

RURAL RECONSTRUCTION

Written by Piet Dijkstra, former assistant of the
Agency for European Folkhighschoolwork

From the time of its inception, the Folkhighschool movement in The Netherlands has shown great affinity with issues of rural life and the agricultural sector. This is due to its origin. The first school, "Allardsoog", came into being in an area with a relatively poor peasant population. Although still on a modest scale, certain social and educational activities were already carried out. One of the initiators of the school, Dr. H.G.W. van der Wielen, a young social geographer, became highly interested in stimulating such activities, although he did not have a rural background. This coincided with his acquaintance of the Danish Folkhighschool, which for decennia had exerted a great influence both on the Danish farming population and on its rural communities. These schools had transformed Danish rural life and it was felt that this formula could contribute to a necessary transformation of Dutch rural life and that it might fill the needs of the Dutch rural population.

It was the time of recession in the early thirties that did not only cause massive unemployment among industrial workers, but equally affected workers in the rural areas and threatened the existence of the rural community, particularly the agricultural community, which was still the backbone of rural life. The social gap between farmers and agricultural workers widened and there was an apparent neglect of rural areas, which led to serious impoverishment. Elements of the ancient image of a romantic ruralism, an image of a world that was sound and safe, with a far greater degree of community, where life morally might be better than in urban areas, were still there, but were gradually fading.

All this alarmed the traditional Farmers Unions and caused protest movements among the small farmers and peasants, both wanting to defend their vital interests. Such protest was in no way confined to The Netherlands. Similar movements arose in Denmark, in Brittany in France and in Schleswig-Holstein in Germany.

Throughout these protests, a sentiment could be noted, which just before the second World War was expressed by Professor W. Schermerhorn (the first post-war Prime Minister of The Netherlands) in a meeting with small farmers:

*"... it concerns our daily bread and butter; this is true, but not the whole truth and therefore (it is) a lie". "Not only"... "the struggle for a better living, but also the struggle for a **dignified** life, dignified with all the heavy intonations that are inherent in this expression. The main issue is the*

representation of the farmer in the national community. It is the struggle for self-esteem".

The Folkhighschool concurred with this idea.

World War II and the German occupation interrupted the activities of the Folkhighschool. Immediately after the war the work was resumed. On a national level rural communities were strengthened, social and cultural services were improved, or new services were introduced, like family care and community centres. A new kind of rural youth movement and a closer cooperation with farmer unions was promoted.

On an international level contacts were re-established with Scandinavia and new contacts were made in other countries: in France with the Confédération Nationale de la Famille Rurale, for which numerous study tours for agriculturists to The Netherlands were organized; in the U.K. with the Village Colleges in Cambridgeshire, which served a cluster of villages by providing social and cultural services and finally in Germany with the Ländliche Heimvolkshochschulen, through which new approaches to rural education and to social services in rural areas became known.

The confrontation with refreshing ideas and new approaches to rural development and services resulted in a cross-fertilization with other European countries. It also resulted in a concept of international contacts and closer relations were built between organizations interested in rural reconstruction. This led to the idea of calling a conference on what was then called "Rural Reconstruction, a comprehensive approach to rural development and to integrated planning, for improving rural conditions". Participants should be representatives of various institutions dealing with aspects of rural development, in particular those where new ideas and methods of working had been developed. Initially the term "rural reconstruction" was considered as controversial.

It was thought to refer to material rebuilding, which is understandable in a post-war situation. It was also thought to imply a rather conservative meaning of wanting to reconstruct a past. A better term was not found and the conference which started in 1953 continued with this name.

In this article we will first be dealing with the 4 conferences held between 1953 and 1956. These were:

- 1953 Theme: The social situation in the rural community, at Folkhighschool "Allardsoog", Bakkeveen, The Netherlands.
- 1954 Theme: The pattern of society in rural areas: social problems, social services and rural education, at Village College Impington, Cambridgeshire, U.K.
- 1955 Theme: The evolution of the social system and its consequences for rural areas, at the Ländliche Heimvolkshochschule Barendorf in Germany.
- 1956 Theme: Practical experience in rural reconstruction in Europe, at Centre Marly-le-Roi in France.

This will be followed by a brief survey of the series of conferences between 1961 and 1969. After an interval of 5 years, the conferences were resumed. Reasons for this interval were a change in staff and a closer analysis - on which we will come back later in this article - which would allow for a wider representation of rural and agricultural organizations and the involvement of organizations outside the Folkhighschools.

The following conferences were organized:

- 1961 Theme: The situation of rural districts in an open society, at Centre Marly-le-Roi, France.
- 1963 Theme: Planners facing the reality of rural reconstruction, in Asolo, Italy.
- 1965 Theme: Environmental planning and adult education, at the Ländliche Heimvolkshochschule in Barendorf, Germany.
- 1969 Theme: The implications of the Mansholtplan and the increase in scale in European agriculture, at the Ländliche Volkshochschule in Barendorf, Germany.

In discussing the situation of the rural population in an open society at Marly-le-Roi, not only the changes in a social and economic situation to which the rural population was exposed was included, but also how and to what extent the rural population could achieve a greater participation in the process of social and cultural change. Furthermore, the discussion also covered to what extent the rural population might have to conform to new conditions without losing their own identity and how they could master their own situation.

The conference in Asolo dealt with the real problems both planners and the rural population were facing. In the Italian context, the theory of rural reconstruction

could directly be linked to a great number of experiments and new realisations. It was concluded that a main problem in rural reconstruction was to translate the concepts to the rural population, so as to make them understand that they should prepare themselves for the necessary changes. Continuing education, including adult education, should be developed.

The two conferences in Barendorf concentrated on environmental planning and adult education and on European problems. The first one related environmental planning to adult education, which was considered to be an intermediary between planning and people. It was felt that problems of rural areas could not be dealt with in isolation and should be seen in the context of other parts of society. The second conference was a logical continuation of the first one, reviewing the implications of the Mansholtplan, a.o. the extension of agricultural holdings and the need for migratory solutions for mainly small farmers. Again the importance of adult education was emphasized.

In reading again the programmes of the first 4 conferences and comparing these with the last 4 by going through the lists of participants and reading the texts of a number of lectures and reports of the working groups, it is tempting to go into a full consideration of the development of these conferences. However, in the context of this article, it is justified to concentrate on a few main features.

Each conference tried to achieve a comprehensive and integrated approach to specific issues of rural and work and tried to define the reconstructional activities involved. This was done with an open eye for new approaches and for experiments that had already shown their values.

In all conferences, participants got first-hand information on such new realizations, not only by discussing such experiments, but in particular through fieldtrips. The main reason for this was the confrontation that might induce participants to look at their own work from a different perspective. In this sense, the choice for certain conference sites becomes understandable. Impington was chosen for its situation to provide rural areas with social and educational facilities of high quality, comparable to those in urban areas, serving a cluster of eight or nine villages, all in easy reach of the central village.

The centre at Marly-le Roi, although a national educational centre, would offer the Maisons de la Famille Rurale, institutions offering opportunities for

farmers' daughters to combine practical work at home and at the farm with part-time education and by that creating a direct link between practical duties and theoretical learning.

The Folkhighschool at Bakkeveen offered a basic concept of work and teaching, involving local people and others of different class. Such realizations were not presented as just individual solutions, but were looked upon as part of a comprehensive approach.

Although a good academic discussion was never avoided, the impetus of the conference work has always been in direct relation to practical solutions. The programmes, and hence the lectures and working groups were praxis-oriented and problem-oriented. In the programmes it was tried to compare developments in rural reconstruction work in various countries, like The Netherlands, Germany, U.K., France and Italy. For example in Marly-le-Roi, such a comparison made an important part of the conference in 1956. The general situation of an area under reconstruction, what was actually done and what had been the results of it, were the core of such a comparative study.

From the very beginning there had been a growing interest from many countries and from various institutions, including inter-governmental and agencies like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N. and the European Communities. This interest was best shown by the invitations extended for a next conference. Such invitations were often accompanied by an offer of material contribution by the inviting country.

Participants were not recruited from one specific target group, but participation should be a mixture of those dealing with rural problems at an academic level, those dealing with rural problems on an administrative level and a main group of those who represented the daily practical work in rural areas. This mixture made the conferences most valuable to participants, enabling them to not only assess their own activities, but also to be confronted with new ideas and experiences and making an exchange of opinions possible.

A start for a change in the organizing responsibility came at the 1956 conference in France. At this conference it was proposed that for the further development of the conferences a specific group should deal with future organization. Formerly, the organization was secured by the Foundation for European Folkhighschoolwork, in close cooperation

with the Foundation for the Exchange of Young Agriculturists. This meant that all preparations at international level were done by the Exchange Foundation, in close cooperation with a committee from the receiving country.

The conference at Marly-le-Roi decided to have a more permanent working group for the study of rural problems, which as an autonomous group might be acting in the European Bureau for Adult Education. The task of this group would then be to establish a wider relationship with interested bodies and probably with organizations like the Confederation Européenne d'Agriculture and the Food and Agricultural Organization of the U.N.

As to the further development, it was suggested that the conferences, including the activities of the working committee, should:

- deal with issues of rural reconstruction in Europe in its widest sense;
- study the issues relating to rural life in specific areas (both geographical and substance) in the countries involved;
- address themselves to the practical comprehensive approach and especially involve workers from the field;
- contribute to the exchange of information relating to rural reconstruction.

In later discussions (1958), it was hoped to establish a greater continuity, a sounder financial base and to widen the more or less "private initiative" to a kind of body that would involve persons and institutions from other countries on a more permanent base, at the same time establishing a link to other European bodies like CEA, or even to international bodies like FAO.

In Summary

Summarizing the four conferences on rural reconstruction, it can be concluded that:

- The rural reconstruction conferences – although with different emphasis on principles, issues and objectives – were a logical continuation of the thinking about rural work and the active effects of Folkhighschoolwork in The Netherlands;
- the Rural Reconstruction conferences emphasized the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to social, cultural and economical – which would also stress the political component – policies for rural work,

in order to bring the rural areas at par with the more urban segments of society.

- the contents of the conferences were therefore stressing the technical elements, ranging from land consolidation to new working methods, economic elements, ranging from improving production, the social element in the widest sense of the term, ranging from improving labour conditions to a wider range of social services, like housing, family care and hygiene and cultural facilities, ranging from better and more educational facilities to general cultural provisions, including leisure;
- the conferences were specifically directed to those who were either directly connected with rural activities, or were directed to practical workers in this field.

Although the full consequences of the changes in rural life were not yet completely recognized and assessed, the full range of rural reconstruction conferences has shown a way that might lead to the adaptation of a new approach for strengthening rural life.