

## Report on the Swedish Rural Parliament – 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> September 2012, Ronneby

Hela Sverige Ska Leva (HSSL) - All Sweden Shall Live - is the name given to the national movement of Sweden's rural communities. HSSL comes together every two years in a Rural Parliament, this one was the eleventh. This is a huge community event and it has been the inspiration for many other rural parliaments across northern Europe. A small Scottish delegation joined 100 other international delegates on 6-9<sup>th</sup> September 2012 in Ronneby to observe the Swedish Rural Parliament first hand. More than 800 Swedish delegates from all over Sweden attended the Rural Parliament, as well as government ministers and politicians. HSSL is an important platform and a powerful voice for rural communities in Sweden, able to attract high levels of involvement and support.

The theme for this Rural Parliament was *"How do we build the country and who does the job?"* The programme included an International Day on 7<sup>th</sup> September which ran in parallel with 18 different all-day field visits that delegates could choose from. The main days of the Parliament were the 8-9<sup>th</sup> of September, which included presentations and plenary sessions for all delegates and some 42 different seminars on topics of importance to rural communities.

The International Day was organised to provide information on rural parliaments, the Swedish Rural Parliament and HSSL, from the perspectives of the organisers, the Swedish Government, local authorities and community representatives. The discussions covered how rural parliaments are organised and the relationships between the respective rural parliaments and their governments. Discussions also included representatives from the 3 main European rural networks<sup>1</sup> and other countries with rural movements and parliaments, including Finland, Estonia, The Netherlands, Slovenia, Sweden, and Members of the German Parliament. We heard about Germany's intention to introduce their own Rural Parliament. The international delegates also met with representatives of the County of Blekinge, which is made up of 5 Municipalities (Ronneby being one of them).

From these meetings, and through attendance at the Rural Parliament on 8/9<sup>th</sup> September and many discussions with many delegates, the following observations were made:

### **Mission and Purpose**

The mission of *'Hela Sverige Ska Leva'* (HSSL) is to network, support and present a strong voice for the people living in rural Sweden. The membership of HSSL comprises 5,000 village action groups, 100 municipal level and 24 regional networks of village groups, and 40 national NGOs and interest groups.

The main purpose of the Rural Parliament is: 1) to bring together representatives from HSSL, village action groups and relevant local, regional and national organisations, to network and exchange knowledge; and 2) to provide a platform for rural communities to meet with and influence the Government. For this particular Rural Parliament, there was a focus on trying to motivate and inspire participants to start new projects and develop the countryside. One of the main issues discussed was the question of what happens to rural communities if they fail to attract young people to be part of local development and there was a specific programme for young participants.

We learned that in Sweden, The Netherlands and Finland, numerous local governments/municipalities originally saw the rural parliament as a threat to their status and level of influence, but these concerns have diminished over time, and in most areas the village action groups work closely with the local and regional authorities and receive much of their funding through them.

### **Funding and Resources**

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<sup>1</sup> European Rural Community Association (ERCA), European Rural Alliance (ERA), Partnership for Rural Europe (PREPARE)

The funding for this very large event came from HSSL, the LEADER Programme, sponsorship (50 sponsors), the National Rural Network and delegate fees. Delegates receive local sponsorship to attend the event from local LEADER groups, local authorities and other sponsors.

### **Governance and Implementation Structure**

A steering group of six members was established for this Rural Parliament, comprising three representatives of HSSL nationally and three from the local area. The staff of HSSL nationally contributed time for overall management, financial management, political links, publicity etc. A project leader (part employed / part voluntary) led the operations on the ground, with the aid of fourteen working groups dealing with different aspects (food, transport, funding, etc.). It was estimated that a total of 300 volunteers had undertaken a total of 7,500 hours of work prior to and during the event.

### **Links to Government**

Various representatives of the Swedish Government attended the event. They included the Minister for Rural Affairs, the Minister for Enterprise and Regional Affairs, the Minister for Integration and Gender Equality and the Chairman of the Committee on Environment and Agriculture, as well as several other politicians and civil servants. Representatives from the European Commission and Parliament were also present.

Previous Rural Parliaments have used outputs from discussions, prior to and during the event, to develop a programme/manifesto to present to the Government. This was not the case at this particular parliament, so it was not clear how the Rural Parliament was attempting to influence policy, although meetings were taking place behind the scenes between HSSL and the Government. Indeed, an announcement was made by the Swedish Government during the Rural Parliament that some 600 million Swedish Kroner had been put towards the provision of high speed broadband in rural areas. HSSL are also working with government on a continuous basis, outwith the Rural Parliament.

### **Observations**

The Plenary Sessions gave a profile to the individual's struggles in the face of adversity to overcome local problems and difficulties they faced. The message that they all seemed to be conveying was that local direct action and entrepreneurship produced results and people should not be afraid to be innovative and pro-active in their own local communities.

It was evident that the participants looked forward to attending the Rural Parliament and we saw it as a celebration of rural life with local produce and local amenities used to the full. Participants were housed in accommodation throughout the Municipality, thus spreading the benefits. The logistics and organisation of the event were superb, with attention to every detail. The task of organising such an event clearly involved a great deal of work by many people. The role of the volunteers cannot be stressed enough, both prior to and during the event.

There is competition between areas to host the Rural Parliament every 2 years. There is great enthusiasm to host the event as it raises the profile of the area nationally and internationally, which is considered to result in wider economic benefits.

Previous Rural Parliaments have had a large exhibition or market place to promote the work of the village action groups and the produce and goods from the rural areas, and have also showcased local arts and culture. This wasn't the case for this Rural Parliament, which was seen as a missed opportunity.

We met a large number of delegates from different countries who were very interested in the proposal to have a Scottish Rural Parliament and expressed interest in attending. A strong international delegation at a Scottish Rural Parliament could present an opportunity to showcase Scotland and the host area as well as strengthen links with other countries and provide a forum for sharing knowledge.

During the course of the wider international meetings, it was decided that the first European Rural Parliament will be organised within the next two years in Brussels, to strengthen the voice of rural communities in Europe in relation to European policy.

The Scottish Delegation consisted of:

- Angus Hardie, Director, Scottish Community Alliance
- Carola Bell, Chair, Community Energy Scotland
- Sandy Brunton, Scottish Islands Federation and Development Trusts Association Scotland
- Jody Fleck, Scottish Government
- Graham Kay, Scottish Government
- Vanessa Halhead, Rural Parliament Adviser and Director of the European Rural Community Association