1. CONTEXT

Country - Sweden

Organisation - All Sweden shall live – Hela Sverige ska leva

Name - Rural Parliament - Landsbygdsriksdagen

ABOUT ALL SWEDEN SHALL LIVE

The mission of Hela Sverige ska leva – All Sweden shall live - is to support local development towards a sustainable society. We stimulate cooperation, advice and support local groups, and furnish them with tools to help them succeed in working with local development. Our objective is also to influence public opinion and rural policies - in order for all Sweden to live!

ORGANISATION

All Sweden Shall Live (HSSL) has a membership of 4,700 village action groups and 40 larger NGO rural organisations. The village action groups directly involve about 100,000 individuals, and their work effect about 3,000,000 people, which is equivalent to a third of the Swedish population. The organisation is run by a board of 14, elected from the membership. HSSL has its national head office in Stockholm, with a staff of 5-7 people, plus project managers. It also has 24 county networks and 100 municipal networks, some with their own staff.

WHAT IS A VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT GROUP

The village development groups are spread all over Sweden and deal with all sorts of matters. They run shops, organise childcare, set up wind power plants and improve roads. They do local planning, work on the transition to sustainable development, handle the local economy, work on getting broadband to their community and organise local financing of projects.

They often start with a local crisis, for example, a factory shutting down or a school closing. The villagers recognize the need for collective action. Usually a few dedicated persons take the lead - in Swedish we call them "fiery spirits" - and others follow. It is not unusual that it is women, people returning to the area or new-comers who are the ones to lead initiatives.

Village development groups (as we define them)

- work on a broad basis to promote local development;
- see to the common interests of the district and represent it in various contexts;
- are open to all and work publicly;
- are appointed and work in a democratic way, often as non-profit associations;
- operate in a district - the village or the parish - defined by the inhabitants themselves.
2. HISTORY

Origins
Specifics
Development

THE BEGINNING OF RURAL PARLIAMENTS

Summary overview

Hela Sverige ska leva was established in 1989 as the result of a campaign with the slogan "All of Sweden shall live". The depopulation of the Swedish countryside formed the setting for this campaign. Especially the sparsely populated areas in the northern inland regions faced a troublesome situation with a lack of jobs and service facilities. The ones who moved away were mostly young people. The villagers felt abandoned by the authorities.

The aim of the campaign was to mobilise the people in the rural districts and to change the attitudes of the general public and the decision makers. Last but not least, the objective was to improve national rural policies.

The campaign was very successful. Letters were sent from across the country filled with suggestions, ideas and demands from individuals and various organisations, levelled against the government. When the official letter was handed over to the politicians, it contained approximately 6,000 suggestions and demands that treated the rural issues!

At the end of the campaign around 1,000 village action groups had formed.

BACKGROUND

Why was there a need for a rural movement? (1950s-1980s)

From 1950-80 the population in rural areas in Sweden decreased by about 50%. In the 50’s people still had significant social and economic cooperation around machines, flour and saw-mills, and different tasks within agriculture. The introduction of machines diminished the need for cooperation by eliminating or simplifying farming tasks. Many farmers bought their own machinery.

Civic society organisations were still active and vibrant during the 50’s. Then a decline of rural areas started in the 60’s. Smaller food stores closed because they were considered not profitable enough. In 1971 there was a big structural change that amalgamated 2 500 smaller municipalities into less than 300. This structural change reduced the number of local political actors, and it became harder to politically influence the development of the local villages. The 60’s was a dark decade for rural regions in Sweden, with depopulation, failing economy and social inactivity. During the 70’s public opinion changed somewhat and the migration away from rural areas was for a while lessened. The beginning of the 80’s was again a set-back for rural areas.
The start of the movement (1987 - 1989)

The campaign “All Sweden shall live” started in June 1987 and went on to September 1989. The initiative came from the Council of Europe. At the same time the Delegation of Sparsely Populated Areas considered making a special effort or campaign in Sweden for the rural areas. Within the civic movements there were thoughts about starting a campaign for the preservation of the cultural landscape in rural areas.

The government asked the Delegation of Sparsely Populated Areas to coordinate the Swedish campaign and their work was done in close collaboration with the newly formed National Civic Movements Committee, which had 98 participating NGOs. At a regional level there were county committees with representatives from authorities and civic movements. Almost all municipalities participated in the campaign.

The campaign was a significant success. The local mobilisation went above and beyond the already high expectations. Authorities and national administrative boards supported the work and a number of concrete pilot projects were initiated. Also in the media the message of the campaign came through clearly.

There were a few areas where the campaign was not as successful. There was not good support from the business sector and national media coverage was too weak for the message to reach the big cities. While the mobilisation of people in rural areas was successful at large, it often failed to include and involve the youth in the local work.


In the spring of 1988 the National Peoples Movements Committee initiated a major project aimed at collecting the views of rural people. 110 scrolls were sent out to travel across Sweden. On these scrolls people were urged to write down their suggestions, ideas and demands. Civic and public organisations cooperated in getting the scrolls around. By summer the scrolls had reached about 1,200 different places in 23 counties and 197 municipalities. Local development groups, organisations and individuals were encouraged to contribute.

The scrolls were presented to representatives of the political parties at a big event in Stockholm in the autumn, and the minister of industrial affairs promised that the government would try the ideas listed in the scrolls. The collected 6,000 suggestions filled 30 binders at the headquarters of the campaign.

The finale of the campaign was the first Rural Parliament in Umeå, April 1-2, 1989. About 650 delegates got together to discuss the content of the scrolls. The result of the meeting was roughly 300 demands directed at around 60 different bodies, and it was decided that the movement for rural areas should continue. The following autumn (1989) the popular movement “All Sweden shall live” was formed. The most important mission of All Sweden shall live was to:

- follow up on the work initiated by the campaign
- stimulate and support local development
- facilitate cooperation/coordination between the different local development groups
• coordinate the political stance of the various civic popular movements
• bring forth the issues of rural areas and act as lobbyists towards the government
• run projects like ”the village politics project” and ”young in the countryside”

Politically All Sweden shall live work towards:

• a clear goal for rural strategy where the regional balance includes all parts of Sweden
• a unified strategy for the development of rural areas
• a central governmental body for coordinating and a new comprehensive view of regional and rural development
• better cooperation and coordination between civil service departments, authorities, and organisations.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The most important objective of All Sweden shall live is to coordinate and unite the voice of rural areas in order to be able to influence politics. The Rural Parliament is like a manifestation of the whole movement. It is a place to catch up on the latest regarding what is going on, and a place to expose current issues, worked on in rural areas, to the authorities, the Government and the National Parliament. It is also an important forum for exchange of experiences, a meeting place and a source for inspiration. We want the Rural Parliament to always be in the forefront of current issues.

4. ORGANISATION

Frequency – Every second year. 11 Rural Parliaments since 1989.

Duration – 3- 4 days

Location – All Sweden shall live County Networks who are interested in holding the Rural Parliament apply to All Sweden shall live. The board presents the alternatives at the yearly general assembly and a decision is reached there. We try to get a good spread over the whole country.

Participants - Invitations are sent to all local development groups, to other NGO’s, the Government, the Parliament, county administrative boards and municipalities. The number of participants varies, but around 1000 people come, of those 70-100 are international.

Responsibilities – All Sweden shall live is responsible for the whole event. Co-organisers are the selected All Sweden shall live county network, the municipality at the selected place for the Rural Parliament. For the past two Rural Parliaments, 2008 and 2010, the Swedish Rural Network has also been a co-organiser. The project leader is hired by All Sweden shall live. Partners are national and regional agencies and other parties that are actively involved in running the Rural Parliament and that support the event financially.

Involvement - The reason for why the All Sweden shall live county networks want to be involved is because it is an opportunity for their area to be seen. It is an opportunity to show
good examples, and to raise rural questions. It is also an opportunity to mobilise people/activists in rural areas.

One reason for the Swedish Rural Network to be involved is because they are obliged by EU to arrange a large event every other year and in 2008 and 2010 they chose to fulfill their requirement by co-organising the Rural Parliament. Their motive is to spread information and to get better implementation of the Rural Program in Sweden.

The municipality help with planning, time from personnel, facilities like schools and meeting rooms and sometimes also financially. The reason they want to be involved is that it is an opportunity to be seen. Being involved can also help the people at the municipality to become better informed about local issues.

**Financing** – the average cost of RP is 7,000,000 SEK (700,000 EURO). Funding comes from All Sweden shall live, different regional bodies, the Swedish Board of Agriculture, the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth and participant fees. Banks, businesses and NGO’s contribute as well. EU-programs including Leader are other possibilities for help with financing.

**Communication** – Communication between organisers is done via meetings and telephone conferences, email and phone calls, both in early stages and later on. Communication with policy makers – by inviting them to the event, via TV, radio, newspapers and by ambassadors (well known people that show public support of the movement) Communication with the public – through webpage and newsletters, and the same way we communicate with policy makers.

5. METHODS

**Preparation** - The date for an upcoming Rural Parliament is set two years before the event. The practical planning starts 1 ½ years before the event. The booking opens ½ year before the event. The program has to be set before the invitations are sent out and the booking opens.

We work on creating publicity around the event in the county where we hold it, and then work on spreading the word across the whole country, via word of moth, webpage, newsletters, at meetings and conferences.

At the very start an executive committee is put together consisting of All Sweden shall live and national as well as regional and local partners. The role of the executive committee is to make decision about things like the budget, media plan, theme for the RP, follow up, reporting etc.

Under the executive committee there is a project group. The responsibility of the project group is to come up with suggestions on budget, organisation, content etc. The project group is made up of some people from the partners and from the various working groups: sponsoring, good examples, transport, food, entertainment, building/construction, media contact, seminars, program etc.

Typically the organisation comprises:
Content – The theme of the Rural Parliament is the first subject discussed. It is up to the executive committee to decide on the theme. It is important to keep a focus. Last time the theme was cooperation across generations. Examples of themes for other rural Parliaments are local planning, youth, rural service, energy, and regional/rural politics. A permanent sub-theme at every Rural Parliament is international cooperation. We continuously follow the political debate and have discussions on current issues.

Method and Process - There are several different elements that make up the Rural Parliament. The content varies every time a new Rural Parliament is held.

Political speeches – Ministers, at times also the Prime Minister, visit the Parliament and give their view on Rural Policies.

Introductory speaker – a researcher, or some publicly know person – an appropriate “celebrity” - is usually invited to hold an introductory speech.

Exhibitions – Can be NGO’s – including All Sweden shall live, local developments groups, political parties, national agencies, interest groups, municipalities, banks and businesses. The exhibition area can also be a market place for communities and organisations.

Speaker’s corner – at times we’ve had a designated spot without a scheduled program where anyone can chose to speak about whatever they like.

Plenary sessions – the earlier plenary sessions were held in the conventional way with a chairman and a secretary. Lately it has been more common to have panel discussions – or as in Sunne, a “sofa discussion”. More or less public figures from various areas get together and discuss current issues before the audience. The technique is very important for plenary sessions. If people have a hard time hearing what is said the plenary sessions will become extremely boring. It is important that the speeches are not too long and that the speech is not delivered by reading from a paper. A good large plenary hall is important. Everybody has to fit in.

Workshops - The work shops are held in many different ways. Something that is important to all is to not have too large groups. Experienced workshop facilitators help the process. At some Rural Parliaments we have held a short education for all workshop facilitators on how to lead a group, how to avoid only a few people talking etc. At others it is up to the different seminar leaders to run his or her session in whatever manner they see fit. Some work shop facilitators use the “Opera method” which is a dialogue based method used in groups of up to 48 participants. It is created to ensure that the opinion of every participant is taken into account, and is a method suitable for making strategies and action plans. At some Rural Parliaments we have placed computers in all seminar rooms containing instructions on how to hold the work shop and a report form for the workshop facilitator to fill out afterwards. The
form was then sent to the board of All Sweden shall live and sometimes also presented to the Government/Parliament. At others we have had experts present in addition to the workshop holder so that the participants would get help sorting out questions on the spot.

Some workshops are especially aimed at young people. In 2010 we used a method called “Rural Areas 2.0” to inspire young people to be actively involved in their communities. The work is done in smaller groups with preferably youngsters from the same village. They work through a set of 10 questions and end the session by creating a half-year plan for how they will achieve their goals.

Field visits – field visits are a very popular part of the program. People want to see what other people are doing. It is important that the hosts at the local place are informed beforehand about the purpose of the visit. Bringing a guide that can describe what is seen and who makes sure that the purpose of the trip is achieved is a good idea. The projects visited should be run by local development groups, and the focus should be to discuss progress, problems and solutions.

6. OUTCOMES

Evaluation – After most of the Rural Parliaments we have produced a report, presented in booklet form. The booklet is sent to various ministries and other relevant bodies.

The delegates also get a chance to evaluate the event via an electronic questionnaire. There is one for national delegates and one for international. The national electronic questionnaire is placed on the All Sweden shall live webpage. The international electronic questionnaire is sent via a link in an email to the delegates on the participation list. The evaluation is presented to the board and staff of All Sweden shall live and is discussed there.

The executive committee for the Rural Parliament meet to evaluate the event. The All Sweden shall live County Networks do likewise. At the Rural Parliament in 2010 there was a big event afterwards where all the working groups met together with representatives from All Sweden shall live and the executive committee. It was a combination of evaluation and thank you dinner.

Outcomes

Aims – Looking back at the original aims and objectives of All Sweden shall live mentioned in the background section, and the first Rural Parliament one concrete example of outcomes is that we have gone from 1,000 to 4,700 local development groups. We work to stimulate local development groups, to facilitate cooperation, to bring forth issues and lobby the Government in several ways, one of the venues for this work is the Rural Parliament. In order to facilitate coordination we have stimulated the development of All Sweden shall live county boards and we have worked together with other NGO’s to coordinate a common stance in various important political questions. All in accordance with the original aim of All Sweden shall live.

Outcomes for rural communities – The event helps to lift the spirit. People experience that they are many who work towards the same goal, and that they are part of a big movement. The Rural Parliament gives the communities a chance to display their work, which can be
inspiring to both themselves and others. They get ideas for solutions and are better informed. (One example is sharing experience on how to run a local elder care cooperative.) People who do a lot of work without getting particularly noticed get a chance to meet others who do the same thing, and return home with renewed strength. For the communities who get to show their work it is of course very positive. Sometimes a local development group may choose someone to send to the Rural Parliament as a reward for the work that they have done for the local community.

It is also a time to enjoy the company of new and old friends and have a good time.

*Outcomes influencing rural policy* – The Rural Parliament sends an important signal to the rest of society that the rural movement is strong. The local influence on politics has increased. The politicians pay more attention to the local development groups. The status of rural issues has increased. One sign that the Rural Parliament is seen as an important event is that the number of Ministers and MPs attending the event has increased.

Regarding the political aims mentioned earlier, one of the results is that a national Rural Programme was accepted by the national Parliament in the mid 2000’s, and that the Delegation for Sparsely Populated areas was incorporated into the regular national administration by becoming a National Agency/board. Most recently, a positive political change is that the Swedish Ministry of Agriculture changed name to Ministry of Rural Issues in October 2010, which reflects an All Sweden shall live long-time stance that the rural areas are so much more than agriculture.

*Outcomes influencing social change* – One outcome, that may or may not be influenced by the Rural Parliaments and the work of All Sweden shall live, is that there is an increase in cooperation with other local groups. This means that instead of working in groups within one’s own organisations, there are local development groups that are inter-political and who work across interest borders to solve specific questions. People may also have become more inclined to take matters into their own hands, rather than to try to solve problems with political methods.

By participating in democratic work shops the participants get experience of democratic meeting techniques that they themselves can use in their own community.

*Outcomes for your organisation* – Holding Rural Parliaments makes the organisation All Sweden shall live known to the public in a way that could not have been done in any other way. It helps us to move our positions forward, and give the political statements All Sweden shall live makes greater impact on politics. The Rural Parliament strengthens the identity of the village movement and creates an “us” that is working together towards a common goal.

*International outcomes* – Our Rural Parliaments have inspired other countries to hold similar events. Cooperation projects have been initiated or confirmed, new contacts have been made and experiences shared.
7. Lessons

What worked –

We feel that we have been successful in coordinating and uniting the voice of rural areas with the purpose of influencing politics. The politicians, at all levels, pay more attention to the local development groups.

Something that has been particularly successful is going out to the villages and seeing other people’s projects and meeting those involved in them. There is a great interest to know what other people are doing.

We feel that we are successful in the sense of covering many issues and having many seminars.

The social aspect is also successful. The dinners and festivities at night are important.

It is a well organized event that draws a lot of people.

Coverage of rural issues is very good in the local media, but not good enough in national media.

Challenges –

To find financing to cover the costs for arranging a Rural Parliament is always a great challenge. It is costly to arrange a Rural Parliament.

The logistics of handling large groups of people is always a challenge. To find big enough facilities in the countryside, to arrange transport and food. Finding rooms for everyone is often a problem. People want to sleep in single rooms, something that is rarely possible. It is also not appreciated to stay far away from the centre of the action.

It may be a good idea to avoid controversial exhibitors/subjects. But since it can be important to lift a controversial/highly emotional subject it is a good idea to make sure that the opposing view is represented as well. An example in Sweden at the most recent Rural Parliament was the “Dare to oppose wolfs” project, where people have very strong opposing views. It created some upset and strong comments.

Be sure to map the presence of concurring events. Some Rural Parliaments have coincided with other big events. This has proved not to be successful. People chose one event to go to. They do not take time to drop in on both events just because it is nearby. Neither did we find it successful to have other events in close conjunction with – right before or right after – the Rural Parliament.

Something to keep in mind is that there is a danger in collecting suggestions and demands from delegates if they are under the impression that the board of All Sweden shall live or the government shall act upon these issues and solve the problems. If people’s expectations are too great, or unrealistic, it can lead to a set-back in good, forward moving energy instead of boosting the morale.
Another challenge is to make as many people as possible feel that their voice is heard. This challenge can be tackled by trying different methods in workshops and on field visits, and by creating a program and physical setting that gives opportunity for many informal meetings and discussions.

It is important to create a program that enables people to meet, that the whole set-up inspires discussions both within and in between the regular program.

It is a challenge to get good coverage and attention in national media.

8. Future plans

Plans for future - A lesson learned is that volume is not everything. It can be worth it to lower the number of attendants in order to secure quality. We plan to limit the number of delegates to about 800 and instead raise the quality of both seminars and the travelling workshops.

There has been discussion about splitting into regional events with some kind of national summary. Using digital technology to gather people instead of just meeting physically is another option discussed.

A few years ago a survey was done among the participants on ideas for the future, and it turned out that most people wanted the Rural Parliament to be organised the same way “as usual”.

In the past two Rural Parliaments we experimented with having an external project manager. We found that we prefer to have the project manager in-house in order to have more control of the event. So for the future we will use internal project managers.

Is there need for exchange among actors of Rural Parliaments?

Yes, it is a good idea to have exchange. This is already happening between national Rural Parliament actors both informally and formally.

European Rural parliaments?

Yes it would be a good idea. But it should start as a rather small/modest event. There is a risk that this would become more of an “elite” event though, since it is expensive to travel.

Regional Rural parliaments?

Yes, absolutely a good idea. We have also discussed the possibility of having a Nordic as well as a Baltic Rural Parliament, but have not had the resources to realize such an event

9. Commentary

There is not set formula for the best way to hold a Rural Parliament. The event is constantly evolving and we are still looking for the best way. Every Rural Parliament is unique, also
because of the varying local conditions. One example is the unusually high number of seminars at the Rural Parliament in 2010 - a result of the local facilities; we had many rooms but very small.

It is important to create a program that enables people to meet. When we manage to create a program that inspires discussions then we have achieved our goals. And it is also important that the participants feel and believe that the event makes a difference. That Rural Parliaments are needed to move issues forward, and that it is a good place to meet.

**Links:**

All Sweden shall live: http://www.helasverige.se/kansli/in-english/

Buy book on Opera method: http://www.innotiimi.se/site/?lan=3&mode=shop&product_id=66

**Sources:**


Reports from Rural Parliaments 2006, 2008


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