

2023 Latvian Rural Parliament

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

From 4th-16th June 2023, the 6th Latvian Rural Communities took place in Ērgļi, Forum Synergy trainee Adam Beswick attended the conference.



The Latvian Rural Parliament in Ērgļi was the 6th rural parliament in Latvia and the largest to date. Photo by Ketitija June 15th 2023, copyright Latvijas Lauku forums.

How can we facilitate co-creation and deliberation for transformative and sustainable rural development? This seems increasingly needed to meet the current challenges of anthropogenic climate change, and biodiversity loss, coupled with demographic and economic decline in 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?

The Latvian Rural Parliament met in Ērgļi June 14th-16th to discuss current challenges. Shared with a sense that current policy making instruments are

largely ineffective at capturing marginalised rural voices, the rural parliament presents an opportunity for transformative solutions to be presented, shared and deliberated.

Spanning across three days, the parliament organised workshops, speeches and different sessions. On the final day, the parliament consisted of long speeches where MEPs, bankers and other political leaders received centre stage. 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 of power, 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 out of sustainability challenges. 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, or what steps should be taken.

Despite the headings of MEPs, I argue that in order to find solutions and facilitate the process of innovation, sitting back and trusting that “development will come” is not a viable option for rural Latvia. Instead, innovations to solve complex problems are best emerged, presented and practised when diverse groups of people come together in an open and deliberative space.

This is because:

1. Sustainability challenges are not simple, nor are said “solutions”. They are wicked problems which required new knowledge to be formed, something which top-down approaches do not always do well:
2. Because of this 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”.

A wicked problem is a complex issue that lacks a clear-cut definition, has solutions that are relative rather than absolute, involves stakeholders with diverse perspectives, and is characterised by intricate cause-and-effect relationships (Peterson, 2011). These characteristics are particularly evident in sustainability challenges such as balancing the use of resources today with the

needs of future generations, addressing climate change, poverty alleviation, and establishing sustainable business strategies. These challenges lack clear problem formulations, and their solutions are context-dependent, often leading to conflicting stakeholder interests.

First, the lack of a clear problem definition is a defining trait of wicked problems in sustainability. Sustainability, despite its apparent simplicity, can be elusive to pin down. Is it merely about using resources today without compromising the future, or does it encompass a broader spectrum of considerations? This ambiguity often leads to confusion when trying to address these issues. They

The absence of a 'true or false' solution complicates matters. In sustainability, we grapple with shades of 'better or worse' rather than clear-cut answers. For instance, is an environmentally friendly business strategy inherently better than one that focuses on profits alone? The answer depends on your perspective and priorities.

Diverse stakeholder perspectives further complicate the picture. In sustainability, we encounter a multitude of interests, from businesses driven by financial gains to environmentalists advocating for the planet's welfare, and social advocates pushing for justice and equality. These groups often pull in different directions, making it challenging to reach a consensus.

Complex cause-and-effect relationships are the final piece of the puzzle. Sustainability challenges, especially in agriculture, involve intricate, interconnected systems with many moving parts. It's like navigating a maze, where altering one aspect can have unforeseen consequences elsewhere. For example, utilising chemical additives can boost yields in the immediate term, but may be economically disastrous in the long term as soils are damaged or water polluted. Is it therefore economically rational to justify unsustainable practises?

Solving these sustainability challenges is far from straightforward. These problems are inherently fluid and lack clear, universally applicable solutions. Therefore, we shift our focus from 'solving' to '**managing**' these wicked problems. Given the inherent complexities and lack of definitive solutions, **managing** wicked problems in sustainability is more practical than solving them outright. To manage these problems, we need to focus on system outcomes (economic, social, and environmental aspects) and process outcomes (how stakeholders collaborate). This entails co-creating new knowledge that is credible and legitimate across all stakeholder groups.

New knowledge can help reshape previously believed trade-offs or no-gos with the configurations of a current system. Take conservation for example, where conservation efforts have often been defined in opposition or in absence of

economic activities. Whilst this has enabled for environments and ecosystems to operate functionally without much human inputs, it has created serious challenges for local communities who end up within the boundaries of designed conservation efforts or within national parks. An often told story is of how national parks and conservation efforts end up impoverishing local communities instead of presenting opportunities. I observed this first hand researching forest governance in national parks in Kosovo, where residents in the newly designed national parks were stripped from engaging with the forests they had done for generations. Consequently, the prohibition of environmental-economic interactions has led to poverty, rural emigration and the erosion of local cultures and customs. In the case of Kosovo, many local communities rely on access to biomass for their energy and heating needs, where new regulation restricting the harvesting of biomass in conserved areas has resulted in widespread and devastating illegal logging practises. In Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2005), a fictional community in the Sunderbans in India is subject to international efforts to conserve the local tiger population has resulted in tigers receiving extensive protections at the expense of locals. Suffering from consistent attacks by tigers, the locals live in constant fear, and are unable to fight back. Whilst the tigers are protected by the international community, the people in this fictional locale are not.

Whilst hyperbolic and ultimately fiction, it showcases some of the thematic issues with how not seeing conservation as more holistic than simply protecting a biotope leads to trade-offs with varying degrees of consequences. Taking a holistic approach, combining more people and voices can however find synergies where both natural values and human values can be respected and even symbiotic. There are plenty of examples of where local communities have found methods to undertake economic activities, and contribute to conservation goals. New knowledge such as agroforestry systems, organic farming or rural tourism has seen combining diverse expertise to identify methods to operate and achieve goals within a context of complexity and sustainability. In my experience in Kosovo, engaging local communities who are disenfranchised from the policy making process reveals that there are in fact several areas where accommodating local needs in conservation leads to more sustainable outcomes, not less. For example, CNVP an organisation I collaborated with, demonstrated in a project in the municipality in Novoberdë/ Novo Brdo that by integrating local communities in forest conservation management, they were able to achieve their material needs, as well as boost the biodiversity of the area. The need for illegal logging reduced, as needs were met, and locals often held illegal loggers accountable as there was a sense of shared ownership over the conserved forest.

Cooperating with diverse actors is therefore pivotal in the quest for new knowledge, particularly when managing wicked problems in sustainability governance. Wicked problems, by their nature, encompass intricate

interdependencies and require innovative approaches. Diverse actors bring a spectrum of experiences, expertise, and perspectives to the table, which is essential for co-creating knowledge that is credible and legitimate across stakeholder groups. Through open and inclusive collaboration, these actors share their tacit and explicit knowledge, challenge existing assumptions, and foster a holistic understanding of the multifaceted challenges. This multidisciplinary approach enables stakeholders to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries, work together to develop new insights, and explore innovative solutions that address the complexities and uncertainties of sustainability issues. In essence, the collective intelligence and diverse viewpoints of these actors enhance the process of knowledge generation, making it more robust and applicable to managing wicked problems effectively.

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

If finding solutions to complex challenges means being able to benefit from diverse knowledges and allowing these knowledges to be heard, this entails opening up a discursive space. By discursive space, we mean a place where diverse knowledges can be heard and taken seriously. The rural parliament could facilitate this process.

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 actors, some of which seemed to be there due to political reasons rather than their merit or engagement with questions of sustainability or rural development. A particularly egregious case was when one of the guest speakers from Brussels insinuated that Southern Italians more agrarian lifestyles stem from them being criminals, less developed and less prosperous

than their northern more sensible counterparts. A step forward therefore was to replicate the industrial model in order to ensure that southern Italians are not kept uncivilised. Such a sentiment might fly at Davos, but it was an absurd take at a rural parliament and an insult to agrarian cultures and proponents of sustainable development. As this process of being fed speeches for hours, the organisers tried their best to get comments and thoughts from the participants often to no avail. The lack of engagement from Latvia's rural participants exhibit how the format had become incredibly disillusioning for many, and not at all conducive of sharing and learning in order to meet diverse challenges.



One of many long panel discussions with a mixture of Brussels-based and Latvian stakeholders. The format lacked in engagement. Is the point of a rural parliament to have people from EU parliament from Brussels come and tell what to think or an opportunity for rural voices to be heard at a higher level? This format favoured the former. Photo by Andrejs June 15th 2023. Copyright Latvijas Lauku forums.

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.



Excited faces as another panelist takes the stage for a 10 minute speech. Photo by Andrejs June 15th 2023. Copyright Latvijas Lauku forums.

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!

The setting became an inspiration for how diverse and holistic thinking can look in practise. Its devolved, outside and open space also instilled a sense of a shared journey, and an open and accepting culture for ideas to be shared. In

contrast, the final day in a large hall with speakers on a podium far away and untouchables for participants in my opinion did not install or contribute to the same sense of deliberation. It is this sort of experience that Latvian rural parliament should aim and strive for. In doing so it could become a space where complex challenges are discussed, ideas shared and new knowledges presented and disseminating.



*Participants gathered outside the old railway station in Ērgļi for the first day of workshops. The open and inviting design made it a space conducive of exchange of ideas and knowledge. **A bit of a contrast from the previous pictures am I right?** Photo taken by Andris on June 14th copyright Latvijas Lauku forums.*

Concluding remarks and next steps

Firstly, a diversity in discussions is merited when the size and scale of challenges look the way they do. The complexity of challenges requires diverse stakeholders to meet in an environment conducive of learning.



Taking the Road Less Travelled to the Conference 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? Photo by Keitija June 16th 2023 copyright Latvijas Lauku forums.

Latvian rural parliament should recognise its ability to become co-creators of new knowledge. Function as an important link between local action groups, farmers and rural residents, the cocktail of different backgrounds could prove useful and conducive of new knowledge formation. However, it is evidently not as simple as bringing people together in one room and expect something out of it. Whilst of procedural quality, one needs to also ensure that bringing people together is also results in some substantial quality. Facilitators such as academics or sustainability practitioners have some tools to assist and guide in this process, however doing so requires a reflexive disposition. For constancy firms who pride themselves on identifying solutions in complex problems, this is an area of “innovation” which has remained relatively untapped.

A first step however is to give the keys of determining the scope, direction and form of discussions to the participants themselves. This can be done through

careful design aimed at generates emergence from participant interactions. If the organisers of rural parliaments would oblige, I would happily share some tools that I myself have used in Kosovo and more recently in Armenia aiming at bringing together diverse groups to come up with systems to manage the complex problems.

About the Author



Adam Beswick is a sustainability professional with a Master of Science in Sustainable Development from Uppsala University and a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from King's College London. Combining his knowledge of EU accession processes and environmental governance, he has interned in development cooperation in with the Swedish International Development Agency in Kosovo and is a current recipient of Forum Synergies Traineeship where he undertook an exchange with ABCD Innovation Centre in Armenia. Adam shares a passion for participatory governance processes and wrote his master's thesis using the transition management methodology to identify more sustainable systemic configurations for forest governance in Kosovo.