

Latvia's first Rural Communities Parliament gets underway



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Latvia's national platform of rural NGOs has started work on the introduction of a new participatory democratic process for rural areas – the 'Rural Communities Parliament'.



Over the past two decades or so, since the Latvian Republic regained its independence from the Soviet Union, its population of just over 2 million inhabitants has begun to benefit from a developing and more democratic society. Unfortunately, most of the positive signs of development have been experienced in the capital Riga and surrounding region, leaving behind the rest of the country.

Home to around half of the population, Riga and surrounding area has received most of the investment for socio-economic development. Reflecting this unequal society, Latvia has the highest Gini index (list of countries by income equality) in the European Union (35.9% in 2012). Moreover, it is among the top five EU Member States with the highest regional development disparities.

Participation

To address such inequalities, the Latvian Rural Forum (LRF) has been looking at ways to increase activity and participation of rural communities in decision making and in policy development. In 2012, it decided to transform itself from a network of local action groups (LAGs) and rural non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to the

platform of rural civil society that promotes dialogue between rural communities and decision-makers.

Inspired by similar experiences in the Scandinavian countries and in Estonia, the LRF therefore organised the 1st Latvian Rural Communities Parliament on 6-8 June 2013. The event was held in Latgale – the country's most depressed region. During working groups and through shared experiences, participants devised an Action Plan for rural areas with 57 actions to be carried out by communities, municipalities and ministries over the next two years.

57 actions

The initiative receives financial support from national and regional associations, the local municipalities, the European Social Fund and the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism. Importantly, it is also supported by the many volunteers who will carry out the planned activities.

The Action Plan includes a resolution to conclude legislation promoting volunteering, exploring the idea of credit unions in rural areas, the training of community leaders in rural areas, raising awareness about benefits of local products, and pro-

moting 'life-long learning' geared at people living in rural areas. The meeting of the Council of the new parliament also agreed there will be a second meeting in 2015.

Although the process is still being developed, it has already resulted in several positive results for rural communities. These include more visibility and acceptance by ministries, even those not directly concerned with rural affairs or regional development issues. The process has also promoted an exchange of ideas and experiences between the rural communities throughout the country.

Rural Communities Parliament (Latvian Rural Forum)

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