

Host: Kinoniki Sineteristiki Epichirisi.Greece

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About me

My thoughts about sustainability grew slow but continuously during my adult life.

Professionally I don't have a direct contact with sustainable rural development, I worked as a nurse for 17years in a village/rural area. Often the clients were farmers, I had the possibility to hear and to talk with these people about their work and experience in agriculture/livestock farming. Some of these people lived for over a century and their stories showed me another landscape and working philosophy.

Working in the health sector I got to recognize how important is the way we eat and the consequences on ourselves are just a small part of the problematics of the food production. The current conventional way to cultivate and breed animals is healthy nor for humans nor for the planet. I believe in small scale organic farming and I saw its benefits on people and environment around me.

Motivation

The primary reason why I wanted to know more about organic farming and sustainability was the intent to produce my own food one day. I would like to start my own small polyculture garden in order to supply food to a circle of people around me. I got fascinated from the concepts of natural farming and permaculture and I was looking forward to applying them. I was also interested in low tech constructions and their use around Europe. Moreover, I wanted to experience everyday community living and exchange ideas with like-minded people, to come closer to a conscious and sustainable life philosophy.

Description of the activities carried out

Our activities were belonging to two major categories: farming and building.

Building was often with wood, every furniture is customized to the specific space, so we created tables, wardrobes, chairs, shelves, etc. I learnt also new techniques like limestone with coffee bags, iron, branches, etc. When it was about to build from zero, we used clay, that is very abundant in the soil around the farm (ca 75%). I learnt how to build with cob, wattle and daub, adobe bricks, earth bags and rammed earth. For the plastering part, necessary for rain protection, we used as main ingredient limestone and we learnt the technique of Tadelakt, for waterproof surfaces. The structural part of the buildings didn't really need constant maintenance but there was often some extra feature to add or modification to apply.



Preparation of Cob and building made with adobe bricks.



During a workshop we build a little house with wattle and daub and a reciprocal roof.



The outdoor kitchen of the farm and a geodesic mini house, both are made out of old clothes canes and other local or upcycled materials.

One of the most important goals in the farm is the regeneration of the soil. Many actions happen only for this reason, the soil get treated with a lot of attention and that's because the production of compost and mulching are daily tasks.

Before to start a compost it's necessary to have a big amount of organic matter. In our case the needed organic matter was more that the farm could produce, so often we had to collect leaves, almond-peels, cut grass, manure, ash, coffee and more, from all around the area and other farms.

We tried different compost recipes and techniques but in general the idea is to let your materials to decompose with the right conditions and to create a good environment for microorganism which are necessary for a living, healthy soil=food.

What every compost need is oxygen! In order to stay in an aerobic condition it's needed to mix/turn the pile, if necessary daily. During this work we controlled also humidity and temperature. We observed every day the progress of the decomposing process. After 3-4 weeks, depending on the recipe, the pile has lost more than the half of his volume and humidity but the result is a natural product which contains everything that a plant need.



Preparing a new compost and the daily morning work, turning the piles.

This year the farm wanted to increase the production so there are many vegetable gardens, each one with its own features. There was a seed and tree nursery to care about. For the diseases and the pests of the plants we were searching for natural remedies and trying to monitor the situation.



The new prepared winter garden in a mandala shape.

There is also a big chicken house with around 15 among chickens, geese and ducks, providing fresh eggs daily. Because I was there in August and September there was also the most pleasant part to do: collect veggies and fruits. Some of them we processed to preserve for the winter or to sell as a little self-financing for the farm.



We harvest delicious veggies and fruits everyday.

In the farm there are many small houses (8). The inhabitants of each house have to take care of their place and all together we took care of the common areas, that from time to time have to be arranged to host more volunteers and visitors. Almost everyday someone was coming to visit the farm or we host and organized workshops.

Workshops were a nice occasion to exchange ideas with other like-minded people, in addition to learning new stuff. In two workshops we hosted I was more a participant and in two others I was more a helper in the organization. I had the occasion to get to know a lot more about permaculture but also soil and water in general.



Everyone enjoyed the nature and took the time to observe and to experiment. Talking about our observations and the exchange of knowledge were our main talking subject.

Assessment from a personal point of view: role and impact of the activities on sustainable rural development.

I had the occasion to see applied many things that before I just read about.

The context where the farm is located is very rural: at the border of a village of barely 50 people, surrounded by almost only almonds groves. In a context like this it's easy to get to know everybody around and it's difficult for new people and new ideas to get understood and respected. The farm, after many years, has now a good reputation and the neighbors don't see the unconventional methods as suspicious anymore. Some of them are now familiar with alternative techniques, that are anyway mainly forgotten techniques coming from the times before the introduction of chemicals in agriculture or cement in building. The road for a mentality change to a more sustainable intentions is still very long, but every step counts and I had witnessed a few important ones. During a permaculture workshop we designed the field of a neighbor as if he wanted to pass from conventional to organic farming. We proposed polyculture, avoiding plowing and intense irrigation and other things that are at the opposite of the conventional praxis nowadays. Starting from a very skeptical approach, our neighbor was in the end listening with interest to us.

The aim of the farm is also to become a catalyst for "new" ideas in the area. Another big step that I witnessed was the introduction of a local CSA. CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture. It's a model that in Greece it's quite new and it's a way for farmers and consumers to get more connected, avoiding intermediaries and guaranteeing quality products and prices. In the end of September there has been the first assembly for the people interested in this project. There were local producers and simply curious people. Has been very nice to see the basis for a new network and I think it could be a great example to show that organic farming is not economically wrong.

Lesson learned

In this intense period, I could say I did a journey through sustainability.

The concept of sustainability is as important as difficult to apply, this is a lesson I learnt. If you look at the objects that are around you now, as unbalanced Europe is, very few things we can say they are sustainable for the planet. It requires to be brave and honest with yourself if you want to do something more than buying stuff with a green label. Often the challenge for the sustainability appear us so big that it's not worth to get into it, but for me

it's not like this anymore.

Another lesson that I learnt is that sustainability is also a simple thing. This doesn't mean easy, means that is simple as often the best solutions are. It's taking the responsibility of your actions. It's looking at your resources, then at your desires and try to cover this distance without ignoring the needs of the others, planet included.

I learnt that there are many handy alternatives to the most common ways of farming, housing and energy providing. The downside of these alternatives is that they require often a lot of effort if you are alone. But is this a real disadvantage? Maybe it should be considered as a perk more than anything else, because it reconnects us with the concept of community. Feeling part of a group is a beautiful emotion and if we are too focused on ourselves we risk to forget it. Being part of a community doesn't mean not being independent, probably it's more the opposite. I rediscovered the joy of being interdependent with my colleagues, that become friends. We cared for our common objective and if something didn't go as expected we try to learn out of our mistakes.



Experimenting to filter the grey water with gravel, sand and coal to use to water the garden.



Self-made Haybox/ thermal cooker and a upcycled washing machine running by muscles.



Compost toilette made with cob.
Solar showers.



Village design in Nessonas and planting new wicking beds, perfect for dry climat.



Measuring and digging swales during a PDC.



Earthworks for a natural pool

Action plan

I intend now to pursue these intentions and widen my vision about my possible futures. I want to discover more sustainable ways of living and I intend to travel for a while to learn more and give back at the same time.

I feel like at the start of an adventure and I know it will not be so short. I cannot put long term limitations to me, but when I will come back home I want to inspire other people and being myself an example of sustainability, if possible. I feel I have a talent for teaching and I would like to return what I learnt. I would like to offer workshops and have them international, to increase the range of examples in a group.

I'm am very thankful for the opportunity of this internship.

