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Chapter 2: Eco-Health Farm Network (EHFN), Latvia

Executive Summary

Founded in the early 2000s, the Eco-Health Farm Network (EHFN) supports small-scale producers in rural Latvia to integrate organic farming practices, health services, environmental preservation, and educational tourism into their work. As a knowledge-sharing network, the EHFN aims to help its members become economically and environmentally sustainable through capacity-building activities enabling them to develop healthy and productive lifestyles. It also helps disseminate their approach and its benefits across local, national and international communities by selling high-quality healthy food, delivering a variety of health treatments, organizing educational sessions about farming, health and nature, and receiving tourists on their farms.

For Mara Bergmane, founder of the network, the concept of an “Eco-Health Farm” originated at the end of the 1980s, when she and her husband started to practice a type of agriculture that would enable them to live and work in healthier conditions, and realized it could be coupled with revitalizing ancient Latvian rural knowledge about farming, health and the environment, strengthening it with modern sciences, and sharing this knowledge with visitors. This approach would help tackle 3 major problems encountered by Latvians, particularly rural dwellers: poor health conditions due to, among others, overuse of substances and chemicals in medicine and in agriculture; the degradation of the natural environment largely linked to the industrial farming model of the Soviet occupation that favoured mono-culture and the overuse of chemicals; and the precarious economic situation of small-scale producers, who faced tough competition from larger and more subsidised industrial farms in Latvia and in other European countries.

Ms. Bergmane and her husband gradually gathered several other Latvian small farmers who were particularly interested in integrating health, tourism and ecological farming activities. Developing the EHFN was however a lengthy process as there was little funding to enable its founders to work less on their own farms and devote time to initiate and advertise the network’s activities, and to find partnerships with agricultural, health or environmental experts. Financial resources remain an important issue for the network, but its devoted and increasingly numerous national and international members, as well as interested specialists, enable it to continue its successful capacity-building work.

Today, the EHFN includes 70 organic farms working on over 2,800 hectares, and actively sharing knowledge, experiences, best practice and seeds, at the network as well as at the individual levels, to support each other. The EHFN offers monthly training lectures and workshops, given by experts or specialized members on topics requested by farmers, from biodynamic farming and acupuncture to cosmetics, and annual learning field excursions to model farms in Latvia and Europe. Through articles, networking at national and international levels, and participation in various events and exhibitions, the network also promotes members’ achievements and activities, thus widening their positive impact.

Section 1: Introduction and Context

1.1 Introduction

The Eco-Health Farm Network (EHFN) is a network of approximately 70 organic farms that works to improve the general health and economic conditions of Latvians and other Eastern Europeans while preserving their natural environment, through the integration of organic farming, traditional and modern medicines, educational and tourism activities. These farms certified by the EHFN, produce healthy and high-quality organic food, deliver specific health services, and receive as visitors, schools, local communities, as well as national and international tourists.

Created in the early 2000s, the EHFN's goal is to promote an approach that jointly addresses health, economic and environmental issues, and which supports small-scale organic farmers who have difficulties competing with cheaper products coming from large industrial farms or from European countries with high subsidies for farm products. The network's founder, Mara Bergmane, experienced herself these difficulties on her own organic family farm that she started with her husband Dainis Bergmanis, at the end of the 1980s, and they thus quickly started networking with other small farmers in Latvia as well as from other countries to share knowledge and difficulties, and to find solutions together. In 1994, they first created the Latvian Organic Agriculture Association (LBLA), and started organizing farmers who were particularly interested in the Bergmanes' approach stressing the importance of preserving Latvian traditions as well as their natural environment.

Since its formalization in 2006, the network has supported some 70 members through knowledge sharing, capacity building, and promotional activities. It has mobilized national and international experts in a variety of medical, agricultural and environmental disciplines, such as phyto-therapy, permaculture and biology, in order to revitalize traditional Latvian healing and farming practices, effectively merging them with modern sciences, as well training its members. All that has improved productivity, profitability and living conditions. Members can now sell higher value-added products and services to a larger market, while also improving their health and living conditions as well as those of local communities, and those of national and international visitors through health services and educational and tourism activities.

1.2 Context

The 2.2 million people living in Latvia¹ are spread over a territory of nearly 65,000 km squares.² More than 33 per cent are concentrated in the capital, Riga,³ while over 30 per cent live in rural areas⁴ where the population density is thus very low.⁵

In 2011, Latvia was ranked 43rd on the Human Development Index rank, with a life expectancy of 73 years, an adult literacy rate of 99.8 per cent, and close to no severe poverty.⁶ In 2007-2008, the unemployment rate was approximately 7 per cent, but with the economic crisis rose to over 16 per cent, over half of which is long-term unemployment.⁷

The country's GDP in 2011 was over USD 28 billion,⁸ and the following year, its growth reached 6.8 per cent, the highest in the European Union.⁹ The service sector dominates, representing 70 per cent of the GDP, followed by industry at 25 per cent, and agriculture at nine per cent. The share of the labour force employed in these sectors approximately corresponds to those figures.¹⁰ As forests constitute 45 per cent of the territory,¹¹ wood processing (timber for construction and paper)¹² is an important industry. Exports from this industry represent a major part of the GDP, as well as from food and wood products, metals, machinery, and textiles.¹³ Tourism is also well developed.¹⁴

Latvia has been independent since 1920, but was occupied by the Soviet Union from 1940 to 1941, by Germany from 1941 to 1945, and again by the Soviet Union until 1991.¹⁵ In 2004, it became a member of the European Union.

During the Soviet occupation, agricultural lands were nationalized;¹⁶ farmers no longer owned their lands and management was organized collectively. Over half of the lands were used to produce fodder for cattle that supplied the Soviet Union with dairy products; and many holdings were left unused and became forests. These large collective farms were not particularly productive, and the private holdings given to some privileged

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- 1 *Data, Latvia*, World Bank, 2013, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/latvia> (accessed 18 December 2012).
 - 2 *Latvia*, EU, 2013, http://europa.eu/about-eu/countries/member-countries/latvia/index_en.htm (accessed 18 December 2012).
 - 3 Op. cit. *Latvia*, EU, 2013 (accessed 18 December 2012).
 - 4 *Latvia*, UN data, 2013, <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=LATVIA> (accessed 19 December 2012).
 - 5 *Latvia - population density*, Index Mundi, 2010, <http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/latvia/population-density> (accessed 28 January 2013).
 - 6 UNDP: *Human Development Report 2011. Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All*, New York, 2011, pp.126, 127, 143,158.
 - 7 *World Bank Supports Latvia's Policy Efforts to Boost Employment*, World Bank, 2012, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/EUEINPEXTN/0,,contentMDK:23206322~menuPK:590772~pagePK:2865066~piPK:2865079~theSitePK:590766,00.html> (accessed 18 December 2012).
 - 8 *Data, Latvia*, World Bank, 2013, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/latvia> (accessed 18 December 2012).
 - 9 *Latvia's successful recovery not easy to replicate*, International Monetary Fund, 2012, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/so/2012/car061112a.htm> (accessed 19 December 2012).
 - 10 *The World Factbook - Latvia*, CIA, 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/download/download-2012/index.html> (accessed 12 May 2013).
 - 11 *Latvia*, The Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia, 2013, <http://www.mk.gov.lv/en/latvija/> (accessed 18 December 2012).
 - 12 Op. cit., *Latvia*, EU, 2013 (accessed 18 December 2012).
 - 13 Op. cit., *The World Factbook*, CIA, 2012 (accessed 12 May 2013).
 - 14 Op. cit., *Latvia*, EU, 2013 (accessed 18 December 2012).
 - 15 *Latvia in Brief*, The Latvian Institute, 2012, <http://www.latvia.eu/library/latvia-brief> (accessed 18 December 2012).
 - 16 M. Bergmane: "History and vision of the Latvian eco-health farm network", in *Arch Noah Magazine* No.2/2012, April 2012, p. 1 (Translated from German by Aistraa G.A.).

Soviet authorities became very important to national agricultural production to feed the local population.¹⁷ Following Latvia's independence, ownership of land was returned to farmers.¹⁸ However, agricultural production decreased because farming equipment, which was not given back with the lands, became very expensive. There was also not enough fodder produced for Latvian cattle, and meat production was thus the sector that declined the most. Beetroot production doubled between 1994 and 1998, and forestry products also increased, as sugar, timber and paper were easily exportable, and the country was looking for hard currency.¹⁹

Conditions of rural areas in Latvia

The main challenge encountered, especially by small-scale Latvian farmers, is competition from large-scale industrial farms from other EU countries with highly subsidized agricultural programmes.²⁰ Between 2001 and 2010, the number of agricultural holdings decreased by 50 per cent, as many small and medium farms closed down. Only large agricultural holdings could survive, and today, 1.4 per cent of Latvian farmers work on over 36 per cent of the land. Since 2007, the number of people employed in agriculture has been decreasing by over 20 per cent every year. In 2010, Latvian agriculture had only 180,000 workers left (just over 8 per cent of the population), of which only 16.5 per cent were employed full-time. Increasing unemployment in the sector further diminished the population density in rural areas as people migrated to cities to find paid work.²¹

Latvia's agriculture is currently at risk as it concentrates on only two sectors: field crops and dairy, which account for nearly 70 per cent of the country's total agricultural production whose sales are highly dependent on the international market. From 2007 to 2011 the share of field crops grew from 33 to 45 per cent, and that of dairy products from 16 to 21 per cent.²²

This model does not favour small-scale farmers and labour-intensive techniques, and thus reduces the important employment potential of agriculture. Farmers and the larger population are also exposed to a higher number of chronic diseases linked to the overuse of herbicides and pesticides in agriculture.²³

Yet, agriculture and rural areas as a whole have important development potentials in sectors that already exist, but which are still not sufficiently valued and used. For instance, the health conditions of farmers and rural dwellers can be improved by traditional Latvian farming and healing practices that can be rediscovered, combined with modern knowledge, and developed to generate much needed and profitable products and services. Herbal saunas have become an important healing method in Latvia that is now being revived

17 *Latvia - Agriculture*, Encyclopaedia of the Nations, 2013, <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Europe/Latvia-AGRICULTURE.html> (accessed 19 December 2012).

18 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

19 Op. cit., *Latvia - Agriculture*, Encyclopaedia of the Nations, 2013.

20 *Mara Bergmane*, Ashoka, Fellows, 2003, <https://www.ashoka.org/fellow/mara-bergmane> (accessed 18 December 2012).

21 Central Government of the Republic of Latvia: *Latvia Statistic, Annual Report 2011*, Riga, 2012, http://www.csb.gov.lv/sites/default/files/par_mums/_gada_parskats_2011_en.pdf (accessed 18 December 2012).

22 Ibid.

23 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

across the country.²⁴ Organic agriculture, without the use of chemicals and respecting the environment (as well as living and working conditions in rural areas) can also be widely developed. In 2010, 8 per cent of Latvian farmers were already using organic techniques.²⁵

There is also considerable scope for improving the productive capacities and efficiency of smallholdings. In 2010, for instance, over 56 per cent of the farms concentrated on subsistence production and this production was not sold.²⁶



24 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

25 Op. cit., Central Government of the Republic of Latvia, 2012.

26 Ibid.

Section 2: Analysis of the Catalyst

2.1 Why was it created?

Purpose

The main goal of the EHFN is to enable its members to live healthily, in a natural environment, by eating healthy food, accessing and delivering health services, and continuously learning about health and ecosystems,²⁷ while being productive and profitable entrepreneurs. The EHFN also wants its members to disseminate their farming and healing practices in local, national and international communities. It also aims to revive a sense of solidarity among small-scale farmers,²⁸ to enable them to support one another.

To achieve these goals, the EHFN helps its members, as well as all interested organic farmers, develop alternative models to industrial agriculture and mass tourism, both individually and collectively at the network's level, to enable them to achieve “harmony between natural systems and human health”²⁹ on their farms. The network promotes farming and medical practices that integrate organic and environmentally sustainable agriculture, the health of the farmers, their visitors and the local communities, nature preservation, and rural tourism.³⁰

The approach adopted by the EHFN aims to revitalize the Latvian traditional knowledge about farming, health, and nature that producers, healers and rural dwellers had in the past, and to combine it with the modern knowledge in these fields that national and international scientists and doctors can provide.³¹ The network's members are thus continuously learning about these various disciplines to be able to adapt them and integrate them effectively into their farming, healing, educational and touristic activities, and to their ecosystems.

The EHFN also works on strengthening collaborations among its members so they can share experiences, exchange seeds, or conclude commercial partnerships. It also organizes a variety of monthly and annual capacity-building trainings and events to update and strengthen their knowledge.³² As EHFN members believe that all Latvians can benefit from improvements in their health, working conditions, and living environment, the network also advocates for its innovative farming and tourism model at the national and international levels. These awareness-raising activities are attracting the attention of increasing numbers of farmers and other interested stakeholders to the network and its

27 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

28 *Eco-health farms: Creating alternatives to mass tourism*, Ashoka, 2008, <http://www.changemakers.com/competition/geotourism2008/entries/eco-health-farms-creating-alternatives-mass-tourism> (accessed 5 December 2012).

29 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008 (accessed 20 December 2012).

30 Ibid.

31 G. A. Aistara: “Weeds or Wisdom? Permaculture in the Eye of the Beholder on Latvian Eco-Health Farms”, in J. Lockyer, and J. Veteto (eds): *Environmental Anthropology Engaging Ecotopian Imaginaries: Bioregionalism, Permaculture, and Ecovillages for a Sustainable Future*, Berghahn Books, forthcoming.

32 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

members' goals and initiatives, which in turn boosts the network's human resources, its main asset.³³

Relevance

The EHFN's approach tackles 3 main difficulties in Latvian rural areas: worsening health, environmental degradation, and decreasing employment opportunities.³⁴

The health of the Latvian (and Eastern European) population is significantly poorer than in other EU countries. Among the main causes of this low level of physical well-being are: chronic illnesses; alcohol abuse; improper and excessive use of pharmaceutical medicines; and the presence of herbicides and pesticides in agriculture.

To address the issues of health and environmental degradation, the network stresses the need for farmers and their local communities to learn about illness preservation and environmental preservation, and the importance of using healthy organic products and health natural treatments. The EHFN enables its members to efficiently produce, process, and market healthy organic food using methods that respect their own health and natural environment, for instance by not using chemical fertilizers or herbicides and pesticides; and to deliver a variety of traditional and modern medical services to their local communities and to visitors. One unique feature of the network is its touristic dimension, which widens its impact, not only in rural areas but also in urban Latvia, as well as internationally as the farmers can disseminate their practices and ideas worldwide through their visitors. The exchanges at local, national and international levels also improve their farming and medical techniques, while the revenues from these educational and touristic activities increase farms' profitability.

The EHFN also addresses the issue of competition from goods produced by the large holdings. This competition often forces smallholders to lower their prices below production cost, thus pushing them to reduce the number of their employees, and often, to close down altogether.³⁵ The EHFN thus trains its members to become more productive, and helps them to specialise in high-quality agricultural and health products and services, which they can then profitably sell to the local population.³⁶ Local communities benefit from the revitalisation of villages resulting from the productive businesses EHFN members. Promoting small-scale farming is also relevant at the national level, as it is now recognised that Latvian small family producers are more productive than larger industrial farms.³⁷ Moreover, increasing the number of small-holders contributes to reduce the on-going rural to urban migration in Latvia as it increases the number of jobs in rural areas.

The network's model is also innovative because it revives the traditional ways of working and living in rural areas and adapts them to contemporary life. It is also locally relevant, as members can build on the valuable and effective traditional knowledge already possessed by some.³⁸

33 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

34 Op. cit., *Mara Bergmane*, Ashoka Fellows, 2003.

35 Ibid.

36 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008 (accessed 20 December 2012).

37 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

38 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012, p.1.

2.2 How was it created?

The founder

Mara Bergmane had years of practice in producing food and health products and delivering health services on her own farm, and had already worked for the community before founding the EHFN.³⁹

Born in 1951 in Dundaga, a village in North West Latvia, she graduated from the University of Latvia in Riga, where she studied culture and library science. She first taught history, then became the director of the Renda Cultural Center; both jobs gave her the opportunity to learn about her country's history and tradition.⁴⁰ She also became politically involved to promote Latvia's independence and democracy, and directed the Renda Popular Front.⁴¹

In 1986, as she and her children developed serious health issues that were not resolved using classical medical treatments, Mara Bergmane started to search for and use alternative treatments, such as herbal healing and traditional saunas. These treatments, combined with the consumption of healthy and nutritious products, gradually improved their health, and led her to the idea of creating an "Eco-Health Farm",⁴² where healthy food would be produced and sold, and health services delivered, to improve her family's living conditions as well as those of the community. The opportunity came when, following Latvia's independence from the Soviet Union, Mara Bergmane was able to reclaim her family farm in Renda Parish,⁴³ which had been nationalized in the 1940s.⁴⁴ With her husband, she started a 120-hectare farm called the "Upmali ("riverside" in Latvian) Eco-Health Farm".⁴⁶

The beginnings were difficult as farming equipment and animals were not given back with the farm, and the couple had to start with only one cow and no financial resources.⁴⁷ However, they were keen to learn, and also received valuable technical support from German and American farmers that they contacted to learn about organic and biodynamic agriculture.⁴⁸ As these farming practices are based on the integration of the soils, plants and animals to achieve a holistic and productive harmony through their interactions, animal manure and other natural specific composts are used instead of chemical fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides. To practice locally-adapted agriculture, Mara Bergmane, her husband and their colleagues also started learning about traditional agriculture methods from local farmers.⁴⁹

To prepare for their work, they learned about traditional Latvian healing methods from

39 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

40 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008 (accessed 20 December 2012).

41 Op. cit., *Mara Bergmane*, Ashoka Fellows, 2003 (accessed 6 February 2013).

42 Ibid.

43 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

44 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008 (accessed 5 December 2012).

45 *Par Mums*, Anna Bergmans, 2013, <http://anna-bergmans.eu/parmums.html> (accessed 7 February 2013).

46 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

47 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

48 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

49 Ibid.

Dainis Bergmanis' mother and several others, and received training from doctors specialized in anthroposophical medicine,⁵⁰ which stresses the linkages between the body, the mind and the spirit, and combines several types of prophylactic and alternative and traditional methods, such as homeopathy, naturopathy and energy therapies.

Mara Bergmane and her husband began producing medicinal herbs and food first for themselves, then progressively started selling healthy food, such as natural herbal teas with specific healing properties. They also started delivering health services, such as herbal healing saunas, and organizing educational trainings, such as camps about nature and health,⁵¹ turning their farm into a demonstration centre.⁵²

Since 1991, the Upmali products are certified “Demeter” (that is, from biodynamic agriculture), and organic since 1996, and are sold at a profitable price as they are recognised as having high nutritional value. Since 2002, the farm is registered as a herbal tea manufacture, which generates a significant income as the products are processed directly on the farm and sold with added value.⁵³



Creation – Initial opportunities, support, and challenges

Once their farm was launched, Mara Bergmane and her husband quickly started organizing organic farmers in the area to support each other's work. Together, they began organizing learning seminars about alternative agricultural and health practices, and on how to sell value-added products to be economically profitable.⁵⁴ In 1994, with other friends and farmers across the whole country, they officialised and widened their collaborations by creating the Latvian Organic Agriculture Association (LBLA),⁵⁵ to support organic farmers and increase their number across the country.

Within this association, they progressively decided to regroup LBLA members who also wanted to work on “the integration of environmental protection, health, and organic farming”,⁵⁶ to improve health and working and living conditions, through educational and sharing activities on their farms. In the early 2000s, this small group of farmers thus started to promote and organize activities linking health, organic farming, and tourism.⁵⁷ Safeguarding and revitalizing the useful knowledge and traditions of rural Latvia was also one of their goals.⁵⁸

50 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008 (accessed 20 December 2012).

51 Ibid.

52 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

53 *Anna Bergmans šogad plāno apgūt Vācijas tirgu* (Anna Bergman plans to target the German market), FinanceNet, 2011, http://financenet.tvnet.lv/nozares/360558-anna_bergmans_sogad_plano_apgut_vacijas_tirgu (accessed 7 February 2013).

54 Op. cit., *Mara Bergmane*, Ashoka Fellows, 2003 (accessed 6 February 2013).

55 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

56 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

57 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008 (accessed 5 December 2012).

58 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

The programme of activities developed by these LBLA members was the informal beginning of the Eco-Health Farm Network (EHFN), which was officially registered as an independent organization in 2006. The EHFN members are not only organic producers, but also have to produce and deliver healthy goods and health products and services, while ensuring the long-term preservation of their environment. Further, they have to share information about their practices within the EHFN network, as well as with the local communities and visitors to spread this valuable knowledge, continuously adapt it, and improve the health of the wider public.⁵⁹

The network started with 30 farms, and has grown to approximately 70 members.⁶⁰ They work on farms which vary in size from 20 to 120 hectares, and which represent a total surface of 2,800 hectares, over 20 per cent of organic certified surfaces in Latvia.⁶¹

Before formally creating the EHFN, Mara Bergmane, her husband and other interested farmers had already been working for over 6 years on agro-tourism and health programmes within the LBLA.⁶² Therefore they all had knowledge and practical experiences about integrating health and tourism with organic farming activities.

What enabled Mara Bergmane to officially found the EHFN was her appointment as an Ashoka Fellow in 2003 by the NGO Ashoka, which identifies innovative social entrepreneurs addressing current social issues worldwide, promotes their ideas, and supports them to realize their activities.⁶³ Ashoka recognized Mara Bergmane's model as highly innovative, and her project of creating a strong network of such farms as having the potential to widen the approach's positive impact by reaching more farmers, and thus a larger number of local communities and visitors.⁶⁴ It granted her USD 200 per month (roughly her income at that time)⁶⁵ for 2 years to help her set up the network. This enabled her to invest time to build the EHFN,⁶⁶ and to attend complementary training, for instance on how to organize a training centre.⁶⁷

Once launched, the EHFN searched for and received various small grants from national and international entities supporting grassroots movements aimed at preserving the natural environment⁶⁸, such as from the NGO Friends of the Earth Latvia.⁶⁹ A grant of 5,000 Lats (approximately USD 9,500), from a Latvian bank, enabled the network to develop and print its first presentation and advertising booklet, organize and pay for its first series of farmers' capacity building seminars, and publish a book from a Latvian

59 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

60 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

61 *Vides veselības saimniecības* (Environmental Health Farm), Lauku Tikles, Zivsaimniecības Sadarbības tīkls, Latvijas Lauku Konsultāciju Un Izglītības Centrs, 2009, http://www.laukutikls.lv/biologiska_lauksaimnieciba/organizacijas/515-vides_veselibas_saimniecibas (accessed 6 February 2013).

62 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

63 *What is a Social Entrepreneur*, Ashoka, https://www.ashoka.org/social_entrepreneur (accessed 6 February 2013).

64 *Mara Bergmane of Latvia a finalist at Geotourism Challenge Summit*, Embassy of Latvia, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/usa/news/mara-bergmane-of-latvia-a-finalist-at-geotourism-challenge-summit/> (accessed 5 February 2013).

65 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

66 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008 (accessed 5 December 2012).

67 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

68 *Latvia*, Latvijas Zemes Draugi / Friends of the Earth Latvia, <http://www.foei.org/en/who-we-are/member-directory/groups-by-region/europe/latvia.html> (accessed 22 February 2013).

69 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008.

pharmacologist presenting and teaching traditional recipes.⁷⁰

The most important initial challenge encountered by the founders was the limited amount of time they could invest in extra-farming activities. In the early 1990s, they had just started their own farms, and their time was thus dedicated to learn more about farming, and to launching their enterprises. They did take time to share experiences with one another and to organize capacity-building seminars and invite national and international specialists, but not as many as they would have liked.

Only once their businesses became sustainable at the end of the 1990s were the founders able to meet more often, and create the LBLA to support each other in a more organized and effective way. However, leaving their farm for one or several days to organize trainings or attend trainings remains complicated for farmers.⁷¹

2.3 How does it currently work?

Structure

The EHFN is registered in Latvia as an independent organization, which means that it is not formally linked with or financed by other entities. Mara Bergmane describes the network's decision-making structure as "informal, democratic governance".⁷² The EHFN has an informally elected managing board that takes decisions, but none of its 7 members is remunerated. The decision-making process is also informal; members discuss and take decisions "like a group of friends".⁷³ At the beginning of every year, they jointly decide the kind of knowledge they need or would like to acquire during the year, and organize capacity building trainings and excursions accordingly. For instance, Mara Bergmane is currently keen on acupuncture, hence the EHFN is organizing a series of training on this practice.⁷⁴

Responsibilities within the network are shared according to the interests and knowledge of each member. For instance, the EHFN's founder is no longer in charge of information exchanges as the network has a young member more interested and versed in this task. If one member is in contact with a doctor specialized in a field of interest to the network, he or she can then take charge of the trainings related to this speciality. Overall, each member is responsible for him or herself, as well as for strengthening and improving the network's activities by: sharing his or her needs and interests to help the network find appropriate responses; bringing information from their experiences on his or her farms, or from other sources; offering trainings; and selling or exchanging products. However, members can freely choose their degree of involvement in the network's activities.⁷⁵

70 M. Bergmane, interview, 21 February 2013.

71 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

72 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

73 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.



There are strict conditions for becoming an EHFN member and to be allowed to use the “Eco-Health Farm” brand, which is recognised today in Latvia and other European countries as a guarantee of healthy and high-quality products. Members have to be certified organic, have some officially recognised medical training, offer health products and services, spread their knowledge, and manage their house and surroundings ecologically, for instance by recycling wastes, composting, or building with eco-friendly materials.⁷⁶

Funding for the EHFN comes from its approximately 70 members located throughout Latvia. All members pay a fee, and self-sponsor the seminars, workshops, trainings, and excursions in Latvia and abroad that they attend. As the network’s funds are limited, EHFN has only one paid employee, a part-time accountant, and does not have any headquarters. However, it can always borrow spaces from the LBLA, with whom it works in close collaboration.⁷⁷

Activities

The common goal of EHFN’s farmers is to develop a harmony between humans and nature, to live and work in healthy conditions, and to enable others to discover, enjoy, and learn from their practices. They all produce and process organic food, including fruits, vegetables, dairy and herbal teas, and sell them in local and national markets and, increasingly, to other European countries.⁷⁸ They also deliver a variety of health services, from traditional treatments of herbal steam saunas and massages to nutrition counselling, which are sold to visitors, or simply provided as information to the local population, such as indicating where to find a specific medicine or professional referrals.⁷⁹

The uniqueness of this approach is linking different activities in an integrated way, and the dissemination of knowledge to improve the lives of the broader communities, including

76 Op. cit., *Lauku Tikles, Zivsalmniecibas Sadarbibas tikle, Latvijas Lauku Konsultaciju Un Izglitiba Centres*, 2009 (accessed 6 February 2013).

77 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

78 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008.

79 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.



through tourism. For instance, one farmer on land with several endangered species of plants offers well-being sauna treatments with these plants, and also offers tours of her property, presenting the endangered Latvian ecosystem. Another farmer grows and sells over 100 varieties of fruits, and also explains to his guests the impact of eating fruits on health, and the differences between his ancient varieties and those consumers find in conventional markets.⁸⁰ Yet another breeds cows, grows fruits, serves traditional dishes, and she also treats visitors with saunas as well as a musical therapy based on local traditions. After buying their high-quality and healthy products, benefiting from their health services, and visiting their farms; tourists are also encouraged to consume organic products, preserve their own health, start food and medicinal herbal gardens, preserve their natural environment, and improve their working and living environment in general.⁸¹

As concerns the network, to support its members' work and enable them to produce and deliver high-quality products and services, as well as make their enterprises economically sustainable, the EHFN organizes capacity-building events. These include monthly lectures and workshops on a variety of themes, ranging from breeding specific and locally adapted plant and animal species, to using and developing traditional as well as modern environmentally sustainable agricultural techniques,⁸² to maintaining and enhancing one's health with food and traditional prophylactic and healing methods. These trainings sessions are organized by EHFN members, and are taught by the members themselves or external health and environment experts. For instance, a member offered training on the preparation of herbal facial creams;⁸³ doctors are available to deliver anatomy

80 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012, p.1

81 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008.

82 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

83 Op. cit., *Lauku Tikles, Zivsalmniecibas Sadarbibas tikle, Latvijas Lauku Konsultaciju Un Izglitiba Centres*, 2009.

workshops;⁸⁴ and nutritionists offer classes on healthy cooking.⁸⁵ This collaboration also benefits external specialists offering trainings, as they discover the members' practices and their effects on the ground. These lectures, workshops and seminars are open to non-EHFN members, to help them benefit from the network's efforts and to invite them to join.⁸⁶

Capacity building activities include field excursions that allow EHFN members to learn by observing the practices of others. A trip is organized every summer to a network of members' farms in Latvia, and another is organized every spring or fall to another country to visit farmers providing health-care services and producing goods in an environmentally sustainable way.⁸⁷

Capacity-building meetings and excursions are also opportunities for EHFN farmers to discuss practices, trade seeds and seedlings, share knowledge and difficulties, and find solutions together.⁸⁸ The network also maintains an updated list of members and their specific activities to encourage them to directly contact each other and collaborate bilaterally, according to their locations and areas of interest, to mutually learn about farming and medical techniques, and also to establish partnerships to exchange or buy each other's products to strengthen their businesses. For instance, some farmers find inputs for their activities within the network, such as buying the sauna treatments.⁸⁹

Lastly, as the goal is not only to improve their own living and working conditions, but also those of the Latvian population and beyond, the network broadly advertises its activities. One important instrument is a yearly booklet explaining the network's goals and approach to health, farming, and nature. The booklet promotes the features offered by the individual farms to encourage people to visit them. At present about 30 farms are used for advertising purposes, acting as demonstration centres where members exchange with their visitors, and offer trainings and services in their specific fields.⁹⁰ Advertising for the farms is also crucial to ensure their economical profitability as visitors also purchase their products and services.

Publications in various newspapers about the network or its farmers and special events also help the EHFN gain recognition. For instance, at its participation in 2012 in a two-month exhibition at the Botanical Garden of the University of Latvia in Riga, the network demonstrated how it could help improve Latvian's health.⁹¹

External collaborations and support

At the farm level, the degree and types of external collaborations vary. Some farmers do not try to work with many other network members or professionals, while others actively seek to collaborate with local governments, schools and communities in order

84 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

85 Op. cit., *Lauku Tikles, Zivsalmniecibas Sadarbibas tikle, Latvijas Lauku Konsultaciju Un Izglitiba Centres*, 2009.

86 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008.

87 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008.

91 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

to disseminate good practices. For instance, local communities are invited to lectures, and local schools are provided with healthy food and learning sessions.⁹² Ms. Bergmane herself works with several municipalities to organize summer camps on her farm.⁹³ The EHFN and its individual members also collaborate with professionals and experts in the health and agricultural fields. Some not only participate in the network's capacity-building sessions, but also provide knowledge and services to improve farmers' individual practices, or teach them new skills.⁹⁴

The network is an active member of the Latvian Organic Agriculture Association, which has over 1220 members,⁹⁵ and it disseminates information about its activities through the Latvian Green Party. The EHFN and the LBLA are also constantly in contact, sharing information, raising awareness and advocating at the national level; for instance, the LBLA advertises EHFN's trainings so more farmers can attend.⁹⁶

The EHFN is currently involved in a learning partnership called "Our Agro Bio Diversity", whose aim is to develop a knowledge-sharing network to transmit information about agro-biodiversity, and stimulate existing and potential enterprises to generate biodiversity and use it to produce in an ecologically-sustainable way.⁹⁷ This partnership is coordinated by Arch Noah, a "Seed Savers Association in Central Europe", and regroups various European NGOs.⁹⁸ An important one is the Forum Synergies, which supports and develops environmentally-sustainable social and economic practices across Europe, particularly in rural areas.⁹⁹ In this context, the EHFN, which is recognized, and thus financially supported, by the Forum Synergies as an innovative actor and partner, has the task of collecting and preserving ancient and locally adapted seeds in Latvia. It also organized a three-day seminar including field excursions for its own members and partners of the project (such as the Austrian society Arche Noah, and the Swiss society of ProSpecieRara), to share knowledge about biodiversity, rural tourism and educational projects.¹⁰⁰ As the "Our Agro Bio Diversity" project and the Forum Synergies are knowledge-exchange platforms, collaborating with them is also an opportunity for the EHFN to meet and share with other professionals engaged in similar activities in other countries.¹⁰¹

92 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008.

93 Op. cit., *Mara Bergmane*, Ashoka Fellows, 2003.

94 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008.

95 *Par LBLA*, Latvian Organic Agriculture Association, <http://www.lbla.lv/LV/par> (accessed 6 February 2013).

96 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

97 Preserving the biodiversity of the environment is a crucial issue: in the 20th century, the diversity of agricultural products decreased by over 75 per cent, and today, humans mainly rely on 12 varieties of animals and 14 vegetal species to eat, which is neither healthy nor safe in case of important climate changes. In Europe, ancient breeds and varieties that had been selected over centuries for their adaptation to certain eco-systems, in terms of resilience as well as productivity, are disappearing. Source: *Vides un veselības saime dalās pieredzē ar Eiropas lauksaimniekiem Latgales pusē par bioloģiskās daudzveidības uzturēšanu lauku sētās* (Environmental health and family share their experience with the farmers), Saimnieks.lv, 2012, http://www.saimnieks.lv/Biologiska_saimniekosana/10242/ (accessed 7 February 2013).

98 *Our Agro Bio Diversity*, Arch Noah, <http://www.arche-noah.at/etomite/index.php?id=258> (accessed 7 February 2013).

99 *About Forum Synergies*, Forum Synergies, <http://www.forum-synergies.eu/rubrique2.html> (accessed 31 January 2013).

100 Op. cit., Saimnieks.lv, 2012 (accessed 7 February 2013).

101 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

Challenges

Lack of funds

Lack of funds has always been the major challenge of the EHFN. Mara Bergmane explains that external funds are scarce, and that much time is needed to find them, while the network's members, being all farmers, have little time to devote to fundraising activities. Yet trainings can be costly, and so is the printing of the promotional booklets. Some members, including Mara Bergmane, have to work on fundraising after their working day on the farm is finished.¹⁰²

Lack of funding also negatively impacts collaboration among EHFN members, as well as their knowledge dissemination events, as the network cannot provide funds for activities on individual farms. For instance, Mara Bergmane and her husband's work on disseminating the EHFN's approach at municipal and national levels had to be reduced because of their need to work hard on the farm to ensure their personal income. They also had to reduce their participation as members of the Latvian Green Party, and thus reduce opportunities to disseminate their approach through this important channel.¹⁰³

However, the EHFN can count on its numerous members and partners and its main activity, capacity building, can still function with little financial input. Most of the network's members manage to come 1 to 3 days every month to Riga to meet, discuss problems and opportunities, organize, and attend trainings. The members' own extensive theoretical and practical knowledge in a variety of fields allows them to teach one another, and their willingness to continuously learn and share experiences enables them to connect with specialised individuals and networks at the national and international levels.

Obstacles to members' active participation and membership

The network's members have to work particularly hard to produce high-quality goods in sufficient quantities and to sell them. The Eco-Health Farm model is more complex than that of classic farms and, as mentioned earlier, competition from cheaper, subsidised agricultural products from other European countries is stiff. Consequently, they have difficulties to find time and resources to attend EHFN's events. While these events can help them increase productivity, products' and services' quality, or market them better, it can take some members 2 days to reach and stay in Riga for a meeting or cost them 40 euros or more for transportation and accommodation.¹⁰⁴

Eco-Health Farms are small, do not have many workers, and are often run only by immediate family members. Today, EHFN products are becoming increasingly known, nationally as well as internationally, and some farms are overwhelmed by the demand for their recognised high-quality products. Mara Bergmane herself has had to refuse some orders, such as export requests for her natural toys and herbal pillows, which she cannot produce in large quantities as they are handmade. Hiring more workers is not necessarily profitable because of the additional wages they would require, as well as the additional

102 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.

management and training work it would create, which she cannot afford at the moment given her involvement in the network's activities, which she has made a priority.¹⁰⁵



The heavy farm workload sometimes discourages young people and may make them reluctant to start their own agricultural enterprise. The Eco-Health Farm model is especially demanding as farmers need to implement a number of activities (farming, health services and educational events), and to be specialised and qualified in a medical discipline in order to become a EHFN member.¹⁰⁶ The network is however promoting its model as an attractive job for young people as it would guarantee them healthy living and working conditions, as well as good economic returns.

105 *Producer: we risk fragmenting business by diversifying it*, Baltic News Network, 2011, <http://bnn-news.com/producer-risk-fragmenting-business-diversifying-13548> (accessed 7 February 2013).

106 *Eco-Health Farm Network in Latvia*, Forum Synergies, 2010, http://forum-synergies.exemole.fr/fr/corpus_experience/fiche-experience-25.html (accessed 7 February 2013).

Section 3: Assessment of the Catalyst

3.1 Main achievements

Since the early 2000s, the EHFN and each of its members, have been creating an alternative to industrial agriculture in rural Latvia. Through practical examples of successful small-scale family farms practicing organic and other forms of ecological agriculture, they have demonstrated that this type of farming is productive and profitable. Moreover, this model, which promotes in-house production of the majority of inputs, as well as local selling, is more economically sustainable and stable for small farmers, as they do not need to buy expensive fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides or seeds from large companies, or to rely on large markets with volatile prices.

The EHFN model, which promotes organic and locally adapted traditional Latvian farming methods, also preserves the farmers' health and their natural environment. Local manure and carefully prepared composts are used to fertilize the lands, and sophisticated biological and natural techniques are employed to eliminate pests and weeds.

Specific ancient practices and locally-adapted plants and animal species are actively revived as they are often particularly effective and productive, having been selected or developed over decades by rural dwellers to maximize the returns of local eco-systems.

The EHFN's farming model thus also contributes to the revival of rural Latvia's cultural heritage. It not only enhances the identity of local farmers and their communities, but also fully contributes to the success of the network's members, as when these practices are integrated with modern scientific techniques and adapted by other farmers for their specific needs.

The EHFN and its members also manage to integrate ancient Latvian knowledge about health with modern medicinal science for their own well-being, and that of their local and international visitors. They have successfully developed a holistic approach, based on wholesome diets and healthy living environments, and prophylactic natural treatments. Through the production of food that is organic, nutritious, and diversified, and through the delivery of a variety of educational, preventative, and healing services on their farms, EHFN's members contribute to improving the health of Latvians, who are particularly affected by chronic diseases linked to the over-consumption of alcohol and pharmaceutical products, and the overuse of chemicals in agriculture.

As the network and its members seek to disseminate their approach and practices at the local, national and international levels to help more people improve their own well-being and preserve nature, they have also developed an alternative to mass tourism, enabling tourists visiting Latvian Eco-Health Farms (over 1,000 yearly)¹⁰⁷ to enjoy "healthy stays". Tourists can regenerate themselves with the various treatments offered and enjoy the relaxing and quiet farm environment, while learning about agriculture, health and nature to improve their own well-being at home.

107 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008.

Knowledge is also successfully disseminated to local communities, through educational activities such as summer camps. Many farms also actively collaborate with local municipalities and schools to promote their products and services, such as healthy produce for cafeteria meals.

To achieve their wider objectives, the EHFN has mobilized over 70 farmers spread across the country keen to practice and promote small-scale organic farming, health, environmental preservation, and ecological and healthy tourism. It has also developed a new sense of solidarity among farmers, encouraging them to share knowledge, practices, and challenges, to collaborate and jointly find solutions, and to link up with other farmers and professionals in Latvia and across the world.

The EHFN's regular training sessions enable members to continuously discover new farming and healing methods, and exchange inputs, thus stepping up their business performance. The network has also managed, despite its limited financial resources, to effectively market and raise awareness about its members' activities through articles in newspapers, participation in national and international exhibitions, and collaboration with the LBLA.

EHFN's achievements have attracted broad recognition. In 1996 the "Upmali Eco Health Farm" received the State Award of Good Practice Farm for its success in offering healthy products and services, and environmental and health education sensitizations and trainings.¹⁰⁸ In 2003, Mara Bergmane was elected to the Ashoka Fellowship for her innovative and integrated approach, and for her project of building a network of similar farms across Latvia.¹⁰⁹ Several other EHFN members have received awards by the Latvian government and different NGOs for their contributions to organic agriculture, environmental preservation, and revitalization of Latvian traditions. Their particularly innovative approach of integrating these different fields with tourism has also attracted attention.¹¹⁰

The EHFN was one of 15 finalists (from 350 participants) in the Geotourism competition organized by National Geographic and the Ashoka Foundation in 2008,¹¹¹ which selects actors that contribute to a "tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place - its environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture, and the well-being of its residents".¹¹² Following this competition, the National Geographic magazine published an article about the network, which resulted in considerable publicity for the EHFN as well as in requests for advice on how to reproduce the EHFN in other countries. Mara Bergmane has also been receiving visits from various doctors and other interested individuals, and has begun collaborating with Forum Synergies.¹¹³

108 Op. cit., *Mara Bergmane*, Ashoka Fellows, 2003.

109 Op. cit., *Mara Bergmane of Latvia a finalist at Geotourism Challenge Summit*, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/usa/news/mara-bergmane-of-latvia-a-finalist-at-geotourism-challenge-summit/> (accessed 5 February 2013).

110 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008.

111 Ibid.

112 *About Geotourism*, National Geographic, Center for Sustainable Destinations, <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable/pdf/about-geotourism.pdf>

113 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.



3.2 Future

EHFN members have several plans, for their own farms but also for the network overall. Mara Bergmane would like to work more directly with people with health problems, for example through teaching sessions where she can demonstrate the production and preparation of healthy and nutritious food. Other farmers are starting to produce homemade cosmetics and ointments, and are organizing training sessions for small groups of interested network members, in partnership with the medical department of the University of Riga.¹¹⁴

At the moment, the EHFN intends to maintain its membership base, and focus on strengthening its support services to enable its members to continue perfecting their practices to work and live in a safe environment. EHFN's goal is not only that farmers acquire knowledge about farming, health and nature, but also to gain a deep understanding of how these fields are connected, and how beneficial it is to integrate them.¹¹⁵ The network is also developing the educational capacities of farms as demonstration centres and to teach visitors about the beneficial properties of local plants.¹¹⁶ Another project is the creation of an international network of organizations sharing the same types of objectives. The EHFN is already linked up and collaborating with groups of farmers in Poland, Lithuania and Germany.¹¹⁷

114 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

115 Op. cit., M. Bergmane, 2012.

116 M. Bergmane, interview, 6 December 2012.

117 Op. cit., *Eco-health farms*, Ashoka, 2008 (accessed 5 December 2012).

The network's main challenge for its future is its lack of funding, as well as the lack of time by members to fully devote themselves to EHFN's development. For the moment, it manages to overcome this difficulty thanks to the commitment of several members despite their own heavy workload on their individual farms.

3.3 Lessons learned

The EHFN and its approach provide a variety of ideas and lessons on triggering balanced and sustainable rural growth and well-being.

- **Adopt integrated approaches** – In farm-related activities, for example, link organic agriculture, health services, environmental preservation, and educational as well as touristic activities. Addressing different issues and diversifying the activities of each farm have several social, environmental and economic advantages.

First, farmers enjoy better working and living conditions, through their knowledge of health, and their practice of organic farming. EHFN members are sensitized to and learn how to preserve their health, and what kinds of medicine they should seek if needed. They are also not exposed to dangerous chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides.

Second, farms are environmentally sustainable, through the use of natural types of treatments, and the application of ecological agricultural techniques, such as biodynamic farming or permaculture. As a result, natural resources are preserved and agro biodiversity increases.

Third, farmers strengthen their economic sustainability by producing as many inputs as possible themselves, and trading within the network. This decreases dependence on more expensive external suppliers. Touristic and educational activities are also profitable as members can directly sell products and services from their farms, and increase demand from them as these activities make them more widely known, bringing them more visitors and clients.



Fourth, tourism, health and environmental education also help disseminate broadly the Eco-Health farm approach and its multi-faceted positive impact. Visitors bring these ideas back home, which can inspire other farmers and people from rural and urban Latvia, as well as many other countries, to improve their health by eating nutritious organic products, access specific types of traditional as well as modern medical treatments, and learn about health prevention and environmental preservation;

- **Ensure commitment** – The EHFN was built over the years by highly motivated farmers who were concerned about their work, health, and natural environment, and aware of the benefits of cooperation and integration. Mara Bergmane in particular was strongly committed to the creation of the network and the development of its approach as she herself had suffered from a long-term illness that could only be cured through alternative and natural treatment. Her personal experience encouraged her to share the idea and knowledge of how to create an agricultural model that enables people to work and live in healthy conditions. Even though during the 1990s they could only meet a few times a year, and very informally, these farmers managed to establish the first Latvian Organic Agriculture Association to improve their network about organic farming, and then continued to work on the integration of farming, health, nature and tourism to finally be able to create, 10 years later, the EHFN;
- **Engage and provide training** – The EHFN's approach is based on continuous learning. Mara Bergmane herself followed different kinds of trainings, on a variety of subjects. She first studied culture and library science, and received further training on biodynamic agriculture, Latvian traditional healing, and in several different subjects linked to agriculture, health, and the environment;
- **Recuperate traditional rural knowledge** – EHFN's integration of ancient farming practices with the most modern techniques allows members to produce effectively and efficiently, while respecting local eco-systems. These traditional practices, and traditional vegetal and animal species, have been perfected over decades by farmers who selected the methods, plants and breeds that were the most effective and adapted to the local environment; for instance, those demanding few inputs and displaying strong resilience. Concerning traditional medicines, their use enables EHFN members to preserve their health in the long term by using locally-grown products, such as herbs for Latvian steam saunas and massages. Recuperating ancient rural knowledge is also valuable for rural communities as it acknowledges awareness and practice. Building on these traditions is also very efficient as many Latvian farmers already know them, and just need to reinforce them;
- **Focus on high-quality and value-added products** – Selling directly products of high quality and added value is an effective solution for small-scale farmers in order to compete with the low prices of agricultural products coming from big industrial farms or other countries. Producing high-quality goods, and goods that are, in addition, rare or unique, and thus in high demand, enables producers to sell at a fair price, while eliminating intermediaries; this allows them to reap the entire benefit from their sale. Further, producing profitable high-quality and healthy products at affordable prices demonstrates the relevance of the approach, as this production, processing, and marketing system is interesting for the farmers as well as their clients;

- **Network nationally and internationally** – Finding colleagues outside the network increases its knowledge base and human resources, and thus strengthens its activities. For instance, collaborating with the LBLA enables the EHFN to share information and experiences with many other organic farmers, and not only those interested in linking agriculture and health practices. Creating partnerships with similar organizations and practitioners at the international level also increases the network's possibilities to learn from each other. Members can for instance visit other farms in several different countries. Linking up with other types of specialists, such as doctors, biologists, environment specialists, also adds value to EHFN's capacity-building activities as they can focus on topics that farmers or healers might be less familiar with. Network partners also contribute to the disseminations of the network's approach, and advertise it and its activities more widely; this also gets more people interested and willing to collaborate with it;
- **Collaborate with local authorities and communities** – Establishing working partnerships with local municipalities or schools, for instance, ensures an access to the Eco-Health Farms to a wider public. Not only people who are already interested in this approach visit and get training in these farms, but also, encouraged by local authorities, schools or associations, people who did not know much about organic farming, health or the environment can discover Eco-Health Farms and access educational sessions. Local cooperation can also contribute to the revitalization of rural areas as partnerships can be established with canteens or bakers, or youth can be inspired by these successful micro-enterprises. Finally, collaborating with local communities is also rewarding for EHFN farmers in terms of recognition of the value of their work for the local area;
- **Provide an integrated set of enabling activities, including:**
 - **Networking** – The first benefit of grouping small-scale farmers is that it enables them to get in contact with one another, and share information, knowledge and experiences. They can thus improve their practices, discover new ones, and find solutions together to common challenges. Within the network, members can also exchange or buy products and services to obtain goods that they do not produce themselves, and that help them deliver their own services, such as acquiring dairies to be able to serve complete meals on their farms. They can also access new markets by entering into commercial partnerships with other EHFN members, for instance to sell honey across the country;
 - **Capacity building** – Offering trainings under a variety of forms enables small-scale farmers to ensure their self-reliance by strengthening their practices, productivity and profitability. The EHFN's approach also emphasizes building farmers' capacity to learn by themselves on various topics from a range of sources, and acquire a deeper understanding of their actions to be able to continuously adapt themselves to new situations in a rapidly evolving world;

- **Awareness raising** – Advertising and advocating is also crucial in making EHPN’s approach and work more known and widespread. Not only does it enable them to be understood by the broader public, but it also secures their enterprises, as it brings more clients, and gets the attention of new, interested farmers and professionals, with whom small-scale farmers can further share knowledge and engage in business;
- **Democratic governance** – The informal and transparent decision-making structure of the EHPN leaves considerable space for members to express their needs and interests, and to organize the network’s activities. All members are also made responsible for the functioning of the network, which in turn is better adapted to their demands, and thus effectively contributes to their development.

