

Barbara Kurek, Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation: When the Gradina Moldovei was founded and who was the founder?

Ana Benoliel Coutinho, Gradina Moldovei: Our organisation was founded in 2015 by Mariana Seremet and her husband. Back then they ran the association with a few more people. Today it has already over 10 people.

B: What was the purpose of this association?

A: It had more than one purpose. The founders' idea was not only to share but also to develop their knowledge about agroecology together with others. They wanted to create a source of information about agroecological and permaculture practices in everyday life and garden with easy access for everybody. At the same time, they were starting their family garden. It's not a classic farm, but rather a family farm - 2.200 square metres of subsistence garden. Their harvest is mainly for them. So this garden became also a demonstration plot, where Mariana was experimenting and then sharing her experience with others.

Going back to the question, the purpose of the association at that time was three-fold. Firstly, the demonstration plot with practices which they tried and learnt, whether they were successful or not. Secondly, creating a green library as a source of knowledge. Thirdly, creating a seed bank.

B: Could you tell us something more about the green library? The idea sounds nice.

A: It is good to have things documented. For example, our first big thing was the allopathy guide (it means plant combination). Mariana did a large research and searched everywhere for all possible combinations. After this, she tried to put all this information into our allopathy guide. We also translated 10 elements of agroecology together with the FAO Moldova. Recently we updated and made a kind of agroecology guide, not only about combining plants but also about other things in connection with other principles of agroecology. Currently, these materials are available for free on our website. We also write articles within the framework of the projects we implement. These are available both in English and Romanian. We would like to make them available in Russian too.

So people search for these materials in our library, but now we are trying something else - more interactive.

B: Does this demonstration garden engage people?

A: Yes, it does, but also we are trying something different because we cannot rely on one pillar of knowledge development. It isn't effective enough. And again one producer cannot receive everybody on their farm all the time. Our idea is that everybody has some knowledge which can be helpful for others.

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It is not training in the classical sense. Our idea is that everybody has the knowledge and lots of agriculture and permaculture knowledge is very intuitive. So, our purpose is to create favourable conditions or an environment, where everybody can hone and develop their skills. The idea is to make education horizontal.

Moldova's Seeds of Change

*Interview with
Ana Benoliel Coutinho*



The question here is to create a platform and facilitate the exchange, helping this knowledge to come to the surface. Lots of agriculture and permaculture knowledge is very intuitive so far. People used to live in a permaculture way. Everything was connected, local and natural, and it worked. The knowledge and communication about it, however, seem not to be as structured as it is for the conventional model. So, giving form to agroecology knowledge appears of great importance both for farmers and the rest of us. With the horizontal perspective, people feel free to share and discuss, and there we develop a process of collaborative learning and horizontal education.

B: Could you share with us how would you like to do it? How will you make education more horizontal?

A: For example, we are planning to organise a meeting of an ecologist with organic farmers. The first goal of this meeting is to start a dialogue, which later can develop into an exchange of knowledge and experience useful for both. Our organisation is more a facilitator of the learning process than an educational centre. It is about collaborative learning which empowers and helps to build trust.

B: Do you have any idea how to conduct this process? From my experience, quite often when people with theoretical and practical perspectives, meet, their discussion is difficult, (leading to frustrations).

A: They don't have expectations and that's the thing. Both are curious and willing to give it a try. That is enough for a start, and we take it from there.



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B: Maybe it's crucial to highlight that the purpose of this meeting is to find out how we can be useful to others.

A: I didn't emphasise anything. The concept that we offered to both sides is a talk, not a teaching lesson. A talk to get to know each other and to see how we can be helpful to each other. That's it. We may find out how now, or later. It does not matter. What is important is to start.

B: I'd also like to ask you a question about the Tool for Agroecology Performance Evaluation (TAPE) in Moldova. I am pretty familiar with this research because I was a part of its implementation in Poland. Could you tell us what was TAPE for Moldovan farmers? What did you know about agroecology in Moldova after this research?

A: I did not take part in the TAPE testing, my colleague Mariana did. She did it with farmers from EcoVillage who she had known from the beginning of the EcoVillage.

It seems it wasn't easy - too many questions, and not everything was clear. People didn't understand some terms. To sum up, it wasn't simple, but Mariana highlighted one positive thing and I agree with her-the reflection and the discussion that developed during this survey were fruitful. It seems to have helped them to become more aware about things they do, the diversity and what they have. And some of them were curious to try something new and improve. We collaborate all the time and TAPE was a good opportunity to strengthen this collaboration, raising farmers' awareness and making them interested in something new. And there is another interesting story behind TAPE. Even for us, this research was quite complicated, but it looks useful for officials. For example, our current minister of agriculture (back then the Member of Moldovan Parliament), found that TAPE could be a great audit tool for farmers, helping to identify the reasons behind the unprofitable farming.

B: I'd like to ask you about the community seed bank which your organisation is running. How did it start?

A: Our founder Mariana wanted to create a seed bank because she discovered there weren't organic vegetable seeds. It was a problem. She began through grants, donations and every possible way of finding seeds from different collections and banks to test them. She checked if seeds were good and adaptable to our climate and soil, then tried other ones and made this selection on-farm. She said it was like a seed bank. But here it is important to explain what exactly a seed bank is. Well, a bank never gives you something for nothing. If a bank gives you money, you have to give at least the same amount back. At least! But banks cannot function on that, so you need to pay back a little more. And the seed bank normally should be the same. You receive some seeds but after a season, you should bring back some seeds, so that the bank can break even and better, make seeds available for more people. In practice, we are working now on the concept of the Seed Bank which we will try to create with our partners in 2023. It is not easy but it is possible and people are ready for it because we all want more free local and natural seeds.

B: Did it work like this in your organisation?

A: Our founder was able to create a rich collection of seeds not only of vegetables but also flowers, herbs, fruit trees, and berries. Altogether she has a collection of about one thousand species! She attracted a few people to do what the bank normally would do, where she gave seeds and then they returned back more. Unfortunately, there weren't enough people to carry on this seed bank. The problem is that it's forbidden to produce and sell seeds without special permission. It is, however, a lot of work to produce seeds. We are finding some ways of supporting the producers in different ways but it is still complicated. Now we work on two projects. One is with seed libraries - we are going to create seed libraries in several places for small gardeners and subsistence farmers. They will have the opportunity to get seeds to grow food for themselves. But again if they don't bring anything back to the library then seeds will finish. Nobody will refill it. We are going to explain to the communities that if they want to keep the seeds library, they need to put some effort into it. Even if it's not in producing all the crops but at least one or two. The second project is about creating a seed-savers' network and a joint seed

bank. It is more strict than with the library because we have to ensure the quality of the seeds. We are developing the concept of it - where the seed come from, how we ensure quality and pack them, and where to store them. We are going to work with farmers experienced in preserving seeds and an agronomist. The purpose is to develop a collective seed bank. So this is a bigger project gathering Gradina Moldovei, farmers, and agronomists and we will see who else.

B: It sounds like a lot of work, so I keep my fingers crossed for your success in all these projects. Thank you Ana for your time and all these amazing stories about your organisation. ♦

Ana Benoliel Coutinho has been the Executive Director of Gradina Moldovei since February 2022. She is also the author of articles and materials from areas of the environment, agriculture, food systems, and rural development.



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