



CHAPTER

11



SEEDING AND SHARING: FORUM SYNERGIES AND PREPARE

 HANNES LORENZEN AND MICHAEL DOWER

IN A PERMACULTURE GARDEN OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

From the different stories of people, places and events that have filled the pages of this book, you begin to get an idea of what Forum Synergies was

and is. One thing is certain: it is hard to define. Forum Synergies is something like an evolving creature of collective intelligence, a network of rural actors, and a laboratory of methods to reach constructive dialogue and action. We are like a permaculture garden for rural innovation, for local democracy and mutual aid of engaged citizens across Europe. Remember our early

FS logo - a partly open frame and a tree spreading its seeds into the countryside? When we started our adventure, we did not have or indeed want any fixed, rigid understanding of sustainable development. We wanted to learn from the many exciting ideas, initiatives and practices across Europe and spread these ideas further, beyond our own organisation.

"Forum Synergies is something like an evolving creature of collective intelligence, a network of rural actors, and a laboratory of methods to reach constructive dialogue and action."



PLANTING THE SEEDS FOR NEW PROJECTS AND MOVEMENT

We have done this in many ways. Sometimes we helped newcomers and start-ups with training or seed money, or provided scholarships and exchanges to get young people into rural development work. Our workshops and gatherings have birthed many new ideas and collaborations, conversation and shared experience planting the seeds for new projects. Remember Jenny from chapter 2 of this book? She discovered Forum Synergies during the Karditsa meeting in Greece. There she met the Transnational Institute (TNI) of the Netherlands with whom she published a report a year later on the Greek financial crisis and right to food. *"My horizon opened at that one meeting,"* she says.

Or think of Eimhin Shortt, for whom the Karditsa event was a turning point. *"When I came to Karditsa I was involved with agroecology and land practices but had no idea about access to land questions. It was the conversations I had with Jenny, and Titus Bahner from Germany that sparked the idea of an Irish Land Trust,"* he remembers. That organisation is very much up and running just a year later in Ireland. Before Karditsa, Ireland had no significant involvement with Forum Synergies. We see the continuing expansion of FS sphere of activities from Georgia in the East to Donegal in the Irish – and European – far North West. In 2019 we have found five new Irish hosts for the 2019 scholarships, including Eimhin's own 'Growery'.



NURTURING NEW IDEAS AND HARVESTING THE FRUIT

You can see how projects have their beginnings at Forum Synergies and then grow out into the world beyond us. But being an incubator does not come without a risk. By providing support to individuals, groups and other organisations to get active in rural development, we risked losing the necessary energies for our own core activities when we engaged in many new fields and networks at the same time.

Sometimes we even felt the risk of becoming superfluous, in the way that good teachers see their students learn to flourish without further help. Good parents let their children fly when they are fledged. Forum Synergies has learnt to let its offspring run when their time has come.

However teachers, parents and civic organisations are not the same. We

"My horizon opened at that one meeting"

Jenny Gkiougki

are keen to sow and breed for a new rural life and help resilient initiatives and projects to find their feet. But we also need their feedback, inspiration and creativity so that we can stay on top of what rural movements need. It is not easy to keep a balance between collecting knowledge about good practices, seeding and nurturing new ideas and methods and then harvesting the fruits of these common efforts we make for a new lively and sustainable rural Europe. This is a call to all to keep in touch!

OPPOSITE

1. FS logo
2. Rural Ukraine

THIS PAGE

3. Eimhin (with cap) in the ERSG 2017 in Greece

"You should not be worried when your energy levels are depleted if you have given your heart to what you do."



4a. 4b. Contacts in Estonia during the SMT 1997: the premises of PREPARE adventure

ENERGY CIRCULATION - ONWARDS TO NEW ADVENTURES

Hannes Lorenzen opens the story

Through the 25 years of Forum Synergies' existence, we sometimes came to a point when our energy as an organisation was very low, especially when a new, young project had left the house ... but we soon regained energy from our network. We mention this here, because you should not be worried when your energy levels are depleted if you have given your heart to what you do. Good energy circulates and fills you up if you stay in touch with it, because this is the very nature of collecting, breeding and seeding what you believe in.

When the Sustainable Mystery Tour (SMT) ended by celebrating its 'Agenda 2000' in Portugal, our batteries of energy were indeed exhausted. But then came a new

adventure in Central Europe which revitalised us. The Tour had given us extra contacts in Estonia, Poland and other countries of Central Europe; and had made us aware that, ten years after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, rural people in those countries were grappling with the transition from the earlier systems of the communist regime to the approaches in the European Union which they aspired to join. This was a big transition and as key players of a new self-confident civil society, we took up that role.

With open borders between East and West suddenly everything seemed to be possible. The curtain in our minds had opened. We were curious to meet people of other cultures and realities, learn from their approaches to rural living, find out about their ambitions and perhaps find allies in our own desires for a more sustainable rural Europe in Western Europe.

MOVING BEYOND THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL

Undoubtedly important as the grassroots level is, we felt a responsibility to help give grassroots movements the opportunity to engage fruitfully with national and European decision-makers. We conceived the idea of a *'travelling workshop'*. This would bring civil society and government people from EU candidate countries of Central Europe to an EU member state to visit exemplary rural initiatives. As an officer of the European Parliament, I knew open-minded colleagues within the EU institutions. I launched the idea in the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development of the European Parliament; convinced its President to be Patron of the proposal; and found civil servants in the European Commission to carry and finance it. I enlisted the help of four NGOs - the Swedish rural movement Hela Sverige Ska Leva (HSSL-All Sweden shall live); the European Council for the Village and Small Town (ECOVAST), through its Swedish national section; the Federation of Swedish Rural Economy and Agriculture Societies, and Kodukant, the Estonian association of villages, which had been created with the help from HSSL.

THE TRAVELLING WORKSHOP 1999

The outcome was brilliant - a one-week travelling workshop, three days in Estonia followed by three in Sweden, with the company of 60 people from 18 countries

meeting each other for the first time; seeing new places, absorbing and exchanging new ideas, perceiving the reality of rural life in two countries and reflecting on what it might mean for them.

Co-hosting the event were Kjell Roger Karlsson and Staffan Bond from the two Swedish organisations, and Mikk Sarv of Kodukant. We were supported by Christoph Hatlapa from Steyerberg, Germany, as mediator; and by Márta Márczis of the Hungarian Rural Parliament, Sandor Köles from the Carpathian Foundation, and Michael Dower from ECOVAST as moderators.

THE CRAZY IDEA THAT ACTUALLY WORKED

It was just magic! We had been warned that this was a crazy idea, that *'travelling workshops'* were never conducted by the European institutions, that insurance would not cover the risks, that public money may not be used for such a *'school*

excursion' format. But this crazy idea worked. The opportunity to break away from their everyday routine and travel to experience rural reality, to meet, eat, talk and work with rural people went right into the hearts of people who might never have met each other - high level civil servants of the European Commission and the Parliament, officers from national ministries and regional authorities, local mayors, civil society leaders and very local people including farmers, teachers, rural women and entrepreneurs.

We travelled together across former borders and military security areas. We sat in small groups every evening writing our reports about what we saw - with no dinner until we had finished! We concluded with an art session and a fishbowl debate which had worked so well in Portugal. Back was the creative energy; and we engaged with more key people, offering them a glimpse of what it means to create synergies out of collective intelligence.





EMERGING SYNERGIES

During this travelling week in Estonia and Sweden, the idea grew that this group of people should continue working together through the time of transition and accession to help new neighbours into a new common Europe, and to spread the good news that rural Europe could become more democratic, more innovative and more sustainable in the best sense of the word. We, the members and friends of Forum Synergies, who had mainly focused on Western Europe, now started to discover our new neighbours.

The event had impressed the European Commission, which suggested that this method be more widely applied. The team which had led the event were joined by Michael Dower, Secretary General of ECOVAST and former Director of the Countryside Commission in England, who had taken part in the travelling workshop. He completed the editing of the report on the travelling workshop, which was published by the European Parliament with title *'Creating Partnerships for Pre-Accession'* and he

RURAL PARLIAMENTS

The first Rural Parliament was pioneered by the Swedish rural movement Hela Sverige Ska Leva (HSSL). Every second year since 1995, HSSL has brought a thousand or more people from their network of (now about 5000) village action groups to a three-day gathering in a regional town, to share their problems and solutions, to hear and challenge high level politicians and to agree a programme of collective action for the next two years.

This model has been followed by many National Rural Parliaments in a growing number of other countries, including the PREPARE partners in central Europe and the Balkans.

volunteered to draft proposals for the action that might follow.

WRITING REPORTS WITH A 'WET TOWEL'

Michael Dower takes up the story

The event in Estonia and Sweden was a particular delight for me. I met Forum Synergies for the first time, made many new friends, and came home with a head full of stories.

At that time, having retired from government service, I was a Research Professor of European Rural Development at the University of Gloucestershire; and, in that capacity, making a series of month-long visits to Vietnam to train public officials in the pursuit of their 5-year plan for rural development. A few months after the Forum Synergies event, Hannes asked me to final-edit the report on that event; and I found myself in a hot, quiet weekend office in Communist Hanoi writing about an event focused on animating rural Europe following

the collapse of the Soviet Union. I told Hannes, from halfway round the world, that I had a 'wet towel' around my head – which is a method that has also been used in finishing this book!

The themes in the report – action by the people, added value to local products, strengthening of civil society, cooperation between public and civil sectors – were already the stuff of life for me. Since 1985, I had been a leader of the European Council for the Village and Small Town (ECOVAST), which campaigned to promote the well-being of rural people, small towns and heritage of rural Europe. As President of ECOVAST from 1986, I drove the process of building a network of rural people across the wider Europe, with national sections springing up in Central and Eastern Europe (Croatia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Russia and elsewhere) as well as in Western Europe. In 1991, ECOVAST published a *'Strategy for Rural Europe'*, which established it as a consultative partner of the European Commission and of the Council of Europe.



THE BIRTH OF PREPARE

So, ECOVAST became a natural partner for Forum Synergies in following through the 1999 event in Estonia and Sweden. In consultation with Hannes and our Swedish, Estonian and Hungarian colleagues, I drafted a proposal for an ambitious project to foster multi-national exchange between East and West Europe. At a meeting hosted by Márta Márczis in Hungary, we agreed the basis for the project and a title – Pre-accession Partnership for Rural Europe, with the symbolic acronym *'PREPARE'*. We then sought funding from foundations in the United States, which at that time were keen to promote democratic institutions in the ex-Soviet countries. The [CS Mott Foundation](#) gave us a handsome grant: this was the first of five grants from this foundation, which formed PREPARE's base funding from 2000 to the end of 2016. This enabled us to launch the formal partnership, with Forum Synergies and ECOVAST as founder partners, together with Hela Sverige Ska Leva (Sweden),



Kodukant (Estonia) and the Hungarian Rural Parliament. Hannes acted as Chairman, and I as Coordinator.

By 2006, we had helped to create the [Latvian Rural Forum](#), the [Polish Rural Forum](#), the [Czech National Rural Observatory](#) and the [Slovakian Rural Parliament](#); and they had all joined the PREPARE partnership, together with the pre-existing [Lithuanian](#)

[Union of Rural Communities](#). Regular meetings and travelling workshops progressively strengthened the network, and promoted exchange of experience and ideas between East and West, including the LEADER concept, to the point that these civil networks often had an earlier and clearer idea of that approach than their own governments.

OPPOSITE
5. Sculpture "The crazy dancer"
by Michael Dower

THIS PAGE
6a. 6b. Launch of PREPARE
as a formal association in 2016
7a. 7b. Gathering in Poland in 2007:
Farmers market and panel discussion
8. PREPARE: Pre-accession
Partnership for Rural Europe



9a. PREPARE Gathering in Croatia 2009
9b. 9c. and in Albania in 2016
10a. 10b. Balkan Rural Parliament in 2018



MOVING TO THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

PREPARE then turned its attention to the Balkan countries. Over the decade between 2006 and 2016, PREPARE helped in the creation and increasingly active work of national civil society networks in each of the former countries of the Yugoslav Federation. These networks have not only become PREPARE partners, but are also now among the civil-society organisations from 40 European countries which now form the family of the biennial European Rural Parliaments, of which the first was held in 2013 on the model of the national rural Parliaments first held in Sweden.

Two of the ex-Yugoslav countries, Slovenia and Croatia, have joined the European Union. In 2014, in order to support our friends in the other Balkan countries, which still expect to join the EU in the foreseeable future, we decided to seek the support of the

European Commission to organise a travelling workshop in the same way we did in Estonia and Sweden in 1999. People from the civil and public sectors of rural life from six Balkan countries and Turkey took part in six simultaneous travelling workshops in Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, together

with experts from the European Commission, PREPARE partners and other leading European NGOs. Then Commissioner Dacian Cioloş strongly supported this event. I wrote a report on these events, *'Empowering rural stakeholders in the Western Balkans'*, which was published by the European Commission.





11a. 11b. 3rd European Rural Parliament in Venhorst, NL in 2017
12a. 12b. Estonian Rural Parliament, here in 2013

EUROPEAN RURAL PARLIAMENTS

In 2013, with the support of PREPARE and the European Rural Communities Alliance (ERCA), HSSL organised in Brussels a first European Rural Parliament, attended by 150 people from 30 European countries. Encouraged by the response, PREPARE, ERCA and the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) organised and held the 2nd European Rural Parliament (ERP) in 2015 at Schärding in Upper Austria.

That event was attended by 240 people from 30 countries. It adopted a detailed '*European Rural Manifesto*', based upon ideas gathered through surveys among rural people in 36 European countries.

This Manifesto has guided subsequent advocacy work. The 3rd ERP was held in Venhorst, Netherlands in 2017; and the 4th ERP in Asturias, Spain in November 2019. This biennial series has developed towards a true '*rural voice*' in Europe.





13. Rural Moldova

14. Empowering rural stakeholders in the Western Balkans



REACHING OUT TO THE BLACK SEA

The final part of this story brings us even further east, into the Black Sea. Of the 8 countries (other than Russia) which border or feed into the Black Sea, two - Romania and Bulgaria - are within the EU. The others - Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Turkey and Ukraine - are all in the process of pursuing national programmes for

rural development and are eligible for help from the EU in that process. In 2016, as a sequel to its promotional work in Central Europe and then in the Balkans, PREPARE organised a six-day travelling workshop in Armenia and Georgia, on the lines of the founding event in Estonia and Sweden of 1999 but focused on the well-being of small-farming communities.

Building on that event, there is now growing exchange and

cooperation between PREPARE and rural organisations in the Black Sea countries. Aris Adlers of the Latvian Rural Forum, who became President of PREPARE in 2018, has described the close links between PREPARE's partners in the Baltic countries and those in the Black Sea, drawing upon *"the successful experience of the Baltic states in the process of change from a centrally planned to a market economy."*



SEEDING AND SHARING IN A NUTSHELL

This process of seeding and sharing among rural movements and civil society organisations shows how much innovative potential lies in the 'living soil' of informal exchange of good practices and active bridging between local practitioners and political decision makers. Out of the travelling workshop of 1999 evolved a spirit of change in many rural corners of Europe. Forum Synergies began this journey in 1994, gained many friends, ideas and new partners in the process: but its influence has been light and inviting, while others have provided the impetus.

"How much innovative potential lies in the 'living soil' of informal exchange of good practices and active bridging between local practitioners and political decision makers!"

Vital in political and civic culture is cultivating trust and cooperation between very different human varieties from the grassroots to top decision makers. They are all humans and curious to learn, improve

and succeed. Forum Synergies and PREPARE have been building bridges to authorities and decision makers to gain those trustful relations with public authorities. Twice, in 1999 and 2014, Hannes' insider role in the European Parliament enabled him to gain political and financial support from the EU for major events conceived by Forum Synergies and then by PREPARE.

His personal twin-track involvement in both public and civil sectors was of high value as the family of national rural movements expanded. In the same way, my experience in both government service and civil society helped me in preparing programmes and articulating policy statements. We have sought, in these initiatives, to involve and enthuse both the civil and public sectors, and to promote cooperation across that divide.

The strength of these assets was matched and multiplied by the energy and enthusiasm of so many national civil society partners and so many local participants. Forum Synergies and PREPARE have been able to, as it were, punch above our weight in furthering the interests of rural people throughout Europe. We have dared to try things which seemed impossible and to open a space for creativity and positive cooperation.



15. Community spirit wins publication and its presentation in 2013