SDG 1: NO POVERTY

"If you want to help others and have the abilities to do it, how can you not help? How would you justify it to yourself? My parents always told me: 'If you really want something, you will find a way to achieve it.' This is the idea that I follow," says Marija Bunkaitė, founder of the first innovative home for the elderly in Lithuania.

Orūs namai (House of Dignity) is a social project to help address loneliness and poverty among the elderly population, aimed at bringing together senior citizens who would help one another feel safe and live in dignity. This model of co-living is also designed to improve their financial situation.

Eurostat statistics show that the level of poverty and risk of social exclusion in Lithuania is one of the highest in the EU. According to the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, more than a third (36.7%) of the country's population aged 65 and over live in poverty. The national social security agency estimates that the average old age pension in September 2018 was 318.64 Euros per month. Pensioners living alone in particular often risk falling below the poverty line. Steady rise in prices coupled with exaggerated heating costs in winter lead to savings being made at the expense of one's health. And then there is the psychological challenge of living alone, experienced by a high number of the elderly. To Marija, this is the greatest challenge: "You can get accustomed to poverty, but never to loneliness."

Under these circumstances, Marija decided to initiate the implementation of an alternative model. With donor assistance she bought and refurbished four apartments in a residential neighbourhood in Vilnius. Three senior citizens currently live there, having put their private homes for rent at market price; that money covers the costs of living at their new home, and they get to keep their whole state pension for their own needs. People are free to return to their old flats if they wish to do so, which remain their private property.

Marija says that she has been very clear and honest with herself about what she is doing and why. "I feel responsible for these people: are they warm, are they getting along well? But at the same time, I am well aware that this is their life and I have no right to interfere with it. I have my responsibilities, they have theirs." She adds, "This idea is within my competencies and what I didn't know – I learned, because I wanted to learn! Orūs namai is a place where values and abilities meet to create positive change."

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1 NO POVERTY
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SDG 2: ZERO HUNGER

"A sweet violet sprouted, the first...", 79-year-old Tomas recites a poem from his childhood, written by the poet Julius Janonis who tragically committed suicide at a young age. Four years ago Tomas was hit by a car while riding his bicycle. Since that day he has only been able to move with the help of a wheelchair. A person with special needs, he survives on a monthly benefit of 280 Euros and receives no other state care. "We are the unwanted," he says. "Drunk drivers, thieves legally in power, and nobody needs people like us."

Shopping for food and preparing meals is a challenge for Tomas not only due to limited finances but also his health. That is why Vaidas or Česlovas, volunteers with the Order of Malta Relief Organization in Lithuania, bring him warm soup twice a week in the summer and three times a week in the colder season.

Warm soup is also served to 77-year-old Leonardas, who hasn't left his 9th floor flat in Kaunas city for the last 15 years due to his failing health. Leonardas is also assisted by his nephew Žilvinas, who drops by after work. "I prepare pasta, porridge, or rice, add some sausages, but we get tired of the same meal every day," he says. "I only buy the cheapest products. Every two months Leonardas receives a food package from an EU programme, which contains essentials such as flour and oil, as well as a toothbrush. We get some products at the Food Bank. That's how we live and that's how we eat."

Onutė from Toleikiai village is 89, but calls herself centennial. "When there are good people around, one is still interested in continuing living", she says. The livid senior's parents passed away early and since the age of eight she has had to work to earn her living. Even today Onutė prepares her own meals, using products provided by charities as well as vegetables from her own garden. The courgette, pumpkin, and tomato harvest is excellent this year, and currants are reddening on the bush beside her house. "I will be cooking for as long as I am capable of doing it," she says. Maybe those fresh vegetables are the reason why Onutė's medicine bag is much smaller than those of her peers?

Healthy, high quality food is rarely a priority for people living in poverty. After paying housing bills and buying medicines there's simply no money left for anything else.

Malta Relief Organization's in Lithuania project Food on Wheels, known as the Malteser soup, has been in operation since 1993 in 19 locations in Lithuania. Every year, thousands of meals are delivered to the elderly who experience poverty, health problems, and loneliness. For some, this soup is the only hot dish they have. At the same time, volunteer visits provide human warmth for people living in social exclusion, offering them care and human dignity.

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SDG 3: GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The 6-7 year-olds take their shoes off to enter a curtained room with no visual disturbances and sit down on soft white mattresses. School corridors remain far away... lights dim.

Today, these pre-school children are learning about water. The class is taking place in a sensory environment.

Teacher Inga holds a touchpad in her hands, the room turns green.

"Children, is this orange?"

"No, it's green!"

After several playful provocations, children are surrounded by orange light.

"What sound fits here?" asks the teacher. Someone says: silence.

"OK, let's listen to orange silence."

One by one, children take the touchpad and each chooses a nature sound – birds chirping, the sea, the wind – to reflect their current mood. They add music tunes and images that are then displayed on the wall.

This innovative sensory technology is being used in several educational and social institutions in the country. "This technology and the philosophy behind it are based on our belief that nothing can be achieved without an honest, sincere, compassionate relationship between a child and an adult," says Gabrielė Tervidytė, a social worker and one of the technology's developers. "This approach is a novelty in the social field."

Sounds, images, and lights reflect the most important senses through which we understand the world. It is well-suited for working with children, especially those with special needs including autism, behavioural or mental challenges, and intellectual disabilities. "We should not treat children as pets who can be taught a certain kind of behaviour and be awarded for it with a biscuit," says Gabrielė. "First of all, we must build positive relationships. When a child knows and trusts you, they begin to behave the way they think is expected from them."

Having closely followed recent developments in the social field, Gabrielė says that despite all the reforms children with special needs in Lithuania are still on the margins of governmental policies, including health and social protection. Educational and health services they and their families receive are inadequate, inconsistent and insufficient. "Therefore, these children do not progress as well as they could," she says. "Our sensory technology allows specialists to use innovation without any additional resources required. It helps them to address a child's specific needs, be it emotional needs, social skills, academic achievements, or perhaps simply learning to calm down and control one's emotions, as well as prepare emotionally for other activities such as speech therapy or physiotherapy. It's a unique method because typically children don't have a space in which they have total control. Here they have an intuitive screen which allows them to choose the environment that fits their state of mind at that very moment. It can calm you down or help you concentrate, or open up to learning experiences. What we learn in a safe environment can be easily replicated in real-world situations." She adds, "Relationships are based on trust and created through common experiences. If a child and an adult specialist working with them go through the same experience – for example, we switch on green lights, listen to forest sounds, watch relevant images on the screen, and imagine that we're in a field surrounded by daisies – then their connection deepens. We use such trust-based relationships to prepare children for quality education."

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3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
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SDG 4: QUALITY EDUCATION

A seven-year-old sways on a hammock underneath an apple tree brimming with fruit. Children dig dirt by a sandbox, occasionally running to a wooden table to grab snacks – carrots, cauliflower, and nuts are on the menu today. Pumpkins and tomatoes ripen next to the two-storey house. Here, on a lake shore in the old town of Trakai, is the community-led, horizontally-managed kindergarten Patirčių slėnis (Valley of Experiences).

In recent years Lithuania has witnessed an increase of kindergartens founded as an alternative to both public and private ones. What makes this one special? "We are not just a kindergarten. We want to create a learning home for all – children, their families, and teachers, so that we could all grow together as a community," says Akvilė Budreckytė, coordinator and co-founder of Patirčių slėnis.

The community aspect is crucial here. It aims to bring people closer together, form basis for mutual trust based on common values, involve parents in their children's education, and create a happy childhood for the little ones. "We do not enforce any assumptions of how children should behave. We say NO to them only when their safety is concerned and only to those who can't yet take proper care of themselves." Children here play together and are not divided into separate groups according to their age.

The kindergarten practises Waldorf education and is run under the motto "Preparing for life, not for school." No matter the weather children spend several hours outside every day. Experiencing nature in all its forms helps develop sensations and allows children to play. "It provides children with a happy childhood. We invite them to explore their potential themselves," says Akvilė. The methodology's success relies on the involvement of their parents, a shared belief in the same ideas and values, and their constant implementation.

Akvilė had the idea to establish an alternative, community-run kindergarten when she realised that her six-year old son Ąžuolas wasn't happy in a public kindergarten. "There came a time to make up our minds, whether we would be the ones creating change for ourselves and others. We decided to give it a try," she says. "We're creating an alternative for those who need it. I believe that living surrounded by nature a child grows up much happier."

Patirčių slėnis positions itself as a communal space, where everyone is constantly learning; it is not a service provider. "We value creativity and willingness to learn. Openness, both personal and communal, is just as important. Of course it's not easy, since we don't know the answers to a lot of questions – in every situation we have to decide how to go about it. That is also why we have to be honest and solve problems in a creative way."

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SDG 5: GENDER EQUALITY

School corridors are buzzing with action. Dovydas Mikaliūnas, social pedagogue at Kaunas Engineering Lyceum, chats with each pupil who runs up to him with questions. "Communication with children is based on trust. It is here in these corridors where we sort out most issues that arise, not in my office," he says. "I am in this field because I care about the future and I see a lot of potential in changing the way the children of today see themselves and the world. The only way to change society is by developing progressive personalities who are engaged with the global, not just the domestic. Change will only become possible with the new generation."

Out of some 50 school staff members only less than a third are men. In general, professions that are vital for the functioning of a society – educators, social and health care workers, nurses etc. – are stereotypically considered to be "female professions" and are typically poorly paid. "By adhering to such stencils imposed on us, we provoke stereotypical thoughts and behaviour," Dovydas says. "If you talk to a child as a human being, rather than specifically as a girl or a boy, they will react accordingly. A child needs to see you as a friend and not as a gender stereotype. We have to build humane, not gender-based relationships."

Dovydas has been involved in social activities since early adolescence. At school he did well in all subjects, which opened doors for him to study anything he wished at university. He chose social pedagogy as a broad field that includes many others but admits having received many crooked looks because of this decision. He smiles. "Some time ago I, too, would have been surprised that men choose to become social educators, but now I understand that it's irrational to think that way. We're not in the Stone Age anymore, we can each choose our jobs and in this way support one another."

Dovydas says: "Children sitting in the classroom hear the same information. The question is how they will perceive it – boys and girls differently? But every single person is different! We shouldn't divide people into men and women: there are only people with different views. But it's true that in regards to gender equality we still have to work hard, because all those deeply rooted stereotypes constantly resurface."

Virginija Aleksejūnė, director of the country's Center for Equality Advancement, strongly agrees: "By actively choosing to become teachers, social workers, nurses or other such social professions, men would help to get rid of gender stereotypes and reinforce the principles of gender equality."

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SDG 6: CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

Birutė is a poet who currently lives at Ežerėlis (Little Lake) nursing home. Full of energy, she smiles widely and craves more activities – those long walks and taking care of the vegetable harvest in her small garden nearby is not enough.

Located in the Kaunas district, Ežerėlis nursing home currently houses 45 guests and 28 staff members. It was the latter who started raising questions about everyday hygiene product supplies. "It all started with the caretakers' initiative," says director Irena Tamulevičienė. "They noticed that some of the products we use – such as creams, rubber gloves, shower foam, disinfectants – irritate the skin and have an unpleasant smell. Bedsheets and towels washed with chemicals don't last long, while commercial pads cause allergies. We had no other choice but to swap them for safer products that are also better for the environment. We didn't chase any 'bio – organic' logos. Our only goal was for our guests and staff to feel better."

Then there is water. And although in Lithuania tap water meets the government's quality standards, it is often very limy. Therefore, special filters are used for drinking water.

Irena agrees that while changes are happening slowly, what's important is that they are happening at all. The nursing home received visits from environmental NGOs which organised educational workshops to inform the staff and the elderly about the dangers of chemical products we use in our everyday lives, and suggest alternatives.

Are initiatives like these – replacing harmful hygiene products with safer ones – more costly? "I don't care if it's cheaper or more expensive. If our staff say this or that product is not right, we stop using it immediately. Why should we be surrounded by hazardous substances?"

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SDG 7: AFFORDIBLE AND CLEAN ENERGY

When the sun was officially employed by an innovative startup in Jonava town, its responsibilities expanded to include inflating bicycle tires, charging mobile phone batteries, enabling wi-fi connection, powering emergency phone calls, among others. These multi-functional solar-powered mobile stations, appropriately named Sun Eco, have already been installed in several towns and beaches across the country. They are designed to meet the specific needs of a particular public space.

"Innovation is not about creating something new, but rather looking at the old from a new angle," says Elmantas Mickevičius, manager at the start-up Militera, which is behind the Sun Eco. Having been interested in technology from an early age, he finds creating engineering solutions a pleasant challenge. Elmantas had the idea to employ the sun a couple of years ago. Just like any other good idea it was born out of a need. The municipality of his hometown was setting up cycling infrastructure and was looking for a way to avoid high-cost electrical cable instalment. "People like the idea of inflating bicycle tires by using solar power," Elmantas says. "So we thought: why can't we utilise solar energy for other services too?"

Solar power is a renewable resource that doesn't pollute the planet. The amounts of solar energy that reach these parts of the world are enough for us to make good use of it: annually we have an average of 70 sunny days in the capital, even more in coastal areas. Contrary to wide-spread beliefs, the sun produces energy even on cloudy days, albeit 10-14% less than on sunny ones.

Sun Eco is presented as the first such device in the world, and possibilities for its use are limitless. It is especially suitable in areas where it is not possible to build electricity networks (for example, in protected natural reserves). "Solar panels can also potentially power water pumps, which would be very beneficial to farmers," Elmantas says. This year, the first Sun Eco station is travelling abroad to Nigeria. Norwegian authorities have also expressed interest, aiming to improve urban infrastructure for people who move in electric wheelchairs.

In Lithuania, solar energy is not yet commonly used, but there are positive developments in the area of renewable energy sources. For example, solar power stations for apartment buildings are technically feasible and are already being implemented, but only on a private home level. The state, in turn, maintains legal framework: the Ministry of Energy has announced the development of small-scale energy as one of the priorities for the country's energy sector.

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SDG 8: DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Pirmas blynas (The First Pancake) – a social initiative launched this September – is Lithuania's first restaurant that employs people with disabilities. Its founder, the Dutch social worker Tim van Wijk, told the National Radio that the restaurant aims to create a space in which people with disabilities are equal members of the society. The restaurant's name both reflects its main dish and echoes, in a self-conscious way, a common saying that the first pancake from the pan is never perfect. Being the first of its kind in the country, this restaurant is a pioneer in changing negative social perceptions and fighting associated stigma.

Pirmas blynas hired its first employees with the help of the social recruitment agency SOPA. Since 2006 the non-governmental organisation has been providing recruitment services in the capital Vilnius to support people with fewer opportunities in the labour market, such as the elderly, the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, or those without any work experience. "People who reach out to us often have a combination of such challenges – for example, we have people with a mental or physical disability who have never worked," says SOPA director Jurgita Kuprytė.

With SOPA's support, people with fewer opportunities find jobs in various positions, from cleaners and accountants to custodians and administrators (yet less qualified work is often more available). Jurgita says that many of the people her organisation works with have low self-esteem and lack self-confidence, fear change and avoid taking risks. "We address that by organising trainings – for example, currently we are using the Forum Theatre method to help people overcome their insecurities," Jurgita says. Yet unsuccessful job searches worsen the already existing psychological problems and further aggravate the entire process of employment, which is already difficult due to external reasons. These include negative attitudes towards certain groups (people with disabilities facing especially hard challenges) and the pervasive neoliberal mentality that demands work to be done as quickly and as cheaply as possible.

Jurgita says that it's not only the potential employees who should be putting more effort into the whole process of finding employment, but also those who provide jobs. "Employers, too, have fears and reservations, although the situation is changing. For instance, negative attitudes towards people with disabilities are less common now than before, but not for the right reasons: the country faces a shortage of workers, therefore employers are more likely to hire people whom they would never have thought of hiring before," she says. "The problem is that employers don't progress on work processes and see no point in adapting workplaces to different needs. Instead, they want workers to adapt to their needs."

Data collected by the Lithuanian Labor Exchange shows that as of September 2018, there were 174,821 registered job-seekers in the country. In August 2018, a bit over 23,000 new job vacancies were registered.

"We want an inclusive labour market," Jurgita says. "Because witnessing positive change in people's lives is very meaningful."

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SDG 9: INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Matas Navickas founded his first science lab in a garage seven years ago, when he was only 14. He has been into science since the age of 10, and received the EU Young Scientists award in 2014 for a project in which he made an apple seedling bloom in a tube, a process that in a natural environment takes seven years. He says he wanted to find a scientific way to help farmers save time and resources.

The youth's curiosity, coupled with his love for science, led to another scientific research, which Matas is currently pursuing at the start-up space of Kaunas University of Technology (KTU).

Founded in 2012, the start-up space – fittingly called StartUp Space – is an academic incubator with more than 70 start-ups under its belt, and counting. Successful examples include Segfoltas, the creators of a tool to measure pulmonary function in order to prevent asthma attacks; Icybit, a high-capacity distributing systems developer; a device operated by eye movement, created by Power Eye, and many others.

"We offer all-round assistance to early-stage start-ups. People come here with a business idea, and we help them develop it," says Gintarė Ambrozaitytė, the incubator's business development specialist. "We provide mentoring and facilities for research and product development. Entrepreneurs get access to university databases relevant to their field of work and, upon request, we arrange meetings with professors and researchers at KTU. There is also a support network offering invitations to attend hackathons and accelerators, as well as other international projects our start-ups could find beneficial."

The process starts starts with would-be entrepreneurs filling out a business canvas, which includes stating potential markets for their future product and its competitors, skills available among team members and those lacking. The next step is signing a letter of intent, followed by an incubation period for the implementation of the idea. All going well, the next stage is creating a prototype product, then pre-orders and sales, and finally the establishment of a company that would intend to expand to foreign markets.

But this is a success story. Statistically, Lithuanian start-ups fail as often as their counterparts in the rest of the world. That is to say, nine out of 10 start-ups are not successful. Gintarė says that the most common reason for this is the human factor: entrepreneurs may lack personal and professional initiative, or be unable to take responsibility or recover after unsuccessful attempts.

The start-up world is full of obstacles, which requires a lot of optimism and patience from entrepreneurs themselves. It is precisely for this reason that platforms such as StartUp Space are beneficial to entrepreneurs: the proximity of other proactive, creative, and hardworking people provides a motivational environment with mutual support.

In his new lab at the StartUp Space Matas is searching for chemical compounds that could help protect cells during an ischaemic stroke; this discovery would lead to developing new types of medicines. "Most drugs used in medicine have been copied from the natural world," Matas says. That is why he is analysing specific plants, where he hopes to find the chemical compounds he is after. "My goal has always been to help people," the young scientist says. "If I have the opportunity, I must do it." Why this particular field of plant bio-technology? He smiles: "Because life – all life on Earth– is beautiful."

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SDG 10: REDUCE INEQUALITIES

"What are you doing today for a better tomorrow?" dr. Žaneta Stasiškienė often asks her post-graduate students enrolled in Sustainable Management and Production, an interdisciplinary Master's degree programme at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU). The programme aims to prepare experts on sustainable manufacturing and environmental management at the industry level, mainly through practical real-life problem solving.

Dr. Žaneta, who is also director of the University's Institute of Environmental Engineering, is an expert on sustainability. One of the research projects she is currently working on is White Paper on Smart Regions, to be delivered to the EU on behalf of the European Consortium of Innovative Universities, of which KTU is a member. "Our main task is to help reduce inequalities between cities and regions as well as to even out their development, because a huge gap exists between urban centres and their districts," says dr. Žaneta. "This is due to various factors, including mass migration from the countryside to the city – and, in the case of Lithuania, mass emigration from the country, challenges of mobility, which are particularly strong in rural areas, as well as a significant increase in the need for self-sustainability."

Academics involved in the project identified four key areas for analysis and solutions to be proposed: sustainable energy resources, transport and mobility, community resilience, and circular economy. The latter is based on natural cycles of life, perfected by nature over millions of years, in which nothing is wasted. Circular economy, dr. Žaneta says, is of particular importance to sustainable development. "In order to implement it, it is necessary to identify material flows within specific regions. For example, the flow of goods, energy, and water coming to the cities become waste and sewage once there. In a circular economy, waste would be eliminated and what was considered waste before would actually become raw material used for other processes. It would solve two problems simultaneously: waste management would no longer be required, and raw materials would be readily available."

In this field, academics started using the term "rurban", which extends the idea of Smart Cities to include more interconnected and interdependent territories, while searching for innovative technological solutions to the existing problems. Here it is essential to consider specific characteristics of each region and apply solutions accordingly. For example, in urban areas a major transport challenge is traffic jams, whereas rural areas lack transport infrastructure. Different problems require different solutions.

Ideally, a Smart Region would be a place where nothing is wasted, and where everyone's needs are met by way of natural symbiosis. Smart does not necessarily mean technological; it can, and should, also be a holistic way of thinking and acting – for a better tomorrow, for everyone.

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SDG 11: SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

In a building that was once used as a hospital warehouse, a community is sprouting up. Miesto laboratorija (City Laboratory), a volunteer-run community space and cafe, is a grassroots initiative aimed at bringing the people of Antakalnis borough in Vilnius together, as a community. "We ourselves needed one," says co-founder Renata Sagatauskė. Having returned to Vilnius after studying sustainable development in Amsterdam, she wanted to share her knowledge with others while also implementing her declared values in practice. "Our core values are a sense of community, a sustainable lifestyle, and innovation in promoting sustainable lifestyle. These are the main engines driving us forward," she says. "Community is key, because without people's involvement it would remain only a nice theory. Communities are also crucial for achieving the Sustainable development goals."

People from the neighbourhood got together voluntarily to repair and refurbish the former hospital building. Everyone chipped in what they could: some provided paint and ladder, others upcycled old furniture, while still others took care of lunch. Outside, there is a playground for children made of second-hand materials; on the roof, solar panels; and the entire interior is a photogenic example of creative upcycling. "It's great to see that if you have a strong idea and people trust that you are working for it honestly and sincerely, they will eagerly support you," says Renata.

Today, Miesto laboratorija is a cozy place where people are brought closer together to be inspired by positive lifestyle changes, find like-minded people and create better realities. Educational and cultural events hosting local artists are organised, Sunday brunches buzz with children. The cafe is run on the principles of seasonality and zero waste, some vegetables come from an experimental hydroponic garden. "Our mission is to show sustainable lifestyle choices that can be easily adapted in one's daily life," says Renata. Social inclusion is also considered a priority: most events are free, while prices at the cafe are lower than elsewhere in Vilnius.

It has not been an easy ride, Renata admits. Two major challenges the core team had to face were bureaucratic and financial – three years ago, they started off with zero budget. But motivation not to give up when all seems a lost fight comes from members of the community, who encourage each other to keep on going. "To belong to a community means to be willing to create something together while pursuing a common goal. A community is the atmosphere that is created when people get together," Renata says. "But community-building is a very long process and we openly admit that is is hard. Sustainable development encompasses a wide range of areas, and here we are showing by example that it is possible to achieve it when people get together. It is so inspiring to be able to share this positive energy with others."

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11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES
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esco
MIESTO LABORATORIJA
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SDG 12: RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

The woman puts her old denim jacket on a mannequin. She says she hadn't imagined it would be so easy to bring her old unworn clothes back to life in a creative, sustainable, DYI way. All it takes is a bit of skill which she is learning here, in a workshop organised by Social Retex.

Located in a former industrial warehouse, this social business is where second-hand textiles gain new forms and meanings. "By creating a honeycomb-like open space, we are building sustainable communities," says founder Viktorija Nausėdienė. Social aspects form the basis of all work that Social Retex does – sharing knowledge and material things, acquiring new skills, communicating with each other.

It starts with volunteers sorting out bags of second-hand clothes that reach Social Retex from all corners of the city. The majority of those are then donated to financially vulnerable people, reached through a network of organisations. "Yesterday I received a phone call from one of them, asking for five boxes of children's clothes. They said, 'Are you going to help us out?' Of course we always do," says Viktorija. Only a small part of all donated clothes are sold at the Social Retex boutique to generate income. The rest is used in upcycling workshops organised every month with stylists and designers to teach urbanites DYI skills in sewing. "So many wardrobes are filled with stuff we never wear! However, one's weed may be another's pearl," says Viktorija. "Instead of using up new resources, we are focusing on what we already have. In other words, we reuse second-hand clothes, a resource that would otherwise be treated as waste and end up in a landfill."

Why textile in particular? "Because it is a global problem," says Viktorija. "We seem to have already learnt how to recycle other materials such as paper, plastic, or glass. But while thousands of tonnes of usable textiles are being thrown away, new clothes are constantly being bought, only to become waste not long after. Flea markets or clothes-swapping parties are fun initiatives, but, given the huge amounts of textile waste, they are insufficient to counterbalance the scale of the problem."

Social Retex operates on the principle that change must come from the community itself. That is why education, without which sustainability would be impossible, is crucially important. That, as well as an honest answer to the question: How and why do we find ourselves in this situation where we consume as if there was no tomorrow? And how can we change it? "My greatest wish and ambition is to bring people together and promote creativity, sharing, and community values. In this way we can achieve real social change through strengthening small businesses, creating sustainable jobs, and involving the most vulnerable groups," says Viktorija. "At the same time we have to solve our environmental problems, in our case – to create a sustainable chain of textile consumption."

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12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION
TEXTILE
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SDG 13: CLIMATE ACTION

Between the lower reaches of the rivers Tenenis and Minija is Aukštumalė, the first highland bog described in a scientific study. Rare bird species call it their home, among them grey cranes, tetraphids, and sturgeons, as well as more than 200 plant species, some of which are included in the Lithuanian Red Data Book. The area also boasts some 380 natural dystrophic lakes here, in Šilutė Natural Reserve; and on its outskirts, a degraded swamp.

It is that swamp that needs its former water levels restored, which is being done by way of constructing small dams all across it. "Wetland restoration is a long process. We know things are looking good when peat-moss starts growing again," says Nerijus Zableckis, project manager at Lithuanian Fund for Nature, an NGO working on restoring Aukštumalė.

Wetlands make up around 10% of Lithuania's territory. Over the past 100 years, humans drained some 70% of the country's wetlands. Drainage on mass scale allowed for the expansion of agriculture and other economic activities, such as peat industry; but it created new problems. Wetland degradation causes the loss of habitat and biodiversity, reduces soil fertility, and increases the risk of floods and wild fires. Healthy wetlands, on the other hand, help regulate the release of greenhouse gases, while degraded ones contribute to GHG emissions. Nerijus says that if we were seriously determined to restore and protect our wetlands, we could prevent the release of very large amounts of CO2 into the atmosphere. Given that the majority of degraded wetlands and abandoned peatlands in Lithuania are on state land, and the state is committed to take measures to mitigate the effects of climate change, wetland restoration and protection is an obvious necessity – and it can be done.

Another way to protect wetlands and use them sustainably is wetland farming, which sustains the swamp's natural hydrological cycles and respects nature as it is. In Lithuania, the idea is not entirely new – it has been practised before, and then abandoned in favour of more financially viable economic activities, at the expense of the nature's well-being. Wetland farming activities include collecting plant biomass to be used for animal feed or biofuels; reed-maces are known as a construction material that provides great insulation; various plants that only grow in swamps can be used for medicine. These are renewable resources and if used properly they could help preserve habitats and biodiversity, and mitigate climate change.

A quick look at a map of the three Baltic States reveals that Lithuania's wetlands are fewer and more degraded. But they have been here long before us and it is our responsibility to ensure that they remain. "Our region has always been naturally swampy. But now we have so few swamps left, and of those two thirds are degraded," says Nerijus. "We must restore them for future generations."

Several drained swamps are currently being restored – but it's nowhere near enough.

Peat-moss has been seen in Aukštumalė again. That is a good sign, but we need many more.

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13 CLIMATE ACTION
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SDG 14: LIFE BELOW WATER

Fishing nets accidentally or intentionally drowned in the sea continue fishing; sea mammals, fish, and birds get stuck in them. This causes huge damage to marine life. But apart from the ghost nets, there are other dangerous things drowned in the big waters.

At the end of the Second World War, the Allies – the USSR, the US, and Britain – demanded that Germany disarm, and ordered that chemical weapons accumulated over several decades be sunk in the Baltic sea. It was the cheapest way to get rid of them. It was also thought that sea waters would absorb and neutralise hazardous toxic substances, but they remain in our sea to this day.

According to the Helsinki Commission, at least 50,000 tonnes of ammunition were sunk in the Baltic sea, containing around 15,000 tonnes of chemical weapons. Artillery shells, bombs, containers filled with chemical weapons lay on the seabed. The largest known chemical weapon graveyards in the Baltic sea are located near the islands of Bornholm and Gotland, at a depth of 75-120 meters. But we don't have all the information on the exact types and coordinates of chemical ammunition in the Baltic.

"For a long time we didn't know whether chemical weapons had been buried in Lithuania's maritime zone. We started to investigate this problem in 2003, and since then we've gained experience and are involved in research," says Galina Garnaga-Budrė, director of Environmental research department at the government's Environmental protection agency. That year, the scientific ship Vėjas (Wind) scanned the seabed. Sediment samples were collected and 39 new objects identified. Sample examination proved the presence of certain materials found in chemical weapons, but the study did not show high concentrations. "The findings of that study indicated that various factors such as depth, direction and speed of water flows, water temperature, oxygen concentration, and seabed relief might prevent the spread of hazardous substances, but they need to be closely monitored and further investigated," says Galina.

Several international follow-up studies have been launched since, identifying more chemical weapons in the Baltic sea. Sediment and sea life samples are being collected, studies of chemical substance concentration and degradation are carried out. Biological research is being conducted to determine whether and how chemical weapons affect underwater ecosystems and their living organisms. With the industrialisation of the sea (the construction of gas pipelines and wind power plants), detailed information and the exact coordinates of chemical weapon graves is essential for the well-being of all, both the sea and us.

But what is to be done with the chemical wreck? "There is no unified political decision on whether we should try to take out all chemical ammunition from the sea or leave it there," says Galina. "It has been agreed to deal with it on a case-by-case basis, but it is necessary to have more detailed information which we are gaining through ongoing research."

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SDG 15: LIFE ON LAND

"Do you know that they are about to cut down trees in Šilutė town?" – the first question hits like thunder from a bolt sky. After a second of silence the second question arrives: "So what are we going to do about it?"

Local residents learned about the municipality's plans to cut down hundreds of trees lining the town's central streets only after noticing red paint marks on their trunks. This is an EU-funded project worth 350,000 Euros, meant to "improve urban landscapes"; it is being implemented without consulting the residents, as is required by law and basic democratic principles. The secrecy surrounding this project and its encroachment on public spaces, ignoring public opinion, as well as defamation and intimidation of those who dare to question the authorities further strengthen suspicions of possible corruption, with the municipality possibly acting as a private company rather than an institution set up to serve the interests of the people.

According to the schedule, saws are to be brought on Monday. A group of residents manages to take the following actions in defence of their trees and their green spaces: contact attorney known for his defence of public interests and dendrology specialists to invite them for expert opinion, initiate a petition calling for the suspension of the project, present the municipality with a formal letter requiring expert examination of the condition of the trees, and organise an awareness-raising campaign in the streets of Šilutė, encouraging people to replace their wordy complaints on Facebook with real action to save the trees.

The scientists' initial findings reduced the number of trees likely affected by disease – and therefore marked to be cut down – from 260 to 80. The people's efforts resulted in the suspension of the sows pending results of a new expert examination. "We want the people to be civic, to walk out en masse and say NO," says Marius Jatkonis, one of the founders of the activist group SOS Šilutės medžiai (SOS Šilutė trees). "The authorities haven't yet understood that this civil initiative was born out of ideological, humanly incentives," says Simonas Norbutas, who started the campaign together with Marius. "The battle for nature is sacred. It cannot be measured by cubic meters or the amounts of theft from European funds."

In recent years, Lithuania has witnessed widespread tree-cutting in both urban and rural areas. Huge parts of forest are being completely eradicated, including forests under state protection. In smaller towns, municipalities are sharpening their saws in order to "imbibe" money from the EU, claiming that these supposedly sick trees pose threat to the public. Their intention is to replace local tree varieties with expensive seedlings from abroad. But instead of trying to preserve these old native trees – by properly pecking them and managing their tills, by removing pavement blocks from their roots – and in this way protect them from disease, short-sighted (yet profitable) actions are being taken. Which raises a question: whose interests do the authorities serve? The public's or... their own?

Šilutė is one of the few towns in Lithuania where active efforts by the people managed to stop the disappearance of green public spaces (unfortunately – only temporarily, as it turned out later). But the people's struggle here provided hope to others. "What motivates me is the idea that I, as a citizen, have power," says Marius. "Before this I didn't even know what an ash tree looked like, but now resisting the destruction of nature has become a way of life for me."

Summer 2018

UPDATE (Autumn 2018): In Šilutė, 121 trees are being cut, with around 50 more on the list. The bureaucratic fight for the trees was lost. What about the moral one?

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15 LIFE ON LAND
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SDG 16: PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

According to the Ministry of Justice, one in 10 residents in Lithuania – over 290,000 people – is forced to deal with bailiffs. Out of these, around 180,000 people have more than one executable file in their name; in total, more than a million such cases have been opened in the country. These figures not only represent an inadequate system of debt repayment and its ineffectiveness, but also increase the risk of poverty in a country where, according to official figures, one third of the population is already living in poverty.

Lithuania's debt repayment order is one of the strictest in Europe. At the same time, the risk of poverty and social exclusion is one of the highest in the EU. "Debts and arrears that are passed on to bailiffs for forced collection often result in a person not being able to afford essential services such as electricity bills," says Aistė Adomavičienė, director of the Network of National Poverty Reduction Organisations. "For many years, such extremely rigorous debt repayment system has been pushing people into a poverty trap. They have no financial incentive to work, because the existing system doesn't leave them enough money from their salaries to survive."

Under the law that has been in force until recently, 50% of the official minimum wage may be forcedly collected from a person with more than one executive debt repayment proceeding, leaving them with only 200 Euros per month to live on. Persons earning more than minimum wage may be legally deprived of 70% of the amount earned that exceeds the minimum wage. "Such procedures must change," says Aistė. "Not only do they not contribute to debt repayments, they also continue to push people into poverty and create social problems for the future: people in debt are forced to rely on state benefits or, having chosen to work illegally in order to repay their debts, they are not entitled to state pension after retirement."

It was the non-governmental sector that initiated the campaign for changes in law in order to protect people from sliding deeper into poverty. Having considered their proposals, the parliament announced that from December 2018 deductions from wages would decrease from 50 to 30% for those on minimum wage, and amounts above that sum would be deducted at a rate of 50%, not 70% as before. "These changes are a step forward, but they are not enough," says Aistė. "More decisive action is needed to achieve significant change." NGOs are therefore proposing that deductions be reduced further, while at the same time the issue of excessive fees charged by bailiffs, which often significantly increase unpaid debts, has to be addressed. Currently there are several proposals for legislative changes related to restricting bailiff salaries and activities, which would give indebted people a better chance of repaying them.

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SDG 17: PARTNERSHIP FOR THE GOALS

At the end of August, the aquatic warbler (Acrocephalus paludicola) take off from Žuvintas biosphere reserve in Lithuania and turn towards Senegal, Mali, and Mauritania. The tiny birds that weigh only 12 grams and are on the verge of extinction fly the 6,000 km distance twice a year.

Lithuania is one of the four remaining countries in which the aquatic warbler still lay eggs (together with Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine). Over the past 100 years, their global population has fallen by 95%, and continues to decline. The birds are going extinct because human activities destroy their natural habitats; intensive farming in low wetlands and meadows, land usage change, wetland drainage, and also abandonment of land all contribute to it. The aquatic warbler is an umbrella species: their presence in a given area means that natural conditions there are favourable to many other plant and animal species. If this bird is no longer here, nor will many other forms of life be.

This year an international team began a pioneering mission to restore the endangered bird population in Lithuania by transferring hatch from neighbouring Belarus, where their numbers are healthier. "The whole process required strong partnership and cooperation between institutions and individuals on numerous levels," says Rita Grinienė, environmental communication specialist with the Baltic Environmental Forum Lithuania.

First, a methodology for the transfer had to be created – something that has never been done before – followed by sorting out numerous legal and bureaucratic issues. In this case, the non-governmental sector worked closely with government institutions; since the transfer took place on the EU's external border, even more institutions had to be involved, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Lithuanian Embassy in Belarus, the border veterinary office, and the customs.

In addition to going through similar procedures, colleagues in Belarus also had to carefully collect the hatch from their nests and provide care for them before the transfer. Meanwhile thorough preparation for receiving the birds took place at Žuvintas. Foreign scientists – experts on this particular bird species – developed a detailed programme to be implemented that included everything from how aviaries to temporarily house the hatch should be built, to how often they should be fed – all following their natural ways as closely as possible. "We had a team of highly dedicated people and a lot of volunteers who worked tirelessly day and night taking care of the baby birds," Rita says. It turned out that these little ones are extremely voracious. To feed them, dozens of volunteers spent their days catching insects, only to find out that the birds were still hungry after a feast! The dedication of so many people was truly impressive. "And later, when we noticed that some of the hatch had weak legs, international alarms were triggered. German scientists didn't leave the phone, advising us on how to treat them, while kind people at the national zoo provided us with necessary vitamins. Eventually the birds got well!"

However, a successful transfer alone does not guarantee long-term well-being for the species; for any lasting impact it is necessary to restore and expand their natural habitats. Farmers play a very important role here, for they are the ones who manage meadow grasslands in which aquatic warblers build their nests. Currently, farmers are eligible for financial compensation for their losses due to late mowing (which is needed to allow the hatch to get strength and not end up under heavy machinery). "But even before the compensation scheme was started some farmers would voluntarily choose to help protect the birds, all in good faith and even if it meant financial losses," says Rita. "This proves the importance of honest long-term relationships with the community as well as high-quality education on nature protection."

Fifty individual birds were transferred from Belarus to Lithuania this year, with the mission scheduled to be repeated next year. "The transfer of aquatic warblers is an excellent example of partnership between representatives of different fields," says Rita. "During this long and complicated process, we witnessed obstacles and misunderstandings among various institutions. But, most importantly, we succeeded in achieving our goal."

Safe journey, little ones. We are looking forward to seeing you return home in May.

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