



A group of people are working together outdoors on a large hay bale. In the foreground, a man in a pink t-shirt and black shorts is kneeling, wearing white gloves and using a pitchfork to move hay. Behind him, a woman in a white t-shirt and green shorts is also kneeling and working. To the left, another woman in a light blue polo shirt is smiling. The background features a stone structure, a wooden structure, and lush green trees under a clear blue sky.

CHAPTER

12



1. "Energiser" moment at the Youth Gathering 2015

THE ENERGY OF YOUTH

ANITA SELICKA



Loes Mertens' morning 'energiser' was just thrilling. I admit that it was not easy to be fully up and running that early in the morning when the programme started, after long evening discussions, and of course having a good time. The 'energiser' was not one of those imported caffeine-drinks but a homemade variant. It was Loes' dynamic gym and yoga exercises which switched us on, so we could jump into the next theme or event every day. Many activities happen in parallel: creative workshops

to develop new ideas, young farmers' projects and farm visits; excursions with 'rural reality checks'; an art session in the forest, and the Market of Initiatives for young farmers and entrepreneurs. Loes herself was brimming with energy for her new seed breeding initiative in Portugal for organic and resilient '*sementes vivas*' - living seeds. Yes, Loes did energise us. But there was also much energy in our own ambitions to share and learn about others. We had entered something like a 'spaceship for rural

youth'. Over forty young people from 23 countries, including even from as far away as Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia and the Western Balkans had come to Dronten in the youngest polders of the Netherlands. We were curious to learn about and share opportunities facing the European rural youth.

"We had entered something like a 'spaceship for rural youth!'"

We were hosted at Warmonderhof School Farm which usually teaches local and international students the theory and practice of biodynamic farming. Students were off for the holidays and we were allowed to sleep in their rooms and use their classrooms for our sessions. Biodynamic farming emphasises the need to treat the individual

components of a farming system as part of a whole, to see them as interrelated and ecologically balanced. Balance was also promoted in the curating of the workshop over the three days - a good mix of theory, art and practice, giving and receiving, indoor and outdoor activities. Forum Synergies had to limit the number of participants. The interest was amazing.



FUTURE FARMERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

PEOPLE!



Joris van der Kamp is a young farmer and a film maker. He discovered Forum Synergies at the European Rural Sustainability Gathering in Beaufortain in 2014. Joris was fully engaged in running and animating his Future Farmers project – gathering success stories of young farmers who managed becoming farmers, also beyond heritage, as newcomers or so-called new entrants. Joris had gathered a good mixture of independent new farmers and their success stories from across Europe, who had realized their own visions. We asked Joris to co-organise a youth workshop at the bio-dynamic farm school in Dronten, NL, 2015, which has inspired many young people to start the adventure of becoming a farmer in times of many uncertainties. Joris and his wife Juliane also tried that same adventure. In spite of a number of kickbacks, they launched a new farm project near Wageningen, NL.

Joris van der Kamp and his project *'Future Farmers in the Spotlight'* had helped to actively involve the young farmers' community of the region. He had been a student at Dronten school years before. As founder of Future Farmers he had been producing remarkable videos of 16 inspiring *'newcomers to the land'*-future farmers. He had traveled to Norway, Denmark, Ireland, Germany,

Greece, France and Spain to meet the pioneers where they live and to record their testimonies. His remarkable short film on five farmers telling how to best feed and treat their soils *'Soil farmers'* had convinced Forum Synergies to choose Dronten as *'the place to be'* to learn from *"working with Mother Earth the biodynamic way."*

We did not regret having come here. The engaged, positive spirit of

teachers and the remaining pupils at Dronten was contagious. Although statistics may tell us that young farmers are on the way to extinction, this place felt like a *'young farmers incubator'*, or like an agroecological magnetic field. Everything looked like it was falling out of the established square forms. The architecture of the school building did not offer any right angle, nor did the school's curriculum.

PEOPLE!



Olga Huemer's dream to live on a farm came true. It was her wish when she participated in the Youth workshop in 2015 and 2 years later, she and her husband **Thomas** managed to buy a farm to start with organic vegetables and cereals in a small mountain village in Austria. From her childhood in Ukraine, collecting herbs in the wild for her grandmother and working in her grandmother's garden, she keeps an interest for traditional knowledge of herbs and seeds. That is why they work only with seedfast (non-hybrid) varieties of crops and old breeds of animals, which are mainly endangered. They also are members of **Arche Noah**, an Austrian seedsaving organisation.

Journey through time



Balanced teaching and learning is the essence of biodynamic philosophy, between agronomy and practice in the field, between wood, metal and art work, music, dancing and singing. Cows must have horns, feeding the

soil not plants is a principle, seeds and animals shall be bred for longevity not for high yields - these objectives are respected in biodynamic practices. Finally being a farmer, small or even tiny, is a way of life.

"This place felt like a 'young farmers incubator'."

2. Warmonderhof School Farm



STEREOTYPES LOST

The Dronten youth gathering challenged the stereotype that rural regions are boring, backward or undesirable. According to [Eurostat](#), around 4.4% (or 10 million people) of those employed in the EU-28 worked in agriculture in 2015. Of these, almost three quarters worked in just seven countries. Rural areas account for 28% of the European population. These areas are frequently those with the lowest average income, highest rate of unemployment and poorest access to public services. *"The general opinion seems to be that only the 'losers' stay in their home villages,"* one respondent to the European Rural Youth Parliament told me, *"Village life is seen as outdated and anti-progressive."* But is that still true today?

"The general opinion seems to be that only the 'losers' stay in their home villages."

THE ART OF BEING ROOTED

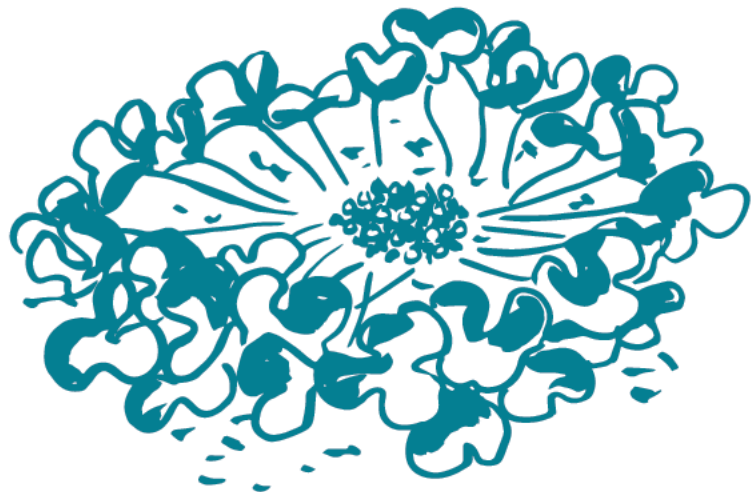
Forum Synergies has always been interested in the multiple ways people engage with and understand rural life. Artistic practice, whether visual, musical or movement-based, is one way of knowing about the rural world. It is also a key way to make rural issues understandable to lay-people or to explore the different ways different people engage with such issues. The rural world is also

ART SESSIONS

During Forum Synergies' workshops we put an emphasis on inclusive and enabling processes, and try to encourage participants to experience and express themselves as human beings with a multitude of dimensions - emotional, intellectual, spiritual - and to communicate from heart-to-heart. During art sessions, there is space for creative chaos, which often frees the mind for creative problem-solving too. Objects and symbols collected during field visits play an important role in the artistic process. In Dronten, we were guided by Land artist Irma Horstman, who invited us into the woods, where all kinds of natural material was rearranged to symbolic art works, which were then connected between each other. Building bridges on dry land, as it were.

frequently stereotyped as a non-cultural space, whereas art and culture are reserved for the city dwellers. This ignores how much inspiring work is being produced in our countryside. Art and playful encounters have become important ingredients of Forum Synergies events. It is in this context that the Latvian Rural Forum ([LRF](#)), with

which I have been involved for the past seven years, operates. We are reframing rural areas as exciting, desirable places for working, living and leisure. We want to prove that young people can do much more than just preserving nature or work in the traditional sectors of farming, fishing and forestry. A new rural paradigm with changes that we have



experienced in the development of technologies are part of that agenda. Lifestyles and values have also revealed new paths to the future – including the sharing economy, teleworking, private and innovative rural schools, new energy efficient and sustainable housing solutions. Also permaculture villages are part of this creativeness, as are small rural

businesses which reach their markets via postal services, drones and other technologies. In all this a widely available broadband, mobile public services and others are helpful – so we can be part of an increasingly dynamic society living in rural areas. But still – this is not happening everywhere and for everyone, so there is still much work to be done.

“We are reframing rural areas as exciting, desirable places for working, living and leisure.”



3. Latvian Rural Community Parliament 2019
4. International participants: from left – Āris Adlers (PREPARE, Latvia), Kirsten Birke-Lund (ELARD, ERP, Denmark), Anita Seljicka, Leotrim Germizaj (Kosovo, PREPARE), Ave Bremse (Estonia)

NEW RURAL PARADIGMS

The latest ‘explosion’ of rural inspiration happened in June 2019 at the fourth Latvian Rural Community Parliament. The theme of the gathering was ‘New Rural Paradigms’ – a three day bi-annual event gathering policy makers, rural enthusiasts, academics, and representatives from all sectors. We invited more than fifty storytellers from all over the country to share their experiences. Most of them were newcomers to the rural

environment – families that had moved to the countryside to start their business or just to realise their dreams. *“You need to dream big and once it looks possible – to work hard on reaching it,”* said Ilona Blūma, who realised her dreams of running her own greenhouse and [aviation school](#).

The gathering also revealed heartwarming stories about the young couple Asnāte and Jānis Avotnieki, renovating an ancient [manor house](#) that they bought through auction just three years ago. The young couple

has turned the house into a place of creativity for working and living, combining old features with modern facilities in a shabby-chic style. The new young owners moved in from the city of Riga. If you had asked them ten years ago, while they were still business students, whether they could imagine becoming owners of a manor house in the countryside, they would have laughed. Living out here with their three daughters, this has become a magnetic place for young people.

PORTUGAL IS NOT SO FAR AWAY

Artur, whom we met in the Algarve in Chapter 5, has also noticed a youthful resurgence in his region. *"We still have problems of course with the ageing of our villages and the countryside but there is also this new young generation coming back from abroad to the Sierra,"* he reflects. *"It is still a small but very dynamic group. Many come back to the place of their parents or grandparents and bring a spirit of new entrepreneurship. They reconnect with their families' history and are usually highly educated. Many come from urban areas, have worked in other countries, speak several languages, and want to live a countryside life with their children. They have access to resources which the older generation does not, such as naturally surfing around the internet. They are interested in new ways of living sustainability and spirituality, want to make the countryside their new world. Their new views and expectations bring us new creativity in thoughts and practical action. We are now able to offer new services to the people without the unique focus of just making money but to live a better and independent life."*

"Their new views and expectations bring us new creativity in thoughts and practical action."

Artur Gregório



5. Anneli Kana - right -, during the Estonian Rural Parliament 2017

NOR IS ESTONIA...

In our Nordic neighbour country Estonia, we also see very active young rural entrepreneurs with a strong youth civil society in rural development. The NGO *Kodukant*, meaning 'home place', hosted the Sustainable Mystery Tour back in 1998 and is now well recognised in Estonia. We have much in common, such as bringing together tradition with young entrepreneurial spirit.

Anneli Kana, former General Secretary of Estonia's *Kodukant* movement: *"Kodukant as an Estonian rural movement and as an NGO has become strong and recognised by officials and governments, because we were from the beginning deeply rooted in our Estonian rural culture, history and national identity. We were singing with thousands of our people to call for freedom in 1988, before the wall came down. We were organising ourselves in rural women's clubs. But we have*

always also looked towards our young people as equal partners and our hope for the future. This is why Kodukant is so strong today."

YOUNG PEOPLE STEERING RURAL DEVELOPMENT

From my work with the Latvian Rural Forum, I have found NGO work to be one where young people can develop themselves and their career quite quickly. Within a short period of time, I found myself managing large scale projects with real responsibility, running day-to-day communication, event organising, document analyses, teamwork, accounting, search for funding and a lot of other activities with grassroots, policy makers, decision makers and international partners - passionate people being involved to keep the show on the road. I saw this notably



6. My 1st Forum Synergies event, ERSG 2014 in Beaufortain, FR – see Chapter 8

7. Team of LRF during a visit to community in Kurzeme, LV – from left Anita Seļicka, Aris Aders, Zane Seredina, Katrīna Idu

at my first Forum Synergies event, the [ERSG 2014](#) in Beaufortain. It was the same year I became a director of LRF and I was keen to learn from existing rural development initiatives across Europe. In Beaufortain I had a delightful opportunity to enjoy intergenerational co-working, as I had a chance to discuss, organise events and even be part of a management team of a European organisation with professionals that have experience in rural development, some even 50 years more than I do.

As a young woman I was welcomed and seen as equal; and I could use my set of skills and knowledge, which of course diverged from the other more experienced colleagues. Even though this might seem normal, it unfortunately still is not always the case that young people are highly valued and involved in all levels and sectors. In 2016, 57% of [young people](#) in Europe have the impression that, in their country, the young have been marginalised and excluded from economic and social life.

In strong contrast to this perception, our team of the Latvian Rural Forum is ambitious and energetic enough to reach the best possible results in all fields of our work. Maybe this is because we are mainly young people, but also because we involve experienced and active members in the board. I hope we serve as an example for others. We are a great resource for our country. For the 100th

anniversary of our Latvian nation, three youngsters produced 100 [videos](#) about young Latvians and their work to improve livelihoods of Latvian people. We shared these stories during the Latvian Rural Community Parliament in the basements of old manors, and I do hope there will be a moment for similar stories from all around Europe in the [European Rural Parliament](#).

RURAL DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT FROM THE BALTIC RURAL CIVIL SOCIETY

"Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, as among the first countries involved in the [PREPARE](#) cooperation network, have since 2009, with their civil society advocacy experience in rural areas, proactively followed and supported the creation of Balkan cooperation platforms. With their experience of cooperation with civil society in the Balkans, Baltic civil society groups are now supportive in Black Sea countries through [PREPARE](#) and [ELARD](#). Their successful experience in the Baltic States helps partners in the Black Sea region in transition from a centrally planned to a market economy."

Aris Adlers, President of PREPARE



8a. 8b. 8c. 1st European Rural Youth Parliament 2017

THE EUROPEAN RURAL YOUTH PARLIAMENT (ERYP)

Whilst there are examples of how young people have been actively included in rural development work, this is not always the case. Frequently it is very difficult to have young voices included in rural decision making. There is a lack of fruitful dialogue and collaboration between 'adult' and youth rural movements which keeps the voice of the rural youth

weak and makes it hard for young and old to work together. The youth workshop in Dronten planted the seed which grew into the European Rural Youth Parliament (ERYP), an informal consortium of rural youth organisations within the European Rural Parliament (ERP). Our resolution at the end of the youth workshop germinated a new rural youth movement. The Youth Parliament is important because sustainable, long-term involvement of young people means making rural decision-making

accessible. It is about engaging young people in the practicalities of working in this arena, equipping them with the tools to be active while the older generation takes a more advisory role. It enables adults and elderly people to listen to young voices, their experiences of rural life and their ideas for solutions. Crucially, bringing youth into focus early on means incorporating both visions and experiences into reflection and decision making and taking each other seriously.

*"I have the passion,
a map in my head and
the heart to carry on."*

PASSION, SCHOLARSHIPS AND GAINING VOICE

"I have the passion, a map in my head and the heart to carry on," said one of the participants of the youth workshop before leaving: she returned home with new inspiration and fresh motivation to continue rural development work. I believe the youth theme will also continue and grow within Forum Synergies, with the new scholarship programme. The Latvian Rural Forum and Forum Synergies now cooperate through a network of hosts from all across Europe, ready to receive and guide young people into rural sustainability projects and gatherings. I will never forget when at the end of the Dronten gathering,

FORUM SYNERGIES' SCHOLARSHIPS

Sharing experiences of sustainable rural development and getting the young generations involved - that is the aim of the [FS scholarship programmes](#). We invite young scholars to travel abroad and to spend some weeks with a host of their choice, offering a tangible experience in sustainable local and rural development. After a call for proposals and a selection based on interviews, scholars and hosts can receive financial and logistical support. In exchange, they commit to share their experience and the lessons learned within the network and with partner organisations. In 2019, reports from the scholarships will be presented at the European Rural Parliament.

Tymur Pliushch from Ukraine was on stage to report back from one of our workshops. On the first evening, at the round of getting to know each other, he had tried to present himself. He was stuttering so heavily that we could hardly understand what he was trying to say. But now

on stage, speaking with passion about his experience, his voice has fundamentally changed. Like in the movie *'The King's Speech,'* he made his passionate wrap-up without a single stutter. We could literally hear his hesitations fall off. He spoke with new energy. That touched us deeply!



ga. gb. Youth Gathering – Dronten 2015



THE ENERGY OF YOUTH IN A NUTSHELL

The scale of interest in the Forum Synergies youth workshop, and the many projects which have appeared following the workshop, has been immense. It really seems like this is an arena in which Forum Synergies should intensify its work. Co-organiser of the youth workshop Joris van der Kamp concluded at the end of the workshop: *"Our Future Farmers initiative and the Forum Synergies Youth Gathering were like mosaic stones in a broader European movement of new farmers and young rural people who are aware that business as usual is not an option. We want to work 'with' nature not against it, with our neighbours, with animal welfare, agroecology, social projects and education for resilience."*

Young people are the energisers of rural development. More young and new farmers are needed to make our rural places dynamic and lively. Besides the economic transition towards more diverse solutions, cultural activities and mutual respect between generations will build solid ground to be able to meet the challenge of future farming and rural livelihoods. Will young people stay or come back in sufficient numbers to keep

the critical substance for the services needed in villages and small towns such as schools, medical care and public transport?

"Sustainable rural policymaking as well as civil society working in this field need to make an effort to fold young people in."

Generational renewal means listening to and actively involving young people on equal footing with older members of the community. Kodukant in Estonia and the Latvian Rural Forum have found a successful way to do this. Sustainable rural policymaking as well as civil society working in this field need to make an effort to fold young people in, to ensure their voices and concerns are heard and taken seriously. We need to see this across the continent; young people are the future, after all. Let us equip them with all that we have learnt, and in turn learn from them, in order to move Europe together toward a more sustainable future.

