Introduction to social permaculture

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Module 1.1: Context

In 2021 five European organisations, Friends of the Earth Cyprus, Friends of the Earth Malta, Promimpresa, Icep, Fundacion Intras and Hekate Conscious Ageing Foundation started a cooperation. The aim is to develop and promote a permaculture based curriculum and educational programme that will help vulnerable communities and experts to tackle issues around physical and mental health. This book is one of the teaching materials, developed and co-created by the partners.

Social context

In the EU 21% of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2019). These disadvantaged people in Europe form part of different cohorts which include:

- People who suffer from mental health issues: 7% of the EU population suffers from chronic depression out of which women are particularly affected (Eurostat, 2014),
- Elderly people: Over 20 % of people over the age of 65 in Europe,
- Former drug or alcohol users,
- People with disabilities,
- Early school-leavers,
- Migrants and refugees.

In many cases the marginalisation is intersectional, some of the above groups would experience heightened discrimination and lack of opportunities due to additional aspects related to gender, race, ethnicity, and coming from certain socio-economic backgrounds. The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated these issues of social isolation and exclusion and has also affected the mental health of a proportion of the population that was previously unaffected.

Moving forward presents an opportunity and a need to build strong social networks where no one is left behind. Building back a better Europe, a Europe of solidarity and care will require better integration and support of previously neglected groups in society. The future also holds challenges linked to climate change, environmental sustainability and food security as outlined in the European Green Deal, Biodiversity Strategy 2030 and the Farm to Fork Strategy. These challenges need to be met not only with advances in technology but also with people-centred and people-driven slow and small-scale, accessible local solutions.

One holistic approach to regenerating ecosystems and communities, in line with the objectives set by the EU through its policies, is that of **permaculture, and more specifically, social permaculture.** The concept of permaculture embodies sustainability through working with nature and building resilient communities. Its ethics can be simplified to three main aspects: Earth Care, People Care, Fair Share.

Working in a group, planning together, creating gardens, community spaces or built structures (eg. water harvesting unit, compost heap, compost toilet, little pond, vermiculture bin etc.), seeing plants and food grow, organising community events, focusing on local governance issues, health and well-being, being outdoors as a community – these

are all exercises that have an abundant benefit on the participants' mental well-being, as well as provide life-skills in the aspects of planning, co-designing, executing a communal plan. Permaculture offers a holistic and complex yet simple and pragmatic framework that can be applied basically anywhere in social and natural environments.

Despite all these benefits, social workers/educators/trainers and people who work with disadvantaged adults would not necessarily have the skills to execute such activities and build self-sustaining permaculture gardens, social or material structures with the vulnerable adults that they care for.

This teaching material aims to cater for this knowledge gap and build on the work of existing projects to create a social permaculture training for people working with vulnerable adults, as well as for vulnerable adults to increase their knowledge and competencies to be able to use tools from social permaculture and nature therapy for improvement of well-being and social resilience.

Historic context and a potential tipping point

Environmental and social organisations, participating in the development of this teaching material, started to focus systematically on permaculture as a potential tool to tackle mental health issues in early 2021. Back then the impact and the toll of the pandemic on mental health started to be seen in communities, and among health professionals, social workers, etc.

In many countries people were isolated in their homes or in lockdowns. It soon became clear that gardening was one of the popular, low cost, accessible and effective ways for people to look after themselves and their mental and physical health. Urban permaculture projects blossomed, people started to grow edible plants on their balconies, in their windows, on their roofs and wherever they could find the space. Local green patches allowed community members to socialize in a socially distanced manner and also to enjoy growing plants, which in itself can have a positive impact on mental health.

As time went on additional large-scale hardships hit Europe. Russia started the war in Ukraine in early 2022. At the same time many countries experienced the worst drought in a century during the Summer. Energy and food prices are rising at an unexpected speed, putting extra burdens on people, families and communities in many places in Europe.

In the meantime, many NGOs and local communities experience and report an unexpected boom in relation to environmental and health consciousness among their communities and target groups. Many members of both young and older generations turn their attention to healthier and more environmentally responsible life-styles and activities. Many grass-root level NGO experts and community leaders say that this phenomena can be partly seen as a contemporary social response to these current events (eg. pandemic, war, inflation) and equally the result of the work of environmental and social movements in the last decades.

One can argue that these current hardships are actually boosting the efforts and the impact of environmental and social movements. Also they turn the general and media attention of the wider society towards more sustainable and regenerative environmental and social practices. These are rather uplifting and in some ways positively unexpected turns of events when we talk about social change.

Many people, social workers, activists, educators, community leaders and organisations believe that now is a potential tipping point in the implementation of local sustainable community actions and educational programs. The attention and the need for such local solutions are growing among many communities. This teaching material aims to contribute and support these initiatives by offering permaculture-based knowledge and activities for all sorts of communities, including ones of vulnerable people.

Permaculture context

The Permaculture Movement is a relatively young movement with a rather "Western" narrative. It is still growing, forming and transitioning at a high speed. For many years it was seen mostly as an agricultural or gardening approach. However, the Ethics of Permaculture, the Flower of Permaculture and the Design Principles (see Module 1 for definitions) incorporate not only the natural ecosystems and the agricultural practices, but many other aspects of human life (eg. buildings, education, health, governance etc.). The social implications of permaculture, or in other words social permaculture, have become an important focus of the movement only recently.

The History of Permaculture

Permaculture was conceived and developed in the 1970s by co-workers Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in Australia.

Originally the term was a contraction of "Permanent Agriculture" for that is what it was, the design and implementation of permanent (sustainable) agricultural systems. Systems designed in this way tend to have closed energy cycles, being modelled on natural ecosystems, there should be minimal primary inputs such as chemical fertilisers.

The designed system should also have a high degree of inter-linkage; "waste" outputs from one part of the system being used as inputs for another part. The ideal is a closed cycle, where outputs become inputs, requiring no primary inputs and producing no waste products. This will not be found in simple (single output) systems, which is why Permaculture design tends to produce multi-layered and highly interlinked systems, echoing natural ecosystems.

It is also useful to recognise the historical soil in which permaculture germinated. It was a decade since Rachel Carson had written *Silent Spring* with its dire, and subsequently validated, warnings about the threat that DDT and other pesticides pose to the environment.

Half a decade after James Lovelock had conceived and published his Gaia theory, proposing that to gain a true understanding of our planet we should view the whole earth as a superorganism (which he termed "Gaia") with the same self sustaining and self regulating feedback mechanisms as are found in all other living organisms.

About the time Mollison and Holmgren were working on permaculture, a Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer, Arne Naess, first published his concept of "Deep Ecology". This ultimately calls for each individual to recognise their necessary connection with the world.

Thus Permaculture was conceived at a time when we were just beginning to recognise that our local actions could have a far greater impact on the biosphere than those which we had originally intended. Carson showed us that chemicals originally designed to "kill pests on my cabbages" were less discriminate and more far reaching in their toxicity than we had intended or foreseen.

Lovelock showed how our local actions can lead to reactions on a global scale, due to Gaia's feedback mechanisms. Naess proposed a philosophical framework by which we could understand our position as part of nature as opposed to the more traditional view of "Humankind" being in some way separate from "Nature". From this it is not surprising to find that Permaculture design tends to produce systems which avoid the addition of synthetic chemicals to the biosphere, look for multiple connections between various elements of the system and attempt to align, as far as possible, with the natural cycles of the world.

However, having said all this, Permaculture is not "Rocket Science", it is basically the application of common sense coupled with a few basic design tools.

(Extract from R. J. Bambrey"s article; "Permaculture" What's That?; *Country Smallholding Magazine* April 2006)
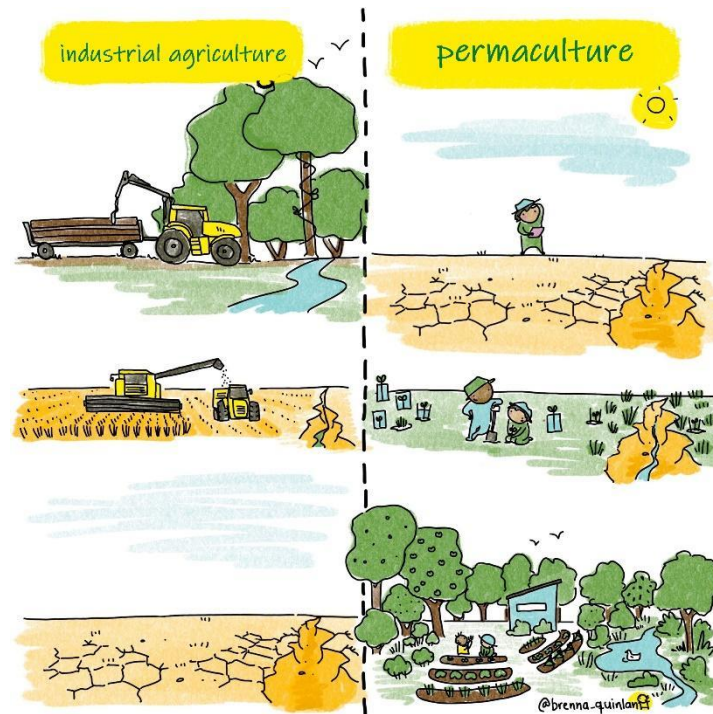
FIGURE 1: DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INDUSTRIAL AGRICULTURE AND PERMACULTURE

At this point it is important to emphasize that permaculture was not "invented" rather "rediscovered" by "modern" permaculturists. Practices and approaches, also used in permaculture, are largely based on common sense, scientific facts, ecological mechanisms, laws of Nature and historic knowledge of poor or traditional communities that live(d) close to Nature.

One example of traditional practices that are pretty much the same as what we now call permaculture:

> **The legacy of 4,500 years of polyculture agroforestry in the eastern Amazon**
> (S. Yoshi Maezumi et al.)
> https://www.nature.com/articles/s41477-018-0205-
> y?WT.feed_name=subjects_evolution
> Here, we show that persistent anthropogenic landscapes for the past 4,500 years have had an enduring legacy on the hyperdominance of edible plants in modern forests in the eastern Amazon. We found an abrupt enrichment of edible plant species in fossil lake and terrestrial records associated with pre-Columbian occupation. Our results demonstrate that, through closed-canopy forest enrichment, limited clearing for crop cultivation and low-severity fire management, long-term food security was attained despite climate and social changes. Our results suggest that, in the eastern Amazon, the subsistence basis for the development of complex societies began ~4,500 years ago with the adoption of polyculture agroforestry, combining the cultivation of multiple annual crops with the progressive enrichment of edible forest species and the exploitation of aquatic resources.

Definition(s) of Permaculture

So what is Permaculture? Googling the term, or asking permaculturists this question, one can get many different answers based on the focus and the perspective of the definition. There is no "one and only" definition. Permaculture is a framework or an approach to sustainable human and community activities, therefore the definition is often defined on the basis of the local context.

Also, there is an evolution of the term as time goes by. In the 70's, the focus was more on agricultural practices. Later on the scope has opened. By now permaculturists define their social change and health and well-being related activities and actions based on permaculture ethics and design principles. As a result, the definition of permaculture is also evolving. The whole process is very organic and beautiful, a lot of thinking, social dialogue and co-creation are involved in the process.

In the meantime it is interesting to notice how flexibly the permaculture framework can be used and applied in basically any kind of social space. It is also interesting to notice that the many different definitions of permaculture reflect on the organic nature of the approach.

A few definitions to the term "Permaculture"

- Permanent Agriculture
- Permaculture is an innovative (design) framework for creating sustainable ways of living.
- Consciously designed landscapes which mimic the patterns and relationships found in nature, while yielding an abundance of food, fibre and energy for provision of local needs.
- Permaculture is a **practical method of developing ecologically harmonious, efficient and productive systems that can be used by anyone, anywhere.**
- "Permaculture, originally 'Permanent Agriculture', is **often viewed as a set of gardening techniques**, **but it has in fact developed into a whole design philosophy and for some people a philosophy for life**. Its central theme is the creation of human systems which provide for human needs, but using many natural elements and drawing inspiration from natural ecosystems. **Its goals and priorities coincide with what many people see as the core requirements for sustainability**." / Emma Chapman /
- Permaculture is primarily **a thinking tool for designing low-carbon, highly productive systems** but its influence can be very pervasive. What can start as a journey towards living a more ecologically balanced lifestyle can go far deeper, even transforming our worldview and radically altering behaviour. This is the inspirational nature of permaculture, it is a means of connecting each of us more deeply to nature's patterns and wisdom and of practically applying that understanding in our daily lives.

- Permaculture is an **applied science, a holistic design system that emulates systems that exist in Nature to create sustainable human settlements and food production systems** which integrate harmoniously with the natural environment.
- Permaculture is variously understood as a set of gardening techniques, a radical form of ecological agriculture, a design philosophy for a sustainable society and an international social movement to achieve **all of the above and more**.
- Permaculture is an approach to sustainable design thinking, agriculture, and community, as well as a **globalized movement**.
- Permaculture is also **a network of individuals and groups spreading permaculture design solutions in both rich and poor countries throughout the globe**.
- Permaculture is the radical **political notion** that living in harmony with nature and with one another is possible.
- Permaculture is **a simple and complex philosophical and practical approach to how to live life on Earth in a sustainable manner.**

Permaculture, well-being and mental health

One of the huge advantages of permaculture is that it is both conceptual and pragmatic/hands-on at the same time. On one hand it is a purely theoretical and well established logical framework. It offers people a common understanding of today's environmental and social problems and core issues. It also offers people theoretical answers to the major issues of our current times on individual, community and policy levels as well. On the other hand, the focus of permaculture, its solutions and practices are super-pragmatic, hands-on and efficient. Permaculture gives understanding and comfort to the mind and useful things to do for the hands. These are two qualities that potentially make permaculture useful for people who struggle emotionally and mentally in the current societies.

In addition, properly applied permaculture practices are ideology-free, inclusive, and harmonious with Nature and humans' psychological needs.

In the following picture, you will see some of the terms that describe permaculture practices. It is worth noticing that these terms are also ones often used when we talk about needs related to mental health and well-being.

Many people who practise permaculture express that the process gives them pleasure, and a sense of connection, settles the mind and the body and contributes to physical and mental health. This is basically the core reason why permaculture-related consciousness and suitable practices can be used effectively in any kind of community including ones of vulnerable adults.

Garden and non-garden based permaculture practices

As it was mentioned before, permaculture was originally about agriculture, gardening, and food production. When someone wants to develop a permaculture garden from scratch, they have to devote 10-20-30+ years to reach a mature permaculture forest garden.

But permaculture is not only about this any longer. Applying the design principles and ethics of permaculture to any aspects of human life defined by the petals of the Permaculture Flower, open up and provide an endless source of short-term, long-term, garden based and non-garden based activities. These activities can take place in urban and rural areas, outdoors and indoors as well. Possibilities are infinite. The following chapters will explain these in more detail. Our intention is to help our readers to understand the permaculture logical framework, as well as to give practical examples of what kind of activities can be done in certain local circumstances and with specific target groups.

Module 1.2: Ethics, Principles & Flower of Permaculture

After reading the introduction, one might ask these questions:

- If the permaculture framework is so flexible, how can we decide if a project is a permaculture project or not?
- What makes an initiative a permaculture one?
- What are the common grounds in the permaculture movement?

There are three fundamental pillars that the permaculture concept is based on. These are simple, well structured and robust:

- The Ethics of Permaculture
- The 12 Design Principles
- The Flower of Permaculture with its thematic petals

As long as a project or an initiative is in line with these three pillars, they can be seen and understood as permaculture project. Ideally the people who carry out the initiatives are aware and conscious about permaculture, but it is not a must. For example if a local municipality is willing to develop the village based on permaculture principles they would want to incorporate all the local initiatives that support the sustainability and permaculture concept. Even if some of these local initiatives do not call themselves permaculture ones, they can still be seen as significant elements of the local social permaculture system and structures. As an example: there might be a local kindergarten that focuses heavily on environmental education. From the point of view of the municipality this kindergarten will be linked to the "education" petal of the Permaculture Flower in the local social fabric. We will talk about this in detail later.

But first, let's have a look at the fundamentals:

Permaculture Ethics

This is very simple and pragmatic.

1. **Earth Care:** Maintaining and regenerating biodiversity and nature's capital
2. **People Care:** Providing and exercising sufficient care for self and community
3. **Fair Share:** Setting limits to consumption and reproduction, redistributing surplus

What this means is that permaculture projects should not compromise any of these ethical basics. It also means that exploitation, abuse, inequality should not and can not be part of the system. At the same time care, kindness, attention, justice, fairness, solidarity etc. have to be part of the system.

Permaculture Ethics
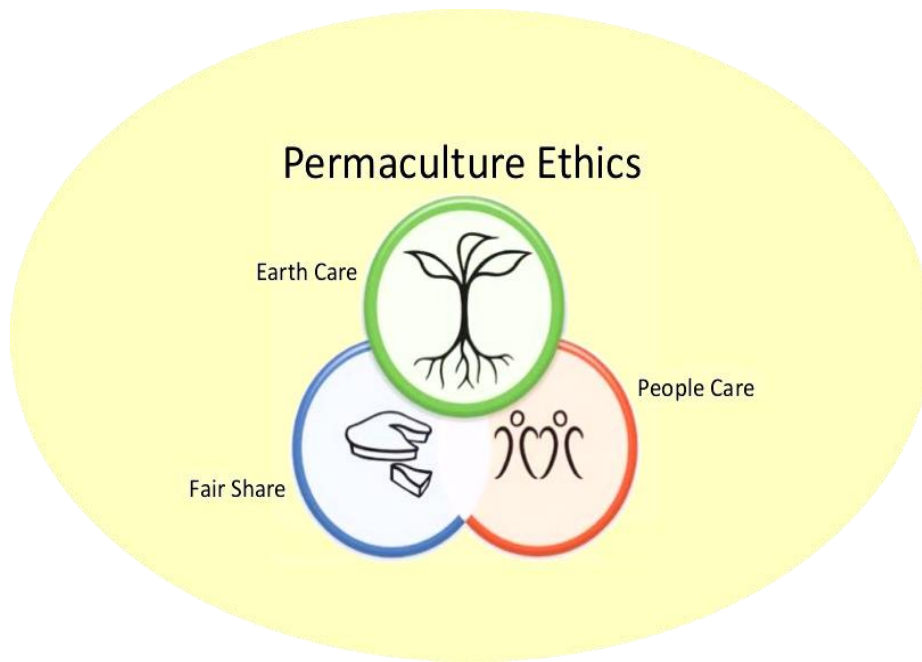
Vulnerable adults and also people working with them often experience inequalities, systematic exploitation, abuse, lack of access to support structures etc. Properly designed local permaculture actions and interventions can be effective to heal and empower members of the communities. Social innovation potential of permaculture also has to be mentioned at this point. The co-creation potential for social workers, vulnerable communities, municipalities and (social) permaculture system designers is huge.

Design Principles

The Design Principles were developed by David Holmgren, co-originator of permaculture. Permaculture principles are brief sentences that can be relatively easily remembered. They can function as a checklist when considering the usually complex options for designing ecological and/or social systems. These design principles are universal, but the methods that express them will vary greatly according to local circumstances, place, people and situation. They are applicable to personal, economic, social and political reorganisation, as illustrated later in the Permaculture Flower.

Principle	Potential implication example in relation to vulnerable adults, mental health or social permaculture
1. Observe and interact	Before taking any action, first listen to people really carefully.
2. Catch and store energy	Be conscious about where the energy is within the community. Maintain activities or rituals that hold and keep spirits high. Even in difficult times validate dark feelings and transform them into positive action.
3. Obtain a yield	Always try to see the situations/systems from an energetic perspective as well. Focus on what kind of benefits can be drawn from them. Yield can be obtained on many levels, for the whole community, for any of the members, the caretaker, etc.
4. Apply self-regulation and accept feedback	Design and maintain safe feedback loops and channels within the community. Make sure that even the most vulnerable members have the real and safe spaces to express their honest opinion. Also, create structures in which feedback is valued, evaluated and the information is channelled back to the development of the system.
5. Use and value renewable resources and services	Everyone is good at something and most of the time passionate about something that is beneficial for the community. Make sure to dig out these skills and passions and include them as resources or energy for development.
6. Produce no waste	Try to make sure that no people, no skills, no good intentions are wasted or left behind.
7. Design from patterns to details	Try to understand the "big picture", the major patterns of a given group, structure or action. Based on that, design the structures/actions in a way that is suitable or at least acceptable to all members.
8. Integrate rather than segregate	Try to find solutions that can integrate all or many actors, factors, members. It might mean that progress will be slower but potentially more sustainable and more robust from the point of view of the community.
9. Use small and slow solutions	If you can afford not to rush things, try to give the process enough time for everyone to get on board. Social change and community development is often a slow process and lasting change can be reached in small and slow steps.
10. Use and value diversity	Especially in the design, the delivery and the feedback phases try to incorporate diverse people and opinions. It might slow things down but again, it creates more robust and resilient systems.
11. Use edges and value the marginal	Try to listen super-carefully to the voices of the edges and the marginal.
12. Creatively use and respond to change	Especially in human systems, change is always there. Marginalized and vulnerable people, underfunded systems often generate unexpected hardships and difficulties. It can be very demanding for the people responsible for maintaining the system. Try to be as creative as you possibly can and also make sure that you obtain yield for your own self to avoid burnout.

Exercise 1. for Design Principles:
In small groups people are asked to brainstorm about what the given principle might and might not mean in relation to social permaculture and when working with vulnerable adults in their local context.

Exercise 2. For Design Principles:
Brainstorming within the local context about how permaculture principles can boost the local community and the already existing local practices.

Permaculture Flower

As you can see there are the Ethics and the Design Principles at the heart of the concept. The petals represent the different areas of human life and community structures. The red spiral represents the interconnectedness within the whole system.

THE PERMACULTURE FLOWER

Examples of activities that may be considered in relation to the different petals
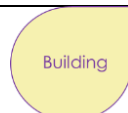
Area	Petal	Examples
Biological field	Land and nature stewardship	Bio-intensive gardening Forest gardening Seed saving Organic agriculture Biodynamics Natural farming Agroforestry, Agro-ecology Nature-based forestry Integrated aquaculture Community gardens Urban permaculture sites Pollinator friendly (urban) spaces Community composting Edible landscaping in urban setups
Built field	Built environment	Passive solar design Natural construction materials Water harvesting and reuse Disaster resistant construction Earthships Elderly, dementia and disability friendly eco-buildings Co-housing design
	Tools and technology	Reuse and creative recycling Hand tools including high tech, small scale tools

|		Bicycles and electric bikes
		Wood stoves
		Fuels from organic wastes
		Wood gasification
		Bio-char from forest wastes
		Wind and solar systems
		Energy storage
		IT based simple garden and building tools
		IT based care providing tools
Behavioural field	Culture and education	Eco-schools Participatory art and music Life-long learning Accessible and barrier-free education and culture Action Research Citizen science Transition culture Voluntary simplicity Anti-discrimination and empowerment programmes Male-violence reduction and girls empowerment programmes Free online educational and mentoring programmes for vulnerable people Reintegration of marginalised groups Decolonisation
	Health and spiritual well-being	Home birth and breastfeeding Complementary and holistic medicine Free and accessible healthcare Women's reproductive rights and health Accessible and safe contraception and abortion Yoga, Tai Chi & other body/mind/spirit disciplines Indigenous cultural revival Mental health and wellbeing support Preventive checks and practices Conscious Ageing Self-care of carers Dignified hospice care Euthanasia, Assisted dying Dignified Dying
	Finances and economics	Ethical investment Fair Trade Local and regional currencies Share economy, carpooling, ride sharing, tool sharing Farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) WWOOFing (worldwide work in organic farming), Workaway and similar networks Tradable Energy Quotas Life Cycle Analysis Circular economy Gift economy Care-centred and care-based local economies Debt-free money and non-profit structures for running care-based social infrastructure
	Land tenure and community governance	Cooperatives Cohousing and eco-villages Open space technology and consensus decision making Sociocracy Participatory democracy

Is something a permaculture project or not?

Let us give you a few concrete examples of social permaculture related projects that can be beneficial for vulnerable adults and vulnerable communities. Many of these are already common practices for experts working with vulnerable adults. It might be worthwhile to add some permaculture-related extra layers and by that perhaps deepen the impact and the efficiency of the whole support system around and within the community.

Petal	Good examples
Building	Community composting unit. Rainwater harvesting system. Small pond (water habitat) with plants, and animals.
Tools and technology	Community composting unit in a care home Traditional and modern/professional hand tools
Education and culture	Hands-on, activity-based education Community art projects Performance with an educational message Intergenerational story-telling projects Cooking and gardening trainings
Health and spiritual well-being	Self esteem and self confidence boosting activities Botanical walks (fitness and learning element) Community care system for the elderly
Finances and economics	Creating products in the community, selling them to the wider public via fundraising events.
Land tenure and community governance	Using the generated funds based on democratic decision making within the community.
Land and nature stewardship	Maintain a little vegetable patch or a bunch of potted plants within the community.

To decide whether a project meets the requirements of being a permaculture project, it is recommended to make an internal evaluation based on the ethics and the principles. The community or the project leader/initiator can evaluate whether any of the three ethics have been compromised. After that they can check if the process is in line with the design principles.

For example: is an elderly care home a permaculture one? It depends…

This London-based women co-housing project is definitely one. They have community governance and ownership, they have their vegetable garden, they provide care for one another etc. https://www.owch.org.uk/

We've built our own community
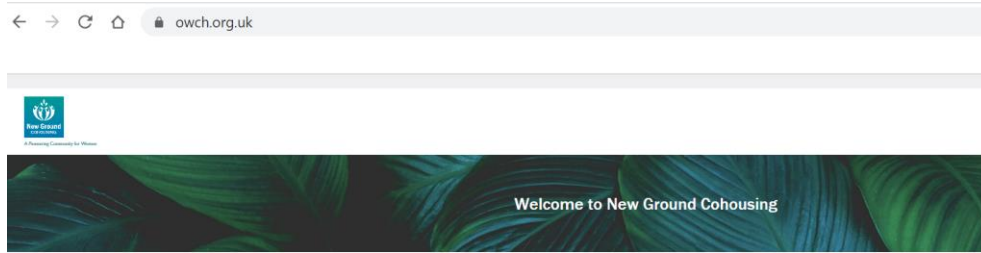
We are a group of women over fifty who have created our own community in a new, purpose-built block of flats in North London. As an alternative to living alone, we have friendly, helpful neighbours.

And of course many care homes are not at all permaculture ones, as they exploit the staff and the elderly as well. Read this article:
https://www.investigate-europe.eu/en/2021/elder-care-for-profit/

July 2021

FOR-PROFIT ELDER CARE

Grey gold — The billion Euro business of elder care

Across Europe, elderly people and their relatives are sharing a terrible experience: understaffed with overworked caregivers, the situation in care homes can become a threat to the lives of residents. The Covid-19 pandemic caused an escalation of the already dire circumstances in many countries. But while there is a shortage of care workers almost everywhere given the ever-growing number of people in need, international corporations and financial investors are making huge profits.

Module 1.3: Roadmap to design a social permaculture project

This teaching material is designed to be used by people who are possibly new to permaculture and they want to use it to improve their physical or mental health, or they might be vulnerable adults, or social workers, or other professionals working with or helping vulnerable adults.

Individuals, diverse communities, support workers, therapists may be interested in permaculture and be willing to use it as a method to improve physical and mental health and wellbeing of themselves and others.

If you are a person who has the intention to design an effective social permaculture project, here are some tips, steps and questions to consider.

Dreaming phase

Read this teaching material and familiarise yourself with the basic ideas and principles of permaculture. Also it might be useful to see some of these youtube videos and many more probably. Amazing and inspiring stuff is all over the internet, from community solutions to housing solutions, from healing to governance, from pots to forest gardens etc.
Based on the information and inspiration, be playful and dream a bit. Find a spot that you really like (eg. in nature, in a bathtub or in a cosy cafe) and sit for a while. Or have a nice drink with your colleagues or mates and brainstorm together. Or go for a run if you are a runner. Do whatever is the best activity for you to bring yourself to a creative state of mind and heart. Ask yourself this question: what would be helpful and fun to do in my own context and community? Or this one: How can I use permaculture knowledge to make my and/or other's life better?

Give this one enough time, and try to enjoy the process. It is possible and even likely that this process itself will be an uplifting and energising exercise for yourself. Dream strategically in line with your personal or organisational mission.

Design phase

After the first step focus on the pragmatic aspects and answer these questions for yourself

- Who is the target group of your planned action?
- This is a very important question: What is your aim? Do you want to promote/teach permaculture or do you want to use permaculture to reach other aims (eg. give mental stimulus to people living with dementia by using permaculture practices). The actual methodology might be very different either way.
- How many people do you want to target?
- Do you plan to work with them on a long run, or you just want to have one-off sessions?
- Do you plan to have an outdoor or an indoor activity?
- What are the potential risks or special circumstances when delivering the project? (eg. you are working with disabled or elderly people and the site of the action has to be safe and accessible)
- Have you or your organisation got a good enough space to carry out the project or do you need to use a public space or the site of others? Have you got space for a garden or potted plants? Maybe a roof, a safe yard, a large balcony or a greenhouse? Remember Design Principle: No1. Observe and interact. Look around and see what kind of spaces and assets you already have. Make an assessment of what resources you already have. It is sometimes very surprising that with careful permaculture design how much resources we can mobilize for "free".

  An example: a school permaculture project was based on pots and soil donated by the parents. It took place on the concrete yard of the school. The first planting event turned out to be a community event where teachers, pupils and families learned together and had fun together. Other than organising the event there were hardly any extra costs for the school. Later it was the responsibility of the pupils to water the plants and they could practise the regular activity of looking after other creatures. They were also allowed to harvest the plants. It was a very low investment, effective, high-impact activity.

- Have you got the expertise necessary to carry out the planned action or do you want or need to invite

external help? If yes, who might be that person or organisation? Here the question rises again: do you want to have a one-off occasion or do you want to develop a strategic partnership with the invited expert?
A useful tip: there might be small eco-farms, community gardens, art spaces, urban community spaces, eco-schools, gardens of elderly care homes, etc. in your region. See if they are doing similar things or if their site is open to host such trainings, events.

- If you dreamed of a big-scale project remember Design Principle (DP)No 9.: Use small and slow solutions. Make a pilot and see how it works. Improve it based on the results of the pilot.
Try to apply DP7 Design from patterns to details, and DP5 Use and value renewable resources/services. In the process, DP4 Apply self-regulation and accept feedback. DP12 Creatively use and respond to change, and make sure to DP3 Obtain a yield.
- Check if the project is in line with the Ethics of Permaculture.

Evaluation phase

Once you have the first version of your social permaculture project planned, stop for a moment. Take a big step back and look at the plan from a distance. See how it feels for you, for your colleagues. Does it feel right? Does it sit well with your mission, time, resources, target group(s), season, etc?

If it does, go ahead and start implementing.

If it somehow just does not feel right, go back to the dreaming phase and give the process another go. Consider all the new thoughts and ideas you harvested in the first round of thinking.

Example social permaculture project design - HCAF, the Netherlands

Let's use the example of Hekate Conscious Ageing Foundation which is based in the Netherlands. The organisation wants to design a permaculture-based program to support lonely individuals of all ages who are struggling with the mental effects of the pandemic.

Aims: Offer knowledge, community and action to vulnerable citizens of the Noord-Holland region to tackle loneliness and improve mental health

Target group: lonely citizens, young and old, mentally suffering from the social impacts of the pandemic

Site and expertise: HCAF do not have a garden or private open space so it has to use other facilities. The organisation has the permaculture trainer staff.

Activity: Forming a local learning community, teaching the basics of permaculture and do action together.

This is an intro-level one-off training of three days. Participants finishing the training can join the already existing online social permaculture community of HCAF. It is a follow-up option if they want to carry on their permaculture journey.

Methodology used:

First day: online gathering where people learn about permaculture theory (based on this teaching material) and they also share about themselves. The learning community members get to know each other and warm up. They will be asked about their motivation to join the course and what they are willing to gain (harvest).

Second day: outdoor training day on a local care-focused eco-farm. Further permaculture knowledge is given to the participants, and they also do hands-on work on the farm (eg. setting up a compost heap). Team building exercises are also carried out and a sharing circle about how people feel.

Third day: online gathering where people share about their permaculture journey and how they feel about the process. They are requested to draw their own conclusions and also set some individual goals for their own next step in relation to tackling the original reason why they joined the course.

There is at least a week between the training days to allow enough time for participants to reflect on their own learning processes. Maximum number of participants is 15.

Example social permaculture project design - Friends of the Earth Malta

As a second example, let's take Friends of the Earth Malta, based in Malta, who collaborated on the piloting of the Social Permaculture training with two local organisations working with vulnerable adults, one with adults with mental disabilities, and the other with adults recovering from drug and alcohol addiction.

Aims: Offer training and support to set up a permaculture garden and/or permaculture activities in the day centres of two organisations working with vulnerable adults, to enrich their therapeutic process. ,

Target group: adults with mental disabilities; adults recovering from drug and alcohol addiction

Site and expertise: The organisation has a small community garden outside their office, and the two organisations participating in the pilot also have outdoor spaces at their different care centres, ranging from a field, to an urban garden, to spaces like courtyard or roofs. The organisation has two staff members experienced with delivering training on gardening, permaculture and group facilitation.

Activity: Piloting the full training developed as part of the Social PEAS project, to teach the basics of social permaculture and how to set up a permaculture garden, with two local organisations, encouraging them to implement the activities at their centres.

In this case, the training material is delivered as a 12-part training course, with two lessons per module. The 6 month programme consists of 2 sessions per month of 3 hours each, delivered at different locations to learn from different contexts, sites and needs. After following the training, the participants of the training are capable of implementing social permaculture practices and activities within their organisation with the vulnerable adults they work with.

Methodology used:

See training schedule here.

Maximum number of participants is 20-25.