

“The only constant in life is change,” said the Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, around 500 BC.

A little more recently, the [Estonian](#), [Finnish](#) and [Swedish](#) National Rural Networks in cooperation with the European Network for Rural Development Contact Point ([ENRD CP](#)) organised a trilateral workshop on the island of Saaremaa, Estonia on the 16-18 April 2018. During the event the participants sought to understand change, the drivers behind this change, and how we can act to improve life and enable a Vibrant Rural North.

Event Information

Title: The Vibrant Rural North workshop

Date: 16-18 April 2018

Location: Kuressaare, Saaremaa Island, Estonia

Organisers: ENRD Contact Point, Estonian, Finnish and Swedish NRNs

Participants: 67 participants from the 3 organising countries and 2 observers from Hungary and Slovenia

Outcomes: Discussion of inspiring future-related topics in a Nordic rural context and development of potential further steps for NRNs

Web page: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-workshop-vibrant-rural-north_en

Meeting Highlights



The event started with an informal evening combined with presentations by representatives of local rural development stakeholders. They presented their roles and activities in the development of Saaremaa Island, principally through LEADER and CLLD, with a focus on local development initiatives, the local fishery sector and rural tourism. Participants were invited to the [Saaremaa picnic food festival](#) which has only been running for a few years, but is already a great success and a very popular event in Estonia.

On the 17th April, the opening session began with an introduction from the Estonian NSU representative Ave Bremse on the objectives of the event followed by a presentation on ENRD CP activities.

Rural Development Programmes – “Where do we stand?”

During the plenary session the participants received an insight into the [Estonian](#), [Finnish](#) and [Swedish](#) Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) and their implementation status. The Estonian RDP has received increased budgetary support for the current programming period, but is facing the issue of not getting enough applications. This is the opposite for two Nordic countries, who need more financing for their projects. Finland’s

budget is primarily focused on their top priorities, namely environment, agricultural competitiveness and the food chain. Sweden is investing a great deal into broadband to improve access for rural populations. Both Nordic countries are working more on climate and the environment in 2014-2020.

Common problems: they all raised the theme of simplifying regulations.

Lessons learned: *“the more measures being implemented, the higher the administrative costs”*.

What about the future?

The ‘What about the future?’ session contained three exciting topics presented by researchers. From Finland the participants received insight from Prof. Hilkka Vihinen into several important drivers of rural change in the Nordic context (e.g. digitisation, ageing population, insecurity) and to possible future scenarios (rural areas as colonies, “business as usual” and vibrant rural future). Dr. Evelin Loit subsequently provided a on Estonian research into the effects of climate change on agriculture and plant breeding in the Nordic context. Finally, a video on digitalisation and robotisation was provided by the Swedish IT entrepreneur, Fredrik Ljungdell.



Fast-developing automisation in the service sector and the development of artificial intelligence are already raising serious questions concerning its effects on society at large as well as our ability to envisage the future. One clear message emerged from the discussion: rural areas will be even more important in the future.

Smart Villages (Thematic Workshop 1)

After two inspiring presentations on smart villages, group discussions were held in three smaller groups and addressed hopes and concerns regarding smart villages. The main focus was on potential actions that would be needed to achieve the ambition of creating smart villages and prevent the concerns from becoming a reality.

- Learning from each other, good practices and success stories can provide inspiration. A “local hero” is needed to unify the village to act as a community.
- Climate: the key elements are the awareness of individual lifestyles and their impact on the environment.
- A smart village can start from scratch, with all the necessary facilities and complete infrastructure for inhabitants.

One general recommendation was to change the terminology around smart villages in order to broaden the meaning from the ICT/technology-loaded term ‘smart’.

Urban-Rural Connections (Thematic Workshop 2)

Participants exchanged ideas and potential actions to shape how urban-rural connections develop over the next 10 years.

Many actions discussed addressed the fear of depopulation of rural areas, for example: rural proofing; welcoming strategies; promoting remote working; and innovation in services (innovation camps and cooperation with scientists). A change of attitude towards rural areas seems necessary, and could be achieved through: positive media coverage; reaction to the negative image of rural areas given by the media; success stories from people living in the countryside; changes in policy making; education; and advertising campaigns targeting a new generation.

The other important topic was related to climate change and sustainability. Localisation (understanding global systems, but preferring local or short value chains), awareness, education and research were identified as key factors for improvement in this domain.

Entrepreneurship (Thematic Workshop 3)

With the earlier sessions in mind, participants formed a workshop of ideas. The most important issues raised by these very diverse working groups were:

- Youth – e.g. to integrate young people better into community entrepreneurship when they are still children, which will also guarantee future jobs.
- The importance of cooperation – within the community and beyond, to find new ideas and ways to cooperate e.g. in social innovation and in the green economy.

The concluding discussion centred on the challenges for rural entrepreneurship which are essentially the same as for rural life in general. The ultimate goal should be RURAL=HAPPY!

Tourism (Thematic Workshop 4)

Rural tourism is a new way of using the land. Today, there are 1.8 billion tourists in the world and for instance Canada – which is comparable to the Nordic countries in terms of population distribution, climate and geography - creates almost 600 000 jobs in the sector. *“So why not Nordic-Baltic countries too?”*

The most important issue raised by each group was climate change and the environment. International tourism implies a massive use of air transportation which results in high CO₂ emissions.

The solution can come from two directions: 1) bottom-up, by changing human behaviour; and 2) top-down, through policy intervention to reduce travel emissions, for example by introducing transport quota . There is a continuous need to raising awareness on this topic. Too many tourists can be also problematic - so a possible solution would be to set reasonable limits for visitor numbers. It was concluded that tourism has a growing role in GDP creation and that the sector needs to be well prepared for climate change and the digital future.



Main conclusions from the final open space session

During the final sessions, several issues specific to the rural North were identified. Among these were: sparse population, sustainable use of natural resources (such as forestry, sustainable management of seal populations), climate change and migration, good government framework and practices.

The links between farming and climate change recognised that a global approach is needed for agricultural policies (including environment, climate, health and competitiveness combined).

Innovation and new technologies were discussed in several groups. The concept of smart (or wise) villages is related to many topics such as youth involvement, services, schools, integration, environment and tourism. These require Nordic-Baltic networking in order to give space for sharing knowledge, experience and good examples or practical information. This can also be linked to the change in human values and their impact on rural areas. Social media is a good way to connect and communicate and it would be interesting to investigate new channels used predominantly by youth (e.g. Snapchat). Innovation in services requires basic IT skills in rural areas and multifunctional service points; the basic needs are electricity, broadband and good roads. Human contact must not be lost, however, and solutions must fit the target groups.

Some methods of increasing the attractiveness of rural areas, especially for the next generation, were also discussed. Crucial to this are the involvement of youth in decision making, farmers and communities networking, a better work environment and social life potential, public and technical services, entrepreneurship support, and the presence of advisors to help with generational change.

The next programming period raises questions on the role of LAGs and NRNs, on cooperation and on simplification. In relation to the future CAP delivery model in general, clear and time-period linked indicators to measure the results are preferable.

Outcomes and Actions

The Vibrant Rural North event was a notable success, and meeting participants gave very positive feedback during the summing-up session. The joint organisation of the event led to a meeting where participants had sufficient space for discussions, and many expressed their satisfaction on the selected topics and the methodological and practical organisation of the event, recognising the value of the coordination between the three NRNs.



The two observer participants from Hungary and Slovenia expressed their enthusiasm to learn from this good example of Nordic-Baltic cooperation. They would like to create a cluster within a Central European region and based on the experience gained during the trilateral workshop, they also would like to organise a similar professional workshop. The participants from three organising countries agreed on continuing the fruitful cooperation – with the next trilateral meeting to be organised in Sweden.