

SUMMARY

The Estonian Rural Parliament, organised by the Estonian Village Movement 'Kodukant' since 1996, is a key platform for rural communities to shape national policies and foster regional development.

Held in a different county every two years, it brings together village representatives, policymakers, and stakeholders to discuss pressing rural issues and propose solutions. The event includes study visits, workshops, and plenary discussions, culminating in a collective action plan outlining priorities for rural Estonia.



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CONTEXT

Rural Estonia faces challenges related to community representation, access to services, and sustainable local development. While rural communities play a key role in preserving cultural heritage, promoting local economies, and maintaining environmental sustainability, they often struggle to have their voices heard in national policymaking.

The Estonian Rural Parliament addresses these issues by providing a structured, inclusive platform where rural voices are amplified. Organised, every two years, it rotates across Estonia's 15 counties, ensuring nationwide engagement.



OBJECTIVES

- > Strengthen grassroots democracy by providing a structured space for rural voices in national policymaking;
- > Facilitate dialogue among rural communities, local governments, and national authorities to ensure informed decision-making;
- > Promote knowledge exchange and best practices for sustainable rural development;
- > Identify and prioritise key issues affecting rural areas, leading to concrete action plans and policy recommendations.

Themes: Democracy and participation, governance, LEADER/CLLD

Country: Estonia

Organisation: Estonian Village Movement 'Kodukant', NGO

Start & end date: 01/1996 - ongoing

Budget: EUR 50 000

Funding sources:

- > Estonian Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture
- > Estonian Ministry of Internal Affairs
- > Regional Development Centres hosting the event
- > Participation fees

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ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

The Estonian Rural Parliament is a continuous participatory process rather than a single event. The organisation consists of:

- > **A two-year preparatory cycle:** planning for the next Rural Parliament begins immediately after the conclusion of the previous edition. The host county is selected and preliminary discussions on themes and logistics commence.
- > **A year and a half before:** the official dates and location of the event are confirmed. Accommodation and catering arrangements are secured to accommodate up to 300 participants.
- > **A year before:** the organisers submit funding applications to national and regional authorities, ensuring financial stability. The host county, in cooperation with the Estonian Village Movement 'Kodukant', starts preparing the local communities to welcome participants.
- > **Six months before:** thematic workshops are agreed based on extensive stakeholder input. Facilitators and rapporteurs are identified, and materials for discussions are developed. Participant registration opens and key decision-makers, including ministers and the President of Estonia, receive official invitations.
- > **During the event:** delegates of the participating village representatives visit the local village hosting the Rural Parliament and neighbouring area to observe rural development in practice, participate in panel discussions, and engage in structured workshops. The findings from these sessions form the basis of policy recommendations.
- > **Post-event:** a final document, summarising key messages and recommendations, is compiled and officially presented to state authorities, municipalities, and rural organisations. 'Kodukant' ensures that the outcomes are actively promoted and followed up over the next two years.



RESULTS

- > **Broad participation and engagement:** each edition of the Rural Parliament involves approximately 300 participants, including village leaders, policymakers, local government representatives, and national authorities. Discussions cover key issues such as governance, rural services, entrepreneurship, and environmental sustainability.
- > **Development of key policy recommendations:** rapporteurs summarise discussions held during workshops, resulting in concrete proposals for the state, local governments, and rural communities themselves.

A Steering Group – the main organisational body, composed of approximately eight members, including the Estonian Village Movement's board, project manager, and representatives of regional organisers – compiles the most critical proposals, which are then voted on by all participants. Each attendee selects their top five priorities, leading to the creation of a final document that outlines actionable recommendations.

- > **Strengthened rural advocacy and influence on policymaking:** the final document, presented during the closing ceremony, is delivered to key government officials, including ministers and members of parliamentary committees related to rural affairs.

Representatives of village associations introduce the document to local municipalities, and the Estonian Village Movement 'Kodukant' ensures its visibility among cooperation partners and media. The document serves as a **basis for rural advocacy over the following two years**, guiding further initiatives and policy discussions.



SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

- > **A structured participatory model:** the two-year planning cycle ensures meaningful engagement and broad representation of rural communities, allowing local concerns to be reflected in national policy discussions.
- > **Effective decision-making and policy impact:** the structured voting process ensures that key messages are prioritised by participants, strengthening the legitimacy of rural advocacy efforts. The final document serves as an actionable policy tool influencing government decisions.
- > **Integration of regional knowledge and best practices:** thematic discussions and study visits enable the exchange of solutions tailored to local realities. The Rural Parliament fosters a knowledge-sharing ecosystem between rural actors and policymakers.
- > **Sustainability and replicability:** the Estonian Rural Parliament serves as a replicable model for other countries aiming to enhance grassroots participation in governance. The event's adaptability over time, including the introduction of digital voting and sustainable event practices, further strengthens its long-term viability.



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