

Two months at COB

3rd of June – 28th of July

Volunteering at a social farm in the countryside of Thessaly, Greece has been a very enjoyable experience. The organisation COB started in the 90s with its focus on building with natural materials. Bit by bit they developed their organic farm in Nessonas, Greece, where they maintain several vegetable gardens, a food forest and take care of chicken, quails, fish, worms, cats and dogs. The focus is on self-sufficiency and living with a low eco footprint. To strengthen the social structures within the village and keep it alive, they also took over the only café there. They live as a community and want to share their knowledge with others by offering workshops and accepting volunteers. It is a farm with multiple different projects, which allowed me to learn not only about gardening, natural building and food preserving, but I had also the chance to experience their way of living in a community.

As I grew up on the countryside, it was really interesting to see the differences and similarities of rural Greece and rural Austria. The three main topics of Forum Synergies (access to land, gender dynamics and intergenerational relations) all showed up in different ways during my two-month-long stay in Nessonas. In the following I try to give a quick general view over the three issues and compare the information to my experiences during my time as a volunteer.

ACCESS TO LAND

The scarcity of farmland is a growing issue in many countries. When we talk about access to land, we are referring to a combination of social, legal and economic issues: *who* can use land *how* and for *how long*. The situation worsens, as more and more soil is sealed to use it for infrastructure like buildings, roads or public spaces. Besides other effects (e.g. floods due to a lack of seeping possibilities) less surface can be used as an agricultural source. Therefore, the basis of our food production and ecosystem is unsteady.

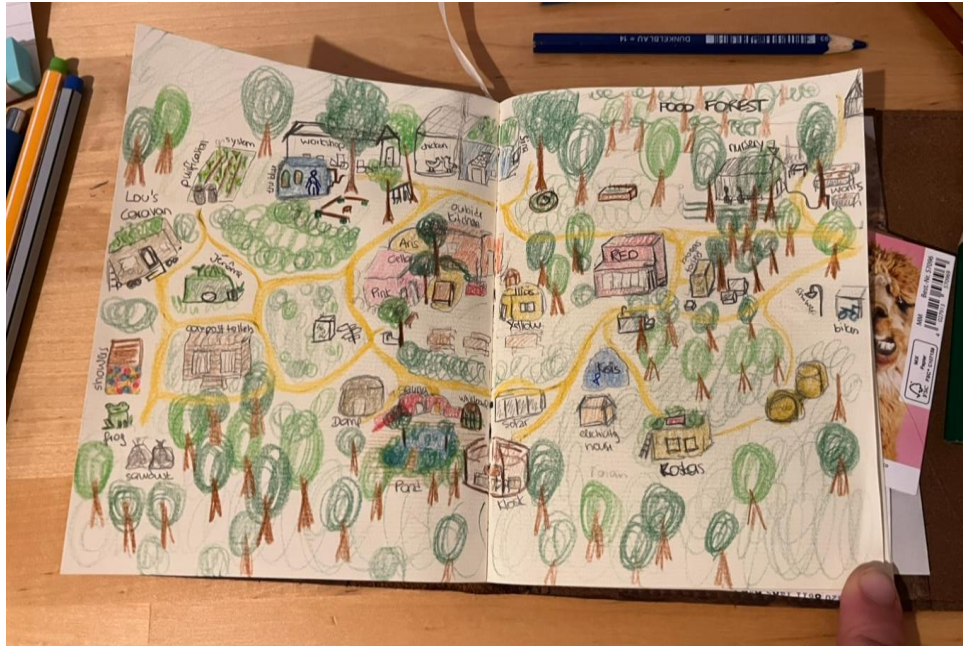
COB has several ways of tackling this problem: As an ecological farm they try to preserve the soil fertility and make it usable for future generations. No pesticides, herbicides or artificial fertilizers are used. As a consequence, many hours of manual labour are required: A big part of my time spent in the garden consisted of weeding and pruning. While it is delightful to notice how quickly the plants and grasses grow and flourish, it can feel like a Sisyphean task to keep the garden neat. The crop output per unit area might be less compared

to a conventional farm. However, due to COB having access to their greenhouse, food forest, the big garden („ecovillage“) and a neighbour's garden, the harvest sometimes seemed more than we could handle. Of course, all the vegetables could be used either for eating, preserving or selling, but on some days the kitchen seemed to overflow with zucchinis, cucumbers, peppers and tomatoes.

The farm of COB follows the ideas of permaculture. They try to work close to nature and create balanced self-sustaining ecosystems. The food forest alongside the living area is a great example for that. All the rows have several layers of plants growing together, usually tall trees, shrubs, ground cover and root crops. Each layer plays a role in maintaining the overall system, and everything supports each other. For example, tall eucalyptus trees provide shade to smaller plants, nitrogen-fixing plants (like beans) help improve the soil for other crops and grapevines can use the vertical space between them. With a mix of plants close together, the food forest has a big diversity and is close to how nature would do it. To support the ecosystem in the food forest, COB has installed a watering system, maintains several bee hives and adds compost or “worm water” to give extra nutrients. The compost consists mainly of food leftovers, plant rests and other biological waste. Whenever it reaches 65 degrees, we turn it with small shovels, add water and try to reach a height of 120 cm to have enough pressure and therefore perfect conditions for the composting process. The mentioned “worm water” is collected under the “worm tubs”: Old bathtubs filled with soil became the new home of worms. Gradually, a little bit of water is seeping through the worm tubs. Because the liquid is very nutrient-rich, it is thinned down and added to the irrigation system.

In the gardens, COB protects the soil by applying natural crop rotation and following the „chop and drop“ method: The cut off leaves, stems or branches are left behind to cover the ground, protect it from the strong Greek sun, keep the humidity and later on decompose and provide nutrients. The only exception are the leaves of zucchinis and cucumbers. They are collected to avoid spreading fungi.

The „drop and chop“ method is used not only at COB's gardens, but also the well vegetated areas between the houses. As you might be able to identify in my map-drawing-attempt (picture below), the living area consists of several houses, common spaces and workplaces. Between them, all kinds of trees, bushes and grasses are growing. Besides the ecological benefits, this led to a cooler climate and was a big feelgood factor for me and a lot of other people passing by.



The openness of COB allows different people to experience life on a farm. The 4000 m² of land were bought 20 years ago and slowly developed into the farm and natural building workplace. By working together, COB can implement permaculture principles on a larger scale and create more sustainable, productive ecosystems that benefit everyone. They welcome long-term volunteers, people passing by for a few days or host and organize workshops. This makes farming more accessible, especially for people who don't have the capital to buy land on their own. In general, the land management in Greece seems a little bit unstructured – especially compared to e.g. Austria. The national cadastre system has been developed only since 1995, whereas Austria has been following that system since the 19th century. Even today rural areas still lack updated records, making it difficult to certify ownership or sell land legally. Both old and potential new farmers might prefer to „let sleeping dogs lie“ (e.g. not sell unused land, because the bureaucratic process might cause trouble).

Another issue especially for organic farmers are the seed regulations. The laws try to ensure a good quality of crops and vegetables. Unfortunately, there are a few downsides to those regulations: The most common seeds are patented by big companies. Farmers can only buy the right to grow those seeds for one season only. They are not allowed to save and replant the seeds from their last-year harvest. If farmers want to follow the law, they need to buy the seeds and the license to grow them again. Patents also make it harder for farmers to share seeds, limiting biodiversity. As a result, farmers face higher expenses and lose control over their seed supply. Of course, you can eat the crops of replanted seeds yourself as it is done at

COB, but by selling them, one would violate the patented rights of the seed company. This shows the last aspect of “access to land”: *How long* can it be used?

In my eyes, COB is trying a very accessible way of using their land. With the concept of a social farm, many people benefit from the land. The used methods all have the goal to live in harmony with nature and to keep the land usable for all future generations.

Intergenerational Relations

The sharing of knowledge and skills between older and younger generations is an important way of keeping useful ideas, good habits and traditions, especially on a farm. Older farmers often have valuable knowledge about sustainable farming practices and tricks that might not be found in textbooks. Younger generations have new ideas and perspectives. Working together and learning from one another can lead not only to the best outcome but also strengthen the relationship. The diversity of people and age groups teaches important social skills as it requires empathy and mutual understanding.

At COB, there are two places where multiple generations meet each other. On the one hand, there is the farm. From toddler to pensioner, everyone lives more or less together. It sort of recreates the lifestyle people used to have in the past with multiple generations in the same house taking care of each other. COB consists of both related and “chosen” family. With everyone following similar goals and sharing a mindset it felt easier than pure multi-generational family houses. However, the blood-relations were noticeable when it came to making decisions.

Growing up in the middle of a strong community surrounded by open space, animals and nature seems to provide a great environment for a kid to thrive. With so many people coming and going, openness is taught on a daily basis. I really am curious to see the person a kid is growing into with the mentioned surroundings. This works the other way around as well: Kids glue the community together and keep the elderly young.

On the other hand, they operate the local café in Nessonas. The village is very small and reflects traditional rural life in Greece. Almost every day, the local group of regulars met at the square in front of the café. Unfortunately, my Greek and their English were too bad to have long conversations. However, in those two months we got to know each other a little. The mayor enjoyed dancing and even taught me the easier Greek dances. The friendly

neighbour Sofia showed us how to braid garlic properly and every now and then encouraged us with fruit or ice cream on our way back from the garden. These interactions were a great opportunity to experience Greek life outside of our little world at COB.

Gender Dynamics

Traditionally, farming has often been male dominated, especially in tasks considered physically demanding or related to machinery and decision-making. Women have always played vital roles, often focusing on animal care, gardening, food production, and household management, though their contributions have sometimes been undervalued or overlooked. Nowadays those stereotypical roles are outdated. With the use of machines less physical strength is needed and working together regardless of gender is common ground. However, power imbalances and stereotypical expectations are often deeply rooted and need a lot of conscious effort to be broken up. It can be hard to recognize common practises as sexist, when they are intended to be efficient.

During my time at COB, three men and one woman were living permanently at the farm. Two couples were part of the community but staying mostly at their own houses outside of the farm. The volunteers were mainly female or non-binary. The daily tasks for the community were divided primarily among the volunteers and included cooking, cleaning and doing the common laundry. Since the permanent people had more responsibility (leading the garden, the café or building), they didn't need to do those common tasks as well. In my eyes, that seemed reasonable and more efficient. If someone is working in another town during the day, they can't be home to cook lunch for everyone. With the addition, that the volunteers were mainly female, this division of work followed typical gender roles. Two times male volunteers stayed at the farm. One was assigned as usual and did those tasks exceptionless together with his girlfriend. The other one refused to do those tasks, because he wanted to learn only about the gardening. As his mindset was supported by one of the permanent people, the work division felt to be based on gender. Because the three permanent women tried to take over those tasks whenever they had the chance to, this feeling got stronger. Of course, it is a plausible reason that people with less responsibility are taking care of the household, but with the described constellation it matches patriarchal structures. Furthermore, the fact that only women who are related or married to someone at the farm are permanently part of the community provokes thoughts about how women-friendly the environment is.

The patriarchal structure in Greece could be seen in the village life. While the men met almost daily in the Café, the women were hardly seen at all. In the evenings, some ladies put

out their chairs in front of their house, enjoyed the summer evenings and maybe talked a little with other women sitting in front of their house. In response to my questions, I was told that women who go to cafés alone are either assumed to be tourists or viewed as prostitutes. This might be an exaggerated choice of words, but it shows the general mentality.

Ultimately, I am convinced that no one intentionally wants to degrade others, but we need to question our attitudes and behaviour regularly. Healthy gender roles help create a farming environment that is more fair, supportive, and able to work well together during challenges.

Résumé

Living at COB was truly a great experience. I really felt as a part of the community and could broaden my horizon in many ways. Gardening, plastering and assisting with the workshops together with so many warm-hearted people gives so much energy and leaves you full of thirst for action. In my eyes one big push factor away from farming and rural life is the solitude. Running a farm collectively could be a solution for the decline of farming, especially in the isolated farms up in the Alps. Together with the education of youth and interested parties, it is making rural life more attractive. I really appreciate having the possibility to do this scholarship and hope to use my knowledge now back in Austria.



Weekly Work Diary

Week 1:

- arrival, discovering COB and their people, getting used to the minimalistic way of life (using the solar energy only during the day, compost toilets, showering with little water, trying to use warm water only when it's heated up by the sun/day temperatures), selfmade ecological toothpaste and soap, putting the biological trash to the compost (120cm high +120 cm long, daily turnover by hand) or to feed the worms (leaving good soil and liquid to water and nourish the plants), adapting to heat
- hand weed the beds, taking care of the vegetables (zucchini, pepper, tomatoes, cucumbers, aubergines, ...) by cutting of shoots and tie them to bamboo-sticks (we harvested and cut before), braiding garlic, harvesting radish, carrots, zucchini, salad, preparing the potatoes with straw,
- first team-meeting, organising work, cooking for everyone, cleaning common areas, musical performances on Austria-France-Greece-music night in café, getting to know locals, cultural night with live music, discovering the area (beach trip, healing fountain, ...)

Week 2:

- working at the food forest (pruning wine and eukalyptus trees), braiding garlic, harvesting, preparing the neighbors' garden, greenhouse (take out the winter vegetables, weeding, pruning tomatoes, tying up tomatoes & cucumbers, ...)
- preparation for tourist group: cleaning the farm, preparing the homemade goods,
- learning basics of natural building (claywalls of oven)
- Taking over additional daily tasks (watering the nursery, feeding the animals, taking care of the wormtubs, ...)

Week 3 and 4: Master Building Workshop at COB

- learning how to organise a group of 56 people: preparing tents, toothpaste, toiletry kits, harvesting, cooking, cleaning, team building, leading a music night, intercultural night, singing together, ...
- managing workload, social dynamics within the working team, sharing circles, ...
- helping a little bit with building: plastering, preparing clay
- First time seeing fire bush close by (what to do, where to go, how to alarm everyone in time, people staying in tents all around the farm, ...)
- Recharging after two weeks of living with more than 60 people and constant work, going to a local festival + beach

Week 5:

- Continuous gardenwork, getting independent

- learning maintenance skills (declogging pipes, repairing water system, ...)
- preserving food (pickling cucumbers & radish)
- finishing the master building house

Week 6: Scouts Workshop

- organizing, cooking, Belgian night, connecting with the scouts
- Harvesting, garden work, collecting herbs in Greek countryside,
- assisting with creative art commission (birdhouse)
- Connecting with the scouts, playing music and games, discovering the area (Kalypso waterfalls)

Week 7

- gardening, learning the basics about bee maintenance
- Preparing irrigation system at the field
- COB-meeting, teambuilding: festival in neighbourtown (diving into Greek traditions)

Week 8:

- preserving vegetables: pickles, zucchinis in oil, sun-drying tomatoes, drying vegetables
- plastering in Farsallah (family house, very high walls – lots of plastering)
- helping at the boat: painting the deck + building a structure to measure the right length for the ropes of the main mast
- Celebration at the Café: trying to have an assembly line work for food and drinks
- team-building-ocean-weekend: barbecuing, staying at the treehouse, beach, enjoying the company
- Celebrating my birthday, saying goodbye (heavy-heartedly)

