

2023 Latvian Rural Parliament

How talking to each other can help Latvia in rural emigration challenges



From June x-x the 6th Latvian Rural Communities took place in Ergli.

How can we facilitate co-creation and deliberation for transformative and sustainable rural development? To meet the current challenges of anthropogenic climate change, biodiversity loss coupled with demographic shifts away from rural areas. Are there really “simple solutions” to these issues as some leaders are promising. And on whose premise are these so called “solutions” postulated?

MEPs, bankers and other political leaders received centre stage at the most recent Latvian Rural Parliament, where a common thread was that discussions of degrowth, rural shrinkage or other transformative ideas to approach sustainability issues were dangerous. “No rural shrinkage!” one guest speaker

opened with, vowing that under his tenure in his current role, there would be no such thing. Instead, they argued that rural populations should a) trust that GDP growth will come or 2) innovate their way to economic prowess. Both of these approaches share in that they are not clear, nor whether they present viable options for rural communities given the systemic nature of these problems.

This little piece is a response to the critique that paradigms of rural shrinkage or regrowth have no place in debates on rural development. It is broadly divided into two sections:

1. Sustainability challenges are not simple, nor are said “solutions”. Current status quo oriented solutions may not suffice.
2. Deliberation is required to meet these challenges. Rural parliaments must do more to use the knowledge of their participants and avoid becoming a platform for politicians greenwashing.

Sustainability challengers (and their solutions) are not simple as some may have you think.

I am reminded to my time at university when I was introduced to the idea that sustainability is a “wicked problem” (go onto define wicked problem).

I would argue there are no solutions to rural development because a solution suggests there is a problem that is diagnosable and solvable. What we are dealing with are systemic challenges that encompass environmental, social, economic and therefore cultural aspects. One could say that the current challenges facing Latvia’s and many other rural areas in Europe are products of how we chose to organise our societies. This includes what we value, how we view success (or not), what is considered worth caring about, and who does what and for whom. (This needs to be strengthened).

So how do we deal with *Wicked problems* when in some senses, what makes these challenges wicked is that they are to some degrees products of our cultural assumptions about the world; what is considered “rational”, and inherent constitutions of reality. We believe these things are normal, and therefore they are “norms”. For example we take for granted that agriculture has to be profit driven and that crops that sell and make buck are therefore good. It is in other words normal for farmers to take be profit oriented. The bid to justify and normalise such assumptions has even been deepened, where economists hold that economic rationality is a virtue of man and an inherent quality of human nature. What we fail to consider is how economic activities do not only exist in a spreadsheet, but also exist within ecological and

climaterary systems. The logic of an ecosystem, or the atmosphere, does not always correspond to growth oriented system goals of “rational” economics.

To put it bluntly, are we more likely to force ecological and planetary systems to fit within our model of “normal” economic organisation (which is now synonymous with the neoliberal world order), or are planetary and ecological systems more likely to punish our hubris?

I would claim that either we become humbled by our ineptness to recognise that us humans exist and are bound by planetary boundaries, or we “innovate” and transcend said planetary boundaries. We break the laws of physics and tell ourselves that we can produce more and consume more but reverse our material footprint. Constant growth will always push consumption upwards, even if we were to find ways to half our material impact through our consumption habits (and that is a big IF).



Guest speaker from EU Parliament. Degrowth, urban shrinkages is framed as a no-go, even a non-starter for discussions on rural development. Is this a useful position to take?

Even if we could go and colonise other planets to supplement our overexploitation of Earth, is this desirable? Firstly the technology is not there to say nothing of the the material footprint. To me it seems that the climate is more on the verge of heating and biodiversity loss is posing existential threats to human life on our planet than we are to colonise Mars for extractive purposes.

And who says pursuing constant and ever-growing consumption is even an exciting or fulfilling way to design our societies and our futures? Is there not more to life, more to relating to each other than material growth? Do we as a

European society struggle so much with our creativity that we cannot envision (or even allow to entertain) a vision of a future which is not postulated on a never ending race to the consume and produce?

This is not even a scientific question, whether. Most sustainability literature and academia point out that the irrational disposition is not recognising that growth needs to be contextualised, it is assuming that growth can go forever. Before I get cancelled, what I am saying is not that growth is wrong, but the uncritical belief that growth can go on forever is not a rational point of view.

What this means is that there are biophysical limits to growth, and that a post-growth world needs to be considered, or at least entertained. GDP growth alone therefore not the answer to Latvia's rural problems. I do not take issue with GDP growth per se, but the disproportionate attention it gets (and got at the conference), particularly from government officials obscures other discussions that can be had. **What we need is to contextualise GDP growth along societal goals** other than simple material accumulation. Why are we growing and for whom? And for how long? **What and when is enough growth?**

We could also as a starting point try to ask how rural communities can construct meaningful themselves within their natural environments, learn its processes and find systems and ways to build meaningful relations. Money comes up as an issue here, but it becomes more targeted and serves to meet specific community contexts. Discussions on how to invest and how to facilitate economic activities changes with such an approach, and becomes more nuanced and pays closer attention to issues of resilience. This implies that in order to understand the role of growth in a society and for rural communities, there needs to be a process to facilitate.

* to do: Work on the logic

Create a space for transformative creativity, not a space for speeches!

The conference brought up some of these ideas, with words of degrowth and rural shrinkage being introduced as guiding ideas to problematise the GDP-growth centric vision of rural development. However, we need to have better tools to nurture these ideas and to explore them in an open and deliberative space. None of these approaches define the world as set, but recognise how societies will need to adapt in their ways to better capture their local social and environmental contexts and challenges, but also social desires: the *what*

ought to be. Therefore these sort of discussions require people to be able to get together in an open and equal space. Organisation and facilitation of such a process requires careful and deliberate design choices.

Unfortunately, the Latvian Rural Parliament exhibited some issues in this regard. Not only issues in allowing for transformational ideas to be considered, but even a lack of an ability for participants to engage with each other on topics close to their heart. Most of the rural parliament consisted of speeches by different people, some of which seemed to be there due to political reasons rather than their merit or engagement with questions of rural development. A particularly egregious case was when one of the guest speakers from Brussels insulated that Southern Italians are criminals and therefore less developed and prosperous than their northern counterparts. Such a sentiment might fly at Davos, but it was an absurd take at a Rural Parliament. Whilst the organisers tried their best to get comments and thoughts from the public, the lack of engagement from Latvia's rural participants exhibit how the format had become incredibly disillusioning for many.



Instead, we can avoid the mistakes of the Latvian Rural Parliament this reflexive process that by recognising that in order to better appreciate complexity of these challenges, greater deliberation, and participation is needed. And participation does not mean filling a room full of passionate rural and subjecting them to hours of MEP speeches, but to generate genuine spaces for transformative thinking and co-creation to take place. Many of the participants I believe have valuable insights and experiences which coupled

with others. I do not think that the Latvian Rural Parliament would reject this aim, but it can do more to integrate these aims into event design. This is sorely needed, in order to make rural parliaments reach their potential to become transformational spaces for rural communities who otherwise struggle to secure a platform.



Taking the Road Less Travelled can take you to unknown places. In a world where innovation (i.e. something new and novel) is increasingly needed, why don't we facilitate conference organisation that can bring this innovation to the forefront?

So how do you facilitate co-creation? There are tools such as transition management, Asset-based Community Development, participatory environmental governance, as well as simply designing workshops based on co-creation. There is also a pool of many talented people out there who would bite your arm off for the opportunity to try to facilitate such a process.

The rural parliament was so close. My favourite day of the conference was a farmers and local action group-led session on the platform of the old (and since discontinued) railway station in Ergli. Now a slow food restaurant, the setting was highly appropriate and inspiring. It shows how repurposing forlorn assets can generate a space for transformation and transition. It also showed how old spaces and public buildings can be converted into spaces and areas to bridge gaps between communities and their local food systems. The surrounding forests and fields becoming assets to not only the look of a community, but the taste of it too!

A diversity in discussions is merited when the size and scale of challenges look the way they do.