

DAY ONE PANEL SESSIONS • 2 DEC 2025 • TUE

PANEL 1B: Rural Vulnerabilities (10:15 AM to 12:00 NN)

Who is responsible for the 2021 floods in Belgium? A Call to Reexamine the Rural–Urban Relationship

SERGE SCHMITZ

University of Liège

In July 2021, devastating floods struck Belgium and Germany, causing 39 deaths and extensive damage to homes and infrastructure in the Vesdre watershed. Such severe floods are very rare in Belgium, but they could become more frequent. In the aftermath of the disaster, many sought to identify who was responsible for the flooding. Two dams were accused of opening their gates, provoking a wave which suddenly flooded the valley. Some pointed out the lack of maintenance of the rivers and their tributaries, where beavers have built several dams. The narrowness of the valley and the construction directly next to the rivers exacerbated the situation, increasing the exposure of numerous people and the danger of the flood when materials, such as containers or cars, are turned into projectiles. Climate change and deficiencies in warning systems were also pointed out. The regional authorities commissioned a consortium of experts to investigate the causes of the disaster and how to adapt the Vesdre valley and other valleys in Wallonia. The experts emphasized the importance of analyzing the issue at the watershed level, considering land uses on the plateaus and the slopes, when most of the attention was focused on the valley. They also highlighted various social inequalities among residents that were neglected. The communication is an invitation to reconsider the water journey, country planning and the benefits provided by integrated agriculture and forest practices.