



SCHOLARSHIP EXPERIENCES

report

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My experience related to sustainable development in general and particularly sustainable rural development has been gained both by education and professional work. I have a bachelor's degree in regional development planning, and I am master's student in the field of spatial development planning, as of now working on my master's thesis on Smart village development. I work in a Local action group (LAG) of the territory where I live ("Gauja Partnership" where I am involved as decision maker) and I also worked in the neighbouring LAG ("PPP Association Sernikon" where I was involved as executive). I have gained experience in development planning on many different levels – starting from small villages (regarding my master's thesis), to municipalities (due to studies and internships), to intermunicipal planning (from LAG perspective) and national level (also due to studies, internships, and my day-job) to EU level (since both of my workplaces are dealing with EU funds). Furthermore, I have always been particularly interested in sustainability issues, especially the environmental dimension of them, and community building so it is something I have "digged in" comparatively deeper both in my studies and work.

I applied to the scholarship program for many reasons, one of the most important – the possibility to get to know another culture and exchange views, experiences and practices. I have found that working with different cultures is extremely valuable (even if not always easy) since you can get completely different perspective and thus expand your horizons. Especially, since Latvia is a small country – there are just not so many initiatives happening and people involved in spatial development professionally, so you have probably already heard of/ from most of them. So, such scholarship programs provide a possibility to get out of the "informational bubble" and get new insights, learn new practices or even learn that there are similar challenges, or some solutions are done the same way in other countries which can be quite useful too. Also, I saw this scholarship as a chance to refresh my knowledge on different sustainability-related topics as well as learn something new and, hopefully, inspire others and be inspired myself to do even more for achieving rural sustainability.



I spent my three-week long scholarship period in Kalavan, a small village of around 110-130 inhabitants in Gegharkunik Province of Armenia. I was hosted by an NGO "ABCD Innovation Center" that deals with community involvement in spatial development and realizing the potential of communities, and the scholarship was also closely related to an NGO "Time Land Foundation" whose main goals are

environmental protection, community development, preservation of Armenian culture, development of scientific, educational and youth spheres and others. My hosts were flexible in creating our activities' plan and, as a result, we were able to combine both my interests and knowledge and the needs of people of Kalavan.

I have described my impressions, thoughts and activities carried out in more detail and have added more photos on the blog
<https://madaraishere.home.blog/>.

The blog posts were posted on my Facebook profile where they were also shared by interested parties both in Latvia and Armenia thus gaining even wider audience and promoted on my Instagram profile as well.

The main activity that I guided was so called “Language club” where we trained English and discussed different topics related to sustainable development with local children (and occasionally some adults). We spent about half of the classes learning the basic words and phrases to help children successfully have a simple conversation with foreigners visiting Kalavan. The other half was spent giving children more freedom in terms of specific discussion topics but also a bit more work since it was necessary to prepare for each lesson. The lessons were held in a manner that allows participants to train different aspects of language – reading, listening and speaking. We tried to touch each of the sustainability dimensions – environmental, social and economic – and had lessons on topics as pollution, waste reduction, inequality and community building.



We also had a workshop on so called “customer routing” that is a method connected to design thinking. We were trying to understand the “customer” experience in the context of territorial development and generate ideas to improve that experience. To use this method in the most effective way and ultimately to produce specific, usable solutions, we chose one driving force for the development of the Kalavan village – tourism, which is the focus of much of the village's activities and jobs.

The main idea of this activity was to “step into the tourist's shoes” and think from his perspective, define the main steps/ positions that are part of the tourist experience, analyse what activities a tourist must do to complete a step/ position and how many different options are available to accomplish it and analyse what kind of emotions are created in the process. Finally, we were brainstorming ideas to improve defined processes so that the tourist experience is as good as possible.



The second workshop was related to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – the 17 goals that all UN member states should strive to achieve in order to create a more equal, sustainable and otherwise better world.

Participants were split in two groups and discussed within each group what the specific goal they had drawn out means to them and what should be done in order to achieve it. Afterwards, the groups had to work together and discuss on how the goals each group had drawn out are connected and is there a way how they can help achieve each other or what could be done to achieve them both.



I was pleasantly surprised on how active and interested were the participants, especially since it is summer holiday for the children and our activities took place every other day or sometimes even more

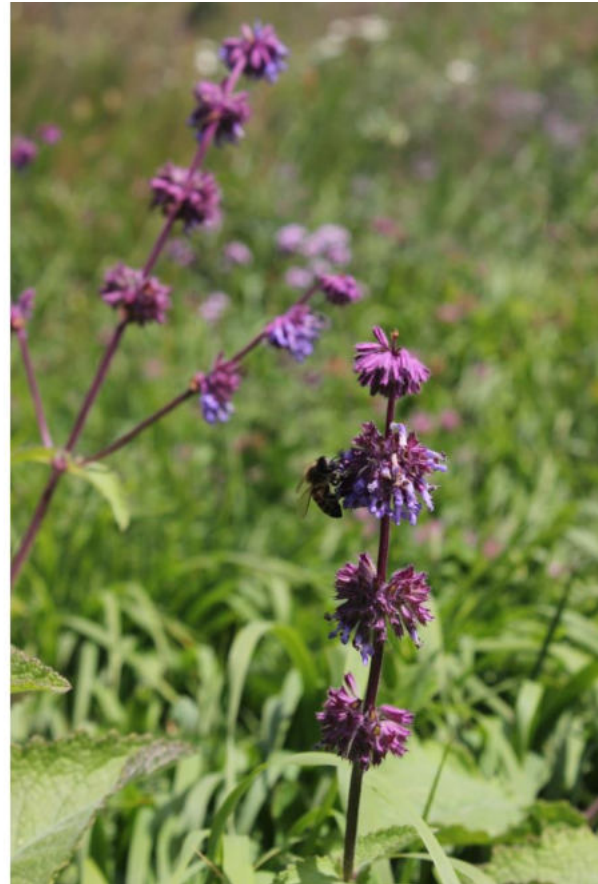
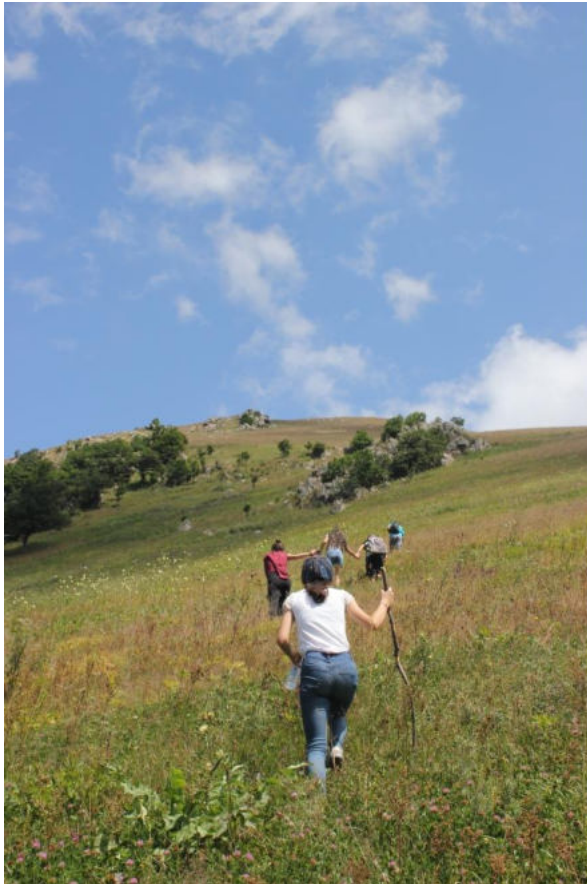
often. They were open to all the new information, asking questions and offering their insights and opinions as well that made guiding these activities quite easy for me, and I highly appreciate it.

We also managed to organise an activity that was not initially included in our activity plan – we spent a few hours on Kalavan “clean-up”, a community action that has become a yearly nation-wide tradition in Latvia. We took gloves and garbage bags, walked around the village and picked up bigger and smaller pieces of garbage – it turned out so well that we run out of garbage bags before we had walked through all the areas planned. What I found even more rewarding than all the waste collected was the impact this activity had on local children – I saw the kids picking up a plastic bag here or a can there on both of our hikes together and the rest of the time spent in the village, too. That showed me that our “clean-up” was not a one-time activity – instead, it had become a part of mentality and lifestyle.



From my point of view, we learned a lot from each other, and this traineeship will have a long-lasting effect on all of us – some children overcame their shyness to speak in English for the first time that is an important step towards training their skills, some children learned the effect that burning rubber and plastics has on the environment and started thinking of alternative practices for village’s waste management, some children found out how everything in our world is interconnected and picked up waste that wasn’t theirs. To me, personally, this opportunity has reminded on how much I like to work with children and has shown that we can find a common language quite well. It has inspired me to work further on sustainable development together with children since it is easier to form or change habits that can affect the development at a younger age, since children look at the world with such a “clear” view and optimism, and often have the greatest ideas that only the creative mind of a child can do. This experience has also proven to me what I have believed for several years now – that a united community can achieve

wonderful and ambitious goals even when faced with adverse circumstances and that not much is needed to give a spark for the process of change.



As for the future, I am starting to think of ways to include children in development planning processes that is not something we do yet but has a potential to help create more diverse, creative solutions to our everyday struggles that, after all, those children will face themselves in a few years if nothing is done now. Secondly, I am considering applying to a program that prepares professionals from different fields to work as teachers since this scholarship experience has shown me how rewarding it is to work with children and how sustainable development can be initiated “from the roots” – not so much in changing the habits of adults (that, of course, is also necessary) as educating the young that can drive further change.

I can truly recommend this scholarship program as a wonderful possibility to both hosts and trainees to learn, explore and meet inspiring people.

I am thankful to all the parties and people involved for gaining this amazing experience, especially the welcoming people of Kalavan!
