Scholarship Programme 2026

Insights & Reflections

SUMMARY

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Based on the six reports submitted by trainees and host organisations.

For detailed reports from hosts and trainees, please visit the Forum Synergies website.

Part 1: Key Insights & Reflections – Learning, Experiences and Impact

The 2026 Forum Synergies Scholarship Programme offered participants the opportunity to immerse themselves in grassroots initiatives working towards more sustainable, resilient and inclusive rural communities across Europe.

The reports from four trainees hosted in Romania, Greece, Ireland and Sweden reveal a diversity of experiences, ranging from permaculture and regenerative agriculture to community-supported food systems, ecological restoration, creative activism and rural entrepreneurship.

Despite their different backgrounds, motivations and host environments, several common insights emerge.

Learning by Doing – Beyond Traditional Education

One of the strongest messages across the reports is the value of experiential learning. Rather than observing sustainable rural development from the outside, trainees became actively involved in the daily activities, challenges and social dynamics of their host communities.

At După Gard in Romania, Till Britsch combined practical permaculture skills with reflections on rural revitalisation and the socioeconomic realities of Transylvania.

At COB in Greece, Tjorven Bertolatus explored bread-making as a means of connecting people, food systems and communities, linking her academic research with practical experience and participatory activities.

At The Barna Way in Ireland, Sofia Maksymovych experienced how ecological restoration, organic food production, creativity and community engagement can become part of an integrated approach to rural development.

At Alnarps Agroecology Farm in Sweden, Alexandra Mitrică explored innovative agricultural practices and community-supported food production while reconnecting with her own agricultural heritage.

These experiences illustrate how practical engagement can deepen understanding, challenge assumptions and connect theoretical knowledge with everyday realities.

Rural Initiatives as Spaces for Social Innovation

The host organisations demonstrate different approaches to creating sustainable rural livelihoods and strengthening local communities.

Their activities extend beyond agricultural production. They combine environmental stewardship with education, cultural exchange, social inclusion and alternative economic models.

From the permaculture practices of După Gard and COB to the creative community engagement of The Barna Way and the Community Supported Agriculture model at Alnarps, the reports show how relatively small initiatives can experiment with responses to wider ecological and social challenges.

At the same time, they reveal the difficulties such initiatives face, including economic insecurity, limited resources, demographic change and the challenges of maintaining viable alternatives to conventional agricultural systems.

Food as a Connection Between People, Land and Community

Food emerges as a particularly strong connecting element throughout the 2026 reports.

Growing, harvesting, preparing and sharing food are not presented merely as agricultural or domestic activities. They become opportunities for cooperation, learning, cultural exchange and community building.

Tjorven's exploration of bread as a commons, Alexandra's experience of community-supported agriculture, Sofia's participation in food-growing and community events, and Till's encounters with traditional food practices all illustrate different dimensions of this relationship.

Together, these experiences highlight the potential of local food systems to strengthen connections between people, their environment and the communities in which they live.

Mutual Learning and Meaningful Contributions

An important feature of the 2026 scholarships is the reciprocal nature of the learning process.

The trainees did not simply receive knowledge and experience. They also contributed their own skills, perspectives and creativity to the host initiatives.

This was particularly evident in Tjorven's residency at COB, where her research developed into community workshops, educational materials and documentation that extended beyond her original project.

At The Barna Way, Sofia contributed to daily horticultural activities and creative cultural exchange, including the Ballybunion Bean Festival.

The reports suggest that the greatest value of these exchanges often emerges when participants are given the flexibility to follow their interests, respond to local opportunities and develop meaningful relationships with their hosts.

Personal Transformation and New Perspectives

Beyond practical skills, the trainees describe experiences that influenced their understanding of sustainability, community and their own roles in society.

Alexandra's reflections are particularly personal, connecting agricultural work with questions of identity, family heritage and a changing professional direction.

Till's experience prompted reflections on rural society and the conditions necessary for sustainable local development.

Sofia emphasised the importance of belonging, inclusion and active citizenship, while Tjorven explored how everyday practices such as baking can become tools for participation and collective learning.

These personal perspectives underline the importance of creating opportunities for young people to encounter different ways of living and working, and to reflect on their own future paths.

Overall Conclusions

The 2026 Scholarship Programme demonstrates the value of small-scale, flexible learning opportunities rooted in real-life rural initiatives.

The reports highlight three particularly important outcomes:

- **Experiential learning:** Direct participation provides insights into sustainable rural development that cannot easily be gained through formal education alone.
- **Mutual exchange:** Trainees and host organisations can both benefit when learning is based on cooperation, openness and active contribution.
- **Lasting inspiration:** The experiences can influence participants' personal and professional development while creating opportunities for continued exchange and collaboration.

Taken together, the reports illustrate how the Forum Synergies Scholarship Programme connects people, knowledge and grassroots initiatives across Europe.

Its particular strength lies in creating space for encounters that go beyond conventional training: encounters that encourage reflection, practical engagement, new relationships and a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing rural communities.

Part 2: Thematic Reflections – Intergenerational Relations, Access to Land and Gender

Dupa Gard, RO – Till Britsch, DE

1 May - 14 May 2026

Report from the trainee, Till Britsch, DE:

Intergenerational Aspects: Till's experience in the Apuseni Mountains highlighted the challenges facing rural communities, particularly the departure of younger generations and the ageing population. Traditional agricultural knowledge, including foraging and small-scale farming practices, remains embedded in everyday village life. At the same time, initiatives such as După Gard demonstrate opportunities to attract younger people and introduce new approaches to rural development.

Reflection: Rural revitalisation requires connecting traditional knowledge and established communities with younger generations and new economic opportunities.

Access to Land Aspects: După Gard demonstrates how permaculture and small-scale entrepreneurship can contribute to sustainable rural livelihoods. Till gained practical experience in fruit-tree grafting and explored the relationship between ecological farming, self-sufficiency and local economic development. His reflections also highlight the difficulties of maintaining viable livelihoods in economically disadvantaged rural areas.

Reflection: Access to land alone does not guarantee sustainable rural development; economic opportunities, practical skills and supportive local networks are equally important.

Gender Aspects: Gender is not a central analytical theme in Till's report. Women appear as active contributors to agricultural and community life, particularly through the role of Ioana, co-founder of După Gard, and through the transmission of traditional food knowledge. However, the report does not provide a systematic examination of gender inequalities.

Reflection: Women's contributions to rural initiatives are visible, although gender relations are not explicitly explored.

cob Building with Earth, GR – Tjorven, DE

22 April - 22 June 2026

Intergenerational Aspects: Intergenerational learning was a central element of Tjorven's experience. Through her Master's research project *Bread Complex*, she explored bread-making as a participatory practice connecting people, traditions and communities.

A particularly meaningful activity was an intergenerational workshop with local women, during which traditional recipes, techniques and personal stories were shared. Her experience demonstrated how knowledge can be transmitted through collective practice rather than formal teaching.

Reflection: Shared food preparation creates opportunities for intergenerational dialogue, preserving traditional knowledge while adapting it to contemporary community life.

Access to Land Aspects: Tjorven's exploration of the journey of bread from field to table highlighted the relationship between food sovereignty, land stewardship and community participation. Through wheat cultivation, harvesting, milling and baking, she experienced how access to productive land and healthy soils underpins local food systems.

COB's regenerative agriculture and food forest practices demonstrate how land can serve ecological, educational and community purposes beyond agricultural production alone.

Reflection: Access to land is closely connected to food sovereignty and the ability of communities to manage resources sustainably and collectively.

Gender Aspects: Tjorven's research opened discussions about the traditionally gendered nature of food preparation and care work. Her encounters with local women highlighted their essential role in preserving food traditions and sustaining community life, while also drawing attention to the often undervalued nature of this work.

Reflection: Recognising women's knowledge and care work is essential for understanding rural resilience and questioning traditional gender roles.

Additional Outcome: The scholarship generated tangible contributions to the host community, including bread workshops, educational materials, photographic documentation and activities linked to other community projects. The host particularly emphasised the benefits of allowing trainees to develop their own initiatives during the placement.

The Barna Way, Ireland, Sofia (UKR)

7 August - 24 August 2026

Intergenerational Aspects: Sofia experienced community-based learning through organic horticulture, shared meals, creative activities and participation in the Ballybunion Bean Festival. The Barna Way brings together people from different backgrounds through social farming, environmental activities and community gatherings.

The experience highlighted how shared practical activities and cultural exchange can strengthen relationships between people of different generations and nationalities.

Reflection: Community-based initiatives create informal learning environments where intergenerational and intercultural relationships develop through participation and shared responsibilities.

Access to Land Aspects: The Barna Way offers an example of privately owned land being managed for wider ecological and social benefit. Its 19 acres include organic gardens, native woodland, biodiversity habitats and spaces for community activities.

Through horticulture, seed saving and environmental restoration, Sofia experienced how land can support food production, biodiversity, education and social inclusion simultaneously.

Reflection: Access to land is not exclusively a question of ownership; it also concerns how land is made accessible and used for the benefit of communities and ecosystems.

Gender Aspects: Gender and eco-feminism were particularly prominent in Sofia's report. The Barna Way, founded by Lisa Fingleton and Rena Blake, demonstrates women's leadership in ecological restoration, creative activism and community development.

Sofia reflected on how their work challenges conventional agricultural models and creates inclusive spaces for participation, empowerment and social change.

Reflection: Women's leadership and eco-feminist approaches can contribute to alternative models of rural development centred on care, inclusion and ecological responsibility.

Alnarps Agroecology Farm (SE) – Alexandra Mitrică (RO)

09.08.2026-11.09.2026

Intergenerational Aspects: Alexandra's experience connected contemporary agroecological practices with her own family's agricultural heritage. Her reflections explored the value of practical, embodied knowledge passed down through generations and the distance that can emerge between urban generations and their rural roots.

Working alongside students, graduates and volunteers at Alnarps Agroecology Farm offered opportunities to reconnect with agricultural practices through direct experience.

Reflection: Intergenerational knowledge transmission involves not only preserving traditional practices but also reconnecting younger generations with the land and their agricultural heritage.

Access to Land Aspects: Alnarps Agroecology Farm provides an example of innovative access to land through cooperation with an educational institution. The farm operates on approximately half a hectare rented from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and supplies vegetables and herbs to 85 households through a Community Supported Agriculture model.

Alexandra also highlighted the economic vulnerability of small-scale agroecological initiatives, including limited employment opportunities and dependence on community support.

Reflection: Partnerships, shared resources and community-supported agriculture can create opportunities for land access, although long-term economic viability remains a significant challenge.

Gender Aspects: Alexandra explicitly reflected on structural barriers faced by women in agriculture. Her report identifies cultural biases, institutional practices and unequal opportunities as factors limiting women's participation and recognition in agricultural professions.

Reflection: Greater gender equality in agriculture requires addressing structural barriers rather than focusing solely on individual opportunities or capabilities.

Executive Summary

Intergenerational Relations, Access to Land and Gender in the 2026 Reports

Across the 2026 Scholarship Programme reports, three interconnected themes emerge: intergenerational relations, access to land and gender. Although the trainees approached these questions from different perspectives, their experiences illustrate how ecological practices, community participation and social relationships shape sustainable rural development.

Intergenerational Relations

Intergenerational exchange is present throughout the reports, particularly through the transmission of practical knowledge, traditional food practices and agricultural skills.

At COB, shared bread-making and cooking workshops created opportunities for younger and older generations to exchange knowledge and cultural traditions. At După Gard, the ageing rural population and the departure of young people highlighted the demographic challenges facing rural communities. Alexandra's reflections at Alnarps connected contemporary agroecology with family agricultural heritage, while The Barna Way demonstrated the value of community activities as spaces for learning and cultural exchange.

Together, the reports underline the importance of practical, informal learning and the role of intergenerational relationships in maintaining rural knowledge and community resilience.

Access to Land

Access to land is explored through several complementary perspectives: ecological stewardship, economic viability, community participation and alternative land-use models.

At După Gard, permaculture and small-scale entrepreneurship demonstrate opportunities for sustainable rural livelihoods in economically challenging regions. COB illustrates the connection between land stewardship, regenerative agriculture and food sovereignty. The Barna Way shows how privately owned land can serve broader ecological and community purposes, while Alnarps Agroecology Farm offers an example of accessing land through institutional cooperation and community-supported agriculture.

The reports suggest that meaningful access to land extends beyond ownership. It also depends on the ability to cultivate, manage and share land sustainably, supported by viable economic models and strong community relationships.

Gender

Gender is addressed with varying emphasis across the reports.

At The Barna Way, women's leadership and eco-feminist approaches are central to the initiative's philosophy and activities. At COB, traditional food practices prompted reflection on women's often undervalued contributions to community life and the distribution of care responsibilities. Alexandra's report explicitly identifies structural barriers and cultural biases affecting women's participation in agriculture.

In contrast, gender is less prominently addressed in the După Gard report, although women are visible as important contributors to rural entrepreneurship and the transmission of traditional knowledge.

Together, these perspectives illustrate both the opportunities for women's leadership in alternative rural initiatives and the continuing need to recognise and address structural gender inequalities.

Overall Reflections

The 2026 reports demonstrate the value of direct, practical learning experiences in sustainable rural initiatives across Europe.

Beyond acquiring agricultural and ecological skills, the trainees engaged with questions of social inclusion, cultural heritage, community resilience and alternative economic models. Food production and preparation emerged as particularly important connecting elements, linking access to land with traditional knowledge, gender relations and community participation.

The reports also illustrate the reciprocal nature of the Scholarship Programme. Trainees gained practical experience and new perspectives, while host organisations benefited from their contributions, ideas and participation in local activities.

Taken together, the experiences highlight the role of small-scale, community-based initiatives as places of learning, experimentation and exchange, and their potential contribution to more sustainable and inclusive rural communities.