



## European Rural Parliament 2015

### National Report from The Netherlands

prepared by

Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen LVKK  
(National Association of Small Towns)



#### Introduction

This national report from the Netherlands describes the process and the outcomes of the European Rural Parliament campaign in the Netherlands, which is organised by the regional organisations for small villages and by the groups which are responsible for the content of the National Rural Parliament, to held on Saturday 14 November 2015.

Most of the regional organisations in the Netherlands organise, once in two years, their own regional Rural Parliaments (of which the contents and recommendations are mainly addressed to the regional authorities). During the intervening year, the national Rural Parliament is organised by LVKK : recommendations from that event are addressed to Members of Parliament and the Government.

This national report consists of the following chapters:

- Short description of the preparation of the National Rural Parliament of November 14<sup>th</sup>. The main themes in the Rural Areas of the Netherlands are mentioned.
- A short description of how the ideas have been collected through the regional Rural Parliaments.
- A description of the statements; demands and recommendations which are formulated by the people at the regional gatherings.

#### Chapter 1: The preparation of the National Rural Parliament 2015 and the main themes which are actual in the rural areas of the Netherlands.

In the preparation of each National Rural Parliament, we work with the organizers of the preceding set of regional rural parliaments to make an inventory of the themes which arose at those events. Some themes apply throughout the country : others apply only to one or more regions, so that the recommendations are sent only to the regional government and politicians.

In general, the problems reported in 2015 were related to the declining and ageing of the population in rural areas; to the economic crisis; and to growing mobility. As a result of these trends, the facilities in the rural area are under pressure and it takes much effort of the people to organise the facilities themselves.

The most important themes are recorded below.

**Health care.** Health care is largely privatised in the Netherlands. Because of the increase in scale, much health care is offered by big and sometimes bureaucratic organisations. Insurance companies gain more influence. But people want more and more to have the care provider close to their homes. Village organisations now start a health care cooperation, and want to organise that older people can get help within the village instead of moving in old age to a city nearby. We think quality is higher and cost are lower by organising a part of the health care in the village. The privatised enterprises don't like that movement, and the legislator place obstacles to it in the law. We try to influence politicians to make it possible for the peoples initiatives to organise it themselves.

**Primary Education.** The declining number of young people make it difficult for primary schools to continue. In the Netherlands there are many primary schools run by different religious denominations. Locals want to conserve a primary school in their village and it does not matter to them which denomination the school has. However, it is very difficult by law to integrate schools of different denomination. Locals want to have more opportunities by law and a support by the difficult process of cooperation between schools of different denomination or in different villages.

**Mobility.** Less money for public transport means that people, and primarily older people, in the rural areas lose their mobility. However, initiatives of the locals to organise public transport themselves by volunteers gives problems with unions and with the organisations which give the income supplement for the volunteers.

**Fast broadband network.** The fast broadband network is profitable in the urban areas, but most providers are not interested in the rural area. In many villages, there are initiatives by the locals to establish their own broadband cooperation and realise the network by self-activity.

**Allocation of social estate.** Because of the declining population and the decreasing of churching, a growing number of schools and churches of becoming vacant. Furthermore, there are many milk factories and comparable buildings in the rural area which are without function. For the vitality of the rural areas, it is very important that there are new possibilities for all of these buildings and that they are converted to new functions as the housing for younger people who want to settle themselves in their birthplace but cannot afford to buy houses when they.

**Energy cooperation.** In the rural area there are many initiatives by local communities to generate their own electricity. The revenues are often invested in the community. In the past there were many rules that made it very difficult for such energy-cooperation to work. Nowadays the law has changed, and more and more the generation of and trade in electricity are interesting initiatives in the rural area.

**Future of self-organisation.** In the rural area in the Netherlands, each village has many associations which contribute to the well-being of the inhabitants, related (for example) to sport, culture, women, church and so on. However, the number of volunteers to run these associations is less than twenty years ago. Also the village organisation is sometimes old-fashioned at unable to modernise its way and style of working, so that it has less attraction to new inhabitants and younger people. How we realise a new kind of organising ?

At the National Rural Parliament in November, the two main themes will be the organisation of health care in the rural area and the allocation of social estate in the rural area. People with much knowledge and experience of innovating local initiatives will organise meetings with experts and Members of Parliament to discuss the opportunities that must be given to such initiatives. Concrete recommendations will be offered to Government and Members of Parliament.

Beside the two main themes there will be workshops concerning the other themes mentioned above, and themes like crowdfunding.

At the National Rural Parliament, we want to bring together the grassroots initiatives so that they can inspire each other. We want to show to government and politicians that people are very able to organise their own solutions for the problems which they formulated themselves. We want to influence MP's in the way that they support grassroots initiatives, and to make it possible for the initiatives to grow and to contribute to the wellbeing of the people in the rural area.

#### Chapter 2: A short description of how the ideas have been collected in the regional Rural Parliaments.

Last half year there were three regional parliaments - in the northern region Noord Holland on 7 November; in the southern region Limburg on 22 November ; and in the eastern region Gelderland on 28 February. The last of these was oriented on the upcoming elections of new regional parliament in Gelderland on 18 March. The other two rural parliaments mentioned above were also oriented to influence the political parties and the new government after elections. Each of these three events had between 100 and 220 participants each, most of them involved in rural initiatives or in village organisations. Also present were many deputies, or people standing for election as deputy.

Each regional organisation for small villages has between 100 and 200 grassroots village organisations which are their members. They know the themes which are salient in their region and organise the regional rural parliament. They choose the themes brought forward by the village organisations. Lots of ideas are offered about the themes, the relations with other themes, how to work on theme, how to work with different organisations, how to look for other partners who might be involved, and what support they need from government and politicians. All these ideas are discussed, sometimes in groups some weeks before the rural parliament, sometimes in workshops at the rural parliament.

After the rural parliament groups are working on the realisation of the ideas or on the making of a document for politicians or to influence important other players concerning that theme.

Every three months, the paid staff of the regional organisations of small villages come together to talk about their activities; the trends they see; the opportunities they see, the possible future themes and how to create new initiatives and projects. Lots of ideas, straight from the grassroots of the rural areas of the entire Netherlands, are discussed and give new horizons and perspectives.

#### Chapter 3: A description of the statements; demands and recommendations which are formulated by the people at the regional gatherings.

Here you find a lot of ideas, formulated as recommendations to the regional government, and sometimes also to the national government. We add some clarification if we think it is not obvious for people from outside the Netherlands.

Note: formulation of the recommendations may suggest that local people in rural areas are only looking for government to bring solutions for their problems. That is not the reality! Local people take many initiatives, and (in doing so) they experienced much resistance and opposition. They want to reduce that by these recommendations !

- Government should continue to support with subsidy the well-being of rural communities and the viability of community facilities in rural areas.

Explanation: Regional government sometimes has such subsidy-facilities. That should stay!

- Government should invest in multifunctional facilities in the small villages.

Explanation: Many villages do not have such facilities, which are very important for the social cohesion, giving opportunities to meet each other. Local people invest very much time as voluntary work in such facilities, and sometimes build and keep the buildings in good condition.

- Local government should install (or maintain) a contact officer between government and small villages.

Explanation: Some municipalities have a contact officer for the small villages. It makes it much easier for the local people and their initiatives to communicate with local government. That contact officer should have a central position in the local administration and should support the initiatives of the locals. It is a serviceman (or woman) for the increasing activities to maintain or improve the local well-being.

- Give space to new concepts and ideas of local people to organise their own public transport.

Explanation: In a vital rural area there must be public transport. It is too expensive to organise it in the old way, so there must be place for initiatives by locals to organise it themselves.

- Government should support the construction of fast broadband internet in all the rural areas.

Explanation: For a vital rural area with economic perspective it is essential to have fast broadband internet. It is essential for farmers and other enterprises, but also for health care where in future more and more consultations will be digital rather than physical. Government should pay the cost of role of broadband in non-profitable areas or support the locals who install it themselves.

- Government should stimulate initiatives of the locals.

Explanation: The policy of the government is to do less by government and more by the inhabitants. So government should motivate locals; provide their knowledge to local initiatives; set up database of good practices; help initiatives by gathering financial sources; help by procedural problems.

- Government should give room to experiments.

Explanation: It is very important that there are possibilities for innovation and creative ideas. Sometimes rules and laws are fatal for the realisation of new solutions. Government has to be flexible by practice the rules.

- Official channels should change to be open to local initiatives.

Explanation: The role of government (local, regional and national) and its officials should change. Less emphasis on testing, controlling and verifying : more emphasis on listening, contributing, facilitating. These are the key words. No longer official processes first; but the thoughts and plans of the local initiatives.

- Government should support social enterprises in the rural area.

Explanation: Social enterprises are very important for the wellbeing of the rural area and for innovative actions. There must be possibilities for a new gain-model so that healthcare initiatives; the start of cooperations and so on can thrive.

- Government should be flexible in relation to building activities in the rural area.

Explanation: For starters at the housing market, it is very difficult to find houses. Lots of young people want to stay at their birth village but there are no affordable homes. There must be

objectives to renovate farmhouses to private residences, and there must be flexibility in the rules concerning the possibility of living in buildings in the rural area.

- Flexibility by processing zoning plans.

Explanation: In Dutch zoning plans, many buildings and places have given function that should be respected. But new shops (started as local initiative) or places where people are working must have the opportunity to start in buildings which local people think are good places for that function.

- Give space to initiatives that strengthen the touristic and recreational infrastructure.

Explanation: Economies in the rural area can be strengthened by good touristic infrastructure. That means to give opportunities to new initiatives, through flexibility in administration processes and possibly subsidy for new initiatives.

- Stimulate the production and using of regional products.

Explanation: Rural areas have many cultural and historical products that are interesting to promote. Manufacturing these products are an incentive for local economy.

- Supporting bilingual education in the border-regions.

Explanation: The Netherlands is a small country and the rural areas are largely the parts of the country which are border-regions with Germany and Belgium. Bilingual education in the border regions gives opportunities to work in the other country and for cooperation and common projects to build a vital rural area on both sides of the border.

- Supporting the cooperation across the border.

Explanation: Local, regional and national government should support the opportunities for economic cooperation in the border-regions.

- Regional and National government encourage the creation of energy-cooperation in the rural areas.

Explanation: To establish energy-cooperation is a good way to encourage the local economy and a good way to gain revenues that can be re-invested in the village or the region. So it must be supported by law and by rules that small-scale energy creation is possible in the rural areas. It is important also that rural inhabitants and rural economies should gain a substantial part of the revenue generated by a large-scale energy creation in the rural areas, such as wind-turbine parks.

- Government should create an Investment Fund for harnessing solar energy in rural areas.

Explanation: In the small villages there are places, such as multi-functional buildings, schools and sports halls, which are very appropriate for mounting solar panels. The organisations which manage these places should be stimulated to produce their own energy by a fund that gives them the money to invest and which they have to pay back over a period of years. In this way, the fund can be a revolving fund.

- Government be aware of the energy you ask of the inhabitants.

Explanation: To support the local initiatives as mentioned above is a very important thing for local, regional and national government. However, the number of active citizens is relatively small: the government cannot just say that people have to organise themselves the facilities that they think are important for the region. Government also has a role: it has to support and to facilitate, and sometimes when there are no active citizens maybe government has to create minimal facilities. Government should not abandon its partial responsibility for the well-being of the people in rural areas.

- Knowledge of initiatives and processes should be available for everyone.

Explanation: It is a common duty for everyone involved in the well-being of the rural areas (inhabitants; companies, farmers; local government and so on) to share the knowledge of successful ideas and results. It is important to establish a knowledge centre which is open for all people and where everyone can contribute with his/her knowledge and experiences. The centre can be organised by local people, partly financed by government.

- Municipality: give a budget for the small villages.

Explanation: A small budget for the small villages. Inhabitants choose themselves how to spend it; responsibility is there for the local people to indicate their needs and to prioritize them. The process of decision-making is very important for the social coherence of the village and the region. Bring back basic responsibility to the locals.

- Organisations in the village/ region: work together.

Explanation: As mentioned before there are many organisations within the village that unfold lots of activities. They all together guarantee the well-being of the rural areas. With increasing functions of such organisations and sometimes less people to do the activities (less population; older population), it is very important to investigate the possibilities of working together. This means: talking about the vision for the future of the village and the ways achieve it; investigating what are the benefits of working together; and trying to concretise the things on which working together is possible and has benefits for everyone. This may take a long process but it is still worth doing.

- Village organisations : look to the future.

Explanation: Village organisations should look at their role in the future and be aware that their role is very important for the processes in the village and region. Inhabitants should dialogue with each other about the future; more than with the government.

- Consider the rural areas as a whole; work towards a Rural Agenda.

Explanation: In the Netherlands there is lot of interest in the Urban Agenda. But we think it is necessary to work towards a rural agenda, in order to make clear which themes are of interest for vital rural areas in the future.

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Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen, Kampsweg 4, 9418 PE Wijster