

FARMING AND FOOD

OUR PRACTICES IN EUROPE

11 participants from 5 European countries and 1 African country

On 17-18 September 2022 the participants from Emmaus groups in Romania, Finland, Sweden, France, the UK and even Togo came together for this meeting in Iași, Romania!

When discussing farming it is best to be hands-on, so this was the first of our best practice exchanges that was held on-site rather than via video conference. We decided to organise this meeting in Iași as this group was one of the first to launch farming initiatives. The lucerne and the grains produced by the group are largely sold on to local producers. Their vegetable farming activity is mainly for consumption on site and the group also raises animals for livestock and produces eggs. An orchard has also been planted by Emmaus Iasi. We also met with the group's outreach partner during this exchange - a restaurant which focuses on reducing food waste. The participants realised that they were all striving for independence through peasant farming (which they believe will be the future of agriculture). A series of workshops allowed the participants to learn from one another whilst helping the host group by building a greenhouse out of plastic bottles and by planting a row of raspberry bushes.

We then held debates on 2 essential topics:

- **Nutrition within the Emmaus groups:** In the Emmaus communities and welcome centres the quality of the food provided is important but perspectives on what quality means can vary! What is actually good for our health? What tastes nice? What is too much and what is not enough? It is definitely easier to manage such nutrition issues in groups that produce their own food but producing food is not enough on its own. To make progress on these topics in our groups we heard about the experience of the French group Emmaus Pamiers which has been focusing on this topic, as well as hearing from several other participants.
- **Soil amendment in organic farming:** The most important thing to know about the fertility of the soil is how to provide food to the soil and how to create a safe environment for our produce. To grow vegetables we must ensure that the soil is well nourished.

The participants of the best practice exchange building a greenhouse out of plastic bottles.

WHAT WE NOTED DURING THESE EXCHANGES NUTRITION WITHIN THE EMMAUS GROUPS

- We should seek support from local organic farmers and visit their farms
- We can create food committees to discuss these topics within our groups
- Involving the chef is essential in order to ensure that there is communication with the companions. We must establish a relationship of trust and hold workshop sessions with the companions
- We should train the chef on how to use our produce, such as making mayonnaise using our own eggs, and on how to ensure that we do not cook too much food and on how to reuse leftovers the following day
- We should seek advice on how to make preserves so that we can use our produce all year round
- We can plan for meals which focus on cuisine from different cultures. Doing this also helps provide fresh ideas for how to use our produce
- In terms of our budget and our environmental footprint it is interesting to have a vegetarian day once per week. It is also important that we explain to people the importance of consuming plant-based proteins and where these proteins can be found
- Reducing our food waste
 - Planning for who will be involved in the meals. E.g. Emmaus Brighton in the UK which organises discussion groups with the companions in order to come up with ideas for their meal plan. The plan is then put together in order to ensure things are well balanced from one day to the next. The group knows in advance who will be eating what from the various options available
 - Donations from food banks can help

certain groups out but the food banks often send us too much, leading to food waste. In France, for example, donations of unused food are not subject to tax. This creates a system which encourages excessive consumption but it is difficult to refuse - some of the communities fear that the food banks will not offer donations to them again in the future if ever they refuse a donation. The topic of food support is something Emmaus could focus on in order to demand that the most vulnerable can also have access to high-quality food and that they do not only receive the leftovers of the agro-industry funded by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Emmaus could help to change the situation regarding food aid and supermarket leftovers

- We should lobby our elected officials on these topics. For example Emmaus Gloucester (UK) organised an event with MPs, inviting them to visit the community and serving them canned soup. They then explained that this is what current policies offer vulnerable people in terms of nutrition. This initiative had a significant impact on these MPs
- Having pigs and hens helps us to limit our food waste but we need to be careful nonetheless



WHAT WE NOTED DURING THESE EXCHANGES

SOIL AMENDMENT IN ORGANIC FARMING

Using plant-based covers

- We should never leave uncultivated land without a cover, especially during rainy periods as this can lead to run-off
- After the harvest we can plant species such as mustard in between crop rotations and then leave it in the soil after cutting it so that it can create mulch. This will allow us to create humus, a reserve of mineral elements that will remain for the long term
- Legumes (lucerne, beans, lentils) also serve as great covers when they are destroyed in the fields

Using good compost

- The secret to a good compost is finding the balance between carbon and nitrogen. We need 30 times more carbon (which should be old, yellow and dry, such as straw) than we have nitrogen (which should be young, green, organic material) and the compost should be regularly turned over
- For green waste and food waste you should aerate by creating large piles with pipes with holes in them. These piles need to be regularly watered in order to prevent fires
- You should wait for the compost to turn a dark black colour before using it or else it may have a negative impact on your soil
- You can separate the compost into wooden cases, separating it into different layers
- Mixing the compost with animal-based soil amendment such as manure is a best practice but we should always be careful as regards the amounts of nitrogen used
- We should use compost before planting vegetables that have high nitrogen needs, such as tomatoes or aubergines.

The following year you should rotate and use a crop that has lower nitrogen needs, such as lettuce. The year after that you should use plants that have deeper roots in order to dig deeper before using a plant-based cover if possible or using soil amendment with compost

- Another type of compost can also be used: Bokashi. The Åland group in Finland uses this technique that allows us to use all leftover food, including cooked food and meat. However, we need an activator to use this technique
- It is important that we work together with local networks of peasant farmers and that we keep the dialogue open as much as possible

Reducing our water use

- Using straw can help to prevent evaporation, as does the presence of trees. Soil which is full of life, and which notably contains worms, requires less watering
- Perennial species are also useful and allow us to harvest earlier

Observation of the soil and planting of raspberry bushes during the best practice exchange meeting

