Rural Experience Hub Kick-off Event in Romania

May 30th - June 2nd at Dupa Gard

Rethinking Intergenerational Dialogue: Reflections from the Rural Experience Hub in Romania

Report by Adam Beswick

In June, Forum Synergies held the first *Rural Experience Hub* in the village of Poșaga de Jos, Romania — an experiment in co-creating a new kind of space for rural development. This wasn't a standard workshop or consultation. It was designed to ask different questions, open up new ways of seeing, and test what happens when creativity, storytelling, and genuine intergenerational exchange are placed at the heart of rural dialogue.

The idea behind the Rural Experience Hub came from a shared sense that something was missing in the way we talk about rural resilience. Intergenerational dialogue is often referenced, but rarely practiced in a way that goes beyond symbolic inclusion. What would happen if we *started* with this idea, rather than treating it as an add-on? What if young people were not simply asked to join existing spaces, but helped design new ones? What if we used imagination as a method for rural planning, not just data or policy?

This pilot in Romania was our first attempt at answering those questions. Together with young people, elders, and local residents, we created a space that was not just about exchanging views — but about experimenting with the conditions and formats that allow real dialogue and shared learning to emerge. And we tried to capture the analytical as well as the emotional layers of rural experience — a kind of knowledge that is often harder to articulate but just as important.

This offered an opportunity to also address wider sustainability challenges in rural areas. In the face of complex, overlapping crises facing rural areas today such as economic stagnation, climate crisis, biodiversity decline, centralisation and professionalisation of agriculture, surface-area based funding that negatively impacts small holder farmers, demographic shifts through an aging rural population — it's becomes increasingly clear that we can't solve today's challenges utilising the same systems of thinking that created them. Sustainability transitions often stall because we stay locked in existing systems, languages, and assumptions - reducing our transformative potential to what we think makes sense within a system of knowing. Instead, by

engaging with *futures thinking* and imagining alternative systems is not just a creative exercise — it's a strategic necessity. By exploring what could be, we loosen the grip of what is, and open up space for new alliances, values, and forms of action to emerge. In rural contexts, this means daring to ask not just how to preserve what we have, but how to *reconstruct* futures that are just, regenerative, and rooted in collective imagination.

With the intergenerational approach and engaging in systems thinking - Forum Synergies hosted a workshop over the course of two days to imagine how intergenerational dialogue should and could look like for a more resilient rural Europe. Rather than delivering ready-made outcomes, the hub was a **proof of process**: a prototype for how rural movements might create space for *learning between generations*, not just about them. We wanted to see what becomes visible — and possible — when young people are invited to imagine the future they want, and when elders are asked to bring not just their memories, but their aspirations too. Everyone can and should be encouraged to dream.

Structure

The workshop was designed to facilitate co-creation and engage creativity. Throughout the process, participants were requested to engage with rural development challenges systemically and creatively and with a dose of futures thinking.

Based on the visit of the local realities of our host (Dupa Gard), the first step was to create a joint understanding of challenges. What are really the issues facing resilience and renewal in rural Europe?

The aim of creating a joint understanding and sense of challenges which can forge the basis for discussions going forward. The listing of issues may also reveal disagreements as not all participants agree on what are the central issues to them.

Outcomes

Current challenges

Creating a systemic map of current challenges started in a brainstomring process. What do participants see as current challenges facing rural sustainability, resilience snd intergenerational governance?

External challenges (societal)

- Youth unemployment
- Lack of public transport options
- Lack of playgrounds
- Lack of quality education
- Climate change (lack of water resources).
- Lack of public meeting points in rural areas
- Lack of cultural and social opportunities
- Poor internet access
- Inconsistent legal frameworks
- Weak access to EU tools and applications
- Few platforms for communication and knowledge sharing
- Losing connection with food production
- "Shell villages"
- Difficulty to access land affordably to contribute to transition workPoor social and cultural programmes in rural areas
- Lack of intergenerational knowledge transfer
- Industrial takeover
- Poverty
- Seedbanks and seed politics

Internal challenges

- Lack of sustainability knowledge and thinking
- Suspicion towards new ideas (e.g. permaculture, community-led development)
- Patriarchy
- Unwarranted belief in "Top-down" solutions - waiting for someone to come and solve current challenges.
- Lack of trust and confidence in rural areas
- Aging rural population
- Reluctancy to leave comfort zone

Personal challenges

- Overwhelmed practitioners - so much to do but unfavourable conditions, requires exhaustive work.
- Climate anxiety
- Furious at current state
- Energised and willing to work

Overview:

Current challenges address a few thematic issues - these include basic needs, emotional and cultural needs (quality of cultural life) but also with an awareness of how current land-use and environmental governance is putting pressures on shared resources (water, food, timber and environmental services). Broadly speaking these can be divided up in a systems point of view as landscape pressures (external), pressures within local communities (internal) as well as the personal and emotional aspects of current challenges.

At the broadest scale, **landscape pressures** are large-scale societal, environmental, and structural forces—such as climate change, demographic shifts, or political and market trends—that change slowly and cannot be directly altered by local actors, though they can be shaped over the long term. In many rural contexts, these external pressures include high youth unemployment, poor public transport, limited access to quality education, public meeting points, and cultural or social opportunities. Climate change, especially water scarcity, compounds these issues, alongside weak internet connectivity, inconsistent legal frameworks, limited access to EU tools, few platforms for communication, declining connection to food production, "shell villages," unaffordable land for transition projects, inadequate intergenerational knowledge transfer, industrial takeover, poverty, contested seed politics, and insufficient rural social programmes.

Internal community challenges which can be more immediately addressable by local actors include limited sustainability knowledge, scepticism toward new approaches such as permaculture or community-led development, patriarchal norms, reliance on "top-down" solutions, low trust and confidence, an aging population, and reluctance to leave familiar ways of doing things.

At the **personal level**, practitioners often face emotional and mental strain: feeling overwhelmed by the scale of work in unfavourable conditions, experiencing climate anxiety, or frustration at the current situation. These feelings coexist with energy, determination, and a strong will to work for change—making personal resilience a critical factor in driving rural transitions.

What could intergenerational spaces and steered governance offer to solve the aforementioned challenges?

Intergenerational processes are able to address several challenges. Whilst they are well positioned to address internal challenges in rural areas - they also offer precedent setting to address external challenges to boot which as mentioned above can be trickier to address systemically on a local level.

Internally, intergenerational spaces such as a rural experience hub **reduces the distance between pools of knowledge** which currently are not being combined due to a combination of internal and external challenges. For example, lack of sustainability and knowledge and thinking can be addressed by creating spaces that disseminate these values. Younger people on average are more exposed to sustainability discourses, and many younger people looking for a rural life are also inspired and wish to see increased sustainability thinking. Creating knowledge sharing also in the long-run reduces suspicion towards new ideas such as permaculture and sustainability through socialisation. Similar experiences would be patriarchy, where taking intergenerational approaches

Intergenerational spaces are not free but are cheaper than programmatic approaches. For a rural experience hub to work, you need people and you need a space, whether ad-hoc or permanent.

These hubs may also help address external challenges. Knowledge sharing and dissemination can also create a platform for setting localised approaches for improved water governance, create spaces for social and cultural exchange. Rural hubs may also contribute to a sense of shared ownership over social and community development - being a reverse factor for rural youth emigration from rural areas. Similarly, they may attract newcomers or young families looking for healthy communities to raise a family in.

Lastly, these hubs can also showcase that not all challenges require top-down solutions. A recurring theme in rural advocacy is for policy makers to "solve" problems - and whilst whilst rural voices need to be heard, it may not that we are not loud enough, it is that in a world of

top-down solutions - then the voice of the few (who also do not have tons of money behind them) will not be listened to. Sustainable governance is a combination of these two approaches, and quite often more sustainable and resilient governance arrangements are not those that are top-down but instead bottom-up. Rural experience hubs can provide the impetus, awareness and appreciation that these steps can be taken and that they can be and often are effective.

These rural experience hubs may also flip a discursive shift from "solving problems" in rural areas to "managing challenges" in rural areas. For a healthy and intergenerational society to develop then this requires continuous work. The future and climate change will no doubt present emergent challenges that we today cannot foresee - instilling a mindset and culture that joint challenges are managed and not ad hoc problems to be "solved" by policy alone.

How then do we design these intergenerational spaces?

We were interested in finding out what type of spaces would be ideal? In an ideal future, how should these processes look like?

Where do we want to go? Who do we want to be?

The visioning part of the workshop was designed to create a vision - a goal which consequent workshops and work can aim to seek to achieve.

Two distinct visions emerged for spaces (hubs) for intergenerational learning in Europe. These represent best-case scenarios, where the constraints of the present were not the main driving force in constructing the spaces. Instead - participants in an intergenerational setting came together to explore what they believed should be the way intergenerational and community governance in rural areas should look like.

i) A community space: Rooting intergenerational work in local areas

In this vision - intergenerational processes do not occur out of nowhere. Instead - a dedicated space called the "experience hub" was created which aimed to collect experiences from rural communities as well as provide an opportunity for new ideas to emerge.

The rural experience hubs would become a centre point for rural exchange and learning. Residents as well as tourists would come to these spaces to learn about the area, its culture and

its customs. Locals alike could access seed banks, come with questions about which type of growing techniques could work where and how.

Our 9-year old participant also requested a playground in this space - which would exist to bring people together across generations.

The air and focus on transition is central to this vision. As opposed to spaces dedicated to different ideas across a village - the space brings these together with the aim and view of empowering rural residents to take responsibility and engage with transition.

The conviction here was to identify key areas where intergenerational processes and learning are needed. Form was thus informed by function - and the different rooms of the vision represent different areas which are in need of this.

For example, one such area of concern was that of agriculture and small-holder farming where seedbanks and a kitchen could bring together knowledge and cultures of food and agricultural practise. Exchanging best-practises could see older farmers share tacit knowledge of having worked land over many years - with younger farmers sharing new knowledges of agriculture such as permaculture or agroecology. Another area was that of local culture and customs. Depopulation was considered a challenge and to prevent the cultural loss of depopulation - libraries, museums and living history opportunities are considered in this hub.

Rooting the idea in the present

What becomes important here is that a physical space or deliberate space making is desired for intergenerational processes, based on the needs of the rural community. Something attractive and accessible, open and inviting for creativity and co-creation.

Intergenerational processes and coming together to tackle joint challenges are needed across many areas. Joint challenges are complex and solutions should reflect the context, aspirations and cultures of the place. This requires facilitation and support to get out and to share.

Rural communities are knowledgeable and interesting - it is worth creating spaces to celebrate this.

Young people are interested in creating purpose.

Sustainability transition pressures put an onus on rooting these spaces in exploring sustainability and resilience of rural areas. Ultimately, a sign of a resilient community is one which has spaces to foster and enable exchange, learning and co-creation.

Local ownership of the format is vital, as each Rural Experience Hub will naturally develop its own unique form

ii) The Snail - a recipe of values for an adaptive intergenerational process
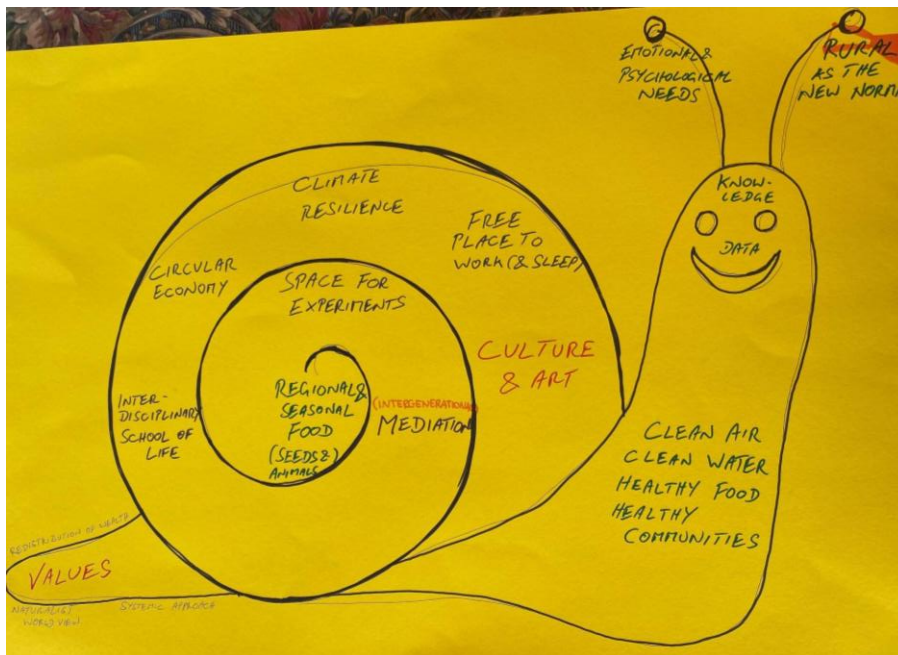
The second working group focussed on the process rather than the design of the space. In their vision, the intergenerational hub develops slowly, driven by common values (like social justice and sustainable environmental approaches) and guided by the needs of the rural community (including their emotional and psychological needs).

As the process is likely to be slow, it is symbolised by a snail, which, in its house, offers a dynamic space for experiences and community development. This hub provides room to address the needs of a living community, including culture and art, an interdisciplinary "school of life" and a space for mediation and conflict management. It also addresses practical services, inter alia linked to re- and upcycling, access to local data and knowledge, regional seeds and food, and to a welcoming place to exchange, work and rest.

Challenges

Thinking systemically does not come naturally

One of the takeaways and learnings was that encouraging systems thinking to explore interactions, interconnectedness and translate that to governance design does not just happen.

Participants were asked to construct systems of dialogue that would address systemic challenges but systems literacy varied.

This shows that for future engagement - creating a joint sense of systems thinking is important to also equip participants with the tools to think systemically.

Once we got into systems - the actual process is quite intuitive and rewarding. At a certain level, recognising that systems - whilst powerful - are constructed and can be remade, it gives the creative license and power to participants to construct the type of dialogues that they want to see.

Intergenerational dialogue as a tool to address rural challenges or as a goal of rural development itself?

There was also a tension throughout the workshop regarding the ideas and purpose of intergenerational dialogue. Is it a means to an end or an end in and of itself?

Two visions emerged

i) The Rural Experience Hub as a tool to address intergenerational challenges

Here - the rural experience hub can be seen as an opportunity to bring together parts of society to address key challenges facing rural development. This includes issues of e,g. land inheritance amidst an ever-aging farmer population, or coming together to address other challenges - e.g. how to best steer development efforts or how to find adaptation strategies for the accelerating effects of climate change.

From this point of view, it is the challenges currently facing rural Europe that is taking the spotlight. These challenges are acute and urgent and the current methodologies of dealing with them lack in intergenerational quality. In fact, it is perhaps the lack of intergenerational dialogue which is making solving these challenges more difficult.

In this case, inviting participants to design spaces for intergenerational dialogue was difficult. This is because the form of a space should be informed by its function - in other words, what challenge it is seeking to address. Engaging with the future in this way was a stumbling block for creativity, not an enabler of creativity since many participants assumed current challenges facing rural Europe would have been fixed by then.

This shows the risk of futures thinking but also exhibits some naivety - are these challenges just "solved" and then by whom? Is the government enough or sufficient in being able to address the pitfalls facing rural areas? Is the challenge of transition in rural areas really only a policy question?

For a facilitator this means getting heavily involved - setting the agenda and remaining participants to address current challenges.

ii) The rural experience hub as a goal of rural development

Seeing the rural experience hub as a goal it gives onus the role of creativity, dreaming and normative steering to development. It locates the hub as an opportunity to co-create a question of "where do we want to go" rather than "where do we appear to be going".

Here participation, co-creation and collaboration were important values that were regarded as being keys for resilience. Even if we have policy prescriptions that address key challenges- we still want to be able to engage and build strong connections and resilient communities in rural areas. The rural experience hub was then seen as an opportunity to strengthen weakening communities and be able to bring meaningful and qualitative development and experience to living in rural areas. Instead of a lack of capacities, the hubs would be a collection of capacities that would enrich rural life.

Such a view is heavily linked to the ideas of participatory governance and even transdisciplinary working. The participants here really engaged in identifying what the potential could be. Norms of how things should be run are vitally important since it can create a joint sense of understanding and become a visual product that can inform policy and inform development.

Participants who favoured this view were often younger participants who wanted to see remake rural areas. Sustainability was high on the agenda, with seed sharing, agroecological principles and collective governance high on the agenda.

These dreams are also important since a lot of rural development discussions risk becoming a list of complaints and things that are not working. This way - it does not only offer a tool, but a guidance to strive towards.

For the role of a facilitator - this approach often means giving the tools and the floor to the participants. Steering too much can reduce the creativity and openness that needs to be created in order for norms of "where we want to go" to flourish. When participants are aksing themselves "can we go here?" - then too many barriers have been set up - at least at this stage.

Of course, participation does in and of itself not lead to collective understanding and agreement. This is why further tools need to be identified and facilitation techniques be improved (e.g. instilling systems thinking at an earlier stage).

Themes

What did we learn

- Participation as a goal or as a tool
- Values and guidance for intergenerational processes
- Potential for intergenerational governance
- A need to root dialogue for real life challenges as well as building a better future.

What emerged from this experiment are insights, principles, and stories — some of which we'll share at the upcoming **European Rural Parliament in Scotland** in 2025. But perhaps more importantly, the hub revealed the need to keep working on this — iteratively, creatively, and together.

Our goal is not to present a finished model, but to issue an invitation. We believe intergenerational learning should be **a strategic pillar** of rural resilience — not just because it's inclusive, but because it's smart. It allows us to surface the tensions, build shared values, and shape a different future together.

We hope to see many of you there — to reflect, respond, and maybe help us design the next iteration of this process.

— Forum Synergies

Closing the bag

Can a rural experience address current challenges?

- *Yes*

Can the rural experience hub be used as a methodology to create a more resilient and idealised future of what rural life can be?

- **Yes**

Somewhere we do not only want to solve current issues. Living in a capitlistic and materialistic society - current challenges can be to participate in the system. On the other hand, rural Europe has an opportunity to configure itself in a such way that it offers alternatives and pathways for a resilient and sustainable future, rather than seeking a resilient place in a system predicated on unsustainable and shortermism.