering and also used as the name for the whole rural movements in Slovakia. The Swedish model is one of the largest gatherings for rural development in Europe and has inspired and influenced many people in many countries.

The Rural Parliament is not a formal part of government, nor it is a voting chamber in the sense of a legislative or decision-making body and does not represent any political party. No decisions are delegated to the Rural Parliament from the government. It is an expression of a social struggle which acts as a forum for discussion and debate to give a voice to rural people and policy makers and politicians at all governance levels to influence local, regional and national policy and networking to increase rural quality of life, to promote sustainable rural development and to share best practice experiences of overcoming shared challenges.

The whole responsibility is to encourage the rural community to meet and to work at trying to find solutions to rural problems and to work and collaborate with the NGOs and there's probably going to be quite a bit of pressure on local government to collaborate with the rural movement. The key outputs will be recommending policy changes, recommending different ways of working or collaboration that help the rural community. The main strengths is the opportunity that the Rural Parliament will allow rural communities to have some self-confidence and to be able to come up with new ideas in the way that people work to each other but the community, in doing that, will know that they have the ear of a government minister. If there is an operating problem here then it can be escalated and be discussed at the Rural Parliament to the benefit of everyone but then it sees way through to national government.

The balance of representation across these different groups varies between the Rural parliaments, with some placing greater emphasis on NGOs and local and national government representatives, while others place focus on maximizing the number of individuals such as small farmers, inhabitants of rural areas, academic or professional in background with the common aspirations to look beyond the interests of different regional, national and European rural organisations and to protect the interests of the rural areas. *'Asking people to come and sit in a room with politicians will not be attractive, but they will be attracted by opportunities to peer-to-peer networking'* (Skerrat D. et al. 2012, page 17). The size of their meetings varies from 100 to 1000 delegates. In some instances such as Sweden and Estonia, central government was involved in setting up the Rural parliament, in other cases, such as Finland, the national government was not involved from the outset and the parliament emerged solely from a grassroots movement (Woolvin, M. et al., 2012),

Rural Parliaments usually meet every two years and each meeting tends to last from one to three days gathering various stakeholders and respected politicians. They involve a mix of seminars, workshops organized thematically, plenary sessions, showcase of best practice projects from local communities, local

⁸ www.ruralcommunities.eu

cultural activities exhibitions, field visits to local case-study projects and informal moments for networking and socializing (Söster G., et al., 2011). This appears to ensure that sufficient time elapses to make progress on aims and objectives. The Rural Parliament therefore serves as the culmination of an open dialogue where actions relating to the issues are discussed, agreed and taken forward to the politicians and policy-makers.

Finance is drawn from multiple sources including the public, private and third sectors. These include the wider rural movement of which the Rural Parliament is part, the national, local, unicipal governments, businesses grants, donations, membership fees and additional culture and tourism resources from the public sector.

In terms of outputs, many of the Rural Parliaments present a statement or report directly at politicians and policy-makers, to encourage them to take rural issues into account in the formation of a new policy.

Currently, there are regular annual or biannual gatherings in six European countries: Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Scotland, Estonia and Slovakia and other countries such as Romania have expressed an interest to apply the rural parliament method.

3.1 The Scottish Rural Parliament

Scotland is the latest country to adopt the Rural Parliament model. Such a rural movement as described in the previous section did not exist here even if an increasing number of community organisations and development trusts are focused around land and other asset ownership and landscape NGOs.

In its 2011 election manifesto, the Scottish National Party made a commitment by ensure the voice of rural Scotland through the creation of a Rural Parliament to enable rural communities to engage more effectively with government.

‘We were aware of Rural Parliaments in around other countries across Europe. The success over the past 20 years inspired us to initiate a Rural Parliament in Scotland. Sweden was the original model, which seems to be the exemplar for us all and sees an opportunity to bring the rural community together with the NGOs and local government and national government to try to develop improved policies for rural areas so we visited them to learn from the experience. We gained some new ideas, but also confirmed that we have our own specific situation here in Scotland.’ (Emma Cooper, Scottish Rural Parliament coordinator)

Thus, the Scottish government was keen to create a situation that brings the rural community together, the community councils, the community land owning organisations, local interest groups, the NGOs, the local authorities and bodies like the health service, the police, fire, transport, rail and to bring them closer together to discuss, engage in and take action on rural issues and to try to find collaborative solutions.

‘Then we worked up a proposal and put it to the Cabinet Secretary saying: if you want to have a rural parliament in Scotland, this is how to do it, this is what it might cost, and after a period of about a year it was announced that they wanted to go ahead and since then, we have set up a company called Scottish Rural Action, a non-profit company established for the dual purposes of convening the launch of the Scottish Rural Parliament (SRP) and investigating the potential for creating a Scottish ‘rural movement’ (John Hutchinson, Scottish Rural Parliament Chair).

Core principles for the SRP were developed and approved by a series of seminars and stakeholder workshops that took place between 2012 and 2014. The principles around which it was built are the following: 1) Rooted in and empowering of rural communities; 2) Engaging of all interests that contribute to the vitality and sustainability of rural Scotland; 3) Geographically, culturally and socially inclusive; 4) Independent and politically neutral; 5) Inspiring and celebratory; 6) Ambitious, strategic, connected and influential on government at all levels; 7) A driver of positive change (Scottish Rural Parliament – Governance Working Group, Report. 7, 2014)

Organisers of the Scottish parliament sought to create an advisory forum and to identify the key themes to be discussed and then to be able to create an action plan for delivery. All the preparatory work was carried out to identifying solutions and actions needed to overcome the challenges. More specifically, 25 events were conducted in different rural locations across Scotland. The locations and contexts were very different but many of the key themes came up repeatedly. By using these inputs and examination of reports it was created a short list of the following priority themes: rural business and employment; access to broadband; transport

infrastructure; issues of land use and planning; protecting natural assets and adapting to environmental change; strengthening communities and health and social care.

The first SRP was held in Oban on November 6-8 2014. The meeting was attended by around 400 people from across rural Scotland, together with representatives of organisations and agencies with roles in rural life. At the event were presented and discussed proposals for the governance of the SRP with the purpose to gain the support of the participants for the creation of a democratically elected and accountable vehicle that can take the SRP forward and to prepare proposals for the creation of a wider rural movement that are inclusive of all rural voices and provides spaces for dialogue and deliberation and thus responding to the civic aspirations of rural Scotland.

Several topics were discussed during the event such as the organizational side of the rural parliament (e.g. partnership, the proper accommodation, timing, guests), the financial aspect (sources, fundraising, expenses, participation fees), the visibility (public relations, communication plan) and the need for an international exchange with other rural parliament methodologies. The focus was on creating a more empowered, connected and sustainable rural Scotland. Participants agreed to ask the Scottish Government to commit to a national conversation on local democratic renewal as a first step towards radical reform of local government that will bring power much closer to communities which need to be empowered to make and influence decisions about matters that affect them at a local and national level, better connected for an improved transport, broadband and mobile phone services strategy and sustainable as they need a baseline of services to be in place in order for their community to survive, and additional services for their community to thrive. The recurrent themes underlying all of these was about local democracy, who makes decisions and how they affect people at a local level.

4. Conclusions

From the discussion about rural movements and their wider rural parliaments it emerges that they can be considered as 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.

They play a role in promoting rural identity giving rural communities a voice through which they can address their own development in a more integrated way and can also network with similar communities such as the fisheries and the urban ones. They work by mobilizing the local people and transferring their needs and ideas into formal planning processes, decision-making and implementation of rural development at each level of administration through advocacy and partnership. By linking many rural organisations their added value is to provide a useful partner for government, a key tool for strategic planning to identify and prioritise issues such as the degree to which they are driven from the bottom-up rural communities or from the top-down larger national organisations. From looking at the different movements, the bottom-up and top-down are interdependent and mutually necessary. Their main advantage is that they are very much stakeholder-led, addressing the issues by people talking to each other and coming up with ideas, rather than being dictated by policy or government interventions.

Until now, the most visible European programme that systematically supported local bottom-up approach has been the LEADER approach where its Local Action groups (LAGs) build partnerships to design and implement development strategies at local level. There are stakeholders who claim that the LEADER approach eats away at the resources intended for agricultural purposes but there also NGOs and experts active in the rural development that support LEADER while defending the need to expand this method also in other European funds such as ERDF, EFF and ESF. This need was accepted at the level of the European Commission as the LEADER approach was extended in urban and fisheries areas under the broader term Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) in the current EU 2014-2020 programming period.

Without the direct involvement of the rural communities, the most critical voice is missing. National NGOs have local representatives, professional people, who may be more remote from the village level while the presence of a strong group of regional and national NGOs, able to work in a coordinated way to support rural areas provides a more efficient context for rural development. Governmental involvement and commitment is also important, but it must be done in partnership with the others stakeholders and it is important to be clear about the aims and objectives of the Rural Parliament. The commitment and support of the government

is particularly vital for ensuring that recommendations emanating from discussions at the Parliament are acted upon and that outputs are transformed into outcomes (Woolvin, M. et al., 2012).

They provide a unique function in opening up the views and needs of small rural communities to the 'distant policy makers and by linking many rural organizations they seek to become a useful partner with government rather than adversary (Herlits, U., 2001)

But, even if this activity requires a great recognition from governments, an outstanding problem for all the movements lies in resourcing all this effort in a sustainable way as it is currently based on volunteer labour which is helped from member organisations and project funding from government. But the sources of funding from non-governmental organization appear to be very time-limited and unsustainable and the government funding may be seen critical as politically influenced and be cut if the movement upsets the Ministry or if the government changes.

There are further arguments in favour of a continued and systematic support of rural parliaments. First, there is the need to strengthen the international capacities of the civil society, which has to take part in a fair political dialogue with the European Union authorities and other international organisations influencing life in rural areas. There is indeed no modern democracy without a strong civil society, organized and involved in the decision-making processes. Articulating the interests of groups on the margin of society has become one of the most urgent needs of an unbalanced society. Despite the flood of information or perhaps because of it, many rural areas can be easily disintegrated and excluded from society in the globalized world.

Here, the rural movements and rural parliaments have a huge responsibility to articulate the interests of the rural areas as they enable voices from rural areas at all levels, from the local and sub-regional level to the national and European level to be heard and respected.

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

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