

Welcome to our podcast, Sustainable Grassroots Organisations, the example of Omamaa. In this podcast, we would like to bring forward grassroots organisations that make a change in society. For us it is important to promote these organisations since they rely on their members actively participating if they want to have an impact on society. I am Kunigunde and I am located in Helsinki. And I'm Friedrich, also in Helsinki, and today is the 28th of February 2023. This podcast was produced by us, Axel Lilius and Michelle Sandin.

In our title we mentioned both sustainability and grassroots organisations. So starting out we want to have a closer look at what sustainability and grassroots organisations actually mean. Having a look at sustainability first, the traditions of sustainability depend in the literature on the author. Elkinton defined sustainability through the term triple bottom line, and this term posits that instead of one economic profit driven bottom line, business organisations should focus on three dimensions instead. Profit people and the planet. Organisations, in his opinion, should commit to focusing as much on social and environmental concerns as they do on profits.

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, on the other hand, came up with a different definition, describing sustainability as the ability to sustain, respond and care for other than humans instead for the web of life. Care in this context, to quote her directly, means that everything that is done rather than everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair the world so that all rather than we can live as well as possible.

So, what are grassroots innovations then in the context of sustainability. When we are talking about grassroots organising, we mean local voluntary forms of organising and innovating that are doing something for the local community without necessarily expecting much in return except for resilience, trust and social relations. These are innovative networks of activists and organisations that laid bottom-up solutions for sustainable development. In contrast to conventional incremental green reforms, grassroots initiatives seek to practice deeper alternative forms of sustainable development. The people involved in grassroots organising are committed activists who often seek to experiment with social innovations, as well as using greener technologies and techniques in areas such as housing, renewable energy, food and alternative money. And they seek to create new social institutions and systems of provision based upon different values to those of the mainstream innovations and organisations include community renewable energy initiatives, eco housing, local organic food schemes and community currencies such as time banks.

More specifically, in this podcast episode, we will look into a more specific kind of grassroots innovation, namely solidarity economy organisations or SEOs. I could not describe SEOs as run by the communities themselves, Marconatto et al. describe SEOs as run by the communities themselves, applying routes of governance that are intended to promote democracy and gender equality. And second, the central objective of the governance of SEOs is to bring social and economic impacts to their members and local communities, such as improvements in sheltering, education and infrastructure. Various other authors, such as Panzera and Rizzie, Prestcott and Hultgård and Polegrini defined SEOs as follows: SEOs share the same principles and both the humanism, persistence and self-management, democratisation of power means gender equality, inclusiveness and reciprocity.

For the specific organisation explored in this episode, which is OmaMaa. It is also important to understand a bit about regenerative agriculture, which is a way of making farming more sustainable. There are some different definitions of what regenerative agriculture actually is.

One of them is that regenerative agricultural systems are designed to minimise external inputs or external impacts of agronomy outside the farm, as defined by Pearson. And similarly, Rhoads defines the systems as those in which input inputs of energy in the form of fertilisers and fuels are minimised because these key agricultural elements are recycled as far as possible. One of the aims of regenerative agriculture is to be as local and as independent from outside resources as possible. But there is more to it than that. Regenerative agriculture can also be defined around the outcome,

which is that food grown in a regenerative manner restores and maintains natural systems like water and carbon cycles to enable land to continue to produce food in a manner that is healthier for people and the long term health of the planet and its climate.

Regenerative agriculture can also be a part of grassroots organisation. For example, Seymour points out that there is a large amount of diversity in the regenerative agriculture movement. This diversity applies to the types of practices used, the people involved and their political views, experiences, opinions and physical locations. The regenerative agriculture movement started to emerge in Western societies in the 1980s, but it is also very important to note that regenerative designs and agricultural practices aren't actually something new but indigenous peoples have been successfully managing the land, using the same principles for thousands of years. Now that we have a bit of background knowledge about grassroots innovations and sustainable farming, let's hear from an expert involved in such an organisation, how they work in reality.

So today we are interviewing Maija Lumme, Maija is a changemaker, activist and sustainability expert. At the moment she works for Fairtrade and produces a podcast for pro ethical trade Finland in truth ethics, among other things. This time we are interviewing her about the ecological farming co-operative OmaMaa and where she is also active. Omamaa, which means our land in Finnish is a food co-operative that is based on community supported agriculture and sustainable farming principles. So welcome, Maija. Would you like to tell us a bit more about yourself and how and why you became involved in Omamaa?

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. I've been involved with omamaa since 2015 when I was working with the NGO. You mentioned Pro Ethical Trade, Finland. We had this a bit esoteric, or a progressive EU project called Social and Solidarity Economy something, something. It was a very long name. I don't even remember what the name of the project was, but we were looking at these examples of solidarity economy in Finland and that was basically the first time in 2015 when I heard about solidarity economy. And so we were looking at these alternative, alternative ways of, you know, arranging economy in Finland and in the, in the project we were looking at those examples around the Europe. So there were very many different kinds of approaches to, you know, meet our basic needs, you know, what is economy? It's about fulfilling our needs everyday needs, getting food, getting the services we need and kind of looking for these more humane approaches to produce these services. So I was looking for the, the different initiatives in Finland. And one of the good ones was OmaMaa So I get to get to know about OmaMaa back in 2015 and I was like, this is great. You get to you actually because when I've been working with this supply chain issues, you know, human rights, environmental issues for, for more than ten years and the thing is that when you buy food from a supermarket, it's very difficult to know what is the real kind of sustainability in the product, because the supply chains are super long. And even though there are these certifications and audits and whatever, you don't really know where the food comes from and what kind of impact it has had on people.

So once I got to visit the farm in Tuusula, we have we are operating on some guys operating on two farms in Tuusula. I kind of found that this is the most transparent and the most sustainable way of producing food, doing it yourself, basically. And I'm not a farmer, so I don't have like illusion of becoming myself, So I don't think that I could produce food for myself. So I'm happy to part participate in this corporate where, where there are actually people who know how to do it. And I can bring in some other, you know, skills that I have.

It's about covering the risks and know sharing the responsibilities. So I was immediately fascinated by the example and I've been a member ever since and doing a bit of voluntary work every year, every now and then and doing the distribution and participating in other ways. And I think it's a great way to you know, learn about food, learn about the production, learn about agriculture, appreciate the food we are having. And it's not like you just want the cheapest product from the supermarket shelves shelf. But actually it's like we did it. So it becomes a bit more of a dear thing. That was the short introduction.

You have already described cooperatives, and I think like all of the listeners have already heard about what makes a cooperative. But maybe could you just briefly tell us a bit more in detail and how OmaMaa operates and what, in your opinion, really makes it a cooperative?

We have the first development in the cooperative's history was that it was a co-operative for producers. But now it is a co-operative for our members. We have like farming members. We have the people who are producing the food, then we have also the kind of customers we are not customers because we are we are participating in the production. So it's already like changing the, the roles a bit to in my opinion, towards more healthier kind of dynamics. But we have a yearly general meeting where we choose the board and we can participate in the decision making of the cooperative. I have never been in the board. I choose to do these very practical things because sitting in the meeting, sitting in meetings is partly what I do every day for hours. So I choose to do more like practical things. But we have a board and active board members and anyone basically could participate in those meetings. We have these frequent farm dining events where these kind of topics relevant to the cooperative art are discussed with, with members and friends. So there's a lot of places to participate. And of course, we encourage members and friends. If you are not a member of the cooperative, you are very much a welcome to join us on the farm and get your hands dirty.

And maybe talking about this, the farming aspects and getting your hands dirty. I think like everybody has any kind of farming experience can confirm that it's like really hard and demanding labour and your members, especially those that grow the crops that they have a farming background I do farmers by profession. Before they joined your cooperative. The farm we are mostly operating on is a family farm that has been in our kind of head farmer's family for something like 500 years or they have a very long history in farming. So our Jukka who is the farmer, he has a lot of knowledge and he's basically caging all the others. And we cooperate with different schools. So there are interns that go to work on the farm and that have studied farming. And so you get to have more like more experience on that. But there are there are also many people who have like zero experience. And there's always something to be done for, for all levels of farming expertise. And there's always something to be done for all levels of farming expertise. I have I'm just happy if somebody tells me what to do. And mostly it's like, you know, weeding or collecting berries and pretty simple things. But yes, I completely agree that it's hard work. And once you kind of do the hard work of weeding strawberries for, for a day or, you know, putting those tiny baby strawberries in the field or collecting berries and you really learn and start appreciating the food we get because it's not an easy thing. And with the increasing kind of challenges with climate, you know, we've had very, very difficult seasons the past couple of years.

And, and with the increasing kind of challenges with climate, you know, we've had very difficult seasons the past couple of years. A lot of a lot of dread, a lot of rain, too much rain, wrong time or like nice sunny weather, but during wrong seasons. So it's a really challenging thing. And, and the thing is that the producers are shouldn't be the ones that that need to, you know, suffer all the consequences. We all need food. And it's like one of the key things in the future, if we if we want to eat and have a healthy soil and, all these things, we should be more interested in how the food is is being produced.

Yeah, it sounds fair to me that like the ones eating the food are also like correctly taking the risk for producing it.

Yeah. Not only the producer because they also have, you know, farming. You have to have investments, you need to buy the seeds and then you might fail, the season might be failing. And it's like, well, the consumer is like, oh, it's not my problem. And then what if the producer doesn't have the means to prepare for the next season because there has been no crops or so? It's like I think it's something that that needs to be taken really seriously. And I actually I read today that in the U.K., the producers in the U.K. have like closed their business. There's a lack of vegetables in the in the supermarkets because of the retailers not paying enough for the production. So they haven't been able

to meet the increasing energy prices. And so they are not producing food anymore and retailers have been pushing prices down. So it's like this is it's I don't think it should be taking a taking lightly.

Yeah, these things definitely. And I think like maybe some of the listeners would also be interested. Like apart from the environment chips, obviously that we've touched upon and for already and what other duties one can fulfil in Omamaa, if I'm not mistaken, you are like organising the food bank handouts. You also mentioned that you're like responsible for a lot of different tasks. So maybe you could give us like a short overview what other and task and members too and what other duties can they fulfil and apart from the farming and farming work.

So, there's like basically every day, every day of the week, all around the year, except a few weeks during the Christmas time. I think there is there is a car going to those who line you can hop on and do all sorts of work. We don't only produce vegetables. So there's like bread making and falafel making and old yoghurt making at the farm during the Tuesdays and Thursdays that are the back days. For me, since I'm working full time, it's a bit of a challenge to go to the farm on weekdays. So, I've taken the, the back distribution and we just launched our new distribution point in Atlanta over the last year. So, it's kind of mind my responsibility and I'm sharing with it with a friend.

But then I actually got yesterday a message from a friend at the co-op that could because we need, we're always in need of more members and more, you know, active participation. So I was asked to support in the communications department, we don't have a department, but, you know, doing some. So a bit of social media. And so they asked if I could do like pictures or a video and explain why I'm a member in the in on Mama and why you should join the co-operative as well. So I might be doing a bit of com comms called marketing and comms in the in the coming few weeks.

So and then, then, then there has been a like I think there was last week or so this like miso making workshop. It's open. So people are, you know, being very inventive. We have like the basic ingredients, what we can produce in Finland that is basically our portfolio. We don't we don't have the avocados, we don't have the ornaments. But actually, I think they are they might be experimenting with, you know, probably with I think they are producing some nuts at the farm. They are they are trying all these different crops because it's not a monoculture project. So they are I think there are at least being some bananas and whatnot. But so we want to be, innovative in the ways we can use these very nice finish ingredients. And there was this MISO workshop, I think they probably fermented some faba beans and did the miso out of those. So. So basically, if you have like special skills you can you can support the cooperative in many ways. And if you are not very innovative, there's always the berry picking and the weeding at the fields.

And for me, for example, it's very refreshing because then, you know, sitting at the laptop doing this, these, you know, reports and guides and communications and sending emails the day after dates, it feels super nice to be out, out in the fields and actually like doing some real work.

And so maybe if we're pivoting away from like an everyday work at one moment, since we're also trying to end connected to the theoretical part of our course. In our course, we've touched a lot upon the topic of sustainability. since what OmaMaa is doing would probably be described by many people as making our world more sustainable. I would like to ask you, what does the word sustainability, word sustainability mean to you? And if you would agree with the sentiment that Obama makes a word more sustainable?

I would definitely agree because, well, sustainability for me means, you know, reducing negative impact in in on human on people, on people and planet.

It can also include producing positive impact, which in, for example, in OmaMaa it's about the food production, but it's also community building project. So you know what, we are, in my opinion, you know, just meeting our meeting the needs, if we think about meeting our needs in a sustainable,

sustainable way, we can only limit that to like calories. A certain amount of calories is not sustainable way of meeting wants needs, but we need the human interaction. And so it could be arranged in a retail a retailer could I've seen these initiatives where you have these slow cashiers where you actually get to talk with the with the person working in a store. But actually there is less and less people working in supermarkets because you have the self help cashiers there.

So. Sustainability needs to cover the impact on people. So human rights without taking that into account. I don't see that it's really you could even talk about sustainability you need to cover the impact on planet so you know environment biodiversity climate otherwise it's also like a bit of weird to talk about sustainability, but I also like the kind of the community side of the word so that you actually try to offer these. Places of interaction and engagement and you know, building these long term projects where you don't just see the next three months of producing something or getting your.... thinking about the short term, but actually thinking about the long term.

So I think this OmaMaa tries to cover all these things. There's, of course, the economic sustainability, which is a challenge for OmaMaa. There's the governance side of the OmaMaa. But I think that's at that's for me at least. I think that's functioning pretty well because it's a cooperative. So there's a lot of participation. But if I were to kind of think the big picture, I kind of hate the word holistic approach to sustainability because it's so vague. But OmaMaa in a way, has a very holistic approach to sustainability. And in in any example, you can look at a company or a community or any organisation you would always find some weaknesses in in. If you look at the kind of the big picture, you will always find some weaknesses in in some of the kind of pillars. But I think this from the sustainability point of view, OmaMaa is very, very solid in like environmental and human rights.

And how would you then convince people that are not supporting this change, like people who would rather go along with our current ways of doing agriculture? What would you tell them of why this work is needed.

I think if this person looks has been following at all like news. It's this shouldn't be too much of a challenge to kind of convince that we need a change because we have the, the kind of the, I think the, the latest alarm is the biodiversity loss and that actually, like our food production might be endangered because we don't have enough insects and bees and birds and, you know, flowers and everything. And I think this is a really worrying news. And the thing is that we would it is.

With these huge problems, it is kind of challenging to have one solution that would fix somehow fix everything and making kind of.

Making smaller questions, making this topic in these like smaller challenges, smaller problems helps to start solving these issues. So if we try to fix agriculture in the world, then it's like, okay, so where to start? I couldn't do anything, but then it's like, okay, so where do you get your food? And could you change something in that the way you are doing it? And could you, do, you know, a farmer or do you know a producer? And could you kind of visit the farm always? You know, getting to know the people who actually are struggling with this, with these things helps. And it's not like, yeah. And, you know, the farmers are always just whining about the prices. You see, if you look at the media, you get the idea that they are just always complaining. But there are actually a lot of things that they are already doing differently. But they can't do it by themselves. They need the support from governments. They need the support from consumers who can become more than consumers.

So kind of. If somebody sees that, no, we don't need to change anything. I don't even know if I would try to do that. Because if we look at the if we look at the kind of big picture, there's a lot of. There's a big change happening with the EU green deal with the corporate sustainability legislation in Germany this year. They, they, they introduced to introduce this supply chain law. So everything is changing. And if somebody is like, I don't I don't care, I don't I don't need to change anything, then I don't think that's a struggle worth fighting. They will have to accept the change anyway at some point.

I mean, you've mentioned before already and I think you've mentioned it now already, that like this is really a global problem that we are facing. And because I mean, before you've mentioned the example

of the United Kingdom and the problems with agriculture and given the fact that OmaMaa has operated successfully here also in Finland. Do you think like the concept of OmaMaa could be applied on a global not only a local scale or maybe even aware of other cooperatives that are already applying this in different regions of the world and that maybe tried to emulate but Will OmaMaa has been doing in Finland already.

The thing is that in in in Germany and France, for example, there are many community supported agriculture initiatives, initiatives and in Finland there are a few, there are many community supported agriculture initiatives, initiatives and in Finland there are a few. But we are somehow in Finland now it seems that we are a supermarket nation. We are we don't have the kind of same culture in, in, in if you go a bit south from, from Finland, you will have these like cheese and, you know, these specified stores and people are not that supermarket oriented. You would have like every week you would have these market events where you would go and buy fresh produce from a producer. So I think there are a lot of these alternative options.

And I when the pandemic hit everyone, we actually got more, more new members joining in because people actually started having time, which is one of one of like. The challenges of modern people. We are extremely busy doing so many things. And I think, in my opinion, I think we should just, you know, do a bit less. And that would already solve some problems if we just, you know, didn't do so much. But yeah, so people come, came, joined the co-operative because they had more time and they started worrying about the future. But now I think we are back in the old, you know, happy oblivion where we don't need to really think about these structures.

Maybe it's about the structures. We just lead our everyday life. And so I think every time there are these like bad news from around the world, people get this message that maybe some things should change. And I think it's it partly strengthens all these alternative movements.

And, and in Finland, it's not really like skyrocketing the these cooperatives, but it's still it's slowly strengthening the movement and it's, you know, something that. I can't see would disappear in the future because these problems are not likely to go away. So I think people, you know, struggle in their everyday lives trying to have time, enough time for everything and putting a bit of extra time on. On making this slow food and these food revolution is not easy for everyone. Okay.

Then we would also like to ask you a bit more about the regenerative agricultural practices that are used at Omamaa If you if you know more about them, like it says on the website, that the agricultural work is based on the concepts of permaculture and quality culture. Can you tell us a bit more how these concepts are implemented in the cooperative?

I can tell you some, some, some like examples that I've seen, and I've been explained at the farm, but I don't I'm not the expert here. I think the kind of the approach is it's so that you wouldn't have this like a piece of land and you would then, you know, farm the things you. The things that consumers are asking for. But actually, you kind of try to understand the whole ecosystem and you plant a different crop on different fields. And you have this like cycle of putting like, for example, if you if you produce peas, they then, uh, intake, do they what is it nights nitrogen. And I think now I'm to the ground somehow, they are yes, it's so it's it does different things to the ground than to the soil than other crops. So, you have to have the cycle where you kind of take into consideration the effects of the of the crops on, on the soil. So, you have that and it's like we don't because it's organic farming. 1So you are not putting you are not importing, for example, of Chemicals and putting those in the land. Then there are these benches where you actually build this higher way of farming. Now I'm like, Oh, I have like zero vocabulary for explaining this in English, but so you have these like being like this French farming.

I don't know this probably if you if somebody who's listening knows about this, they're like, what?

She doesn't know anything about this. But so they build these things that you don't need to.

You can have the kind of benches for many years and then you just build on top of those.

And then there is this like this food garden. And the idea is to let the chicken wander in the orchards. So they will be they will be fertilising the land. And then they could the chicken can hide under the trees. And it's like this beautiful thought's a beautiful of very big a scheme of different things in like in in harmony and then there are so many, so many plants they've planted, some like or there's a little vineyard and it will of course take a lot of time to have the first or mama wine. And then there are there's a I don't I don't know if the bees that are on the farm are actually ours, but there are some bees and a bit of honey production. So, there's like so many things happening and it's not like what we as members, for example, want.

It's not like, yes, well, I would like to eat lettuce, but it's like this. Does it fit the system? And is it good for the soil and all those things? So it's not when we go to the supermarket, it's like what I feel like eating this is this is based on the, the farm and the land, what it can give us and what is like possible and sustainable.

That sounds amazing and beautiful. It sounds beautiful.

I don't know if my explanation sounded very expert explanation, but. I am not the expert on the Farming side, so don't judge, they're like, oh, they're just bunch of a bunch of idealistic hippies who know nothing about farming. Actually, Jukka Lassila is one of the he knows so much about anything. I was wondering the other day, like, I think it was at a farm dining at evening, I was wondering, like, you know, these vegan alternatives for cheese are very heavily based on palm oil and it's not very sustainable, you know, about the challenges in palm oil production, etc. And he was like, Yes, I've been experimenting with fava like fava bean meal or hemp oil or what was it? I was like, okay, all right. Because I was like, Could it be possible to produce these, you know, finished vegan cheeses? And so he had a he had tried already that one, too. So he knows everything about any he knows everything about all the farming and how to produce things. But then it comes to the to the question of resources. If we had unlimited resources, we could be doing all these innovations. But it's actually because there's so much work manual labour we don't have then would we need all the you know hands on deck all the time.

Yeah. I think it's also important to like point out, as we have here, that like in a cooperative like this, even though like the point is to produce food that like all sorts of scales are needed. So like it's not like just the farm, but also that someone needs to do the social media and like the handouts and the logistics and everything. Yeah, just something that's something that people often forget.

And it's funny because then when you go to the supermarket, then you want to buy something. You get like tomatoes from Spain for I don't know what, €1, €53 per kilo. And then you're like, this is really cheap.

If you think how much like labour and resources went into these tomatoes, how is this possible? They, the workers definitely didn't get a good like living income from this. And what kind of what does the supermarket or the retailer get out of these tomatoes? And then there are all these expenses for the for the logistics and everything like this is really not this should not be so cheap. This is this should be more expensive, like. Yeah. And then when you actually do the work and then you're kind of happy to pay the pay the price of the food because you know, that it's, it's not free to, to, to do that.

Okay. Then finally, we would like to hear what are to you the most exciting things about Omamaa.

Hmm. Well, there the food is, I've learned to cook, and to live with the different...I think the thing is that you have to think about the whole food thing in a different way. I, I have always food in my in my kitchen because I have always like dried fava beans or, you know, some, some grains. And so I have I don't have this like I have nothing to eat I always have food. So this is something that is really nice It's a bit a bit like, you know, food sovereignty. I'm I don't I'm never worrying that something runs out of supermarkets I don't have to worry about because I have food. And then I just

make the other day this really delicious lasagna which had these I think they were maybe spelt, spelt like lasagna sheets that we got from the Roma and then it had fava beans.

Okay. I also bought some stuff from the supermarket, like tomato okra like this and this. But is it tomato? And oat milk I had once I tried to make some oat milk myself from Omamaa oats, but then it was like, this is maybe a bit too much. This is maybe a bit too much, even for me. So I get to eat really delicious food. I, I'm, I have this, you know, security, food security for, for myself and for my community, which is one of the biggest things for me to be in, to be part of this community of very many different, interesting people. There are students. There are people, who are you know, leading this very alternative hippie lifestyle. There are artists, there are scientists, there are business people, all sorts of like fascinating people that shared the same ideology or the same values. And so being part of this movement where we actually kind of not we just don't talk about, you know that we these things need to change in in world and yeah, we need these structural changes, but we are actually doing it.

Yeah, it's very, very inspirational for me and I hope that it's for others as well. So it is inspirational for them. And I think by now you've gotten a lot of our listeners interested in the work you are doing. So if they wanted to become involved in what Omamaa is doing, how could they start? How could they find more information on your and co-operative?

The Web page would be omamaa.fi and we have a Facebook group, we have Facebook page, we have Instagram. And if you just you know, this is I warn you, if you suggest that you might be interested in joining the work at the farm or, you know, participate on a on a farm dining event, you will definitely be invited to do so. Then you might, you know, get addicted. You might want to come to these events and these, you know, join the farm, the farm for, for example, it's a really beautiful place. You might want to come to these events and these, you know, join the farm, the farm for, for example, it's a really beautiful place. Once you visit it, it's like you want to go back. So you might get addicted, but then. There are many ways to participate. And I would really recommend to visit to visit the webpage or contact me or, you know, get in touch and come to meet the people and eat the food. Think that's like a great prospect.

And I think that would bring us to the end of our interview. So thank you very much for taking the time to tell us more about OmaMaa, about your ecological farming co-operative and the important work you're doing with our listeners. We do appreciate it and we wish you the best for the future and hope you can inspire other people to do their part in making our world a more sustainable and liveable place.

Thank you so much.