

## **FoodDiversity Pre-Study outreach efforts connect innovative communities as Rural Living Labs for food security**

*Study visits to Estonia and Russia continue to broaden Baltic Sea Region network of small-scale food producers striving for food security*

By Marcella Samuels

The [FoodDiversity Pre-Study Project](#) international consortium of partners led by [Sambruket i Sösdalabydgen](#) concluded their 3<sup>rd</sup> international meeting held in the Arkhangelsk region in Russia from 5-6 March 2016. This meeting marked the start of the final lap of the year-long pre-study as the team prepares to conclude its foundational work in June 2016. The FoodDiversity Pre-Study Project (simply called the FoodDiversity Project below) is funded by the Swedish Institute and consists of participants from five Baltic Sea Region countries, including from organisations in Estonia, Russia, Poland, Belarus and Sweden. The 12-month pre-study is intended to explore the benefits of integrating biodiversity into the design of small-scale food production. The aim of the FoodDiversity Project is to highlight the benefit of agro-ecological systems and approaches where food production and biodiversity are integrated in the design. In addition to strengthening competence within the Baltic partnership for applying biodiversity in small-scale agricultural operations, the 12-month pre-study period is being used to strengthen the likelihood of establishing a multi-year European-based regional initiative.



What makes the international consortium participating in the Project so interesting is that they are united by a common interest in using biodiversity as a central mechanism for creating local economy, food security and Transition. The team hopes to use their preliminary research, networking and capacity building efforts in the pre-study period as a foundation upon which to launch a long-term socio-ecological platform for research and practical work on food security through biodiversity in the Baltic Sea Region. To do this, practitioners and researchers are working together, doing research and practical activities simultaneously in order to co-design and evaluate different pathways of producing food outside of the industrial food chain.

FoodDiversity's Estonian partner, the Network of Estonian Eco-Communities (NEEC) led by their coordinator Liina Järviste, hosted the previous international meeting, held in the small village of Mõisamaa, Estonia from 23-25 November 2015. The meeting was held in Ms. Järviste's small eco-community of Väike Jalajälg, located 70 km outside of Tallinn. Ms. Järviste and her community welcomed the FoodDiversity partners warmly during the three-day visit, which included a rich variety of opportunities for the partners to connect with local people. The Estonian meeting showcased the work of Väike Jalajälg as an intentional community working on farming and various ecological enterprises, including their burgeoning enterprises focusing on micro-greens and ecological chocolate. The recent meeting in Russia continued the pattern of friendly, cross-cultural study trips, and built on the warm reception encountered by the team at their previous meetings. FoodDiversity consortium Russian partner, Antonia Kulyasova, who is also the Coordinator for the Ecovillages and Eco-initiatives Network (REEN), hosted the most

recent meeting in her small village located in the Arkhangelsk region. All who attended felt the warmth and community spirit of the local people in Ms. Kulyasova's small village. This community feeling has become a re-occurring theme and hallmark of the FoodDiversity Project experience in each international meeting, starting with the August 2015 [kickoff meeting held at the Sambruket transition initiative centre](#) in the small, rural, local community of Norra Mellby located near Sösdala in the Skåne region of southern Sweden, where the FoodDiversity Project journey began with a warm welcome in the heart of Sambruket's co-farming intentional community and transition initiative.

Working on food security and biodiversity within these three intentional community settings, in three different Baltic Sea Region countries, created a sense of unity and camaraderie that continues to be shared by the partners. The members of each of these intentional communities were actively shaping their own 'real-world' agro-ecological systems by working together to build healthy, socially inclusive human interactions within their communities while also working together



to decide on the kinds of healthy foods produced and consumed. Within all of these small-scale communities, experiments are underway everyday as community members try to use their small, rural community setting as a hub of experimentation and leadership for developing organic, non-industrialized food production strategies. The challenge has been doing these experiments in ways that respect the practices of culturally rich members of the communities, while also considering potential for enhancing the biodiversity of food that could be produced locally with plant and animal species that are adapted and resilient to local temperate (i.e. four season) climatic conditions experienced within seasonally harsh Northern climates. Building on and sharing knowledge for how to successfully enrich the soils and produce healthy, organic food in Northern, temperate climates has been a benefit of these international meeting forums.



Sharing experiences among small-scale farmers in each community has been a central benefit of the pre-study period. For example, the most recent Food Diversity meeting in the Arkhangelsk region was intentionally scheduled so that it would take place back-to-back with the ForestForum so that more networking could take place between the partners and the participants in the ForestForum.

The ForestForum brought together

children, teens and adults of all-ages to participate in learning sessions about local development initiatives for youth based around food production and local forest resources. Representatives from Permaculture Russia and AeTAS were also present at the meeting with the FoodDiversity team, which gave both groups opportunities to share their local experiments and ideas with each other.

In all three international visits, it has become more apparent to the FoodDiversity Project partners that experimentation taking place in their local communities involves not only experimenting with *what* food is produced, but also with *how* the food is produced as well. The cultural diversity in each community also impacts *who* is getting involved in planning, growing and consuming the locally produced organic food being grown, often times mixing up the categories for who would be a producer and who would be a consumer, giving rise to a new kind of actor in the food production web that fuses both roles into what is could be called a *prosumer*. The term *prosumer* originates from the audio industry where it was coined to describe a category of professional-grade audio equipment sold on the consumer marketplace to non-professionals, so it's a fitting choice of term since it refers to a blurring of the lines between *producer* and *consumer*, as well as *professional* and *amateur*. The rise of *prosumers* within diverse food webs has the potential to create a pathway for practical re-skilling. It can also further democratize the production of food by opening up possibilities for ways to put food production back into the diverse hands of everyday people rather than enclosing food production into the hands of just a few professionals.



Even the food served during the meetings became a catalyst for rich discussions between the Project partners and their hosts. It became more obvious with each meeting and study visit that local culture matters, since it influences what food ends up ultimately on the table. For example, during the study visits at the international meetings, the team experienced the simple reality around the dining table about how decisions for what foods to cultivate would naturally begin at the consumption end. What people

wanted to eat influenced what they wanted to grow. What they wanted to eat would also influence economic decisions on what foods would be cultivated versus what foods would be purchased locally from neighbours or purchased from regional or global food market outlets. It became increasingly clear, one meal at a time, that biodiversity could not be addressed in a vacuum. Local culturally significant food varieties had to be considered as well, since they well may have the strongest influence on the decision for what would be grown and what would be purchased in the marketplace.

As the FoodDiversity project team came into contact with each community in each country visited, the project team was made aware of what mattered most among the local people in the communities that were visited, including how different foods were grounded in local traditions, and in some cases, went back to very old local varieties. For example, at the meeting in Estonia, the team heard a dynamic presentation by Annika Michelson about heirloom plants. In contrast, during the Estonia meeting the team also discussed the legality of different varieties of plant materials being exchanged regionally, trying to find the balance between building resilience under changing climate conditions, reintroducing lost varieties, and the need to manage the risk of introducing aggressive competitive species that could become invasive species that would do more harm than good to the local ecosystem.





At each meeting, the team has also had opportunities to consider landscape design strategies. Partners were able to see, reflect on, and share both their existing designs and their future strategies for enhancing their biodiversity. The range of strategies discussed and seen in each country included not only standard farming rows, and permaculture layouts, but also other unique intentional designs, such as the design inspired by spiritual beliefs seen at the study visit in Estonia to the intentional community of Lilleoru, where Lilleoru Herbal Teas are produced.

At the meeting in Russia, the National Inventories for each country were also discussed. National Inventories being conducted by each of the partners, in each of their respective Baltic Sea Region countries, are being used to create a foundation for a social networking tool that will feed into the future project, as well as be used to generate some immediate benefits for project partners and the small scale farming community in each partner country. It is expected that the National Inventory in each country could be used to connect small-scale, local, organic food producers who are looking for helpful allies at every stage in the Food Web, from soil to seed to table and back again. In the process of interviewing practitioners for the National Inventory in Sweden, the FoodDiversity research team, co-led by members of Sambruket and the Lund University Human Ecology Division, became catalysts in helping small-scale food practitioners in Sweden to help co-develop and co-design the direction for the future project as practitioners were invited to share their needs, one of which was to have physical and virtual spaces for experimentation, discussion and networking with other practitioners.



The problems identified by the actual small scale producers themselves, some of whom are both in the role of primary consumer for their own production, may point the way towards the next project after the current pre-study wraps up in June, notes Sambruket Chairperson Oscar Kjellberg. “Looking forward to the next project, what Sambruket members would value as a next step is to have a way of comparing and evaluating Sambruket as a model for local Transition initiatives when it comes building food security relative to the other models we are identifying in our National Inventory for the Food Diversity Pre-Study Seed Project,” said Kjellberg. As the pre-study wraps up, the question of what will follow-up on its work arises. The team has already



begun applying for funding from various sources to continue its work in the future. Kjellberg added, “The idea for the next project would be to compare various living experiments happening at the same time, so rather than having experiments competing with each other or working in isolation, it would be to enhance collaboration and cooperation through a network, perhaps as Rural Living Lab experiments, so they would be constantly interacting, comparing and enhancing one

another based on mutual learning and knowledge sharing. Our focus as a local Transition initiative is to become a Transition Center that can help build and share local knowledge among our members, as well as being a knowledge-hub for the local community.”

Mr. Kjellberg also noted that, “Having had the meetings work like study visits in Sweden, Estonia and Russia enabled partners to see more about what each of us have in common and what we can learn from the different food production modes we have in our local, small, rural communities in action, including the local experimentation already underway.” Part of the networking mandate of



the Project was to explore the non-industrialized food production techniques being used to enhance food security in the Baltic Sea Region. The Project team has avoided picking one type of production system over another as a clear winner in the quest for food security. However, as stated in the project mandate, the team is focusing on those food producers who are committed to staying organic, whether as certified by the EU, or a national body, or by virtue of using what some team members have termed ‘traditional organic’ production for plants and animals. The joint community-NGO-university research effort is now in

the process of completing final interviews and analyzing the observations from all the National Inventories with the hope that the analysis may reveal particular obstacles, and perhaps also a range of strategic approaches, even beyond breeding and cropping selection alone, that may impact whether or not successful outcomes are realized.

If the initial observations from the international meeting study visits and national inventory interviews thus far are any indication, it seems likely that a future project could connect both local and regional food production practitioners engaged in both intensive and extensive organic practices. The future project will likely reflect the variety in their regions, bringing together those farmers and gardeners who are experimenting with traditional heirloom organic growing styles, permaculture food forests, perennial polycultures, holistic management with working animals to perform regenerative agriculture, evolutionary breeding methods for plants and animals, or a combination of two or more of these food production methods. This seems rather fitting for a project about FoodDiversity, where the diversity includes not only who produces food, but also how the foods are produced, and what food is produced. The final report for the pre-study is expected to be completed by the end of August 2016.