

# The Rural Network in 2021

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## 2021 was a year of innovation and enthusiasm

Taina Vesanto, Chair of the Rural Network's steering group

The coronavirus pandemic continued to globally re-frame daily activity and life in 2021. When summing up the year, we can't ignore the pandemic no matter how hard we want to put it behind us already. The Rural Network did not let the pandemic slow it down – quite the opposite. Digital tools and communication channels are now used on a daily basis. Webinars have become a permanent practice in our work, which requires reaching out to people all over Finland, and they have increased people's opportunities to participate. People also took part in discussions and workshops with enthusiasm. Those attending our events online also stayed for the workshop phase, actively sharing their thoughts and ideas.

The new thematic groups started off strong this year. The Green Growth Thematic Group was clearly needed. People are thirsty for knowledge and fresh ideas on how to operate in the changing environment. With so many of us considering multi-locality, our thematic group's webinar on the concept was a huge success. The year 2021 also saw the long-awaited establishment of a Swedish-language thematic group. Its ideas and efforts have been excellent. It will keep us connected to active Swedish-speaking regions in Finland, but also to other Nordic countries. The youth group participated in the preparations for the Rural Parliament festival of ideas and the formulation of the declaration of young people at the Rural Parliament. The group's dance challenge also inspired many actors. Young people's affairs were so inspirational that we wanted to have another year of working closely with the youth group.

The year was full of action. In the work of officials and stakeholders, a lot of time and energy was spent on the planning of Finland's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). In the Rural Network's activities, on the other hand, it is important to offer the opportunities and connections needed to fully take advantage of the tools available in the future. For example, this year's webinar on recovery funds for providing information on recovery funds and European Innovation Partnerships (EIP) was a success. The overall concept and good topics of rural networking breakfasts drew listeners, so more of these events will be organised in the upcoming years as well. It is equally important to bring actors together and make various platforms available for development purposes. One such partnership – collaborating and sharing a portal with AgriHub – commenced in 2021. The details of the collaboration will be determined further during 2022.

On rare occasion, we held an event on site. The Local Food Day attracted plenty of visitors to meet rural operators. The event is sure to be popular in the future as well. Vuolijoki, the winner of Smart Village, received a lot of ideas and support through their innovation camp. The Innovation Market in KoneAgria, on the other hand, received a lot of positive feedback from both the performers and visitors, who were saying that they were happy to have attended the event. Among other topics, presentations were held on seven EIP projects related to agriculture, and the market served as an interesting meeting place. It is an excellent way of presenting and sharing innovations.

The Rural Parliament was also definitely one of the top events of the year. It was held as a hybrid event. Only speakers and performers were present at the Kurikka Campus, but the energy and empowering effect of the event surely was spread throughout Finland on the web and through the networks. The Rural Network had a key role to play in the preparations and implementation of the event.

Leader work has always been an important part of the Rural Network's work. And so it was this year too. The current issues included getting ready for a new funding period, and a spirit of working together was created through joint events. Collaboration between the ELY Centres and Leader is important, and the Rural Network contributed to its development and to forecasting of future changes.

And finally a look at Europe: ‘Rural enchantment 2040 – the seed for a good life. It thrives, tries and creates something new together.’ This sums up Finland’s message for the Rural Vision work to prepare a long-term vision for the rural areas of the EU. Finland built its vision on the basis of the Rural2030 foresight activities so not everything needed to be started from scratch. The insights and outlook for 2040 were compiled through a smooth and inspiring future work process. The end result is visible not just to us but also on the European level. And for a good reason; the vision serves as an excellent reference for the future.

This review is not long enough to mention all the wonderful and interesting events that took place during the year. To find out more, you’ll have to read the annual report. And then you can start looking forward to all the upcoming exciting events. There will be plenty of those in 2022!

## 1 Top 4 events – Genuine encounters and experiences

### Local Food Day

The renewed ‘Local Food Day’ continued in September with where the ‘Fresh from the Farm’ day held in the five previous years had left off: on Saturday, 11 the of September 2021, Finns had the opportunity to “scratch beneath the surface” of rural operators and buy fresh produce or ready to eat food products directly from the producers themselves. Many participating companies also allowed the visitors to see their animals, machinery and yard area.

This year, the event that has already become a tradition was renamed to Local Food Day. The name was changed with the aim of better describing the whole concept of this one-day event: this year, people were invited to explore their local area’s operators more widely. Local Food Day participants included local food producers and other rural operators. It is a genuine access all areas event – and we aim to stick to this new concept!

The National Local Food Day was a success: hundreds of people were attracted by rural produce and experiences throughout Finland. In total, 235 rural operators ranging from traditional farms to rural experience companies opened their doors to visitors. This was a nice surprise amidst these exceptional times of the pandemic. We almost broke the all-time record with this number!

The opening event was held at the Hutko Llama and barnyard-animal farm in Pukkila. At Hutko farm, visitors got up close with llamas, donkeys, rabbits, wool pigs and other barnyard animals, made purchases from the booths of local producers and youngsters participating in 4H activities, and enjoyed the delicacies served in the café. The farm experience also included speeches and music. The most thrilling part of the day was llama agility. You can watch the opening event on this [video](#).

Information about the Local Food Day was communicated on multiple channels, including press releases and the social media. This year’s marketing of the event also included using influencers in collaboration with Satokausikalenteri (Harvest calendar). Satokausikalenteri and influencers **Roope Tonteri** and **Michael Ntima** went on a local food journey and told the story on Facebook and Instagram. During the journey, they gathered their bags full of local food that was used to prepare a harvest menu. The menu with its recipes and ingredients was delivered to five influencers, who told their followers about the

recipes and showed how the dishes were made. To find out more about what happened during the local food journey, read [Satokausikalenteri's](#) article.

Participating in the organisation of the Local Food Day were the Rural Development Programme for Mainland Finland 2014–2020 and the Rural Network, the food sector coordination project of the Brahea Centre at the University of Turku, Aitojamakuja.fi, the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK), the Central Union of Swedish-speaking Agricultural Producers in Finland (SLC), Maa- ja kotitalousnaiset (Finnish women in agriculture), the Martha Organisation, the Swedish-speaking Martha Organisation (Marthaförbundet), 4H in Finland and Swedish-speaking 4H in Finland, Lomalaidun ry and the Finnish Association of Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs (SMMY).

## People gathered at the Innovation Market to learn about new farming innovations

The KoneAgria exhibition for agriculture and forestry professionals was organised in Tampere on 14–16 October 2021. The Rural Network's Green Growth Working Group's Innovation Market was also present at the exhibition. In this article, the working group's coordinator, Timo Junnila, recounts his experiences from the exhibition.

After a long break, KoneAgria once again brought together rural developers and agriculture and forestry professionals. After a few years without the exhibition, it was great to see the newest developments in the industry and meet colleagues again. It was clear that other people there had also been waiting eagerly for the event, as it brought in almost 15,000 visitors. The atmosphere was very positive and abuzz with excitement from beginning to end.

The Innovation Market was organised by the Rural Network's Green Growth Thematic Group. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Baltic Sea Action Group and AgriHub were also at the stand.

One of KoneAgria's new features this year was the Innovation Market, which brought together innovations from different organisations. Included in the market were seven fascinating agricultural innovations, all of which had received EIP funding. A presentation like this had never been tried before, but it will almost certainly be seen again – feedback on the Innovation Market was extremely positive. The stand also gave interested visitors an introduction to the ways in which funding can be sought for new innovations. The EIP scheme is currently open to new project applications. You can read more here, if you like.

The goal of the Innovation Market was to increase awareness of EIP innovations to help them achieve use and further development. I believe we succeeded – throughout the exhibition, the Innovation Market saw many interested industry professionals, including farm operators, other potential users, researchers in the field and developers. The Innovation Market became an excellent spot for meeting people and networking, bringing together different parties interested in agricultural innovation. People at our stand were brainstorming follow-up developments for current innovations and even brand-new projects! The Innovation Market gave visitors the opportunity to see one of the innovations, a strawberry picking robot, in action. The robotics prototype's algorithm is able to tell when individual strawberries are ripe, after which the robot can use its robotic arm to pick the berry. Madis Lemsalu from Natural Resources Institute Finland presented the robot in operation to interested visitors. The robot was tested last summer on the fields of several strawberry farms. Though the results were promising, Madis explained that the system is still in need of a lot of further development work before it is ready for operational use.

The Peltodata.fi agricultural mapping service was also a subject of interest for many. The service is an excellent example of the utilisation of open data, which has not been used much in the past. It lets anyone download a free evaluation of the condition of their field plots, based on satellite images taken over the course of several summers. The goal is to offer information that is produced from a wealth of data in a compact and concise package. It has been great following the development of Peltodata.fi, as I was also involved in the early design process of this particular EIP project.

The Innovation Market also presented a concept for fresh wood chips and four solutions related to cattle fodder, feeding and wellbeing: digital baling, smart fodder, thermal imaging, monitoring of feed temperature and natural peptides. All four projects are concerned with finding solutions to practical problems. As with many other projects, these innovations need further funding to continue development after the EIP project comes to an end.

The Yle journalist Juuso Pekkinen also visited the Innovation Market. A few of our innovations even found their way onto Pekkinen's radio programme, which you can listen to on Yle Arena!

The Innovation Market's stage was busy throughout the exhibition. There was already a large crowd gathered on Thursday morning when Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Jari Leppä stepped onto the stage to explain upcoming CAP changes. During the exhibition, the stage also hosted presentations on innovations and EIP funding, grant-giving events and discussions on farmers' environmental actions.

Minister for Agriculture and Forestry, Jari Leppä, visited the Innovation Market to talk about the reform of the CAP reform. Friday's Innovation Market saw a fascinating conversation on farmers taking action on climate change. Participating in the conversation were farm operators Samuel Jussila and Petri Jokela. The Innovation Market's stage also saw interviews of grant recipients from the Tuottajalle Kiitos (Thank You to Producers) programme on Friday.

The Innovation Market received plenty of positive feedback, and a similar feature could well be organised in the future as well. Thanks to the stand, agriculture and forestry professionals had a place where they could find plenty of information about agricultural innovations under development and opportunities to develop new innovations.

I want to thank everyone who was part of planning and putting together the Innovation Market, as well as everyone who helped make it possible. I hope to see you all again soon!

*Author:*

*Timo Junnila, Coordinator of the Green Growth Working Group, [timo.junnila@icloud.com](mailto:timo.junnila@icloud.com)*

*The Innovation Market was organised by the Rural Network's Green Growth Thematic Group. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Baltic Sea Action Group and AgriHub were also at the stand.*

Video: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CVBCv1UDVHJ/>

## The Rural Parliament brings joy to regional development

The three-day Rural Parliament held in late September was a virtual multi-location event, which was an appropriate format for these strange times.

The main venue was a studio built on the Kurikka campus, where only speakers and performers were allowed to be physically present, and some of them had also chosen to use remote connections. The Rural Parliament could be watched via the ProsectumLive platform, which enabled jumping between the main broadcast, the partner market, the workshops, informational videos and others. The platform is like a virtual exhibition centre that is easy to move around in!

As Jouni Kemppainen, chief editor of the *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* (Rural Future) newspaper, said, the Rural Parliament had a very energetic atmosphere. For creating that atmosphere, a special thanks goes to our lively presenters, Inari Fernández and Christoffer Strandberg. They were a wonderful pair!

I mostly knew Strandberg from entertainment programmes, such as his hilarious sketch characters and other performances on the tv-show *Putous*. My co-workers and I were amazed at how brilliant and knowledgeable he was as a presenter. He kept on point and even had time to follow the chat. Very impressive and such professionalism!

Another topic of discussion for the remote coffee breaks was how nice it was to listen to Fernández and Strandberg's warm-hearted talks in the morning. The positive mood also caught on and continued through the Rural Parliament's many panel discussions which we found to be of exceptionally high quality. Thorough background work surely was a contributing factor. Namely, Erätauko specialist Efe Ewvaraye's work behind the scenes to warm up and prepare each discussion group before the live broadcast.

Wednesday's morning coffee discussion on the aspects of a good life was one of the most interesting ones for me. In that discussion, Anna Rotkirch, who works as a director of research and professor at the Family Federation of Finland, talked about how starting a family is influenced by the current social values, trust in safety nets and general attitude towards children. Similar aspects also affect people's decisions to relocate. A real life example was heard at the Rural Parliament of a family that had to postpone their move to the countryside indefinitely because the locality where they had planned to relocate did not have a school. Something to keep in mind when deciding on the continuation of local services. When the services go, so will the taxpayers.

Another insight came in the discussion on the changing nature of communality: the village's strong sense of community can make inclusion difficult for a new resident. Jani Halme, a creative director known as a media personality and a city-country-dweller, pointed out that when an association receives public funding, at the minimum, it should be required to hold an open day: So as to say: "Welcome everybody. This is for you!"

So what did we gain from these three days? At least it boosted our work motivation. In this ever more rapidly changing world, an endless wealth of opportunities awaits in regional development and rural research. The Rural Parliament also had a strong sense of breaking biases. The city and the countryside are certainly not enemies; on the contrary, they cannot exist without one another. Besides, many of us would like to live – or already do to some extent – in both.

And I have to mention those wonderful presenters again! A good reminder for your own work that the spirit and smooth running of the event has a lot to do with the hosting style and otherwise executing everything carefully.

The next Rural Parliament will be held on 2024 in Nurmes. Hopefully it will be a physical event, or perhaps a hybrid one. Until then, let's bring joy to rural development!

*Author: Saija Rätty, spokeswoman for Kaakonkantri.fi and wanna-be city-country-dweller*

[Video from the Rural Parliament.](#)

## Vuolijoki Innovation Camp

### **Smart Village competition winner's innovation camp in Vuolijoki**

In early November, dozens of Vuolijoki residents and other innovators interested in village development were brought together for a two-day innovation camp in the heart of Vuolijoki. The venue of the innovation camp was a former bank located in the centre of Vuolijoki, which currently serves as a central meeting place for Vuolijoki residents that could also be referred to as a village hall. The four innovative topics discussed during the camp were based on development ideas proposed by Vuolijoki residents. Holding the camp at the very source of the innovations being created gave unique added value to its content. The results of the camp are a good starting point to the innovation process, and we look forward to seeing the ideas being put into practice. Further information on the camp is available via the following link. [LINK](#)

### **Intensive Innovation Camp in Vuolijoki — insights and outcomes**

An innovation camp on village development was held in the village of Vuolijoki on 4–5 November. A number of rural developers and village activist were brought together to find concrete solutions to challenges that the residents of Vuolijoki had selected, but which also apply to other villages in Finland. Camp participants Tuija Kallio and Maria Helo promised to tell us their thoughts after the camp.

In early November, we attended the Vuolijoki Innovation Camp, which effectively delved into the themes presented by the village residents in advance. The camp was the prize for winning the Smart Village competition in Finland one year ago. It was actually a good thing that the time for claiming the prize came later due to the coronavirus pandemic. There was more time to think about the themes, the development activities in Vuolijoki continued under a new project and new networks were created on account of the win.

The themes selected were challenges that also concern many other villages and regions in Finland: new forms of living in rural areas; looking at work and livelihoods with new eyes; strengthening the village identity of children and young people; and, biogas and sustainable villages.

The camp was organised in collaboration with the village action association and village activists of Vuolijoki, the rural network services and the regional development consultancy company MDI. The preparations gained momentum in September–October and, in less than two weeks, the camp had slightly over forty participants from all over Finland.

The village activists of Vuolijoki wanted to hold the camp in the heart of the village, in and close to Pankkitalo, which is a former bank building. Accommodation was arranged in the premises of the former municipal hall, as well as in cottages and local people's homes. Group work was carried out in Pankkitalo's remote workspace, the council hall of the former municipal hall and flower shop Runokki. During team work, the participants also walked around the village and visited the local school and youth centre, as well as the motor workshop that will be opened soon. Local businesses were also contacted via telephone.

The camp was organised in collaboration with the village action association and village activists of Vuolijoki, the rural network services and the regional development consultancy company MDI. There were approximately 40 participants.

### **How was the camp experience for you?**



It was an intensive two days full of energy and excitement. After a breather, we have been keeping in touch all around Finland. So many new faces and contacts! Meeting people was definitely the best part of the camp. The only downside was the intensive team work that prevented us from networking with the people in the other teams.

The first team considered how to get new residents to relocate to the countryside and how to get them to settle in the village.

The goal of the second team was to look at work and livelihoods with new eyes. The team's idea was to organise a recruitment campaign not only for knowledge workers but also for the needs of the region's industries to meet current challenges in respect of the availability of skilled labour.

The third team devised ways to strengthen the village identity of children and young people, posing the questions: How can we help children and young people to enjoy themselves in their home community, and how can we ensure that their voices are heard?

The fourth team worked on biogas and sought a solution to the problem of the profitability of biogas production and distribution in sparsely populated rural areas such as Vuolijoki.

After a brief pause, a slightly more critical look can be taken on the ideas and their future potential. A few discussions to break down the implementation, successes and future plans of the camp have now been had among the camp's participants and organisers. Plans for the future are gradually taking shape and hopefully many will bear the implementation responsibility for further measures.

A lot of ideas are now in the back pocket. The camp was a shot of energy to Vuolijoki. Hopefully the nice, positive buzz will attract new people to join the village activities and new residents to the village — at least once the mini-houses are ready!

Organising the camp was a big effort from the village residents as well. Thank you so much to all those involved in the arrangements, and to the camp participants, who donated your time, ideas and support to us for use in developing the village. Hopefully you will take some of the fantastic ideas generated at the camp with you to other parts of Finland as well. And maybe we'll see each other again soon. Until we meet again, you are always welcome to Vuolijoki!

*Text by: Tuija Kallio and Maria Helo*

### **Outcomes of the Innovation Camp**

The goal of the Innovation Camp was to find concrete solutions to the challenges identified. The Vuolijoki Innovation Camp sought concrete solutions to the challenges selected by the residents of Vuolijoki, which could be promoted through private or public funding after the camp. Another goal of the camp was to form networks among the operators from the themes and regions to strengthen co-operation between them. The purpose of the camp was to inspire the residents of the village to continue to develop their own community and living environment.

In the finals, each camp team presented their pitch to the jury which included Marianne Selkäinaho (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry), Pirjo Oikarinen (Leader Oulujärvi), Teemu Hauhia (Rural Network) and Teuvo Hatva (Kajaani, Chair of the City Board).

The first team considered how to get new residents to relocate to the countryside and how to get them to settle in the village. Their experimental idea was based on a mini-house area that offers the opportunity to test living in Vuolijoki as well as to test easy and communal living. There would, for example, be a sauna, boat and allotment garden.

The goal of the second team was to look at work and livelihoods with new eyes. The team's idea was to organise a recruitment campaign not only for knowledge workers but also for the needs of the region's industries to meet current challenges in respect of the availability of skilled labour. The team would start developing teleworking opportunities by identifying needs and developing the functionality of teleworking facilities. The ways of increasing the attractiveness of the teleworking facilities and making everyday life easier include the opportunities of the planned fibre optic cabling and offering an assortment of services to people who work remotely. As a broader vision, the team would also start commercialising the silence and tranquillity of the village of Vuolijoki and further develop the role of teleworking facilities as a facilitator of creating a community spirit and encounters throughout the village.

The third team devised ways to strengthen the village identity of children and young people, posing the questions: How can we help children and young people to enjoy themselves in their home community, and how can we ensure that their voices are heard? The team identified small and quick experiments, such as a horse club and airsoft space. The next steps in the idea creation process were, for example, related to the international Oulujärvi moped meeting in 2023.

The fourth team worked on biogas and sought a solution to the problem of the profitability of biogas production and distribution in sparsely populated rural areas such as Vuolijoki. The team found a solution to promote local biogas production and take advantage of the market. If the plans are implemented, a biogas plant will be built in Vuolijoki, and an ecosystem will be created that will benefit industry, agriculture and residents, while a regional brand will be created to attract young people.

The jury selected the biogas team's idea as the winner. The jury felt that it took into account many different perspectives, such as industry, agriculture and residents. The idea was considered ambitious, yet feasible, taking into account the rising level of environmental appreciation among young people, through which the area could become attractive specifically for new environmentally-conscious migrants. The jury also felt that the idea would act as an enabler for the other ideas generated at the camp.

## The ReWi Visions project was the best in Europe!

The spotlight was on Finland and Finnish rural development work in Europe in 2021 when ReWi (Resource Wise) Visions was selected as the best project in the Rural Inspiration Awards (RIA) organised by the European Rural Network (ENRD), which highlights and gives Europe-wide visibility to projects undertaken with the support of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). Each Member State was allowed to submit a total of eight nominees to the RIA competition, and Finland's ReWi Visions was selected as the best project in the Green Futures category. The goal of the ReWi Visions co-operation project has been to inspire young people to look at entrepreneurship and future working life from the perspective of circular economy, and to build tools for those working with young people. [Read more about the ReWi Visions project](#)

### 1.1 2021 – The year of virtual coffee breaks

#### Virtual coffee breaks proved to be a good concept!

Organised monthly by the Rural Network Support Unit of Finland, virtual coffee breaks are an informal online event for bringing together people who are interested in rural development to hear about current topics related to rural areas over a cup of coffee. These informal events bring fresh perspectives, feature guest speakers and introduce new topics to those involved in the Rural Network. Each virtual coffee break

has a different theme. So far, the topics discussed have ranged from feminism in regional development and CAP pre-events to primary production innovations, however, they are always linked to rural areas, rural development and people living in rural areas.

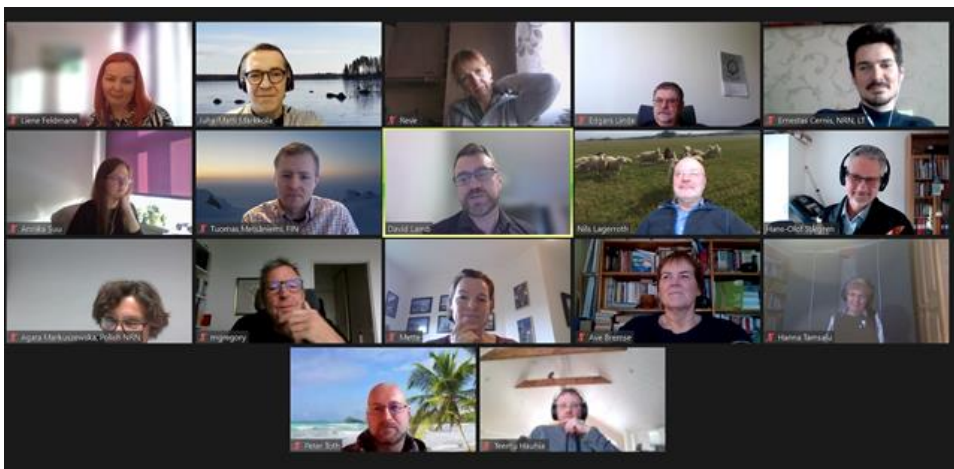
The first virtual coffee break was held in March 2021, and a great number of listeners have been joining in every month ever since. The average number of listeners has been over 200, and the variety greatly reflects the compilation of those involved in the Finnish Rural Network: entrepreneurs, researchers, government officials, Leader action group workers, project implementers and active members of associations from all over Finland.

## Nordic-Baltic coffee breaks

At the initiative of the Finnish Rural Network, which is also the event organiser, the experts of the national support units (NSU) of the Rural Network's participating countries in the Baltic Sea region (DK, EE, FI, LT, LV, PL and SE NSUs) have been getting together over coffee on a monthly basis. The usual number of people attending the coffee breaks is 20–25. The attending countries include all the other National Rural Networks (NRN) of the EU Member States of the Baltic Sea region except Germany. Representatives from the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) have also regularly attended the Nordic-Baltic coffee breaks. Informal in nature, the virtual coffee breaks are an excellent opportunity to hear news from the other countries, make plans for joint activities and learn from each other. The ENRD has also introduced the model of the Nordic-Baltic virtual coffee breaks to other large regions included in the European Rural Network.

*“During Nordic-Baltic Coffee Breaks monthly meetings members from different NSUs discuss relevant matters and topics, share news and new projects. These activities encourage peer-to-peer learning and inspire others to emulate good practices, share contacts and ideas. One of the biggest perks of Nordic-Baltic Coffee Breaks is opportunity to collaborate and create common projects with other NSUs which Lithuanian NSU looks forward to in the future. Experiences from different countries help us tackle joint problems and new topics. It is especially useful for NSU from smaller countries that often do not have enough time or human recourse.”*

Ernestas Černis, Lithuanian Rural Network



## Youth Leader: international coffee breaks

In early spring 2021, the virtual coffee break concept was expanded to Youth Leader when Leader action group workers from Finland and Sweden had their first joint virtual coffee break. The event format provided a simple solution to exchanging experiences, learning from each other and providing peer support to Leader action group workers working with young people. At the end of the year, the decision was made to expand the coffee breaks held every two months to a wider audience, and Leader action group workers working with young people from other countries in the Baltic Sea region were invited to attend the virtual coffee breaks with workers from Finland and Sweden. The role of the NSU of the Finnish Rural Network has been that of a coordinator: to convene people and, where necessary, help facilitate the conversations.

*“Research shows that more and more young people are being drawn to big cities and that our rural areas in the EU are being depopulated. Within the EU’s LEADER framework, there are many good examples of LEADER projects that are working to change this and to increase the participation of young people and their opportunities to influence their countryside. LEADER Finland is at the forefront of this with its inclusion work for young people.*

*It was against this background that LEADER Sweden’s youth coaches network initiated a digital coffee break with youth workers at LEADER Finland. There were only a few of us to begin with, but this later grew closer to 15 participants from Sweden and Finland. We talked about how our work with young people is structured, how we reach out to young people, the handling of the Covid-19 situation, entrepreneurship, young people’s health, knowledge of Erasmus, established new collaborative partners for international projects and much, much more. These digital meetings have created new networks, new knowledge, collaboration and cooperation that strengthen our rural areas and which will now continue into 2022 and the new programming period for CAP.”*

Emma Stigson, project manager at Leader Östra Skaraborg (Sweden)

## 2 Getting ready for the upcoming period and the transition period

### 2.1 A sizable information package on EU recovery funds was delivered at the 210 million ways to develop the countryside online event

The Finnish countryside got good news in the spring of 2021: approximately 210 million euros of EU recovery funds was allocated to the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. Since the recovery funds had to be locked in quickly, and they were allocated to no less than seven measures, the schedule for communicating the information was tight. The Rural Network and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry joined forces to organise a webinar, which was held on Wednesday 26 May and was aptly named ‘210 million ways to develop the countryside’. Attending the webinar was about 750 people.

Arrangements for the event were complex: There were nearly twenty speakers, who gave their speeches in five different rooms. The opening speech was given by Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Jari Leppä, whose message to everyone was to quickly seize the 210 opportunities on offer. In addition to the actions of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, information was also provided on the recovery funds to be distributed under the Just Transition Fund (JTF) and the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) during the afternoon session.

Despite the complex arrangements, the event went smoothly and the feedback was positive. About 750 people interested in rural development attended the webinar.

### **The second official language was not forgotten**

The Rural Network's Swedish-language thematic group held a Swedish-language event concerning recovery funds on 10 June. The event's name in Swedish was: 210 miljoner sätt att utveckla landsbygden. It translates into English exactly the same as the event's name in Finnish: 210 million ways to develop the countryside. Approximately 40 rural developers attended the event.

## 2.2 Creating a common rural vision for the EU – the national Rural2040 process

*Rural enchantment 2040 – the seed for a good life. It thrives, tries and creates something new together.*

This sums up the message of the Finnish Rural Network for the European Commission's work to prepare a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas up to 2040. The ideas and summarised messages of the Finnish Rural Network were collected early in the year through the future work process, in which the Rural2040 vision was created in four virtual workshops. The work involved rural operators, public sector representatives, regional developers, residents and company representatives from both rural and urban areas.

Finland's Rural2040 vision was based on the future work for Rural2030 carried out in 2018, which was updated in the workshops. The aim was also to include young people in the Rural2040 process. One of the workshops was designed for young people, and it was partly carried out as a Minecraft game workshop.

Finland's Rural2040 vision includes the idea of a vibrant, communal countryside that creates well-being in Finland as a whole, and where co-operation and entrepreneurship are natural ways of working. Rural businesses are diverse, adaptive and good at networking. Sustainability is at the heart of operations in rural areas, where tough times are endured. The countryside is also a little mystical: once you have experienced its enchantment, you cannot stay away and will keep coming back there again and again. The population in rural areas is growing. In the countryside, people find a place to put down roots, peace in nature and a sense of community. Live a good life every day. [Read more about Rural2040 work at Maaseutu.fi](#)

In June, the European Network of Rural Development (ENRD) held a virtual event on rural vision work that lasted a whole week: Rural Vision Week. The purpose of the event was to present different perspectives on rural vision and the different aspirations that the EU Member States have for the future of rural areas in Europe. The Finnish Rural Network participated in the Rural Vision Week in co-operation with the Swedish Rural Network. Both Member States wanted to focus on the views and experiences of young people living in rural areas, so naturally they should co-operate.

Nordic youth, supported by the Rural Network Support Units, built a [virtual market stand](#) for presenting each Member State's vision process from the perspective of young people. We also implemented a panel discussion together, entitled 'Young Perspectives on Future Nordic Ruralities'. The panel participants presenting their ideas for the future and about the present to an international audience included a young Sámi reindeer herder, a young person participating in Leader activities and young entrepreneurs from southern Sweden.

The vision for the EU's rural areas up to 2040 was published in June. It identifies areas of action towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas and communities.

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas\\_fi](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas_fi)

The debate on the practical measures of the EU's rural vision continues in the EU and the Rural Network. In the autumn in Finland, the new vision was discussed and further deliberated on, for example, in the workshop of the Rural Parliament and at the European Rural Entrepreneurship Voices Forum. The European Rural Entrepreneurship Voices Forum was an international seminar implemented together with the Lapland University of Applied Sciences, North Karelia University of Applied Sciences and the rural advisory organisation ProAgria. The seminar envisioned the future prospects of rural entrepreneurs and what the EU's rural vision looks like from the perspective of rural entrepreneurship. [Rural Future Synthesis](#)

### 2.3 Network platform

As a concept, the Rural Network is rather abstract: it covers everyone who is interested in rural development, but no one knows the exact number of people in the network. What if there was a place where all the people in the network could show themselves and what they do? What if the answer to the question 'What is the Rural Network?' is 'Check out the maaseutuverkosto.fi website'?

In the sector, there has long been a need for a place where you can find the whole network with its activities, events, discussions — and, first and foremost, potential partners. Another eternal problem is the difficulty of finding projects, both ongoing and completed ones. With these as our starting points, we began to design a network platform for rural developers and those interested in rural development. The first draft of the network platform was seen in early 2021, in a pilot version. The national coordination projects were a great help in this.

AgriHubi Farm Business Competence Network Finland was launched in early 2021. The co-operation between the Rural Network Support Unit of Finland and AgriHub was close from the start, and it soon became apparent that a network platform was also needed for the AgriHub. There were so many similarities in the focus groups and in the network platform functionalities needed that we set out to implement the network platform together. If a network has power, then multiple networks have it in spades.

Before the network platform could be built, there was much work ahead with the invitation to tender and the competitive tendering process. Writing the invitation to tender, which began in May, did not culminate until in early November in the selection of the supplier. The selected supplier, however, did not waste any time before starting the implementation, and the first tests were underway in the beginning of December. Wow, what a pace!

The network platform will be released in early 2022.

## 3 Working group fieldwork

### 3.1 Opportunities of multi-locality

Working group activities were launched in early 2021 with the selection of coordinators. The members for the working group itself were sought from institutions related to the theme, such as the Finnish Environment Institute, the Natural Resources Institute Finland, the Federation of Finnish Enterprises and the Ministry of the Environment of Finland. Efforts were made to find the members on the widest possible scale, from many different areas. Operations started in February 2021.

The first step was to determine the scope of the theme, the challenges and which aspects to focus on within the wide theme. It was also important to identify the current state with respect to multi-locality. We reviewed the ongoing projects and the existing activities.

An annual calendar was set up for the activities, with the aim of sticking to it as best we could. Most of the activities stayed on schedule, but project meetings could not be held until August. We aim to hold the working group's meetings at least every three months, to go through current reports and the activities of the working group and coordinators.

In terms of communication, we started right away to identify suitable individuals for influencer communication in late spring 2021, and the final piloting of influencer communication took place in Q4/2021.

The Opportunities of Multi-locality: Focus on municipalities webinar organised by the working group was well received and attended by participants throughout the country, from Helsinki to Inari. Implementing the webinar was a good experiment, on which we received good feedback as well. In the future, we will hold webinars that are built on the same template, but have different perspectives.

The theme itself has gained good publicity through the working group in more ways than one. Some of the working group's members are constantly featured in the news coverage and interviews related to the theme. Coordinator Vihinen participated in, for example, SuomiAreena and the Rural Parliament. We made a statement there together regarding multi-locality.

The working group has been asked to join all kinds of activities. For example, coordinators Puntala and Vihinen have been involved in project co-operation in the Landemia project, various organisations and the municipalities of the Southern Ostrobothnia region with respect to multi-locality measures and strategies. There has also been co-operation with multi-locality projects governed in the Savo region, as well as with research institutes.

There has also be co-operation with Leader action groups such as Leader Kuudestaan and Leader Aisapari. The coordinators have been hosting workshops related to multi-locality in connection with, for example, Aisapari projects. Information has been actively communicated during the activities, especially to municipalities and other stakeholders. In the summer of 2021, Anssi Kujala, a member of the working group from the Federation of Finnish Enterprises, said that he would leave his post in the federation and, consequently, would no longer continue in the working group. We are currently seeking a replacement for Anssi.

## July's SuomiAreena discussed living a good life in Finland with increasing multi-locality

A disruption to place attachment is affecting our everyday life. We have multiple locations for work, hobbies, home life and studies. We enjoy spending time in the city and in the countryside. Does multi-locality mean that we can have our cake and eat it: be in love with many places at the same time?

SuomiAreena's discussion 'Living a good life in multi-local Finland' envisioned multi-local life in Finland now and in the future. What is multi-locality and what kind of opportunities does it give us? What does it mean for working life and, for example, studies? And what does multi-locality mean for a small, sparsely populated

rural municipality? Do young people find it interesting? The discussion delved into experiences of multi-locality and the related transformation of communality, as well as the double-edged sword of digitalisation – the challenges and opportunities it brings. [Read more at Maaseutu.fi](#)

### 3.2 Smart rural areas in Swedish Finland and the Nordic countries

Despite high hopes at the beginning of the year to be able to arrange the Finnish-Swedish Rural Parliament physically in Loviisa in March 2021, an event which had been postponed from autumn 2020, we again had to change the event into a one-day webinar. Malin Rönblom from Karlstad University (SWE) talked about location policy in light of the pandemic, and new opportunities for rural areas. Business analyst Kjell Lindström (SWE) talked about future trends and organisations and leadership. Participants also heard about current issues in rural policy/the National Rural Policy Council and rural development/the Swedish Rural Network. In addition, discussions were held using Timeout breaks to gain a deeper understanding of what constitutes a good life in rural areas. Special thanks go to SILMU r.f. who made great efforts to realise the Rural Parliament despite the circumstances.

During the spring, a three-part webinar series was arranged: The New Rural Habitat; The New Rural Collaborative Environment; and The New Rural Business Environment. Many interesting lecturers took part in these webinars and best practices and projects were presented. For example, issues and projects were highlighted regarding multi-locality, habitability, ease of doing business, change requirements (SITRA), remote working hubs, the village as a creative place, migration slots, sustainability issues and social responsibility, partnership agreements (third-sector municipalities), what is a modern association, and collaboration concepts at local level. In June, the theme group also organised a Swedish-language information session on the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility (recovery funding), smart villages and broadband funding.

In the autumn, programmes for the Rural Parliament in Kurikka in October were planned and prepared. Together with the Swedish Rural Network and JSM, the theme group organised a bilingual workshop on the theme “Smart Rural Areas” and launched the concept “Youth in Rural Areas” (through Timeout dialogue breaks) together with the Bildningsalliansen (an umbrella organisation for non-formal adult education in Swedish in Finland). They also arranged, together with Nordregio and the SHERPA project (Horizon 2020), a Swedish-language workshop on the rural vision for 2040, and on important themes from a Finnish perspective.

In November, major effort was put into a Nordic webinar to see what we can learn from each other in terms of rural development. The webinar was opened by Finnish Minister for Nordic Cooperation and Equality, Thomas Blomqvist. Lecturers came from all over the Nordic region and from Nordregio. They contributed and shared their expertise, insights, research and best practices. It was gratifying that the webinar also attracted many participants from the Baltics.

At the end of the year, “Youth in Rural Areas” Timeout dialogues were initiated with young people, in cooperation with the Bildningsalliansen. First up was the high school in Pedersöre. A virtual Timeout dialogue was also held in December where the theme was “The Future of Åland”.

During the year, the theme group collaborated with many parties. Special collaboration exists with Nordregio, the Nordic Council of Ministers’ research institute in Stockholm and its thematic group “Green and Inclusive Rural Development”, where the coordinator is also a member. The coordinator has also lectured at external events on the work of the thematic group, the Rural Network, EU funding, smart villages



and smart rural areas, as well as on other innovative themes relating to rural development and local development.

### 3.3 The rural young people as future decision-makers

The year 2021 got off to a flying start. During the first few months, the thematic group held meetings to plan for the coming year and discussing the Festival of Ideas campaign in preparation of the Rural Parliament. The Festival of Ideas campaign, the related youth workshops and the Rural Parliament event itself were the thematic group's biggest and most visible measures of the year.

From January to July, the focus was on event preparation meetings and setting up the thematic group. The coronavirus pandemic lasting longer than anticipated has partly double and even tripled the amount of work needed, with the restrictions being lifted and imposed throughout the spring. The Trends and Dreams webinar held in March saw

researcher Tuomas Kuhmonen from the Finland Futures Research Centre present the RURALIZATION project's research results on future trends and young people's dreams for the future. The first of three workshops to prepare youth policy recommendations was already held by the end of June. In July, a music camp was held for young people in Kurikka, with the goal of creating a choreography for the rural dance challenge and completing the filming of an instructional video.

From August to December, there was more activity in the earlier months of the period due to the final workshops related to the Rural Parliament and the Festival of Ideas. Another workshop on youth policy recommendations was held by the end of August. In September, during the Rural Parliament, the third and final panel discussion-type workshop was held on the theme A municipality led by young people — What would it be like?. The purpose of the workshop was to gather more input from young people, both for the Rural Policy Declaration and for the youth policy recommendations. In addition, the young people of the thematic group participated in writing the Rural Policy Declaration during the Rural Parliament.

In the Rural Parliament, young people participated in the planning and implementation of the programme, as well as in the discussions. The Rural Parliament's climaxes were a short performance by Elonkerjuu, a band from South Ostrobothnia, and the participants' rural dance challenge. Towards the end of the year, we wrapped up the action-packed year and thought about the future. There was also some activity towards the European Rural Parliament and the European Rural Youth Parliament, and communication about the Rural Parliament held in Finland.

### 3.4 Green Growth

Double-click below to download the PowerPoint presentation.



## 4 Improvement of the implementation quality continued

### 4.1 Co-operation with ELY Centres

Co-operation between Rural Network Services and ELY Centres was also marked by the preparation of regional plans for rural development in 2021 and the Smart Rural Areas tour that began in 2020, which urged the ELY Centres and Leader action groups to get ready for the upcoming strategy period in an inclusive manner and in collaboration with the residents, entrepreneurs and other actors in the area. The Rural Network Support Unit supported the ELY Centres in the organisation of virtual workshops and webinars: the unit provided assistance in coordination and event planning, technical support and licences for virtual tools for the use of ELY Centres in a total of 11 virtual events held during 2021 in various operational areas of the ELY Centres.

In addition to the Smart Rural Areas tour, the Rural Network Support Unit sought to support the programme work carried out by the ELY Centres in 2021 by organising meetings for expert groups and participating in theme-based development work. Despite having to cancel many meetings due to the coronavirus pandemic, the ELY Centres' business experts got together in a virtual meeting held in the spring 2021. In the autumn, we worked on the environmental and climate programme for Finnish Lakeland with five ELY Centres. Great efforts were also made in the pilot project to develop co-operation between ELY Centres and Leader action groups (read more in chapter X), and the results of that pilot will hopefully benefit us in the long term.

*“Work in 2021 continued to be marked by teleworking and virtual solutions. The people at the ELY Centres responsible for matters related to the Rural Development Programme knew in advance that the spring would be hard work and full of seminars, webinars and workshops. The deadline for submitting the regional rural development programmes to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry was 30 June 2021. In early winter, we*

*hoped that we would be able to hold a few seminars and maybe even meet people in real life. This proved to be a false hope. Of course we had already become familiar with virtual meetings and workshops in 2020, however, they were not yet routines for a digital dummy like myself. Luckily, we had come to trust the guidance and organisation skills of the Rural Network Support Unit during the two joint workshops held for the ELY Centres of Finnish Lakeland and in the Smart Rural Areas event in the autumn of 2020.*

*Therefore, in the beginning of the year, we again turned to the support unit's experts with our ideas for workshops and webinars. In the end, we implemented three fairly large workshop webinars in co-operation with the support unit in the spring. The preparations for the primary production, organic and business workshops were handled quickly. As we Savo people like to talk a lot, during the exchange of ideas phase, Salla and Tuomas gently but firmly kept us on track and we got the preparations done on schedule. Another webinar workshop needed to be held in the autumn with respect to the environmental and climate programme for Finnish Lakeland. We thought about the Rural Network Support Unit, and they answered our call for assistance. Once again, they handled the planning, guidance, registration and technical implementation superbly.*

*The Rural Network Support Unit has created a great concept for supporting regional and local operators when they need to use digital solutions in their work. Access to the required licences and the knowledge and skills related to the use of digital tools and implementation of meetings has made our jobs a lot easier here in the operational areas of the ELY Centres. Doing things together with the support unit has also been a great opportunity for us to adopt new practices and learn how to use new technologies. At least here at the ELY Centre for South Savo, the services provided by the Rural Network Support Unit have filled one key resource gap that would have prevented us from doing a lot of things, or at least kept our actions smaller and less effective. The first word that comes into mind about working with the support unit is 'easy'. In fact, I feel I could start planning another event just so that we would get to enjoy our co-operation again under their gentle but firm guidance. Thanks to everyone at the Rural Network Support Unit!"*

Ilpo Lehtinen, Head of Rural Services, ELY Centre for South Savo

## 4.2 Leader year at the Rural Network

Getting ready for the new funding period was strongly reflected throughout the year, including the Rural Network's Leader year. Setting the pace for the year were the Leader days held in the spring and autumn, the Leader board meeting day in the spring and the biannual meetings of the chairs of the boards of the Leader action groups. All these meetings had the new funding period and the progression of its preparations on their agenda. The meetings provided a good forum for joint reflection and working together. Getting ready for the new funding period has progressed in good spirits and the feeling of working together was also reflected in the events held by the Rural Network.

The Rural Network provided special support to the Leader action groups of the Päijät-Häme and South Savo regions, where Leader action groups are being merged together. The training to support in the change, which started in 2020, continued during 2021. The training is aimed at supporting the action groups so that the merging of the Leader actions groups will run as smoothly as possible.

## 4.3 Improving co-operation between ELY Centres and Leader action groups

Flexible co-operation between ELY Centres and Leader action groups is essential in Leader work. The funding period starting in 2023 will also bring changes to the interface between the ELY Centre and the Leader action groups. The changing of the funding period is a good time to consider how well the co-operation is working between the ELY Centres and Leader action groups, how to predict the effects of the changes in the upcoming funding period, and what the areas can learn from each other through the co-operation.

During the autumn, the Rural Network Support Unit carried out the development process to identify the need to develop the co-operation between ELY Centres and Leader action groups and to consider the solutions for promoting the co-operation. Three pilot areas were selected to participate in the development process: Southwest Finland, Pirkanmaa and Southeast Finland. Two meetings were held in each pilot area, in which the people of ELY Centres and Leader groups went through the current state of cooperation and the related development needs.

The feedback on the meetings was positive; they were perceived to be helpful. On the basis of the discussions held in the pilot areas, it can be said that cooperation between the ELY centres and the LEADER groups are primarily going well, even though some targets for development have been identified. Mutual interaction needs to be developed by paying special attention to holding regular, goal-oriented meetings. It is important for the experts working at ELY Centres and those of the Leader groups to get to know each other and what the other one does; after all, it is a partnership. There are differences in the operating practices both between and within the areas; sharing of operating models and learning from each other should be enhanced.

The pilot areas' lessons learnt and the outcomes of the discussions were distributed to all parties in the field at the Leader Day event held in the autumn, and the discussions will continue in 2022 as well.

Developing cooperation between ELY Centres and Leader groups is a fine example of what networking is. All the steps of the process were executed. After identifying the challenge, it was examined through three examples. The actors were given the opportunity to have a controlled discussion with various parties on how the operations could be developed. The observations made were simple: learn to know each other better and what the other one does, keep communicating in a consistent and structured manner, and learn from other areas as well. Lastly, the observations and lessons learned were shared more widely.

## 5 Communications

### 5.1 Co-operating with influencers helped reach new audiences

Over the years, co-operating with influencers has been tentatively implemented in the Rural Network's communications: Joonas Hellman told his followers about rural development work from the perspective of young people and presented the idea of influencer marketing all the way in Brussels; for example, Jussi Vatanen and Ville Haapasalo, have been engaged in communication campaigns. However, we shifted up a gear in 2021 – thank goodness for that! We hit the jackpot right away with the Do it in Finland campaign to present domestic tourist attractions in Finnish summer, in which Meeri Koutaniemi visited three destinations she had selected and posted about the trips on her Instagram account. Meeri's first Instagram post brought almost 5,000 new followers to the Do it in Finland Instagram account. Overall, Koutaniemi's posts were viewed more than 700,000 times on her social media channels alone, and reached nearly 300,000 viewers.

Shortly after that, new influencers were signed up to communicate about the Local Food Day held in September, coordinated by Satokausikalenteri, and the results exceeded the expectations once again. Excited about this great model of influencer cooperation, we felt that it should be embedded more permanently to our communications. So, in the autumn, we had an influencer marketing strategy set up for us, which we used for the first time before the end of the year, to spread the message on the joys of living in the countryside, with different perspectives on multi-locality, through enthusiastic influencers – our

influencer campaign received over a million impressions and 250,000 reaches. [Read more at Maaseutu.fi](#)  
There is more to come!

## 5.2 Do it in Finland established itself as a travel website

This was the third summer of the Do It in Finland campaign, which is aimed at encouraging people to travel in Finland. In 2021, updates were made to the destinations presented on the website and the number of destinations was increased even further. The website now contains more than 300 amazing EAFRD-funded destinations that you can travel safely and responsibly to, and have fun and new experiences! The social media campaign ran from June to August on Facebook and Instagram, where 2 to 3 posts were made per week.

During the summer, the destinations presented on the Do it in Finland website received almost 2,500,000 impressions and 720,000 reaches, including the posts Meeri Koutaniemi made about the destinations she visited.

On Instagram, #teesesuomessa has already been used in nearly 3,000 posts over the years, including 59 posts on the campaign account. So we can say that Do it in Finland and the EAFRD have established their position in the field of domestic travel in Finland.

## 5.3 2021 was a year of adapting

In many ways, 2021 was a year of adapting. Due to you know what, we have come accustomed to many things: screen sharing, the referral function, Menti word clouds, Miros and Flingos, virtual team rooms, electronic signatures and file sharing in cloud. In my opinion, we've made it through the adaptation phase surprisingly well. Perhaps the time was finally right for taking a digital leap?

In the spring 2020, few of us had any idea for how long the acute pandemic situation would continue. Lucky that we didn't, because we might have been discouraged. Instead, we did what we had to and adapted to the prevailing conditions by adopting new practices that I don't think we will be abandoning any time soon. For example, here in Lapland, the travel distance from Utsjoki to Rovaniemi, where project meetings and workshops are usually held, is about 450 kilometres. It is almost the same as the travel distance from Helsinki to the Kaustinen Folk Music Festival. I believe – in fact I know – that people here have been happy with the digital leap – we no longer have to travel for hours and book accommodation. We now have the possibility to attend a regional workshop from the comfort of our home. This saves time and energy for other work tasks – and yes, for leisure time activities too! You have more energy in your leisure time when you don't have to sit in a car for six hours after a work meeting.

I must admit — I don't think that 2021 was as horrible as you might expect. Things were *buzzing* here in Lapland: we have been communicating actively, making videos and all sorts of articles, visiting the municipalities virtually, talked to entrepreneurs and associations who received financial support face to face when the pandemic situation allowed it, organised networking events for project implementers on Teams, participated in national campaigns and used them as benchmark for our own campaigns (how about the [Skiing Holiday in Lapland campaign?](#)), provided advise and support to project applicants, and so on and so forth. Leaders have been kept busy by the participatory preparation of new strategies in a region of long distances.

During 2021, yours truly participated in the activities of the Communications Network for the Rural Development Programme and the communications team for Leader. The communications people for Leader

also met face-to-face in Tampere. There is great value in peer support, whether you get it remotely or face-to-face. It gives you confirmation that you are doing the right things. This is the kind of peer support I have received from the other communication people of the Rural Development Programme. In addition, I have regularly received information from the Communication Network about the current status of the CAP27 reform and communications during the upcoming programming period. All ready-made materials, for example, for communicating about the recovery funds, have also been a great help in the midst of hectic everyday life, so thank you for those!

My warmest thanks to my colleagues in communications throughout Finland: you have been a great source of inspiration to me in the past the year! In many ways, 2022 will be the end of an era for us in communications with the closing of the communication projects and the transition to a new regional communication model. I look forward to seeing what kind of new networks of cooperation will be created for us in the future!

Johanna Asiala, Communication Coordinator for Lapin keino

Leader Outokaira tuottamhan ry

## 5.4 Enhancing continuity and impartiality in the future activities of the Communication Network

With the new programming period approaching, communications also started looking and working towards what was to come: change is always a possibility. The Communications Network operating in Finland has proven to be effective and it has been rightfully admired for years. We have found a unique way to meet the needs of regional and local communications. Communication projects have played a big role in this, and even though it is not possible to set up communication projects in their present format anymore in the upcoming period, have no fear, we have secured the future of the Communications Network!

During 2021, we have jointly prepared a local communication officer model in which the operational areas of each ELY Centre will have a local communication officer appointed for them for the entire duration of the funding period to handle the communications on common CAP issues. The change will bring much-needed continuity and further enhance working together within the Communications Network. The appointment of local communication officers will also ensure impartiality between the regions.

## 6 Innovative and profitable agriculture — EIP and AgriHubi

AgriHubi launched its operations in early 2021, and right away started working closely with the Rural Network. Two discussion sessions were held in January with the aim of engaging agricultural stakeholders in identifying the problems and solutions that the AgriHubi Farm Business Competence Network Finland should tackle. The group discussions at the sessions sought to identify the business management research and training needs of farm businesses, and the management consulting needs of future farm businesses, the economic and management tools needed, the means to ensure lifelong learning of farm businesses and in consulting, and the challenges posed by changes in the operating environment to the development and implementation of consultancy services. The results of the discussion sessions were reviewed in style at a webinar entitled 'From producer to business manager', which was held on 17 March and also organised together with AgriHubi.

EIP projects featured prominently in the webinars held throughout the year, but two events for presenting results stood out from among the events held by the Rural Network Support Unit: the event on recovery

funds held on 26 May, which, in addition to the results of EIP projects, featured a wider discussion on the best practices of EIP projects, and the Innovation Market, on which you can read more in sections 1.1 and 1.3. Regular virtual cafe breaks were also held for EIP operators to provide an informal forum for project implementers and administrative staff to exchange information. The autumn saw the first application round for EIP projects funded with recovery funds. To support the application round, the Rural Network held two info sessions together with the EIP scheme administration.

## 7 Insights

Virtual networking of people is not easy. However, the threshold for participating in virtual events is lower, and new people have found their way into our events. Let's keep up the goal-oriented expansion of the Rural Network next year too!

### **AgriHubi and Maaseutuvirasto.fi are a match...**

...made in heaven. Isn't that what they say about two things that fit together perfectly? A relatively large group of actors was engaged in the preparation and implementation of a common network platform for meeting the needs of both AgriHubi and the Rural Network during the year under review. And as far the sayings go, one could also state on the basis of the preliminary preparations that top results were achieved without aiming all that high. Co-operating with those involved in the Rural Network from the piloting phase to the actual designing of the platform and the ongoing implementation phase has once again been one of the highlights of the year. This is another project that succeeds through cooperation!

### **People are genuinely interested in rural development**

We rural developers love this work and don't think that better and more meaningful work even exists! And yet we sometimes doubt ourselves and feel like our efforts are going to waste. Does anyone care what we do? Are we making a change in anyone's life? As a concept, it is true that rural development work does not convey a fraction of all the great things it contains. During 2021, we got to tell exceptionally many people coming from outside our own developer bubble about what we do. Oh what light-bulb moments we got to witness! People were thrilled and, without asking, started to spread the word. So let's continue to boldly and proudly speak about our work and at the same time create more new rural developers along the way!

### **The role of breaks is emphasised in remote work**

The coronavirus pandemic made knowledge workers switch to working remotely in droves. It all went surprisingly fast and smoothly. However, people soon realised that the change had other, less positive impacts as their calendars started to fill up rapidly. The number of meetings and the number of people that needed to be invited to attend the meetings seemed to increase significantly in just one year, and for many, the increase also affected the number of working hours and coping at work. So maybe we are still learning how to work remotely and adapting to this new normal. There are, however, two easy ways to promote coping with work-related stress: 1. Book only meetings that last less than an hour, and do not let them run over the scheduled time. Taking a ten-minute break between meetings makes all the difference. 2. When you convene a meeting, specify whose attendance is necessary and whose is not.

### **Taking an active role pays off, also on an international level**

Having a participatory and streamlined process for the Rural2040 vision has paid off. We engaged a diverse group of experts to work on the vision for the future, we effectively summarised our ideas and then submitted the summary for use in building a common vision for the EU's rural areas. Our ideas can clearly be seen in the end result. The process was encouraging: even a small Member State can get its ideas heard when the work is done in a fresh new way and various actors are genuinely included in the process. All this showed in the end result, and grasping it was easy and meaningful also at the EU level.

### **Effectively reaching new target audiences through new channels**



Communication professionals must stay alert: new channels of communication keep emerging, old functionalities are developed and people's preferences change. Fortunately, the activities of the Rural Network Support Unit have always been founded on the courage to try new things, including new practices and tools.

This year, we sought to reach new target audiences, for example, through influencer co-operation — and our efforts were very successful! All of our three campaigns reached a six-figure number of people, and I am sure many of those people are new audience to us. This kind of co-operation should be continued in the coming years as well. Let's keep our eyes open though — the next novel idea is probably already waiting around the corner!

## 8 Indicators for monitoring in 2021

This chapter provides concise numerical data on the Rural Network's events; the objectives, types and participants of the events, and information on the various service packages.

In 2021, the Rural Network held, or participated in the organisation of, 97 events. The total number of participants in these events was 11,295 people. As a rule, all events were held as virtual events during the year of the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to these, during the year, parties involved in the Rural Network organised nine service package events that attracted a total of 1,796 participants. The Rural Network Support Unit organises 16 recurring stakeholder events, such as the virtual Nordic-Baltic coffee breaks, afternoon coffee sessions for thematic groups and meetings of the Communications Network. The thematic working groups of the Rural Network convened 24 times in total; Green Growth (8), Opportunities of Multi-locality (3), Smarta landsbygder i Svenskfinland och Norden (6) and The Rural Young People as Future Decision-makers (7). The number of participants in stakeholder events was 820 people. In addition, four collaborative events were held in co-operation with the Rural Network Support Unit. Collaborative events are events that do not meet the service package criteria in some respects, but nevertheless have been deemed worth implementing together with the Rural Network Support Unit in order to promote the Rural Network's activities. Participation in nine virtual meetings or workshops was related to the events of the ENRD and the EIP-AGRI network. Overall, 13,911 people participated in rural network events (trainings, service packages and stakeholder events).

During the Local Food Day, 17,774 people visited the participating farms. The number of visitors per farm ranged from four to four thousand. In total, 235 farms participated in the Local Food Day event. Despite the year being marked by the coronavirus pandemic, the number of farms that participated in the Local Food Day event for the first time under the coordination of the Rural Network Support Unit was close to an all-time record. Approximately 450 people attended the opening event of the Local Food Day on Hutko Llama and barnyard-animal farm in Pukkila. In KoneAgria, approximately 4,000 people visited the Rural Network's Innovation Market. In summary, 35,685 people in total participated in the virtual and on-site events related to rural network activities.

## 9 Funding plan and actual figures in 2021

	<b>Budget for 2021</b>	<b>Actual figures in 2021</b>
Remuneration expenses	550,000	491,614
Other expenses	2,000	0
<b>Total cost of structures</b>	<b>552,000</b>	<b>491,614</b>
Communications	300,000	276,533
Training	491,800	131,375
Best practices and networks	359,500	135,357
<b>Total costs of action plans</b>	<b>1,151,300</b>	<b>543,264</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,703,300</b>	<b>1,034,878</b>

The Rural Network's costs are divided in accordance with Article 54.3 of Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council between a) the structures needed to run the Rural Network and b) the preparation and implementation of an action plan.

The remuneration expenses for the Rural Network's structures include all of the personnel costs for the Network Support Unit (including employee remuneration and add-on costs, travel expenses, personnel training, occupational health care) and other general fixed costs related to the unit's remit (including leases, supplies and purchases of services), excluding the following expenses, which are included in the other costs of structures: heating, electricity and water, cleaning services, security services and guards, postal costs, transportation services, telephone costs and videoconferences.

The costs of action plans include comprehensive Rural Network services, such as the costs associated with communications, training events, good practices and networks.