

## **Final report of my Forum Synergies scholarship at COB permaculture farm 20/06 - 20/09 2024, Mara Locatelli**

The experience at Nessoná's farm in Greece has been widely diverse in terms of activities and fulfilling in terms of social and practical skills gained.

COB is very active in many different self-sufficient aspects: from gardening, to cooking and preserving food, from hosting events to natural building.

All of these activities, in which I've been involved during my stay, enlightened me with the idea that, for an intentional community to be efficient through resilience, is it very important that all these aspects are connected one to another as healthy cooking that leads to people's well-being comes from a hard work in the garden and, as a community with an healthy garden, infrastructures made with natural materials make the most sustainable shelter together with low-impact devices such as reed bed system, biogas and compost toilets.

Moreover, all of this knowledge is as important as it is shared and spreaded as the COB project is involved in organising workshops and youth programs in order to teach and sensibilize on those topics.

Last but not least, the connection with the local community around your project, as a way not to isolate the eco project from the outside but, on the contrary, to reinforce the human power of cooperation and to perpetuate an openness to all social, gender and age backgrounds.

To resume, this experience, among the many learning outcomes, enlightened in me the importance of having all these elements connected and in cooperation as a base for a healthy and prosperous community.

Concerning agricultural learning, I have deeply improved my knowledge about permaculture practices from soil and land regeneration to water management and food waste.

The main practical Gardening tasks I've been learning:

- Compost making,
- Biofertilizers,
- Seedlings and nursery,
- Preparing a vegetable bed (weeding, broadfork, mulching and planting)
- Taking care of summer veggies (tidied up tomatoes and cucumbers)
- Plant propagation through cuttings
- Teku kana
- Seed bombs
- Lentils and chickpeas harvesting
- Almond harvesting

- Wood chipping
- Some basics of pruning

Connected with the regenerative agriculture activities, the food processing part is very important. All the abundance from the garden is processed in order to be enjoyed out of season (maybe in winter, exactly when you'll miss the most of summer veggies, you will just have to open a jar and...the taste of that season will be there again!).

My main learning outcomes from the food processing aspect:

- Bread making with homemade sour dough cooked in fire oven,
- Marmalades
- Pickles and fermentations
- Water kefir and some kombucha experiment
- Vinegar making
- Preparing balanced vegan meals for big groups

Concerning the food preparation area, I've been discovering and using different low-impact devices present at the farm such as: solar dehydrator, solar oven, dutch oven, barrel oven.

Another activity I really enjoyed learning has been natural building. During my stay I had the opportunity to participate in a 3-days intensive natural building workshop and to help in the renovation of an old house in the village that COB eco-project is bringing back to life in order to host volunteers, erasmus groups and events.

My main learning outcomes from the Natural Building part:

- cob making (a mixture of clay, sand and straw to be worked in natural walls)
- Adobe bricks making (sun dried bricks with clay and straw)
- Straw insulation
- Rocket mass heater
- Natural wooden oven
- Wattle and daub (canes' structure as wall support)
- lime-based natural plaster
- tadelakt technique to waterproof natural plaster.

Besides all those precious practical skills, the experience at COB gave me many tools to sensitize my Social Skills through everyday community living in an international environment where I could speak different languages, sharing and celebrating cultural diversity. I had the chance to observe the daily organisation of volunteers and the division of the different daily activities, understanding the human resources' tools to properly accommodate and help volunteers or workshop participants to have the best experience possible.

In July a Youth Exchange about low-technologies took place at Nessonas with a group of youngsters from five countries. This was a precious occasion to meet and exchange with people from different backgrounds and to find common grounds on our interest in sustainability and alternative technologies for environmental preservation.

During the two week Erasmus+ program I help with the organisation; from the welcoming of the participant, to the food preparation and also giving a little presentation about my learning outcomes during my time there.

This made me reflect on how important is the role of someone dedicated to the human resources in order to have both long and short volunteers not feeling excluded or unlistened in their needs and to guarantee a volunteering experience that can fit both them and the host.

As I mentioned above, beside the many 'internal' activities, COB aims to involve and open itself to the local community by creating social spaces for everyone and trying to instigate a closer dialogue. The past year, with an Erasmus group of volunteers, COB has undone the works for the renovation of the abandoned school of the village, giving back to the community a recreational space to meet, especially for women, usually less advantaged in having a safe place where to be themselves outside of their houses.

Since the start of this year, however, COB farm has been involved in the renovation of the village café in order to offer again to the village a space for community bounding and meeting. As I was able to observe during my stay, locals still have quite strong gender roles with 'unwritten' rules that includes only men enjoying the café while women are supposed to stay at home or meet with each other at their places.

The project of the café undertaken by COB has the intention to involve women more in the public participation of the local community, giving them a space where they can meet and organising recreational activities together. On this topic, I've been helping with the organisation of some cinema nights at the newly open café free for all the community and the organisation of small workshops of sewing and soap making that could bring together the women of the village.

In this context, COB Farm is involved in ways to get closer to farmers around the area in order to offer support and to show different ways of growing food in a more sustainable way.

The area around the farm is a flat intensive agricultural area where the main production are almonds, peaches and apricots (the winters are too rigid for olive trees except in some restricted microclimate zones). The majority of local farmers are intensively using chemical products on their fields and are in general quite sceptical about organic or regenerative agriculture as they have a tendency to find it not very profitable.

The kafè project in the central square of Nessonas village is also a tool for COB in order to get closer to locals; by offering an inclusive recreational place to the villagers, the project is aiming to show to locals that COB community is open to cooperation and exchange with them and willing to make them try the fresh products that the farm produce organically, without the use of any pesticides.

Another benefit that the café project wishes to bring to the local community, together with women's inclusion in the village life and the promotion of more sustainable agricultural practices, is to bring together different generations as the majority of the inhabitants of Nessonas village are above 50 years old.

Of course for us COB's volunteers is not really easy to entail a dialogue with the locals since we don't speak greek but I felt in different occasion, as we gathered at the Nessonas café in the evening that our presence, a group of young foreigners in such a rural non-touristic area of Greece, could already open a dialogue in the head of some older villagers on how a farm as COB is able to invite and connect people from every age and background, uniting them by common visions of a better tomorrow.

