

ERP Mid-Term Event 2021 - Breakout Group 2 Report

Breakout Group Name	Localism – local empowerment and governance
Names of Leader, Reporter, Speaker/s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leader – Ben van Essen – Dutch Association of Small Towns and Villages - Speaker 1 – Artemis Pana, Scottish Rural Action - Speaker 2 – Wiet van Meel, Netherlands - Speaker 3 – Lambert van Nistelrooij - Reporter – Artemis Pana 	
Main issues and lessons identified in presentations and discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It was noted that all three “Changing Contexts” plenary panellists noted a shift amongst international national institutions and government towards localism and bottom-up policy development/service design. Alexia Rouby noted both democracy and activism as important drivers of rural development that “were not so prominent before” while Prof. David Miller spoke of the need to enable grassroots communities to design their own local responses to the climate emergency. - Democracy is complex and the two types of democratic enactment – elected and participative (civil society) – do not always work in harmony at local level. Elected democratic vehicles at community levels tend to have enormous briefs and limited powers while participative democracy (civil society) vehicles are frequently challenged by a lack of resourcing, both financial and in terms of skills/expertise. The reliance on volunteers can create hierarchies between communities that ‘have’ and those that ‘have not.’ - Nevertheless, this is not an excuse for communities to sit back and expect change to happen. Communities need to mobilise themselves and do so in an inclusive manner, making sure community members who struggle to be heard also have a voice. The LEADER LAG network was noted as a proven tool to mobilise and build bridges between both elected democratic vehicles and civil society but also, most importantly, between the public, third and private sectors. Other tools were discussed including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Country-specific networks of civil society organisations that coordinate action across multiple villages, maximising regional assets and creating a strong, independent regional voice that is linked directly to government structures but unlike LEADER is not part of government (Finnish example); o Legislation that supports community empowerment and facilitates, for example, the transfer of assets and powers from authorities to communities (Scottish example); o Democratic forums such as citizen assemblies, public assemblies, participatory budgeting groups etc. that seeks to build democratic consensus on local/regional priorities and resource allocation; o Online platforms, such as SMART villages, that connect all members of a local community, providing local information and occasionally acting as a mechanism to gain democratic consensus on matters of local importance. - The tools outlined above – networks, legislation, forums and platforms – must be backed by real power and investment. Meaningful localism requires Government to shift position from director of local 	

policy/delivery to a facilitator's more enabling role yet, despite the rhetoric, the tendency for policy makers to develop centralised, 'one size fits all' approaches is still very much apparent. Breakout group members agreed that **communities should have the right to challenge governments** and transparent mechanisms to do so. These mechanisms may include things like communities having:

- an influential seat around the table in policy making forums from the outset of the policy-making process, not called on retrospectively to 'rural proof' policy;
 - the right, enshrined in legislation, to appeal planning decisions and that this appeal process carries significant weight;
 - a process to initiate local referendums similar to Germany;
 - adequate resourcing for local governance bodies (e.g. village associations, elected community representatives) so that volunteers feel supported and equipped to undertake their roles with enthusiasm and confidence and have the legitimacy and trust to represent their communities' interests.
- Breakout members identified opportunities to consolidate the localism agenda and the right of villages and communities to be active agents in their own futures through influencing legislation and policies which will underpin the EU Rural Pact and country Partnership Agreements, the latter of which set out national authorities' plans on how to spend EU structural and investment funds.

Any ideas and case-study examples relating to the theme (including a name and email for the person proposing if possible)

- The Finnish Village Movement Association as an example of local people taking control "with optimism" about their power to be heard, "not making it complex" but having clear paths to influence
- The LEADER programme and network as a vehicle for participative democracy and community-led local development which can bridge gaps between grassroots communities and regional/national/supranational structures
- Black Isle Partnership (Scotland) as ongoing effort to harmonise and mobilise elected democratic vehicles and civil society within a clearly defined geographic region.
- SMART villages as a means of coordinating community consultation and harness community assets

Messages for the 5th ERP 2022

We, the member organisations of the European Rural Parliament, welcome the greater emphasis on localism and community empowerment evident in the narratives of national institutions and governments.

Communities work best when able to shape their own future and when they can see that future as a positive destination. There remains, however, a disconnect between decisions makers and what happens in our towns, villages and neighbourhoods. We need to get more power and resources into the hands of local people if we are to address the big emergencies of our times, including the climate crisis, or harness the opportunities presented to us, including the increasing recognition of the value of rural cultures and livelihoods.

For this to happen, we call on communities to step up and not wait passively for things to happen to them. We need communities to practice inclusive democracy and activism, to manage local conflicts and to have meaningful debates about their futures. Government and institutions must also step up. They must resource the vehicles that enable localism and community empowerment and give communities the right to challenge and shape policy.

Between now and the 5th ERP, we want to see:

- The European Union actively involving representatives from the European Rural Parliament in the drafting of the Rural PACT.
- The Rural PACT to affirm the EU's commitment to well-resourced localism as the default approach for rural and island policy/service development.
- The Rural PACT to be underpinned by a concrete implementation plan that sets out mechanisms to ensure localism is supported at country level including through country Partnership Agreements.
- Discussions between the EU and representatives from the European Rural Parliament regarding the role of ERP member organisations in scrutinising Partnership Agreements.