

Forum Synergies Work Programme 2011 - 2012



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Forum Synergies in Europe today

The Forum Synergies network is a unique approach of connecting and valorizing rural experiences to develop more sustainable European countryside and more sustainable European policies.

We build upon a common understanding:

- Forum Synergies is following a holistic/ living approach
- Forum Synergies is about re-connecting what has been separated: history, culture, health, food ...
- Forum Synergies is not just about making projects but about linking people
- Forum Synergies is about linking the local/ practical level with the EU/ political level
- Forum Synergies is about promoting dialogue but not about lobbying

Animating, supervising and moderating the process of "feeding back", linking experiences, coordinating thematic exchanges, capitalising lessons learned and transforming them into messages... all these core activities form a spirit of understanding practical sustainability from which we derive our projects and messages, find partners and allies and keep the network alive.

Roots and History

The Forum Synergies network was founded 1995 as "European network of experiences in sustainable development" by 35 organisations of 16 European countries in order to explore and illustrate practical ways to "sustainable development", a term which by the time started to become 'en vogue' in the political scene but was hardly understood in its consequences. The central activity and strength of our network up to now is exchanging practical experiences of (mostly rural) sustainable development and discussing them with policy makers.

After a still well-remembered travelling exhibition which was taken from Estonia to Portugal, the "sustainable mystery tour", we founded Forum Synergies as a legal organisation of Belgium law in 1999. In the following years we organised European gatherings in Estonia, Sardinia and Northern Italy, contributed our experiences actively to European policy debates and helped to establish related networks like PREPARE for the pre-accession countries and CURE for urban-rural relations.

Developments 2007-2010

Alongside the EU policy planning period 2007 - 2013 we engaged in a new phase of activities and developed a program of activities with five main elements:

- *Identification of success stories*: a database was set up and made publicly available about best practice experiences in terms of policies, organisations and practical success stories.
- *Thematic exchanges*: the existing "farmers ecology" exchange was continued and new exchanges in the field of "sustainable development in lake areas" and "access to land for community connected farming" were developed. Each of these groups organised travelling workshops or small conferences in different places and finally succeeded in organising separate funding for their activities.
- *Annual gatherings*: "European Rural Sustainability Gatherings" (ERSG) with 80-100 participants from 15-18 countries were organised 2009 in Goehrde / Germany and 2010 in Vouneuil / France. Local activists, politicians and participants used the opportunity to exchange their views and experiences on the spot.
- *Cooperation with partner networks*: we continued our involvement in partner networks' meetings e.g. of PREPARE and CURE to contribute a particular aspect of sustainability there; we set up a successful cooperation (the 'lake project') with the environmental network Global Nature Fund; we

co-organised ERSG 2010 with the French network CELAVAR; we collaborated in projects with organizations like Fondation Civitas (Romania), Groupe de Bruges and European School of Journalists; and we actively participated and took financial responsibility for the Agricultural and Rural Convention process (ARC 2020) which organized a large civil society debate about the future of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) after 2013.

- *Strengthening the network:* we started to publish newsletters for members and interested partners, set up a new, regularly updated webpage which gives access to a lot of information about our activities and enlarged our scope of membership from 10 to 18 countries.

We observed an unbroken interest and need for an “on place” exchange for experiences, with increasing participation from new eastern member states like Latvia or Hungary and new pre-accession countries like Macedonia or Serbia. At the same time new thematic activities like the "access to land" exchange mobilised new members in the western countries, raising important new issues. Thematic fields like climate change or economic vulnerability in times of crises have entered the agenda. The ARC 2020 process showed a high political interest in our capacities to give feedback and inspiration to policy makers.

We deeply appreciate the support which was given to us in these years especially by Fondation de France and Fondation pour le Progrès de l’Homme to care for these core activities.

Key elements 2011-2013

To consolidate our role as the leading European exchange network for practical sustainability experiences in rural areas, and as valuable resource for policy makers, we strive to develop these key elements in 2011-2013:

- further develop our core activities of sharing experiences and creating a European ‘added value’
- continue our involvement in the political debate about CAP reform 2013 (the ARC process)
- continue current thematic exchange activities and develop new ones
- valorize the network by consolidating our visibility and communication strategy

These elements will be explained in more detail below.

Sharing experiences - Creating the added value

Running the network – the coordination structure

The basic structure of a voluntary board and a salaried team of coordinators has proved to be successful in the last years. On the board, co-presidents Philippe Barret (France) and Hannes Lorenzen (Belgium) will be responsible for strategic decisions, contact to foundations and the general guidance of the team. Treasurer Oliver Emmes will care for the financial responsibilities.

In the team, Simone Matouch (Austria) will be responsible for animating, supervising and moderating the ‘feeding back’ process of members and partners to the network. She will care for general coordination and time keeping, for communication (newsletter, website) and for reports of meetings. She will also act as the central contact point for members and partners, gathering and redistributing all sorts of relevant information.

Marina Guedon (Spain) will continue the compilation of success stories and directory of organisations in the database, assume part of the communication, prepare a “Capacity building workshop”, and compile reports for our French funders.

Titus Bahner (Germany) will be responsible for the general overview and coherence of the programme, prepare decisions to relieve the board from caring for details, provide content, revise project drafts and write strategic documents like funding applications, and organize and partially moderate the 'lake project' and 'access to land' thematic exchanges (on separate budget).

European Living Countryside Gathering

Forum Synergies' annual gatherings are a lively exchange of experiences between local projects, with multipliers and also with policy makers for mutual learning, inspiration and capacity building. The last gatherings each had 80-100 participants from 15-18 European countries.

After consolidating and enlarging the network in 2009 in Göhrde, Germany and deriving political messages towards CAP reform in 2010 in Poitiers, France, the next gathering will probably be held in South-Eastern Europe. Conclusions from the discussions and debates on the gathering will be evaluated as an input to the ongoing CAP 2013 reform discussions. As before, „messages from the countryside“ shall be communicated to relevant policymakers on national and EU scale.

LifeShops

After the successful development of several thematic exchange activities in the last three years we wish to emphasize Forum Synergies as a network of people that – beyond their professional interests – share a personal vision and explore new ways to sustainable lifestyles in their (mostly rural) local contexts.

Forum Synergies “lifeshops” therefore shall be a way to **discover** sustainable lifestyles, get **inspired** by the creativity of others and **celebrate** an already existing sustainable present with friends.

A lifeshop is a one-week time frame upon invitation of a host. Forum Synergies members can participate totally or partially up to their personal interest and availability. During the week the guests stay in simple accommodations in a rural village or small town, maybe in families, and are basically self-responsible for their programme. The host organization offers catering, a permanently available meeting place for the guests, possibly child care, and different thematic offers around their local experience. These may be e.g. field trips, project presentations, meetings with village people or cultural evenings. To overcome language barriers there should be translation support available for guests who spontaneously are curious to meet somebody interesting there.

The lifeshop is an opportunity to deepen our personal relations in the network, to arrange group meetings to develop projects, to have a General Assembly or a Board/Team meeting, or simply to take the family to an interesting place. Annually there could be two to four lifeshops in different corners of Europe, accompanying thematic workshops or attached to events like a local festival.

Financially, FS' support to travel and accommodation would depend on the relevance of a participant's presence to FS projects which currently receive funding.

Capacity Building Workshops

Some of the conclusions from the 2009 European gathering in Germany were related to the moderating experiences that FS network has accumulated over the years. The Open Space methodology to identify new ideas or the fish bowl session to contribute to commitments are an example of participative methodologies that were considered as interesting tools by the participants. The Forum Synergies “touch” in moderation was also highlighted in some thematic workshops.

In capacity building workshops we want to extend the exchange of rural good practices to our philosophy and methodology and train interested participants in these techniques. The workshops are planned as an internal offer to FS members and close partners.

Database

FS has published an on-line database of success stories of practical sustainability at the grass roots in different places and different fields of rural development, in order to provide stimulus to those who are facing similar opportunities and challenges throughout rural Europe, and to amend this resource of information continuously. Our success stories show good practices of local and collective approaches of sustainable initiatives linked to rural or peri-urban territories.

Work on this database will be continued in order to develop it to a more active resource for FS networking. Emphasis will be given on more practical success stories and on innovative initiatives to solve current problems of rural countryside. Short descriptions of FS members' and participants' activities that have been compiled for the rural sustainability gathering shall be added...

Additionally, the database entries will be made livelier by reworking the layout, combining them with short video messages that have been produced at the last gatherings and making them more easily accessible on the FS website.

Strengthening the alliance between foundations

The main goal is to create links between foundations in different countries in order to promote and support European projects in the field of sustainable rural development.

Steps foreseen:

- Clarify the expectations and priorities of work for Fondation de France and check out the role FdF wants to play.
- Evaluate all the contacts Forum Synergies has created with other foundations
- Forum Synergies is taking part in meetings of foundations in order to (re-)activate contacts and to present the proposal of future cooperation with FdF
- Organise a special meeting between interested foundations and potential project funders

Thematic Exchanges

FS offers to its members and partner organisations a wide range of support in exchanging experiences in sustainable development across countries and professional backgrounds. The typical form are 'traveling workshops' that examine a topic at different participants' places. Participants are inspired by field trips to comment on the local situation, and to enter in a moderated exchange about their experiences which is then also evaluated for political conclusions.

The permanent staff provides the necessary infrastructure for exchange of good practices and training, the organising of events, and the evaluation of European networking. Members engage as volunteers in contributing to dialogue and reflections on sustainable development from their specific backgrounds.

Thematic exchanges 2011-2013 will continue existing activities and start some new ones. The following list is explained in more detail below.

1. The "Farmers' Ecology" programme since 2001 is collecting local knowledge of rural people about agro-ecosystem management, to preserve it from being forgotten and to use it for solving local and global challenges. In 2010 work could be expanded from Spain and France to Romania.
2. (lake project) "Sustainable Development in Lake Areas - Empowering Local Initiatives and Civil Society" focuses on participatory implementation strategies of the EU environmental directives.

3. (CCF project) "Access To Land for Community Connected Farming" is evaluating innovative forms of land access for farms that produce and market locally and provide integrated services to the local community. A coherent concept of CCF is developed in cooperation with scientific partners, to be articulated in the context of CAP reform.

4. The "rural health" exchange emerged from the European gathering in 2009. The exchange tries to find best practises about rural contributions to human health, like medicinal herb production, organic food, social health services, etc.

5. "Sustainable forestry" is a new thematic exchange to valorize an existing treasure of international experiences.

More thematic exchanges are welcomed to be developed by members with support of the team.

Farmers' Ecology

FS followed the work initiated some years ago in relation with Farmers Ecological knowledge ; In 2010 and 2011, French, Spanish and Romanian partners are collaborating in a cooperation project called "Ecologie Paysanne Europe - EPE" and partly funded by FdF. (international meetings and coordination costs).

The initiative aims to strengthen and widen a network of exchange, bringing together all stakeholders willing to collaborate in the collection, transmission and promotion of farmer's ecological knowledge before they disappear. And to disseminate these knowledge from local to European level, through actions which emphasize their contribution to sustainable development.

In 2010, the partners have been promoting and/or participating in trainings organised for local organisations linked to methodological aspects of knowledge collection. (Florac (FR) - March 2010 ; Castellón (ES)– May 2010). A 1st International workshop was organised in Romania (Sept 2010), focusing on common tools and methodology (website, wiki), but also on the local experiences of the participants.

With the activities planned in 2011, the objective is to strengthen and open the network, focusing specially on the transmission and valorisation of farmers' knowledge and the follow-up of the project.

The 2nd International Workshop, which will take place from May 25th to 28th in Verdon Natural Park (France), will focus on transmission and valorisation. A coordination team meeting will study the perspectives of EPE future which might be towards the Mediterranean basin (international cooperation projects) but also towards Eastern countries (European funds).

The final gathering will take place from October 20th to 23rd, 2011 at Mas de Noguera (Spain). The event will be an opportunity to present results, to define future thematic work and to spread the network, inviting Spanish and foreign groups which are already working on rural knowledge. After these two years, this event is intended to be the beginning of a new phase, meaning the consolidation of Farmers Ecology project and its opening to more European or foreign groups.

A brochure presenting the progress and results achieved will be printed in 3 languages.

Sustainable Development in Lake Areas

Starting in 2009 with support from Fondation de France's 'l'Europe en plus large' programme, a series of five workshops about participatory implementation of EU Habitat, Bird (Nature2000) and Water Framework Directives (WFD) in lake and wetland areas was organized in partnership with the German NGO Global Nature Fund.

The goals of the project are

- mutual learning to give local actors and authorities access to practical knowledge about participative implementation via exchange with successful projects

- developing a political proposal to regional, state and EU governments to use existing participatory options in EU legislation to support sustainable development.

Four workshops took place in Estonia, Poland, Slovenia and Greece. The project will end with a final workshop in France, Val de Drugeon near Besançon, in cooperation with GNF and Pôle-Relais Tourbières (french peatland center) from 14-18 Sept 2011.

Three follow-up projects are currently discussed among participants. They are about exchange of practical experiences in the following fields:

- Environmental Education
- Habitat Management
- Eco & Rural Tourism

FS participation in these is possible but not mandatory, depending on our available personal and financial resources.

Access to Land for Community Connected Farming

This project focuses on innovative ways of access to land and other necessary resources for 'community connected farming'. It aims at:

- documenting success stories of access to land for CCF and facilitating exchange of experiences,
- improving our analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of CCF, its particular social, economic and environmental benefits, and
- putting access to land on the agenda at EU and national level, and formulating policy recommendations (including participation in the ARC process).

It is a joint project of Terre de liens and Forum synergies. It is the continuation of several meetings organised by FS in 2008 and 2009. The current phase has funding from Sept 2010 to April 2011.

The planned activities in this remaining time include writing of 6 case studies on local experiences in France, England, Lithuania, Italy, Germany and Romania and a mapping of interesting initiatives throughout Europe; a cross-cutting scientifically based analysis of access to land for CCF, based on case studies and mapping; a position paper on the importance of access to land in the EU; and possibly a one-day seminar in Brussels (EP?) on access to land for CCF. The documents will be compiled in a publication.

Rural Actors for Sustainable Health

Health is not only a topic everyone has his own personal interest in but faces more and more attention in the public and political discussion. Permanently increasing costs for the public health care system on the one hand and a burgeoning doubt in the overall power of a mechanised healing concept cause rumour in the political, economic and private public world. All over Europe we have to face a more and more restrictive regulative framework whereas our traditional knowledge about healing and taking care for ourselves are threatened by loss and prohibition.

The project aims at establishing a network of actors for sustainable health. Based on the existing knowledge and resources of rural actors this network shall safeguard and valorize local knowledge related to health care and set up links to other stakeholders like medicines or scientists to develop concrete offers for the general public.

A first exchange has already been organized in April 2010: 45 Latvian eco-health farmers visited German biodynamical and bio farms in order to explore new solutions and exchange experience in the field of healthy living at countryside.

Activities planned in 2011 include setting up of an inventory of actors, organizing field trips and a workshop, printing a leaflet; and research in relevant legal frameworks on EU and national level about needs for adoption deriving from experiences.

Sustainable Forestry

Forest is at the heart of debates since deforestation has been identified as dramatic in the 70s. Many initiatives have been done at international, European, and national level. Yet, in 2011, the year of the forest, many challenges remain: deforestation has “slowed” only from 14 million to 13 million ha a year. Biodiversity in forests is threatened everywhere, not only in the tropical regions. In Europe for example, forest surface has increased in recent history, but quantity is not quality.

And as in agriculture, when the balance is broken, disastrous results can appear like diseases, increased fires, soil fertility loss, vulnerability to storms... As forests support agriculture through services like erosion mitigation and water regulation, it is necessary to promote a more sustainable forestry in the rural landscape.

To date, in Europe, there is no common EU forestry policy, only guidelines. At the EU level, there are no network promoting exchanges on sustainable forestry practices done by civil society. Only Prosilva Europe, a network of forest experts trying to combine wood production to social and ecological roles, plays a role to promote sustainable management of forests. Wood certification is supposed to solve the sustainable forestry challenge, but it can reach that target only when there is an agreement of what good forestry is, which is not the case today.

Forum Synergy’s work on forests could contribute to let good initiatives around Europe be known and support the debate. The objective is to promote exchanges between successful experiences of sustainable forestry in order to support them, raise awareness on possible alternatives, and propose a different paradigm for forests. Sustainable forestry includes forest management as well as forest protection.

Activities of the first year will be

- Set up a small working group in FS to prepare the draft proposal;
- Identify relevant themes and existing European Networks regarding forests;
- Make a draft proposal to FS and to members;
- Organize a workshop to discuss on the proposal and build together the project;
- Look for funding and set up eventually partnerships.

Policies

Agricultural and Rural Convention (ARC)

The Agricultural and Rural Convention (ARC), the European civil society platform on the reform of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy 2013-2020, has submitted its call for a paradigm shift in agriculture and a rural renaissance in November 2010 to the EU Institutions. The call was positively received in hearings of the Commission, the European Parliament and the European Economic Social Committee.

Forum Synergies has co-initiated and taken legal and financial responsibility for the ARC process and actively participated at the debates. The ERSG 2010 in France, using a political ‘window of opportunity’, was explicitly dedicated to valorizing network members’ experiences with EU policies for the ARC process, ending in a political ‘Declaration of Vouneuil’ which became part of the further discussions in Brussels.

We will continue to support and follow the ARC process and motivate our members to contribute their experiences and ideas.

PolicyShops

The idea of Forum Synergies policy workshops is to create an open space of common experience and reflection between policy-makers and local people. These workshops will allow the participants to leave their daily routines behind and to discover a local project from different points of view. Bringing together the views of a local initiative or community and those of policy makers, planners, administrations and ministries involved in rural and territorial policies, will highlight strengths and weaknesses of projects as well as of policies on the spot.

FS policy workshops will also highlight good practices in governance and decision-making between the various levels of responsibility. Our workshops wish to help local people involved in local projects and policies to discover how the European values of cohesion, solidarity and cooperation can be realized and linked to the local and territorial level. Moderation of the policy workshops will include some intellectual, mental and physical exercise and training to put oneself into the position of their partners on local, regional, national or European community level.

The workshops will be organized at times and places throughout Europe which are of key importance for preparing and establishing the European, national and regional rural development strategies and programs running up to the new period from 2013-2020. PolicyShops will feed back to the ARC process. Close cooperation with competent authorities of all levels will be achieved.

Visibility

Communication Concept

In order to structure the growing flow of information about projects and events we would like to imply a revised, clearer communication concept with the following elements.

1. Communication with Members and Partners

The richness of our network derives from our members' experiences and their feeling to be part of a living and valuable 'family' structure. Reconsidering this, emphasis shall be given to integrate more explicitly the experiences of our members and partners in our communication strategy:

- The bimonthly FS newsletter shall contain updated information about FS projects and about member activities collected by short interviews.
- The new activity of 'life shops' creates more opportunities to meet.

2. External Visibility

The target group of our external visibility are current and potential partners, and further interested parties like rural or environmental NGOs, policy makers and funders.

- A unified corporated identity shall be developed and applied to all publications.
- The website shall be reissued with a clearer structure and easier access to the wealth of resources that has been accumulated during the last years.
- Information about changes on the website and new activities shall be circulated in a brief form by email ('news flash') to a broad public.

- Printed material will be worked out by the team (revised FS leaflets, visit cards, leaflet presentation of thematic exchanges). Occasionally hardcopies of project reports will be produced according to the needs arising from FS' presence in events.
- For our "visibility" we will continue to send FS representatives (board / team members or local representatives) to conferences and public events which promise to be visited by multipliers and potential new partners.

3. Communication with Policy Makers

Exchange with policy makers constitutes an important element of our identity. Policy makers on EU level will be addressed personally, mainly by our board members, e.g. during events or meetings. Policy makers on the national/local level are contacted by our members or project partners, using the visibility material explained above.

Besides, politicians and administration staff are regularly invited to our thematic exchanges and policy shops and addressed by the ARC process.

4. Communication with Funders

Communication with our old and potential new funders will be done mainly by board members with appropriate support by the team. All funding support will be mentioned in our publications and activities.