

FORUM SYNERGIES SCHOLARSHIP REPORT

MARA LOCATELLI AT COB (20 June - 20 September 2024)

This report provides an overview of our participant Mara Locatelli's three-month scholarship experience and immersive stay at COB Social Cooperative and permaculture intentional eco-community in the rural area of Nessonas, Greece through the Forum Synergies Programme from June to September 2024. The report covers her hands-on involvement in regenerative farming, natural building, self-sufficiency and community engagement, while addressing key social themes such as gender inclusivity, access to land, and intergenerational cooperation. COB provided a comprehensive environment for hands-on practical learning and social responsibility.

- **Project Overview:** COB, located in rural Greece next to the small village of Nessonas, operates as an educational, self-sufficient, intentional eco-community space. It engages in various sustainable practices, including permaculture, natural building, self-sufficiency and local community engagement. Mara's participation in the project was aimed at learning as much as possible these methods and practices, deepening her knowledge in community-building and eco-friendly technologies through non-formal education and hands-on activities.
- **Goals and Objectives:** Mara's primary goal was to acquire practical skills in regenerative agriculture, natural building, self-sufficiency and community engagement while also gaining insight into the social dynamics of rural communities and addressing key social themes such as gender inclusivity and intergenerational cooperation.

Activities and Skills Gained

Month 1: Orientation and Community Integration

- **Activities:** Mara's initial weeks involved familiarising herself with COB's operational structure, its communal activities, and sustainable infrastructure. She started integrating into daily farm tasks, which included composting, biofertilizer production, seedling care, and food preservation. She also became acquainted with COB's low-impact technologies like reed bed systems, compost toilets, and biogas energy.
- **Skills Acquired:** Self-sufficiency practical skills such as compost making, mulching, and food preservation and processing (bread baking with homemade sour dough cooked in a fire oven, fermentations, marmalades, pasta sauces, water kefir and kombucha, vinegar making) were learned during the initial weeks. She has also been discovering and using different low-impact cooking devices present at the COB such as solar dehydrator, solar oven, dutch oven, barrel oven. Mara emphasised how these

activities, when connected, contribute to community well-being through sustainable systems.

- **Social Dynamics:** Mara also learned about the importance of communal efforts for resilience, with shared activities such as cooking, gardening, and natural building, which connect different aspects of self-sufficiency. She highlighted how a healthy, productive garden directly influences well-being through healthy, balanced plant-based meals. She also observed and experienced how communal living fosters cooperation and ensures inclusivity, especially in daily communal tasks like cleaning of individual and shared indoor and outdoor spaces.

Month 2: Deep Dive into Specialized Skills and Projects

- **Natural Building:** One of the most significant experiences for Mara was her involvement in the renovation of an old village house, designated for the volunteer's future accommodation. She iced into natural building techniques, learning cob and adobe brick making, straw insulation, and lime-based natural plastering. These sustainable methods reflect COB's philosophy of bioclimatic architecture, resource efficiency, re-use and up-cycling. She also participated in the renovation of another cob house inside the farm's premises which will be functioning as COBbnb for eco-touristic purposes. She gained experience in wattle and daub (canes' structure as wall support), earthbags, rammed earth, and tadelakt technique to waterproof the natural plaster. She also participated in the creation of a rocket mass heater and a natural wooden oven.
- **Regenerative Agriculture:** Mara's agricultural work focused on permaculture principles, from soil regeneration to water management techniques, such as using biofertilizers, wood chipping and different methods of compost making. She helped with harvesting regenerative crops like lentils, chickpeas, and almonds, and participated in seed propagation techniques, such as seed bombs. She also learned all the procedures of how to prepare a vegetable bed (weeding, broadfork, mulching and planting) and how to care for summer vegetables while participating in basic tree pruning and plant propagation through cuttings. Mara also assisted in taking care of our community seed bank (identification, categorisation, labelling), and learned how to create seedlings and prepare the nursery for the autumn and winter crops.
- **Workshops and Erasmus+ Youth Exchange:** In July, Mara assisted the COB team in the organisation and implementation of an Erasmus+ Youth Exchange program on low-tech sustainable solutions. She helped to organise natural building and food processing workshops, prepared healthy, balanced meals for large groups, and presented her experience and knowledge in regenerative agriculture, enhancing her

- leadership skills in a multicultural environment with young participants from 5 different countries.

Month 3: Leadership and Community Engagement

- **Leadership Role:** In her final month, Mara took on more leadership responsibilities, organising workshops and community events. She played an essential role in the renovation of the village café, a space aimed at involving local women and creating a more inclusive environment in a village where gender roles are traditionally rigid. She organised cinema nights and workshops like sewing and soap-making, which helped bring women together, encouraging female participation in a previously male-dominated public space.
- **Access to Land:** COB's regenerative farming project aims to showcase alternative approaches to monoculture farming, working attentively on bridging the gap between local farmers and sustainable agricultural practices. Mara was involved in outreach efforts to local farmers, demonstrating regenerative techniques such as soil fertility, crop rotation, organic fertilisers, importance of biodiversity, low-impact farming methods and economic sustainability in farming. This ongoing project seeks to shift scepticism of local stakeholders toward regenerative and organic farming. The village community building that has turned into the café project, is creating a social local hub, facilitating dialogues, mini workshops and screenings on the above thematics.

- Gender Issues

COB's initiative to renovate the village café was aimed at bridging the gap between the eco-community and the local population of the village with the further goal to also challenge traditional gender roles. By organising activities for local women, the project provided them with a safe, public space to gather, learn new skills, and engage in community life. Mara's contributions helped create and organise a welcoming environment for women who typically had limited opportunities for public engagement.

- Intergenerational Cooperation

Throughout her active involvement, Mara engaged with participants from all age groups, from elderly villagers to young volunteers and Erasmus participants. COB's community projects, like the Youth Exchange "Low-Tech Eco-Camp" and "Rizes" café renovation, fostered intergenerational collaboration by uniting different groups to work toward shared sustainability goals. The project aimed to break age barriers, especially in a rural village where most inhabitants are over 50.

Challenges and Solutions

The most significant challenges Mara observed included traditional gender roles that limited women's public participation and scepticism from local farmers toward organic and regenerative agriculture. Fortunately the renovation of the village's cafe and organic shop provided an entry point for engaging local women and fostering inclusive spaces. To address

scepticism about organic farming, COB used its café to promote its own organically grown products, aiming to demonstrate the profitability of regenerative agriculture. Regarding the documentation of the activities, unfortunately it didn't go exactly as planned and as professionally as we would like due to the last minute unavailability of our usual visual expert partner. For this reason we delegated this task among our team (which was also difficult and challenging as most members are away during most summer days for holidays or seminars and trainings).

Financial Overview

The Forum Synergies scholarship proved to be an amazing opportunity for Mara to support her through her learning journey and hands-on experience on sustainable rural development. It covered her travel, accommodation, local transportation and living expenses efficiently, allowing her to focus on the core activities of the program. Key expenses also included materials for the natural building activities as well as materials of the organisation of workshops for the local community including the fees of her trainer who supervised and guided through the activities that she chose to participate.

Evaluation and Reflection

- **Impact:** Mara's experience at COB was transformative. She developed hands-on practical skills in sustainable rural development through regenerative agriculture, natural building and self-sufficiency methods and techniques as well as community leadership. COB's philosophy of sustainability through holistic integration—connecting farming, building, and community engagement—was deeply influential in her learning, gaining insights into social dynamics related to gender and intergenerational cooperation.

- **Personal Reflection:** Mara reflected on the importance of community-driven rural sustainability efforts, emphasising that creating inclusive spaces which promote cooperation between different genders and age groups is vital for a thriving eco-community. She plans to apply these lessons in future projects, particularly in rural development initiatives with the aim to rejuvenate rural communities while reshaping social norms.

Dissemination and Next Steps

Mara plans to continue sharing her knowledge of permaculture, natural building, and community organising through blog posts, workshops, presentations, and online platforms. She aims to foster more inclusive and sustainable rural communities, integrating the lessons learned during her stay at COB.

We will be publishing the blogpost which Mara wrote describing her experience as well as a dedicated social media post and reel tagging the Forum Synergies project (please see "Dissemination links" document).

Conclusion

Mara's scholarship experience at COB was highly enriching, providing her with the tools and skills necessary for leading sustainable initiatives. The project successfully addressed critical

issues such as access to land, gender inclusivity, and intergenerational cooperation, highlighting the value of eco-communities in fostering resilient, inclusive societies towards a regenerative and socially just future.

Travel

Mara arrived at COB, Greece from Italy through Green Travel using ferry and bus on 19/06/2024. She returned to Italy on 21/09/2024 through Green Travel again using bus and ferry for her transportation.