ERCA at the Future Forum Rural Development (Berlin January 22/23 2025)

The Future Forum on Rural Development (https://www.zukunftsforum-laendliche-entwicklung.de/) takes place annually in Berlin in conjunction with the Green Week. With the Future Forum, the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture has been offering stakeholders in rural development a platform for exchange, discussion and knowledge transfer for more than 15 years. The 2025 edition was fully booked; 1,500 participants and more than 1,000 digital participants. This year, the 18th Future Forum focused on the theme of **"Participation, democracy and cohesion in rural areas"**. The aim was to gain insight into how forms of participation, democratic structures and social cohesion in rural areas can be strengthened. In the 30 Expert Forums, special attention was paid to **the role of women and young people in rural areas.**

ERCA Vice President, Ben van Essen was invited by ERCA member, **Dorfbewegung Brandenburg** to discuss how a village association can be established in more states in Germany (Brandenburg is the only one so far). In addition, in Expert Forum 30 entitled "**Democracy and cohesion in rural areas"** Ben spoke on behalf of the European Rural Community Alliance about the connection with the EU and the European Rural Parliament that will take place in Scotland in October 2025. The Dorfbewegung Brandenburg would like to become more active at European level. Their membership of ERCA and regular participation in the European Rural Parliament are important entrances to them.



Some observations of the two-day conference.

- The rural area in Germany has many challenges that are comparable to other European countries. The political and social context surrounding (the tackling of) these tasks is specific in Germany. For instance; the level of government that is closest to the citizens, the municipalities have few powers and few financial resources, compared to the Netherlands. Because municipalities have few financial resources, many citizen initiatives are stimulated via funds.
- Germany has an interesting advisory body: **The Expert Council for Rural Development** (SRLE), which advises the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL). The Dorfbewegung Brandenburg has a seat in it, as does LEADER Germany. The SRLE has very recently published an opinion on the organisation of rural policy in the coming period. In this report, the SRLE indicates that four processes in particular will determine the political and social debate:
    - Climate change and species extinction,
    - Demographic change, in particular the ageing population,
    - The transformation of the energy system and the digital transformation and;

- Social change related to increasing skepticism towards democracy and the system.

The political zeitgeist was clearly palpable throughout the conference. The great concerns about rising populism, the rise of the AFD and the sharp decline in trust in democratic bodies were explicitly addressed in many speeches. A study presented at the conference by Prof. Rainald Manthe made it clear that trust in politics has fallen dramatically in Germany in the period 2020-2023.

- The Zukunftsforum Ländliche Entwicklung is a high-level, country-wide exchange of policy makers, scientists, NGOs and civil society on rural development. The proposition is:. It was very inspiring to participate in the dialogue on these questions. The (threatened) democracy was a weighty extra dimension in the discussions, in which municipalities and villages are seen as the seed cell for a fully-fledged democracy.