



# LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN RURAL EUROPE

GUIDELINES FOR POLICY MAKERS

COMPOSED BY

EMBERCOMBE—UNITED KINGDOM

FOCUS ECO CENTER—TRANSILVANIA/ROMANIA

GARDEN OF GENERATIONS—AUSTRIA

COMMUNITY OF KLEIN JASEDOW—GERMANY

SLUŇÁKOV—CZECH REPUBLIC



Embercombe



 *Klein Jasedow*

 *Sluňákov*

 *Garden of Generations*

 *Focus Eco Center*



## WHAT THIS PAPER IS ABOUT

*Five partner organisations,  
three years of cooperation.*

We, five »learning communities in rural Europe« (LCRE) from five European countries — counting from west to east: United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Czechia, and Romania — have cooperated over a period of three years from 2014 to 2017 in order to work out principles, guidelines, and methods in connection with setting up and operating places of eco-social learning in structurally weak areas of rural Europe.

Central to our project were the following questions:

- ▶ **What do LCRE contribute to society as a whole and in particular to the challenges European societies are facing at present?**
- ▶ **What are the framework conditions enabling LCRE to beneficially impact society?**

Policy suggestions for reinvigorating rural life have been made in the Cork Declaration of 1996 and the follow-up Cork Declaration 2.0 of 2016. Given these suggestions, the question may be asked why there has been hardly any progress in implementing them during the past two decades. From our perspective, this has to do mainly with the fact that

- ▶ decision-makers lack examples of realistic models and experiences in rural areas, and
- ▶ the declaration focuses more on the technical side of rural development, undervaluing the socio-cultural aspects of rural community life.

*We can draw from more than  
40 years of experience.*

Drawing from up to forty years of experience in working as spatial pioneers, regional developers, community-builders, ecologists, ecological educators, social entrepreneurs, and social innovators in rural Europe, our project group has gained a rich treasure of experience, a set of principles and values, and an extensive repertoire of tried and tested methods, tools, and instruments that may contribute to reviving rural parts of Europe. We believe that this experience and expertise can positively contribute to tackling the demanding, multi-faceted challenges we are confronted with on a regional, a national, and a European level.

*Get informed about our work,  
and support LCRE!*

This paper aims at informing political decision-makers like you about our work and to invite them to learn about some of the main specific challenges projects like ours are facing while they try to create and support regional resilience, regional subsistence, regional cultures, and regional job and business opportunities especially for young people. We are convinced that in order to secure a liveable future for European rural areas it is mandate to encourage the young generations to stay in, move to, or return to the countryside, sustain their families there and participate in the communal efforts to secure the basis for a good life — buen vivir, right livelihood — for all.

We invite you to rethink your political goals and methods while following the questions and arguments sketched out in this paper.

## WHO WE ARE

Our group consists of five rather diverse organisations and communities whose members are deeply devoted to contributing to the development of their particular rural region. These are:

- ▶ **Embercombe** from Devon in South England
- ▶ **Focus Eco Center** from Transylvania in Romania
- ▶ **Garden of Generations** from Lower Austria
- ▶ **Community of Klein Jasedow** from Pomerania in North East Germany
- ▶ **Sluňákov** from the Olomouc Region in the Czech Republic.

### *Embercombe*

Embercombe is the name of a valley in a secluded region of county Devon in South West England. It was formerly used by a millionaire for a private air-plane runway, so it includes two former hangars which today provide room for workshops, the main kitchen, meeting spaces, and offices for an unconventional social educational project. From a well at the upper part down to a lake at the lowest part numerous gardens, orchards, and meadows stretch across the valley which is surrounded by a large forest; the place is able to provide basically everything needed for a »good life«: fresh water, locally grown food, timber, and firewood. Embercombe offers various workshop-programmes that invite people to find their true purpose and meaning in life through deep experiences in nature. As the valley with its large permaculture gardens and orchards is surrounded by large forests, it is an ideal place for retreats and deep contemplation. The project's initiators are convinced, that those who are in touch with their own inner potential and are able to clearly see the problems in the world will be ready to take action for the transformation necessary in order to survive on this planet. The programme participants come from various social backgrounds, including large companies, universities, or non-governmental organisations. They live in yurts and use compost-toilets, so the Embercombe experience takes people close to nature right from the beginning.

Only a small number of people are permanently living on site, but groups of 30 volunteers — young people from all over the world — live there for a period of three months to take care of all the practical work in the garden, the kitchen, the workshops, or setting up new and refurbishing existing infrastructure. These volunteers form a temporary community that meets every morning to share their thoughts and feelings in a »morning circle«, and they receive some coaching by Embercombe-residents, making the volunteer programme not only an opportunity to gain work experience but also to take time to reflect and to search for meaning.

Embercombe also offers programmes for children in cooperation with local schools and organises public events. It is managed by a trust.



[www.embercombe.org](http://www.embercombe.org)

## WHO WE ARE



[www.focuseco.ro](http://www.focuseco.ro)

### *Focus Eco Center*

In the valley of the river Niraj in Transylvania, near the town of Targu Mures, the members of Focus Eco Centre have established a number of pioneering projects to demonstrate that traditional small-scale agriculture is not old-fashioned but ecologically and economically sustainable and should be the general orientation for the future development of rural regions in Romania and other European countries. They show that the human-made landscape of their valley has stayed so rich in biodiversity exactly because of the farming activities that have taken place there for centuries, and that the social climate in the villages is so positive because people are used to helping each other in various areas of agricultural work. This traditional farming culture was threatened by the collectivisation enforced by the Ceausescu dictatorship during Communist times and after the revolution in 1989 by the introduction of capitalistic consumer culture.

Focus Eco Centre aims at connecting with the positive, surviving aspects of the past while adapting them to the requirements of modern life, i.e., establishing new methods of direct trade as community supported agriculture and ecological agrotourism. This shows that a network of small, cooperating ecological farms is truly avantgarde — not the agricultural industry which is about to destroy the beautiful landscape and the social culture in the villages of Transylvania. Various educational activities try to promote this new paradigm for rural spaces. Focus Eco Center is based in a former school house in the village of Adrianu Mic. This is the starting point of a »path of agro-biodiversity«, leading through various biotopes, such as streams, wetlands, meadows, pastures, orchards, woodlands, or swamps, ending at a small farmhouse. Focus Eco Centre mainly assists young locals in finding a job perspective in their rural area, but also connects city dwellers with local farmers as well as young people from all over Europe who want to experience the benefits of traditional subsistence farming and a lively village culture which has been lost in so many of the more »developed« European countries.



[www.gartendergenerationen.net](http://www.gartendergenerationen.net)

### *Garden of Generations*

Garden of Generations is an emerging community in Lower Austria. On a beautiful piece of land on the outskirts of the small town Herzogenburg, a pioneering project of multigenerational co-housing, ecological building activities, participative organisation, ecosocial entrepreneurship, gardening as well as care for the youngest and oldest is about to start. Together with an innovative architect the group of initiators has worked out a plan for apartment houses, offices, and communal spaces according to the planning principles of Christopher Alexander's pattern language. The group organises itself by the method of sociocracy, so that overlapping circles of responsible people work on decisionmaking in different fields, such as »multigenerational cooperation«, »housing«, or »business«. By working with various

tools for community building and reflecting on the vision to create a place, where people from all generations live and learn together peacefully, practice new cooperative economic ways, and develop a degree of subsistence to lower their ecological footprint, Garden of Generations will become a centre of learning how to realise a »good live« — in the sense of »buen vivir« — a low-impact way of life that is not harmful to the planet, leaving it behind in a better state for coming generations. The learning takes place in the everyday life of the inhabitants as well as in workshops and seminars. As a branch of the nearby alternative school »Lernwerkstatt« Garden of Generations will also enable its children to form a learning group on site, within the community, so that their education will not be separated from real life as is the case in classrooms.

To buy the property and to enable the construction work the founder of the project developed the innovative tool »wealth pool« which has been approved by the Austrian authorities as a legal method of raising funds: It offers people to transfer an amount of money they currently do not need themselves into an account administered by a custodian of the community's supporting association. This fund is only used for investments into property that equal the value of the loans. A liquidity-reserve of 10 percent is kept so that a loan can be payed back in appropriate time when it is recalled. Money for this fund is constantly acquired, so that people are encouraged to lend interest-free money they currently do not need even for short periods of time. This concept overcomes the dichotomy of debt and donations — wealth pool is neither nor, it makes financial resources, which are not needed anywhere else at the moment, available for the investments of a meaningful project. Currently, efforts are made to transfer the concept, which is used already by a number of Austrian projects, to other European countries.

### *Klein Jasedow*

The community of Klein Jasedow has existed for more than 40 years. In Germany, it is the longest lasting one of those intentional communities which have formed in the 1970s during the rise of the New Social Movements. Having started in Upper Bavaria with a four-years interphase in Switzerland, the community settled in 1997 in the hamlet of Klein Jasedow, belonging to the municipality of the small town Lassan, close to the Baltic Sea in the far north-east of Germany. Today, 28 persons of four generations are sharing life and work in the form of commoning. They run the »European Academy of Healing Arts« — a non-for-profit educational center for health care professionals and artists, a free Democratic School for children, and several social business — including a publishing house issuing an influential magazine for a sustainable livelihood, and a workshop for crafting musical instruments —, are performing artists and have started a long-term hands-on research project focusing on the question of how — given the present con-



[www.eaha.org](http://www.eaha.org)

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ditions of climate, soil, and lifestyle — a life-fostering, sustainable, subsistence agriculture can be established within the the local region. Since their settling in 1997, the community has initiated other companies and associations which together with their own workplaces have resulted in creating and securing more than 50 sustainable jobs, which is a considerable contribution to solving the huge unemployment problem caused by the social upheavals in Eastern Germany after the fall of the wall. Members of the community are participating in communal affairs, with one person being a long-term member of the town council. The community is well connected with relevant NGOs and political actors throughout Germany and Europe.



Sluňákov

[www.slunakov.cz](http://www.slunakov.cz)

### *Sluňákov*

Located in Moravia in the south-eastern part of the Czech Republic, Sluňákov is a centre for environmental education founded by the municipality of the town Olomouc and initiated by ecological activists in the years following the Velvet Revolution of 1989. It realises a way of education that does not only convey factual knowledge, but, first and foremost, a profound experience for all senses, enabling individuals to solve problems and create their own ideas — this attitude puts much more emphasis on posing questions than on giving exact answers.

The central building of Sluňákov with its organic architecture and ecological building materials provides accommodation for groups and space for workshops, conferences, and administration, but the main educational work is done outside on excursions to the nearby Litovelské Pomoraví Protected Landscape Area or other destinations, including Sluňákov's own premises: a large area of low-lying fields close to a stream just behind the main building. Some of Czechia's most interesting and eminent land-art artists created large installations, such as a »Garden of Eden« hidden behind the brick-stone facade of a life-sized ark or the walk-in »Solar Mountain«, awakening reminiscences of megalithic cairns. This land-art park is part of Sluňákov's »House of Nature« and is open to the general public, with inhabitants of the nearby village Horka nad Moravou going for walks on the grounds; visitors can also participate in guided tours. House of Nature tries to convey the interconnectedness between natural and cultural processes, it is a place to reflect about the role of humans in the world we share with so many other living beings. In order to inspire these reflections Sluňákov organises in addition to its everyday work with groups of children public lectures, debates, and events for the general public, such as the Olomouc Ecological Days, the largest festival on ecological issues in Czechia. Sluňákov cooperates closely with Palacký University in Olomouc, and students work as interns in the Sluňákov educational programmes. To put Sluňákov's work in perspective, it is worth remembering that environmental activism in Eastern European countries still tends to be much more of a dissidents' task.

## WHAT IS AN ECO-SOCIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY?

Words commonly used in everyday language may, at first, not seem to ask for definition. However, frequently it is exactly words we take for granted that may require us to take a closer look at the meaning we attribute to them in a given situation. So, what exactly do we mean by »learning communities in rural Europe« (LCRE) with an »eco-social« orientation?

### *Learning*

Just as we cannot not communicate (Paul Watzlawick), we cannot not learn. We learn as we live, and we live as we learn. It is a token of industrialised, highly specialised modern societies that »learning« has been institutionalised and refined to institutions such as kindergartens, schools, universities, etc. But even in such institutionalised settings, some of the most important learning may happen outside and between official classes. In traditional, indigenous cultures, learning was and is not separate from everyday life. Granted, in modern European societies we live in settings considerably different from those of non-engineered cultures. Nevertheless, as learning psychologist Peter Gray has convincingly argued, we are carrying in our cultural memory many traces of such informal ways of learning.

Despite the great diversity in terms of organisational aims and structures, one common feature characterising the LCRE authoring this paper is that they attempt in rather different ways to reintegrate learning into everyday life. The five partner organisations are learning organisms in as much as they are themselves dedicated to constant learning. From a perspective of constant learning, there is no such thing as absolute failure but only rich opportunities of growing and becoming experienced. In fact, »failure« may be the best teacher, as long as we learn from it. Another common feature is that there are no instructors and students in the conventional sense, but every person involved in our projects — placekeepers, volunteers, or programme attendees, etc. — is in some way or another a lifelong learner.

### *Community*

Community may refer to a basic quality of life or to a particular form of organisation. At the very basic level, every multicellular being forms a community. According to estimates, the human body is comprised of about 30 trillion cells and at least the same number of microbiota. In this regard, the paradoxically sounding phrase »I am a community« starts to make sense. When it comes to human organisation, community may refer to groups of humans bonded together by affection, necessity, environment, values, work, etc. In all these cases, community will be a complex interplay between personal freedom and connectedness to a larger whole.

In as much as it describes the various relations between individuals and their environment, community is closely linked to the concept of

*We learn as we live.*

*Most of our learning happens informally.*

*Failure is the best teacher.*

*Every being is a community.*

## WHAT IS AN ECO-SOCIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY?

*Community is linked to being-at-homeness.*

being-at-homeness or »heimat«. We feel at-homeness, when we experience a maximum of congruency between ourselves and our natural, social, and cultural environments. Complete at-homeness is an ideal we may strive for but hardly ever attain. Interestingly, in its current meaning »heimat« is a relatively young term. In German-speaking areas, it came to the fore in the 19th century. The increasing loss of heimat due to dislocation, displacement, uprootedness, persecution, pogroms, persecutions, war and other atrocities of the 19th and 20th century seems to be related to the frequency the term is used. As German-English writer W. G. Sebald pointed out: »As is often the case, the term ›heimat‹ is reciprocally related to the phenomenon it refers to: The more we talk about ›heimat‹, the less it is to be found.« When using in the context of this paper the terms »home« or »community« in a sense related to being-at-homeness, we are doing so not in a nostalgic, retrotopian sense but out of the conviction that »rootedness« is an essential precondition for bringing about truly sustainable, life-fostering cultures. Rootedness brings about ease of mind and feelings of security, keeping people open to change, friendly to strangers, preventing them from developing irrational fears about »foreign infiltration«. The notion of home is also connected to ecological concerns in as much as at the most basic level home, first and foremost, refers to our common earthly home: the natural world we live in and are a part of, in fact, we are nothing else than nature..

*Rootedness is an essential precondition for a sustainable life.*

*Community is where community happens.*

In this brochure, »community« mostly refers to one of the following phenomena: village communities, regional communities, intentional communities, temporary learners' communities, or community of placekeepers and co-workers. In a wider sense, it may also refer to the life-sustaining communion between man and nature or to any spontaneously arising moment of community between two or more beings. After all, »community is where community happens«, as philosopher and theologian Martin Buber wrote. And it happens, we might add, within the spectrum defined between freedom and connectedness.

### **Rurality**

*More than half of Europe is rural.*

More than half (51.3 percent in 2012) of the EU's land area is classified as »predominantly rural«. However, large areas — in cities and in the country alike — are characterised by far-reaching urbanisation. Tokens of urbanisation, such as sealed soils, extensive farming (resulting in depleted soils and poisoned environments), consumer lifestyles, species extinction (with urban biodiversity sometimes outnumbering rural biodiversity), are phenomena to be found also in many rural settings of Europe.

Historically, mass migration from rural areas into the cities was connected to the enclosure of the commons, the onsetting process of industrialisation. Large numbers of ousted, formally subsistent peasants were forced to move to cities, ending up as beggars, workers, and consumers. The devastating consequences of social, mental, and physical forms of dislocation

and displacement associated with industrialisation, privatisation, disappropriation, or persecution were termed »deracination« or »uprootedness« by French philosopher Simone Weil who described »rootedness« as »perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul«.

For international development experts Robin Broad and John Cavanagh »rootedness« is a more appropriate term than »resilience« or »sustainability« for describing the preconditions and structures of local self-determination. They distinguish between »economic rootedness« (economic subsidiarity, prioritising local over national over international production), »environmental rootedness« (community control, i. e., commoning, over natural resources), and »social rootedness« (furthering equity, personal health, and community).

In the context of this paper, our notions of rurality — and community — are strongly informed by the concepts of rootedness, subsistence, subsidiarity, and sufficiency. Defined in this way, rootedness does not contradict international cooperation and transnational integration. On the contrary, one thing that is common to all project partners is that they are deeply rooted in their given rural environments while being well aware of global issues, very well informed on planetary boundary threats, and proactively maintaining international cooperation.

### *Which Europe?*

Elusive to define, »Europe« may refer, among other things, to the geographical area of the European continent with contested outlines, to continental European mainland — excluding the British Isles —, to the evolving policy of the European Union, or to a set of values and cultural concepts dating at least back to European Enlightenment. In the latter sense, Europe is frequently used synonymously with Western civilisation and taken to include neo-European states in North America, South America, and Australia. According to Algerian-French writer Bernard-Henri Lévy, »Europe is not a place but an idea«.

In any event, Europe is the place where ideas of universal humanitarian rights originated as well as (neo-)extractivism, colonial empires, and countless wars, including the Great War and World War II. »Eurocentrism« — epitomised by centering maps of the world around the European continent — refers to a form of cultural chauvinism based on the assumption of »European exceptionalism«, propagating Europe as the navel of the world and Western civilization as a universal yardstick for measuring any culture.

Although the process of building an economic and political union between European nation states — starting with the European Coal and Steel Community — was itself a means of maintaining peace and democracy in the aftermath of the two World Wars, it is wise to bear in mind that democracy is a delicate creature and that the history of Europe is by no means free from complacency, chauvinism, and colonialism.

*The consequence of industrialisation is »uprootedness«.*

*We focus on subsistence, subsidiarity, and sufficiency.*

*Europe is not a place but an idea.*

## WHAT IS AN ECO-SOCIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY?

*Increasing sense of space,  
lost sense of place.*

Transnational integration brought along both chances and challenges. As German Historian Philipp Blom suggests, for instance, with an increasing »sense of space« — expanding not only to supranational political entities and other continents but even into outer space — we have lost our »sense of place«. Losing this sense of place and being-at-homeness leads to feelings of dislocation and uprootedness; such feelings, in turn, lead to constant fears of losing something when instead it would be appropriate to welcome refugees fleeing existential threads. Addressing such sensitivities and feelings of loss, is one of the tasks connected to European integration. Turning away from these issue, may lead to further separatist, right-wing populist, and neo-nationalist movements which may put at risk the continuation of the European project. Therefore, we also encourage critical reflections and debates about European integration and musings about accompanying alternative place-centred visions for the European Union such as a Europe of the Regions.

### *Eco-Social*

*Ecology and economy have  
identical semantic meanings.*

Derived from the Greek word »oikos« (household), »ecology« may refer to studying the intricate network of relations between agents, places, and resources of a given »oikos« (ecosystem) or to the entire »oikomene« (in ancient Greek the entirety of the »inhabited world«), that is, the grand household of earth's biosphere. Interestingly, the semantic meaning of »ecology« and »economy« — frequently taken to have conflicting interests — are virtually identical. Viewed from a consequent care-use attitude, the tasks of ecological and economic stewardship are intrinsically intertwined.

*Today economy is not care-  
using the common oikos.*

Of course, the contemporary realities of economic and ecological practices are nowhere near this ideal of collectively caring in responsible ways for our common earthly household. Instead, humanity is constantly overexploiting the resources available on our planet, with current global resource consumption equaling 1,7 (hypothetical) earths.

*»Social« characterises deeds  
beneficial to society.*

Just as ecology is concerned with that which constitutes an ecosystem, sociology — derived from Latin »socius«, companion — is concerned with social relationships, interactions, and orders established within and between human communities on various levels. Sociology may also be concerned with factors connected to preserving, finding, and building-up an environment we may call home and the conditions of establishing feelings of being-at-homeness. On another level of meaning, »social« characterises deeds which are beneficial to society as a whole and, in particular, to social groups who have been marginalised by mainstream society.

The five partner projects are, in their own unique ways, characterised by eco-social approaches on numerous levels in as much as they are countering social inequity in structurally weak areas of rural Europe; are integrating into their work marginalised groups of people; are integrating the socio-cultural environment of their respective place; testing new ways of

communal working and living; are furthering sustainable ways of living, connecting traditions with future-viable lifestyles; are promoting life-fostering relations between man and nature; are concerned with the preconditions and possibilities of preserving or creating places that may provide sources for feelings of being-at-homeness.

### *Nature gifts*

Today, ecologists often speak of »ecosystem services«. We acknowledge that this has raised awareness of the invaluable assets nature is providing to humanity's existence as it is connected to the predominance of economic thinking and puts a price tag to everything that humans call a natural »resource«. But we resist using this term: It is too deeply steeped in a mechanistic view of nature as something to be exploited for an exclusively human sake. By using the term »nature gifts« instead we want to appreciate that nature is far more than just our servant. On the contrary, human beings are nature, too, and should behave like her servers and grateful caregivers instead of her masters. Consequently, in the context of this paper we use the term »nature« in a way that does not exclude but integrate human beings and human culture.

*Nature is not our servant!*

The form of organisation suited best to such an inclusive approach to nature is »commoning«. Deeply rooted in human history, commoning refers to the practice of caring for, making use of, and conserving for future generations a commons, such as clean air, water, soil, knowledge, traditions, etc. »There is no commons without commoning«, as historian Peter Linebaugh famously pointed out the procedural nature of commons. Commoning could be called a natural attitude in as much as it – contrary to much of contemporary economic theory and practice – does not put human profit first, but takes into consideration the needs, requirements, and interests of all of nature, including human nature.

*Commoning is a form of organisation.*

## CRISIS? WHAT CRISIS?

*There is no cosy country life.*

Today, it is commonplace to state that humanity is facing a number of enormous challenges. These will have different effects to different regions on our planet, and of course they cannot be kept outside the rural regions in Europe. There never was such a thing as a cosy countryside where the world is forevermore in lovely order nor will such a thing exist anytime in the future. Even though life in rural regions may seem more resilient and secure compared to many places in the cities, it is challenged to the same extent as life in urban contexts, although the challenges vary in many respects from that imposed on city dwellers.

Some of these challenges are putting at risk ideas and values that are at the very core of European integration. Some of the most pressing challenges identified in the course of our project are:

*Right-wing populism,  
neo-nationalism,  
separatist tendencies*

► Right-wing populism, neo-nationalism, and separatist tendencies — which is not to be confused with the legitimate desire of obtaining the right of self-determination! — are on the rise in Europe and worldwide. European state leaders are propagating »illiberal democracies«, post-fact politics are spreading, identitarian ideologies, right-wing movements, and demagogic regimes are on the rise. They make political profit of the people who have lost orientation and do no longer believe in a value system that in their eyes is too open and thus too weak. This kind of policy is based on fear — fear of foreigners, refugees, neighbours, corporations, the European bureaucracy, etc.

*Migration*

► In Europe and worldwide, there is a surge of migration. At present, more than 65 million people worldwide are fleeing their home countries because of war, natural disaster, or economic crisis. This only seems to be the start of even larger waves of migration, caused by climate change.

*Feeling of being left behind*

► The populations of structurally weak regions in rural parts of Europe are increasingly feeling left behind by mainstream politics. This feeling of being left behind particularly applies to young people.

*Industrialised farming*

► Farming has become increasingly industrialised. Monocultures are spreading, requiring increasingly more synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, leading to resource shortages. Intensive animal farming has been identified as a main motor of climate change.

*Urbanisation and consumerism*

► There is an ongoing urbanisation of rural areas. Industrialisation and consumerism have destroyed traditional lifestyles and cultures of subsistence in rural Europe and elsewhere. The spread of agroindustrial monocultures is going hand in hand with monocultures of the mind, in rural and urban environments alike.

*Loss of resources*

► Vital resources (water, soil, minerals, fossil fuels, etc.) are dwindling, leading to shortages and distribution battles. In future this will be one of the major causes of movements of mass migration.

- ▶ There are rapidly growing challenges posed by climate change. The goals of the Paris Agreement — as laudible as they may be — will by no means be sufficient to ensure the continuation of human civilisation on this planet.
- ▶ Biodiversity is rapidly declining, the extinction of species is accelerating. Since 1960, for instance, the bird population in Europe has decreased by 65 percent.
- ▶ The relationship between man and nature has become increasingly exclusive, as humans have dissociated themselves from the natural world to the detriment of all life forms, including our own.

*Climate change*

*Declining biodiversity*

*Dissociation from nature*

Realising these challenges, we can clearly see that they are all connected. We are faced with a holographic set of interconnected problems. Challenges posed to rural European areas are not just regional problems of rural Europe. They are European and even global challenges in as much as they are inseparably linked to structural challenges posed to western democracies and industrialised consumer societies. More than half of the European Union's land area is classified as predominantly rural. If there is no viable vision of rural Europe, there can be no vision of Europe as a whole. If rural Europe fails, European integration is bound to fail. The most important message LCRE have to give is that these deeply worrying developments are not without any alternatives. On the contrary, there are bountiful alternatives developed by LCRE all across Europe based on well-tried and tested methods, principles, and attitudes.

*Rural European problems are global challenges.*

*LCRE have developed many solutions.*

This goes well with the statement of the Cork Declaration 2.0 2016 »A Better Life in Rural Areas«, which is »convinced of the value of rural resources capable of delivering sustainable solutions to current and future societal challenges that concern all citizens of the Union such as assuring a safe and sustainable provision of quality food, developing the circular economy, broadening the bio-economy, fostering resource efficiency, combating climate change and reducing the reliance on fossil fuels«.

But our day-to-day practices, lifelong experience, scientific findings, and visions of a sustainable life in rural Europe which tries to come close to the concept of a »good life« — buen vivir, right livelihood — for us humans and all the beings in the more-than-human world do not support certain proposals laid down in the Cork Declaration. Demands for the digitalisation of rural areas are causing our concern: Technology may provide helpful tools, but is really only the last ingredient of living a good life in the countryside! What needs to be strengthened, first and foremost, is the community spirit. And before digitalisation comes to work the great potential of »commoning« which is firmly based on well proven and tested practices has to be unleashed, valued, and constantly adapted to the requirements of our present day and age. Bits and bytes are no bits to bite — and healthy food needs a healthy community to provide it.

*Technology is only one ingredient of a good life.*

*Healthy food needs a healthy community providing it.*

## CRISIS? WHAT CRISIS?

On top of this, we have to accept that the degradation of the nutritional value through the increased CO<sub>2</sub> content of the atmosphere, as recent research found, is ultimately the result of an engineered world which cannot be brought back into a sustainable balance by using the very tools that have caused the present calamity.

*The Cork Declaration is missing the point of commoning!*

What is regrettably missing in the Cork Declaration is a specific focus on the social glue which binds rural communities together: commoning! Commons expert David Bollier states: »Rather than look to state authorities as guarantors or administrators of their interests, commoners generally prefer to seek direct sovereignty and control over spheres of life that matter to them: their cities, neighborhoods, food, water, land, information, infrastructure, credit and money, social services, and much else. The very process of independent commoning has numerous benefits. By demonstrating the superiority of commons-based systems (e.g., free or open-source software development, local food provisioning, cooperatives, alternative currencies), commoning creates quasi-independent, socially satisfying alternatives to capital-driven markets.«

*Commoning is superior to technocratic measures.*

In our realities as LCRE we experience commoning practices as far more effective than even the best-intentioned catalogue of measures compiled by policy makers from superordinate levels. Commoning runs contrary to top-down processes and is not even characterised as a bottom-up-process but rather a completely egalitarian act of self-empowerment, replacing centralised hierarchical structures by polycentric forms of organisation. In the best sense it is the very reality a good and sound local community is sharing. This means lifelong learning together — and this is what LCRE are all about. By disregarding this essential aspect of rural reality the Cork Declaration weakens the basis for a truly resilient development of the rural areas and exposes it to the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation which are increasingly eroding the social and cultural cohesion of the rural communities.

Viewed from this perspective, the Cork Declaration and the whole body of well-intentioned papers on rural development have to be put in the appropriate place: they can be instruments in the orchestra of various voices, but the director must be the community spirit. If the latter is lacking, or the instruments themselves are put in directing positions, a technocracy will eventually turn rural areas in Europe into mere suburbs and open air carbohydrate factories.

## WE UNDERTAKE TO

On the backdrop of these challenges and based on a common set of values and principles, informed by the insight that the transition to a truly sustainable, life-fostering, ecologically and socially just future must be founded on an inclusive, dedicated culture of dialogue and diversity, we undertake to:

▶ **celebrating diversity, defending pluralistic societies, and furthering democratic participation,**

by:

- giving young people the opportunity to experience themselves in a community and in decision-making on equal terms (Embercombe);
- strengthening local communities by teaching them possibilities to care for their resources – water, land, traditions (Focus Eco Center);
- running a free Democratic School for children (age 6 to 12 years) with a socio-ecological focus (Klein Jasedow) or a free Montessori School (age 6 to 16) focusing on active learning (Garden of Generations);
- teaching people of all ages about diversity in nature – the more diverse the species a biotope is hosting the more resilient it will become while monoculture is prone to crisis; human society will survive only, if it cherishes diversity as well (Focus Eco Center, Sluňákov).

*Pro diversity,  
pluralism,  
participation*

▶ **countering populism, neo-nationalism, racism, and other segregating ideologies,**

by:

- establishing connections to international partners to realise cultural exchange (all LCRE members);
- teaching people about global challenges, encouraging them to stand ambiguity and the complexity of our world (all LCRE members);
- giving hands-on examples of integrative work in individual groups (Embercombe), NGOs (Garden of Generations), or on the communal level (Focus Eco Center, Klein Jasedow, Sluňákov).

*Against populism,  
neo-nationalism,  
racism,  
segregating ideologies*

▶ **recovering, reviving, and reinventing local traditions in order to develop sustainable, life-fostering, and future-viable ways of truly sustainable styles of living, working, and learning in rural Europe,**

by:

- organising festivities for the local population (Focus Eco Center, Garden of Generations, Klein Jasedow, Sluňákov,);
- reviving traditional forms and reinventing new forms of neighbourly help and commoning (Focus Eco Center, Klein Jasedow);
- experimenting with and teaching of traditional ways of building, farming, food preserving and handicrafts (Embercombe, Focus Eco Center, Garden of Generations, Klein Jasedow);

*Pro local traditions  
and sustainable styles of living,  
working, and learning*

## WE UNDERTAKE TO

- inviting students to learn about their abilities to lead a life based on simplicity (Embercombe);
- teaching people of all ages about sustainability in all aspects of life (Sluňákov).

*Innovative Impulses  
from rural lifestyles*

- ▶ **infusing urbanised societies with innovative impulses**, drawing **from rural lifestyles and traditions** that have been adopted and refined in such a way that they reflect the reality of life in 21st century Europe, by:
  - publishing a magazine and books focusing on these aspects (Klein Jasedow);
  - offering courses and seminars for professionals from different faculties — disseminators —, different age groups, and different social backgrounds, offering opportunities of rethinking unsustainable attitudes and learning practices of self-sustainment (all LCRE members).

*Relationship man–nature,  
preserving natural habitats*

- ▶ fostering and promoting an **inclusive relationship between man and nature, preserving natural landscapes, habitats, and resources** for future generations, by:
  - connecting art (music, dance, poetry), land-art, and the natural world, enabling deep experiences of nature within and without, bridging the gap between nature and culture (Klein Jasedow, Sluňákov);
  - showing by practical examples that human beings do not have to be a pestilence for our planet but can become symbiotic servers of life on earth by responsibly care-using her gifts (all LCRE members).

*LCRE-networks*

- ▶ **building formal and informal networks** between LCRE across Europe in order to **establish and deepen cooperation** between places of eco-social learning in rural areas, by:
  - staying in contact among ourselves and continuing to visit each other's projects;
  - identifying other LCRE and inviting them into partnerships and cooperations with us.

We invite you to find out more about our aims and attitudes and to support us in creatively countering the challenges society as a whole is faced with.

## WHAT TO EXPECT AND NOT TO EXPECT FROM US

There are a few things you should know about our modes of working. The following paragraph will help you to better understand what to expect and what not to expect from a cooperations with us.

- ▶ When cooperating with LCRE, be prepared to accept and embrace diversity. **Our projects are based on maximum diversity.** Diversity differs from tolerance: Meaning »to bear, to endure«, tolerance frequently is a mere token of indifference. But the very essence of diversity is difference. Diversity is a value in itself. Without biodiversity, life on earth would not have been able to develop or to last. Attempts of homogenising, streamlining, or standardising our projects will destroy their diversity and hence their very essence. You may not be able to pigeon-hole our projects in a single one category.

*Maximum diversity*

Diversity does not at all mean »anything goes«: Diversity needs acceptance, appreciation, and cooperation. Instead of taking those of other opinions as adversaries we take differing opinions — as long as they refrain from fundamentalism or dogmatism — as complementary factors inviting both sides to identify the common interest to join forces.

- ▶ Do not expect us to canvas for party politics. **We are non-partisan, and our credibility and effectiveness is owed to our impartiality.** We believe that our work is a benefit to society as a whole and that our deeds speak for themselves. We encourage you to visit our projects and find out more about our work. We discourage any attempts of instrumentalising the goals of our projects for party politics.
- ▶ We advise you against trying to evaluate our work by standardised evaluation tools. More often than not, **standard evaluation schemes will fall short in identifying the unique contributions of LCRE.** An evaluator once suggested to one of the LCRE members that the learning progress children made during an environmental education programme be measured in terms of how many species of frogs they could identify. If they could name one frog at the beginning and four at the end of the programme, this was considered a progress. A deeper experience of nature was not of interest. Many administrative practices and funding procedures are based on standardised evaluation schemes. However, this cannot do justice to our work. We have come to call this the »Four Frogs Fallacy«.
- ▶ Expect us to **find creative solutions to demanding challenges.** This is what we are good at because, as LCRE, we are faced with challenges and the need for finding creative solutions on a daily basis.
- ▶ Do not expect us to cook up short-term solutions bound to the temporality of terms of office. **We are deeply connected to the place we live on.** This is our home, and we are here to stay. Therefore, we are thinking and planning in long-term cycles, looking for truly sustainable solutions.

*Non-partisan*

*Standard evaluation tools fail*

*Creative solutions*

*Connection to the place*

## WHAT TO EXPECT AND NOT TO EXPECT FROM US

*No panacea offered*

► Do not expect us to have a set of panaceas and monolithic truths. Granted, **our methods and principles have been well-trying and tested**, sometimes for years, sometimes for decades, and sometimes for as long as several centuries. But these well-trying methods and principles have evolved over the course of time and will continue to do so, as we are constantly refining and putting them to the test of practical life.

*LCRE address a wide range of problems*

► **Refrain from one-size-fits-all solutions** to complex challenges. As experienced developers of rural regions, we have learned that on the local level organisations like our LCRE are able to address a wide range of problems and develop informal public dialogue about important societal issues which local or national policy-makers will not get hold of.

We invite you and your fellow decision-makers at all political levels to integrate in your own political programmes some of the pressing questions addressed in our work. We will be glad to establish dialogues and to contribute our practical experience and our approaches to finding innovative solutions together with you.

## HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT US

The following requests will support us in continuing to do the work that we believe can provide positive stimuli and impacts to society as a whole.

- ▶ Support meaningful partnerships and cooperations between all levels of the political system, that is, the EU's institutions, the state administration, the local administration, and NGOs such as LCRE — simply because the projects supported are meaningful in themselves. *Support partnerships!*
- ▶ We have developed interdisciplinary methods, principles, and attitudes that may inform and assist decision-making processes on all levels. We encourage you to familiarise yourself with and draw from these resources. We invite you to adopt practices. *Draw from our resources!*
- ▶ Our projects are socio-cultural laboratories. As such they require freedom of experimenting. Our (long term) experiments are open and unbiased and often will defy standardised evaluation schemes. Be open for the unconventional. Be confident that the outcome will make sense — even in the case of failure —, be beneficial to our respective regional socio-cultural environments and, ultimately, to society as a whole. *Open up for the unconventional!*
- ▶ Protect the habitats of LCRE. Agroindustrial practices, land grabbing, and populist, neo-nationalist tendencies are increasingly threatening spatial pioneers as well as old-established inhabitants in areas of rural Europe. *Protect our habitats!*
- ▶ Support LCRE in gaining and reclaiming vital resources such as land, water, or development funds. Our projects may be small compared to international banks and corporations but the voluntary work we do provides benefits to society that are too important to fail. *Help LCRE get land, and funds!*
- ▶ Facilitate framework conditions, including financial resources, institutional support, and the legislative framework, such as planning and building laws. There are well-tried and tested innovative ways of sustainable building, such as tiny houses, earthships, etc. Frequently, these ways of building are contradicted by building regulations that date back to very different eras, settings, and requirements. *Support innovative ways of sustainable building!*
- ▶ Help LCRE to promote their activities and ideas. Prevent influencing the public agenda with pressure and exchange of services. Refrain from discrediting activities of an LCRE by using their work for the political goals of a particular party, thus preventing it from being accepted by others (misuse of the opposition principle). *Promote LCRE ideas and activities!*
- ▶ Refrain from using LCRE as amplifiers for a particular political programme, but listen to their needs and their feedback concerning your own political activities. Help to maintain their independence and strengthen the meaning of the non-governmental sector. *Listen to our feedback!*
- ▶ We believe that the time has come to build pan-European networks of LCRE, dedicated to furthering social cohesion, transformative learning, and sustainable development. We are asking you to support us in establishing such informal and formal networks. *Support our networks!*

## HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT US

*Turn tolerance into acceptance!*

► We believe that European societies need to expand the concept of »tolerance« into an attitude of »acceptance«. Rural communities cannot flower by merely tolerating its members. Instead, they need to accept each other in their diversity and often their contrariness. This can serve as a blueprint for European societies facing the growing need of successfully integrating migrating people from virtually all cultures, and it should be one of the essential topics in education. We are asking you to use your means to bring this understanding of acceptance instead of mere tolerance to life in your respective political environments.

*Embrace diversity!*

► »Embracing diversity« is even a step further than »accepting« — there is an ascending path leading from tolerance over acceptance to embracing the different, the unknown, the challenges of the future. Ultimately, this is a major task for society as a whole, especially when it comes to dealing with otherness. We invite you personally to join us on this path — being well aware that strong trends in contemporary European societies are blatantly running contrary to this attitude.

*Our values, principles, and methods can provide guidance for others.*

Based on our experience as eco-social learning communities in rural Europe, we are convinced that there are ways of tackling the highly demanding, multi-faceted challenges our societies are faced with at present. Central to our longstanding work has been the attempt to take ahead future ways of sustainable, life-fostering living, and transformative learning. In doing so, we have developed values, principles, and well-trying methods that are well suited to further social cohesion and transformative learning. We trust that the values, principles, and methods of our organisations can provide guidance for others who work in similar fields. We are now making our expertise and experience available to other projects and to policy makers on the regional, the national, and the European level. All of our lives, we have been learners ourselves, and we will continue to learn as we live. We ask you to join us in this learning process. We encourage you to make your voice heard in this ongoing lively and diverse dialogue. We invite you to find out more about our work, and we urge you to consider the suggestions and appeals made above.

## FURTHER READING

For further reading we recommend our comprehensive documentation:

### **Learning Communities in Rural Europe**

A Handbook

composed by

Embercombe—United Kingdom

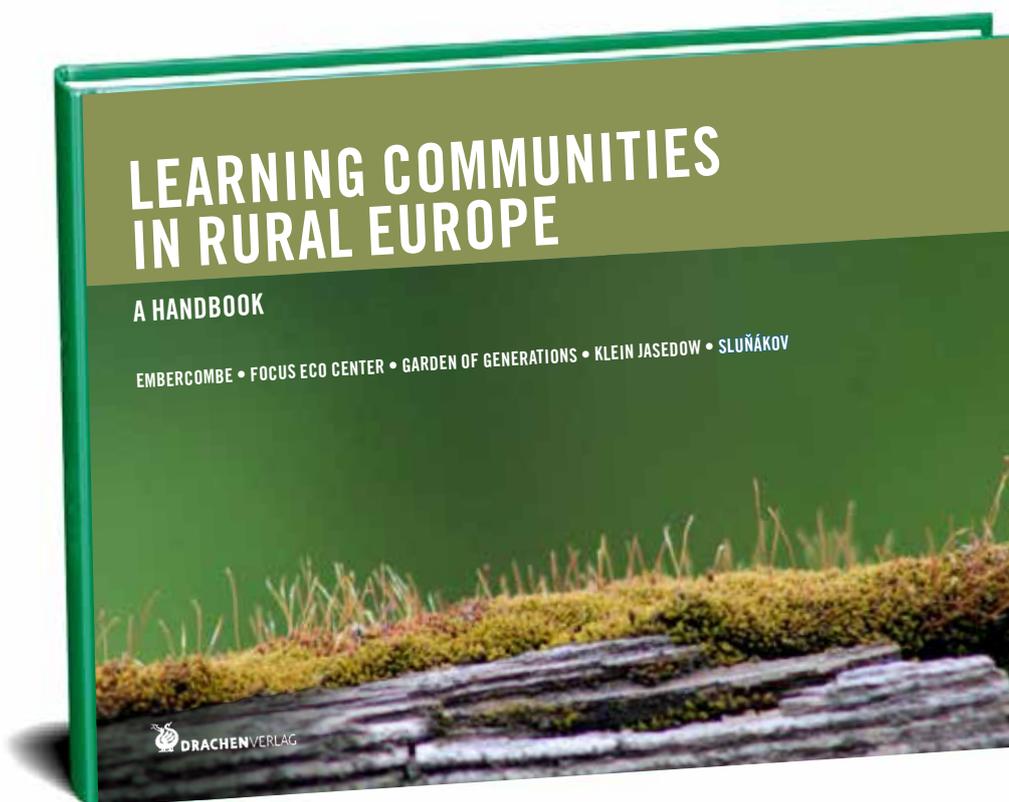
Focus Eco Center—Transilvania/Romania

Garden of Generations—Austria

The Community of Klein Jasedow—Germany

Sluňákov—Czech Republic

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Learning Communities in Rural Europe  
Guidelines for Policy Makers

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