

European Rural Parliament
Looking ahead, beyond the 2015 Gathering
Paper for meeting with national champions 5 November 2015

The Steering Group seeks the views of the national champions on two main issues

- the immediate follow-up to the Gathering
- the way ahead over the next two or more years.

Follow-up to the Gathering.

Outputs from or after the Gathering. The process of working groups and plenary debates at the Gathering is designed to crystallise the output of over 30 national campaigns and other work into an agreed Manifesto and a supporting Report, “ALL Europe shall live”. The Manifesto will be short and punchy, suited to lobbying, and hopefully easy to be translated into many languages by national champions or others. We believe that a long illustrated report, improved from the present draft, can be a rich source of ideas for rural people and the bodies that represent them. But it is too long for politicians and other decisions-makers to read. So, we propose to produce (after the Gathering) a shorter document, with a strong focus on policy and action, setting out (in more detail than the Manifesto) the main concerns, commitments and demands of the collective of non-government organisations who are represented at the Gathering. This document can be the Agenda for Action over the next two years, up to the next Gathering.

The launch process. We propose the following steps to launch the Manifesto and the action programme :

- Production on 7 November of a Press Release, highlighting the key ideas in the Manifesto. This could go that day to the European Press: and could be circulated to all national champions, so that they can use it and the Manifesto in translated form as soon as they wish.
- A meeting in Brussels with Commissioners, European Parliament, Committee of Regions, ECOSOC, others, plus Press.
- A submission to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.
- A series of national events/press releases/submissions to national governments, organised by national champions.

The way ahead.

The 2015 campaign. Future action should draw on this year's experience. The leadership in the ERP 2015 campaign was jointly taken by ERCA and PREPARE. They agreed in Spring 2014 to hold the second Rural Parliament in autumn 2015, two years on from the first Rural Parliament of November 2013. A launching meeting, with almost all of the national members of the two networks present, was held in early September 2014. That meeting decided to go ahead with a campaign, with the active participation of the national members. It became clear that many countries were not represented, so ELARD was invited to bring in its network. The Coordinators of PREPARE and ERCA offered to act as Joint Coordinators, on a voluntary basis. A base fund of €105,000 was secured from the Europe for Citizens programme.

Outcome. It is too early to judge the full impact of the ERP 2015 campaign. It has demanded a heavy commitment of time by the two Coordinators, by staff in Hela Sverige ska leva, by volunteers in the ELARD team and (crucially) by the national champions and the Austrian hosts and their allies. We really needed much more money. Despite much effort, we failed to find national champions in Malta, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy and some Black Sea countries; and the national campaigns were very limited in a few other countries.

On the positive side, we have achieved a series of national campaigns, with a total direct involvement of towards 6,000 people. The most ambitious national campaigns included a series of regional

meetings, sometimes followed by a national event. The national events included Rural Parliaments in the Swedish-speaking community in Finland, Lithuania, Croatia (for the first time), Bosnia and Herzegovina (also for the first time), Latvia and Estonia, Cyprus (for the first time) and Slovenia, with Netherlands due in November. A most encouraging feature is that, in some countries which have the least developed civil society network in rural areas, the ERP process has triggered a much more significant networking effort than would otherwise have happened. For example, it is seen in Portugal as starting-point for a continuing campaign to strengthen rural communities; and there are now active moves towards the creation of NGO-based national rural networks in Albania, Austria, Cyprus and Turkey.

The way ahead. Encouraged by these positive outcomes, the three co-initiating bodies – ERCA, PREPARE and ELARD – have agreed that they are willing to continue the campaign, with (provisionally) a biennial rhythm, if there is enthusiasm to do so in a significant number of counties. A meeting of PREPARE partners in June provided a chance to test the idea with 15 national champions, and they supported the proposal to continue.

Proposal. So, we offer the following proposal for discussion at the meeting on 5 November

- a. The European Rural Parliament campaign should continue at least for a further 2-year cycle, with a Gathering in Autumn 2017 as the next climax.
- b. ERCA, PREPARE and ELARD are willing to provide continuing leadership, working with a growing team of national partners.
- c. The campaign would have elements both European and national.
- d. The national partners would pursue campaigns in their own countries, on their own initiative, with their own timing and resources, but able to call on the ideas and support of the partnership.
- e. The three European Networks, plus (if it is agreed) other European NGOs who represent rural stakeholders and who sign up to the stated aims of the ERP campaign, would pursue the European dimension, supported by an advisory group representing national partners.
- f. The campaign would have a biennial rhythm, with ERP Gatherings every two years; and the national partners would be encouraged (but not obliged) to fit their national activities, including national rural parliaments, to the same rhythm.
- g. In such an approach, the biennial ERP Gathering would not be a free-standing event but rather a climax of a biennial process, with a build-up and a follow-up, in the way that the Swedish Rural Parliament or the Maapäev are climaxes in the continuous activity of Hela Sverige ska leva or Kodukant.
- h. The ERP Gathering should be held in a different part of Europe each biennium, in a similar way to the changing regional locations of the Swedish Rural Parliament.
- i. There could be other international events within the two-year programme.
- j. This year's experience suggests that the preparation for the third European Rural Parliament, to be held in Autumn 2017, will need to start in Spring 2015 (perhaps with a Call for Proposals in March to host the 2017 event), but that fund-raising will need to start even earlier.

Finance is a key issue. The view of the present Joint Coordinators is that this year's dependence on voluntary effort is not sustainable. In their view, a continuing campaign demands at the centre a highly competent paid Coordinator, with necessary support. By 'highly competent', they mean someone professionally grounded in multi-partner campaigning and in the realities and politics of rural life. Funding is also needed to support the action programme, and to pump-prime the ERP 2017 Gathering. This implies finance of the order of at least €200,000 (spread over 2016 and 2017), in addition to whatever funds can be found by national champions for activity in their countries and the funding which can be raised in the host country of the ERP 2017 Gathering.