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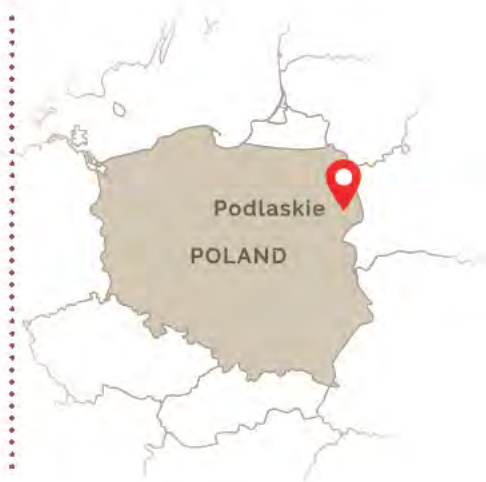
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LEARNING TO LISTEN

MARINA GUÉDON



We celebrate midsummer, sitting at a fireplace amidst a clearing of Knyszyń forest, in Podlaskie region, Northeast Poland. Under the shadows of the pines surrounding us, the wolf appears - in my mind -, the wolf who gobbled sweet Little Red Riding Hood. The big bad wolf. He is back in rural Europe. He is not only in 'my' mind here and now, he scares ordinary people. Shepherds are upset

that the wolf is protected and hikers fear crossing paths with the wolf in the forest.

A few months before finding myself in the Polish forest, I participated in a training on non-violent communication and mediation. During this training, I heard the 'little red riding hood' story - told from the perspective of the wolf. This was fascinating. Listening

to the wolf, sweet little 'chaperon rouge' was not so sweet anymore. She marched through 'his' forest, accompanied by a bunch of noisy woodcutters and other unpleasant people. For the first time the wolf felt fear in 'his' forest, he tried to reach out to the newcomers and explain, but they just screamed at him and the woodcutter almost killed him with his axe!





OPPOSITE
1. Mountain forest forums in Bavaria, Germany, an inspiring experience of 'Civic dialogue' shared on FS website

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2. 3. Workshop venue in Podlaskie region

MEDIATION AND NON-VIOLENT COMMUNICATION

The first thing you learn in mediation and nonviolent communication is to listen before you talk. This is to try to put yourself in the shoes of the other, to grasp his or her point of view. When you learn to wholeheartedly listen, you talk with a different understanding, with more compassion. This is often a more productive way to face a shared problem together.

In situations of conflicts or misunderstandings, it is useful to consider in what ways we may also

be the wolf in someone else's story, not just sweet little red riding hood. One way of confronting this is daring to engage the wolf in a conversation, embracing its views and then welcoming fears, anger and conflict as a source for change that might be needed to improve our relationships, our understanding or even future cooperation. To practice nonviolent communication means stepping out of our 'comfort zone' and being able to see ourselves as someone else's wolf too.

From the very beginning, Forum Synergies has foregrounded the importance of constructive dialogue, facilitating gatherings and

"To practice nonviolent communication means stepping out of our 'comfort zone!'"

space where people are enabled to exchange views in person and in protected space. This is about building bridges between rural people, between wolves and shepherds, farmers and nature conservationists. We have trained ourselves and others to change perspectives and look at sustainable rural development as gathering by the fire in a forest clearing.



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4. Pembrokeshire, a territory with rich natural and cultural heritage, here Newport

OPPOSITE

5. Narberth, small rural town

6. Stackpole Quay

7. Participants of our Civic Dialogue Workshop in front of PLANED headquarters



Journey through time



CIVIC DIALOGUE

We understand '*civic dialogue*' as a fusion between civic engagement and territorial dialogue. We are interested in concepts, practices and problems related to citizens' participation in rural decision-making, including collective initiatives. We facilitate dialogue between actors, opening a space for discussion and promoting mediation, consensus building, and local involvement.

Our '*civic dialogue*' thematic programme deals with dialogue between opposing stakeholders. It aims at influencing policies that have a strong impact on territories, especially with regard to agriculture, food, environment and social cohesion. We facilitate informal exchange between participants and offer capacity-building in constructive communication.

In general, the topics of our training sessions are:

- **democracy** (dialogue between citizens and institutional actors)
- **civic engagement** (territorial

dialogue - cooperation between local actors and projects)

- **dialogue and relationship building** (environmental mediation and rural conflict resolution)

To illustrate this, I would like to take you to two great civic dialogue workshops organised by Forum Synergies. Together, they flesh out quite nicely the potential and breadth of civic dialogue techniques. I take you to Wales first, to the region of Pembrokeshire, before we head back to Podlaskie, Poland in order to end the story of the encounter I had with the wolf. Our visit to Pembrokeshire was in 2015, and it was about learning from a success story. Civic dialogue strategies have been employed for some time in local decision-making structures. It is an efficient, effective system. Our visit to Poland, one year later, was about learning from an area that had almost no experience with civic dialogue. Our hosts were new, ready to learn and keen to try out some techniques.



WELCOME TO PEMBROKESHIRE, WALES

During my train ride from London Paddington to Carmarthen station, I felt enthusiasm and stress, a combination I am familiar with when I have to deal with the unexpected. Obstacles piled up: the train was delayed, my final destination changed and, whilst I generally feel fine in English, the Welsh accent plays tricks on me. What if I do not understand the conductor when he announces my station?

But, as is often the case, kindness reigns and co-travellers tell me when and where to get off. So I find myself on a cold Welsh night waiting for a member of PLANED to pick me up. PLANED is the local partner we collaborated with to host the workshop.

The organisation has ample experience working on dialogue, citizen participation and community empowerment.

PLANED: 'LIVING LOCAL COMMUNITIES' AT WORK

Pembrokeshire sits in southwest Wales and has a mainly rural population of around 123,000. It has a long coastline with fine landscape that has been protected and valorised by Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. The economy relies mainly on agriculture and tourism, thanks to a wealth of natural and cultural heritage.

We are here thanks to Michael Dower. He had already identified PLANED as a success story when he carried out a survey on local sustainable projects in the UK.

PLANED is a community-led partnership with a 30-year history. It

works with "geographic communities and communities of interest to identify, to develop and to implement sustainable projects that ensure the well-being of the community, with a focus on long-term, integrated, collaborative actions." Under its former name, the South Pembrokeshire Action for Rural Communities (SPARC), PLANED was one of the 137 groups selected by the EU to pilot the LEADER programme back in 1991. It has been managing the LEADER group since then. From a Land Trust to energy provision, PLANED's work is far-reaching. Our workshop, however, focused on how to build partnerships between local communities, the public sector, voluntary services and special interest groups.



LEADER

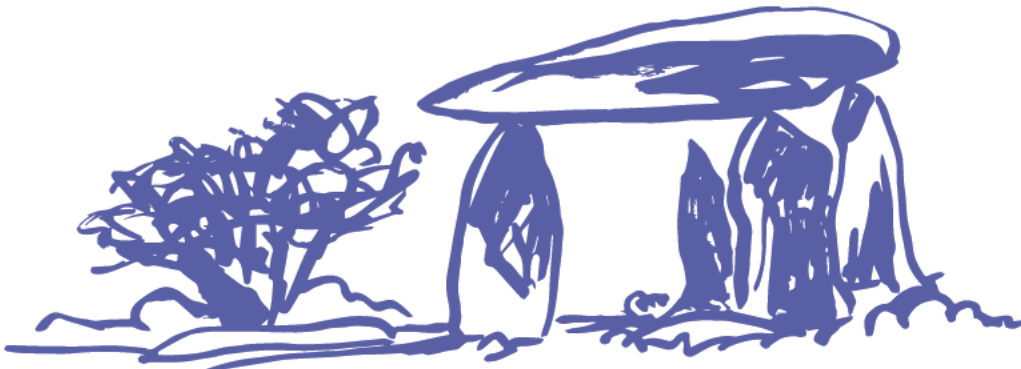
'LEADER', (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) the rural development programme and method to promote partnership between civil society, entrepreneurs and public bodies, is one of the most remarkable success stories in the European Union. With the LEADER programme, which started in 1991, the EU for the first time encouraged member states to establish bottom-up participatory development projects. LEADER later became part of rural policy programmes and is still a very important element of the Common Agricultural Policy.

LEADER focuses on endogenous development with an integrated multi-sectoral perspective, encouraging innovation, international cooperation and exchange of experiences. The heart of LEADER projects are so called LAGs (Local Action Groups), working in partnership between the public and private sector. LAGs are usually constituted as non-profit-making organisations, in charge of involving local people to define the Local Development Strategies (LDS) of their respective territories and to implement it.

CLLD

'CLLD', Community-Led Local Development is the export of the LEADER approach to all EU structural funds. Since the programming period from 2014-2020, it can be applied in European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), European Regional Development (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF) and European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) Fund. This has allowed for a more diverse funding mechanism. LEADER LAGs and CLLD projects can now deal with more complex

rural development challenges than before – such as cooperation between the rural, fisheries and urban areas, social cohesion and essential services for rural residents, services for the disabled and ICT. The 217 rural LAGs who joined the initiative in 1991 have now grown in number to 3000 in 2019, including coastal and urban territories. The LEADER and CLLD method is also being applied and spread in many neighbouring countries of the EU, in Latin America, Africa and Asia.





8. Controlled burn in Craig Rhos y Felin, Brynberian
 9. Firebreak cutting in Carn Ingli, Preseli Hills
 10. Participants exchange during the workshop in Wales

TALKING ABOUT WILDFIRES

"We used to have wildfires in summer on the mountains, generally provoked by farmers," Steven Bradley of the Pembrokeshire Sustainable Agriculture Network explains. "Because of a lack of information, farmers sometimes just throw a match. This may seem silly to us now, but it was clear that there was a lack of appropriate information about fire prevention reaching the people who need it. It became a real problem."

So PLANED helped set up a group to identify all actors that had to be sat around the table to really tackle the wildfire problem.

These included the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park team, the fire brigade and local farmers. Farmers were trained in controlled burns and were also offered technical support like firebreaks. It enabled open communication and education between all affected parties. The results are clear: the number of wildfires has significantly fallen. Needless to say, this has saved the fire services much time and money.

This information was taken to the Welsh government as a case study to encourage them to set dates for permissible burns in the uplands. They *"looked at this group as a citizen pilot and also as a source of information to see how to adapt*

policies sooner than later," Steven explains. This is a good example for the kind of easy communication and collective problem-solving enabled by bringing different stakeholders around a table.

Over 30 years, PLANED has established a long-term relationship with farmers, authorities and the National Park. Steven tells us that *"working with farmers is sometimes a tough nut to crack but we don't patronise them: we bring the information, sow the seed and give them time to build their capacity without breaking confidentiality – even if some activities are not always legal. Some projects take years before people commit. Patience is essential."*



"We bring the information, sow the seed and give time to build capacity without breaking confidentiality."

Steve Bradley



11. Imagine you dreamt community
12. 13. Sharing knowledge explaining
the sustainability tool

DISTINCTIVE COMMUNITY SKILLS

"What makes your place distinctive and special?" members of the PLANED team ask in a workshop to bring to the fore what participation and engagement actually look like. "A good place to raise children," "beautiful wildlife" and "small community" are some of the first ideas they jot onto the flipchart. It does not matter whether you have been here for days or decades, every perspective counts. Together, the ideas on the flipchart illustrate some kind of collective vision.

We follow this by talking through the 'Community Audit', a series of questions which sketch out in more detail what the place looks like and what people do in it, where they work or what kind of services and transport options are available. This is a chance to get participants talking about their own perception of the community, around a cup of tea.

A similar exercise - the 'Skills & Resources audit' - goes one step further, on the personal level: people discover their skills (personal, practical, technical and hobbies),

and identify what they need from their local community. Too often development decision-making processes or results-driven projects ignore this human aspect. Approaches like these foreground personal connection, bring a sense of pride and engagement to the local community and empower individuals to get stuck in on the local level.

"These tools help to envisage how sustainable development is relevant to you, in your local community," PLANED people say. "Here we feel that if a small group of people explores what needs to be changed and makes that change on their own, it can have a bigger impact than just organising a training session on sustainable development."

FS TRAINING SESSIONS: SHARING KNOWLEDGE

Forum Synergies' training sessions usually have the character of knowledge sharing rather than front teaching. We train by sharing good practices and professional knowledge. We build training sessions around the existing experience and needs of participants. During the workshop in Wales in 2015 the local partner organisation PLANED organised a training session on community visioning. During our Civic Dialogue workshop 2016 in Poland people shared their knowledge on group facilitation and on local community involvement. Participants used tools of mediation such as active listening, reformulation and observation of body language and analysed the different perspectives of stakeholders.

IMAGINING THE FUTURE – ACTION PLANS

For a local community to really be involved in the sustainable development of its own place requires building a vision of what they want to see it become in the future. What would their ideal community look like? Beginning with such big questions, we take a step back to turn visions into tangible actions.

This is to counter an often used top-down approach to development, which rarely takes into serious consideration the needs or wants of communities or regions. This is ethically problematic and unlikely to be a sustainable, long-term development strategy. For that you

need local actors to be involved in local initiatives and projects from the very beginning, taking account of their needs and working through different ways to meet them. Ownership must be with the community, if these strategies are to continue. This also helps should funding run out.

"Well, the catalyst to start a process is usually a challenge, an opportunity or an issue to solve in a community," the PLANED staff tell me. *"We are here to enhance the process and filling the gap if the community lacks support for instance".* They do this by gathering community members to draw up an Action Plan.

"People suggest how the proposals that come out from the Action Plan might progress," Helen Murray,

"Ownership must be with the community"

former Director of PLANED explains. *"Thematic working groups from the Community Association Forum take them forward. According to the project topic, we link them to our networks: Community Energy Network, Heritage, Sustainable Agriculture etc. If they are interested in joining, they get the opportunity to share experiences, get to know other people, have access to decision-makers and carry the lessons learnt back to their communities...We keep in contact with people on the phone, asking if they need support, linking up constantly."*

LEAVING WITH A WELSH LOVE SPOON

Members of the PLANED team also talk about the importance of celebrating what has been achieved. *"We invite communities to a celebration that acknowledges them as stimulating and supporting the dialogue,"* she says. So PLANED accompanies these projects from the initial dreaming exercise right through to the celebration. Perhaps we can think of it as a kind of support network, something which creates the space for people to work out what it is they want for their region and what steps they need to take to actualise that vision.

It sounds almost common sense but it is still rare to find such rural development projects where real participation and community engagement are foregrounded. Seeing examples of how this actually pans out is vital and we, the participants, continue our Civic Dialogue Journey through Europe inspired and curious and armed with a Welsh love spoon, a traditional hand-crafted offering to sweethearts, under our arm as a parting gift.



PEOPLE!



An activist, a dreamer, a teacher, a musician, a facilitator, **Mikko Sarv** doesn't really fit into 'boxes'. Deeply committed to Estonian rural life he was Chairman of Kodukant, the Estonian village movement in the early 2000. He became co-president of Forum Synergies together with Isobel Holbourn when the non-profit organisation was officially founded in 2000. He explored Open Space methods in his country and supported its use in Forum Synergies. In past years he has been involved in a Forest School.

WELCOME TO PODLASKIE, POLAND

The 'Voivod' (province) of Podlaskie has frontiers with Belarus, Lithuania and Russia. Its capital, Białystok, has 500 years of history and is surrounded by the Knyszyńska Primaeval Forest. This region is known for its mosaic of ethnicities, home to Poles, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Russians, Tatars and Jews.

In Wales, we identified the principles and elements of methods that ensure good participative processes. This Civic Dialogue workshop in Poland asked participants and local partners "How do you support participation and stakeholder dialogue in EU procedures such as Natura 2000, CLLD-LEADER, Water framework (or other ones specific to the country/region)?" Our train journey to Białystok cuts through

meadows and wetlands with a dense pine forest growing on sandy soils. It is so different from the mountainous Mediterranean rural areas I know in the Valencia region, where I live. However, discussing with Elżbieta Strzelecka, a member of Forum Synergies from Poland and Marta Dobrogowska, the project manager from the LAG Puszcza Knyszynska, our partner in the organisation of this workshop, I have the feeling that there is maybe more in common in terms of 'culture of participation' than I expected between these two places.

Poland lived under the Soviet regime for decades whilst Spain was oppressed for decades by a dictatorship. My impression is that in both cases the lack of freedom, the limited access to local resources and the difficulties in developing civil society movements have left a lingering mark.





BOTTOM-UP LEADERSHIP

"LEADER and methods of participation are quite new in Poland," Elzbieta tells me. "Unfortunately, a number of groups are mainly controlled by politicians or municipalities as LEADER projects are perceived as a source of power."

That sounds familiar to me: I have witnessed a similar situation in my region of Valencia, during the programming period of LEADER + (2007-2013). Some LAGs were controlled by local mayors, often in a paternalistic way and sometimes on the verge of cronyism, leaving almost no space for civil society participation. *"We know what is good for the territory, leave it in our hands"* I remember one of them saying in a meeting. Under such circumstances LEADER principles are more of a token action. The public is informed when main decisions are already made, or consulted through narrow, closed questions with no real debate.

These readymade projects undermine the spirit of LEADER. The EU clearly demands participation of stakeholders in rural programmes and projects. But what we see is that in many cases these democratic principles are not yet part of the public administrative practices. Often simply training of civil servants and civil society is what's needed. And that is what we offer in our Forum Synergies training workshops.

"Readymade projects undermine the spirit of LEADER."



SOCIAL CAPITAL

On our excursion through Podlaskie we reach [Knyszyńska Forest Landscape Park](#). Director Joanna Kurzawa explains how the consultation and dialogue with stakeholders unfold in order to define the park's management plan: *"Depending on the sites, twenty to thirty people join our meetings, which include representatives from the municipality. The mayor has almost exclusive*

deciding power on all activities of the commune. We have organised meetings at different hours to reach a broader public. In the morning we talk with local authorities, in the afternoon with local representatives of communities. We have also organised thematic meetings for foresters, the local population and many more." After this, all opinions are gathered and decision makers have to explain why certain suggestions or concerns were taken into account in the formulation

of the final management plan and why others were ignored.

The Knyszyńska Forest Landscape Park was established in 1988. The Park's area is 745 km², 85% of which are forests and woodlands. The whole surface is under EU Natura 2000 support schemes since it is home to over 200 species of nesting birds. In contrast to national parks or nature reserves, agriculture, timber production and other productive land uses located within the boundaries of

the landscape park have economic significance and are subject to regulations.

We meet Adam Kamiński, the LAG president, who explains that the province had the lowest percentage of associations per inhabitant. He tells us about a turbulent local history where much shuffling of borders, war, resettlement and changes in economic systems meant that there is not a well-established local identity. He believes this means people were quite easily manipulated. *"The forest is a brand, dozens of touristic offers are developing but there is no initiative from entrepreneurs for a common 'touristic product,'" Adam explains,*

"there was an attempt to build a consortium for a cluster but it did not work as they did not manage to build trust." Caring for social capital is of vital importance in rural areas – especially when villages are losing population, an issue faced by many European areas. *"Trust among stakeholders is of paramount importance for success," he says, "Trust is not something given to someone. Trust has to be earned."*

So you see how some hopeful collective and participatory processes

have emerged, often without the support of facilitating bodies or funding. This occurs when individuals or groups have been really engaged in the protection of the forest, slowly but surely moving mountains.

Adam Kamiński

OPPOSITE PAGE

15. 17. Podlaskie, a region of mixed cultures and religions: Orthodox church and Tatar mosque

16. Meeting with Joana Kurzawa and local players in the House of the Forest

THE CIVIC DIALOGUE EXPERIENCE IN A NUTSHELL

"Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply," said author Stephen Covey. Watching the Brexit campaign and corresponding negotiations unfold, I am reminded of this. An important mediation strategy is about active listening, to ensure everybody understands the others' needs. I wonder if what is implemented to solve individual or local organisations' conflicts should have been used for the Brexit dilemma too.

I think again of Little Red Riding Hood. I feel that the fear of the 'other' and the inability to communicate these fears seen in the tale are similar to the xenophobic, intolerant and racist arguments of the extreme right and populist discourse present in much of contemporary European politics.

Leaders of these parties play on this fear to scapegoat migrants or foreigners as the Big Bad

Wolf. This is our challenge all over Europe. We must create more space for dialogue and listen to all people's perceptions and needs – even the Brexit wolf – to find a way to live together in peace.

Our last day of workshops in Poland is the 24th June 2016 and we wake up to the results of the Brexit referendum. The Leave the EU campaign has won with 51.9% of the vote. This is sad news for us, especially for Sarah Rutter, our English participant who bursts into tears. Married to a French man, Sarah lives in Savoie with her family and coordinates a transnational project between rural French and Italian areas. She feels deeply European. *"What will be the consequences for my children and for my country?" she asks.* 3 years after the vote, as I write this, the steps to leaving the EU still have not been finalised and the UK lives in limbo.