New Solutions
Arthur Morgan Institute for Community Solutions

Called to Be the Change and together to build Resilient Communities, our current programs are:
  - Regenerative Land Use
  - Community Economics
  - Energy Democracy

We bought a farm. Agraria – Arthur Morgan Institute’s Center for Regenerative Agriculture

Coming out of our February Healthy Soils Symposium there was enthusiasm for purchase of a farm that went up for auction near Yellow Springs. In a remarkable display of the Community of Trust that underpins our organization, we had the winning bid on 128 acres at auction on March 16, with the real estate closing on April 28. Pages 2–4

Digging in Regionally
Our regional collaborations continue to grow, involving citizens and students of all ages from Yellow Springs Schools, Antioch College, Central State University, and the University of Dayton.
  - Regional Resilience & Community Roundtable. Page 5
  - Foodshed assessment. Page 6
  - Food accessibility. Page 6
  - Community Organizing Conference Page 6

Economics of Happiness Conference, October 20-21 Featuring Helena Norberg-Hodge (Ancient Futures and Economics of Happiness), Michael Shuman (Local Dollars, Local Sense and The Small-Mart Revolution) and Charles Eisenstein (Sacred Economics and The Ascent of Humanity). Explore new economic models from across the region and across the planet. Page 8

Peter Bane, Toward a Soil Conservation Corps. Page 9

Filming this fall in Kerala, India for Saving Walden’s World – the 100 year plan—to include our sister community, Mitraniketan school and Farm Science Centre. Page 10

Greater Dayton Conservation Fund Watershed Counties
Agraria: A Community Land Trust and Regenerative Agriculture Research Center – Susan Jennings

There’s no clearer demonstration of the universe as a self-organizing system than the synchronistic process that led Community Solutions to be the sudden owner of Agraria, a farm on the western outskirts of Yellow Springs.

We learned on the Saturday afternoon of our February soils symposium that a property that included a sensitive local watershed—Jacoby Creek—had unexpectedly gone up for auction. The watershed and aquifer below is a source of drinking water for Xenia and Yellow Springs, and protecting it has been a goal of the village for over 40 years.

Throughout that weekend, and before, we’d been exploring ways to put our new soils work into practice.

Our Healthy Soils Symposium focused on active hope, highlighted by keynote Didi Pershouse. Didi is the author of *The Ecology of Care: Medicine, Agriculture, Money, and the Quiet Power of Human and Microbial Communities*. She writes and teaches about how our ‘sterile’ model of care—killing everything that we see as pests—needs to be replaced by a ‘fertile’ model of care that builds healthy communities of soil, cells, and people.

Symposium presenter Peter Bane enchanted us with his drawings of water and carbon cycles, helping us to visually and viscerally link our care of the soil to larger water and climate systems. We also heard from many local farmers, gardeners, and researchers about their ongoing relationships with their land.

By Saturday afternoon, the conference room at Antioch College was abuzz with ideas of how we might move forward as a region to demonstrate what we were learning.

And the farm that the Jacoby traversed was a demonstration opportunity on a grand scale. But it wasn’t until one of our members stepped up with an early promise of investment that the dream of bidding on the property began to take hold. Two weeks later—with the incredible support of an entrepreneurial board of directors; a hard-working and flexible staff; investment promises from several friends and members; commitments of conservation monies from the Village of Yellow Springs and the Tecumseh Land Trust; and the knowledge of our historical organizational weight—we took the leap and purchased 128 acres of the Jacoby property. It came complete with house, barn, workshop, fields, streams, and brambly copses threaded throughout.

While the purchase of the farm feels like an unexpected leap into the future, it’s clear that we have been preparing for this for the past 75 years. Arthur Morgan was a philosophical and practical father of the Community Land Trust model and was recently inducted into the Community Land Trust Hall of Fame. His son Griscom founded the Vale and Celo intentional communities, both of which continue to flourish. And Griscom’s daughter, Faith Morgan, and Pat Murphy dreamed of a new place—Agraria—where residents could do small-scale farming and live in community in energy-efficient homes.

More recently, our board and membership settled on five strategic focus areas, with *Regenerative Land Use* front and center. For the past few years, we’ve been educating ourselves about healthy soils through workshops and trainings across the country and in Yellow Springs. We’ve also built up partnerships with local and national colleagues around soil health and regenerative soils practices.

And we’ve been learning about local financing—part of our *Community Economics* focus—and had convened a group of colleagues from the village, local foundations and the Yellow Springs Credit Union to explore how to build community capacity to invest locally. It was the connections made through this group that enabled us to partner with the Credit Union on a linked deposit strategy—a strategy that’s enabling our supporters to use their funds as surety for a line of credit for the farm purchase and early expenses.

All these preparations were in place, but we still could not have predicted how they might manifest into such a grand vision. Now that we are on the other side of closing on the property, and on the cusp of a new organizational future, it’s obvious that our agrarian community land trust has been made possible by the 77-year-old community of trust that’s been built within the organization, within Yellow Springs, and within our membership network.
Why Soil?
Across the planet, farmers, researchers, economists, activists, and community members are linking global crises like hunger, climate change, refugees, and war, to the degradation of soil. Historically, many if not all of civilizational collapses can be linked to soil degradation.

Locally and nationally, depleted soils add to the economic challenges of conventional farmers. On Agraria, 75% of our topsoil has been lost, with erosion and depleted nutrients adding to the challenge. Soil and fertilizer run-off lead to widespread algal blooms and dead zones in lakes, rivers, and water basins, contributing to water woes. Many researchers also link exponential growth in some chronic diseases to pesticide residues and nutrient-poor soils.

Yet, new understanding about soil biology and the incredible capacity of regenerated soils to heal ecosystems are sparking hope—again on a planetary scale. In Australia, China, across Africa and other continents, small and massive regeneration projects are demonstrating the possibilities inherent in healthy soil biology.

This hope underlay the United Nations declaration of 2015 as “The International Year of Soils,” as well as the inclusion of carbon-rich soil as an important climate mitigation strategy in recent international climate accords. Twelve of the eighteen most promising tools to reduce atmospheric carbon are land based.

Regionally, many farmers are taking the lead in practices that build carbon and healthy soil biology. David Brandt, a carbon farmer, Community Solutions conference presenter, and Agraria advisor, has been experimenting with cover crops for over forty years, and has built his Central Ohio soil carbon content from 1% to 8%.

Other strategies like rotational grazing, perennial pastures, silvopasture, and agroforestry are being studied in farms and research plots across the country and the globe.

Agraria
Agraria is 128 acres of rolling farmland. Now that spring is here, the trees and bushes are sprouting yellow and green, wildflowers line the paths, and birdsong and the tracks of wildlife remind us of our fellow residents. On the property frontage on E. Dayton-Yellow Springs Road, there’s a wooden Banker’s Barn circa 1920 with approximately 7000 square feet of space on two floors and a loft. There’s also a home and a workshop, and yards with lilac and blackberry bushes.

Our overarching vision of Agraria is that it will serve as a multi-functional teaching and research farm that models best practices in soil regeneration.

The land has been farmed conventionally, most recently planted in corn. We’ve just conducted an extensive series of soil tests—including for nutrient levels, soil respiration, and the presence of heavy metals and oil. In the next few weeks, we will be planting cover crops in partnership with David and Ann Brandt of Walnut Creek Seeds, and local farmers Jim and Brian Clem.

Much of the next several months will be spent developing plans for the farm, including:

- Heritage and perennial grains
- Biodynamic vegetable gardens
• Hedgerows and edge planting
• Silvopasture
• Pastured animals.

We also plan to develop a small community of homes for resident staff/farmers. Concurrently, the Nature Conservancy, in partnership with the Tecumseh Land Trust, will be developing a restoration plan for Jacoby Creek that includes removing honeysuckle, allowing the stream to find its natural meandering state, and planting native species in the riparian barrier.

Education, research, and regional community outreach are woven throughout our project plans. In addition to the partnerships mentioned below, we are documenting our interests in Agraria and soil restoration in a soil podcast series, and in Peter Bane’s book on soils and water cycling. Dennie Eagleson, a local photographer, is recording the transformation of the soils and the landscape through a longitudinal photographic series. Further soils conference presentations and field days are in the works.

This summer and fall we are visiting several possible models for Agraria—including Joel Salatin’s Polyface Farm in Virginia, Mark Shepard’s New Forest Farm in Wisconsin, and the Land Institute in Kansas.

Collaborative Opportunities
We are fortunate to live in a rich agricultural and educational landscape. We’ve been working with Central State University, an historically black university and recent land grant institution, Antioch College, and regional farmers, on grants related to organic transition and farming internships.

We are also exploring research and educational activities with the Yellow Springs Schools, a national leader in Project Based learning (PBL). This spring we partnered with a third-grade Mills Lawn class on a soil PBL activity—planting underpants (yes, underpants) in the schoolyard to assess soil microbial activity.

OEFFA—the Ohio Ecological Food and Farming Association—has served in an advisory and cheerleading role in our soils work, and we look forward to research, education, and grant partnerships with this visionary organization.

With funding from the William Beale family, a biochar pilot project could find its culmination in the use of biochar-infused compost on Agraria and partnering farms.

We also look forward to collaborations with the Soil Carbon Coalition, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Rocky Mountain Seed Alliance, Healthy Soils Australia, Mitraniketan in India, and citizen scientists.

Our research into soil fertility, perennial crops, and agro-ecosystems also interweaves with larger questions of community economics—creating strategies to help conventional farmers transition to healthier practices, and urban gardeners to build healthy soil. We’ll be exploring ways that our work on Agraria can inform and support our Springfield food system work, for which we were recently awarded two Americorps VISTAS.

Getting Involved
Buying Agraria is just the first step of our multi-faceted journey, and we’d love to share next steps with you. A charrette on May 20th was an opportunity for friends and neighbors to share their ideas about educational, research, and outreach opportunities.

We’ll also be hosting volunteer days throughout the summer and fall—and could use your help with trail clearing, tree planting, yardwork and painting.

We’re hosting a celebration dinner with music and storytelling on Saturday, August 19th. And we’ll be hosting farm tours and workshops during our Economics of Happiness Conference on October 20th–21st.

Donations of all shapes and sizes are welcome! We need a slew of shovels, a tractor, other farm and garden equipment, small and large investments, etc. Our Indiegogo campaign is designed to raise funds for early farm expenses, including our second cover crop planting, our second round of soil testing, and farm fencing.

Please consider an investment in Agraria. Early funding will enable us to plan for the long term. For more information on how you can help, please call or email us, or visit the Agraria link on the Community Solutions website. We look forward to growing this dream with you.
At Community Solutions we have begun to inventory examples of regional collaboration, multi-community initiatives in our Greater Miami Valley region of Ohio. How are organizations helping communities cope with change? This information will be shared on a Regional Resilience website that is under construction. We have found interest in convening a periodic Regional Community Roundtable to share our stories of success and challenges.

This undertaking seems historically fitting as our organization name, the Arthur Morgan Institute for Community Solutions, identifies us with Morgan’s ambitious watershed work as director of the Miami Conservancy District. However, our concern is broader than preventing physical floods. We see shifts in the climate, the economy and social health that threaten the region.

We suspect that the worst is yet to come and just as no individual stands alone, no community can survive and thrive on its own. Colleges and universities in the region, county soil and water conservation districts and a small network of conservation advocacy non-profits have begun the work of connecting stewardship of the physical region with the social and economic changes that are underway.

By buying a farm to serve as the home for a Center for Regenerative Agriculture, Community Solutions has taken a dramatic step in its service to the region. In addition to research on soils, the Center will be a facility for research, education about and demonstration of best practices in land use, community economy, decentralized generation of electricity and social resilience. This will be an educational resource for SW Ohio, in particular.

[Establishing a land base for our research and education mission makes Community Solutions more like our sister organization Mitraniketan that Arthur Morgan encouraged and supported starting in 1956. Mitraniketan school and People’s College now has Indian government status as the Farm Science Centre for their region of Kerala state.]

Our new farm Center puts a land based emphasis on our regional resilience work. Regional foodshed analysis, local food production, issues of storm runoff, distributed energy and energy efficient buildings now will be less abstract. We will continue to develop relationships with area universities, non-profits and local agencies, looking for stories of their successes to share with others. This networking will inevitably develop with a connection to our projects at the farm Center.

So many towns across America have been like the legendary frog in a pot of water slowly heating up until cooked. Circumstances have changed slowly enough that there was not a broad sense of crisis. Different regions have faced varying circumstances, yet now there is a wide spread sense of malaise. In our corner of the Rust Belt, the Dayton and Springfield, Ohio, metropolitan region, the news headlines are full of deaths from drug overdoses. That is the extreme, a symptom of widespread hopelessness.

There are many factors at play here. Automation and global competition have reduced the number of manufacturing jobs. Agriculture has been consolidated and focused on commodity production for a national and international market. A century of industrial land use has begun to show chemical residues in all of our surface water and increasingly in our groundwater. A widely mobile population no longer shares decades or generations of memories and experiences that provide the basis of neighborly trust.

Yet most people in this region, as most people in the world, are coping in their daily lives. It is just that so many are not. We have an elaborate sophisticated economy that supports social interactions at the workplace, in sports and other recreation, at church and, yes, on the internet. Yet those who do not have a job or a supporting network of friends and family are struggling.

Step back and examine our daily system. It is very fragile, dependent on transport of materials and energy over great distances. Most people drive a car to work. We drive to see family and friends. We tend to forget or ignore the times when there was a regional power outage, a gas shortage or spike in cost, the hundred year flood, the devastating tornado.

Where our energy sources are close by, where food is produced locally, our communities will be more likely to survive the unexpected crisis.

In the long run those more dramatic crises may be less threatening than the slow longer term changes. Just as the frog in a pot of water would jump out if the heat spiked, it enjoys swimming in the gently warming water. Wake up.
Regional Foodshed – Julia Honchel

A regional foodshed assessment workshop was held at Community Solutions in early April with workshop leader, Brian Williams. Williams discussed his work developing the Mid-Ohio Regional Foodshed Plan. The plan included an assessment of current food production, the market for local foods, and an outline of what would be needed to increase local food production and consumption in a region. Community Solutions has tentative plans to perform a similar assessment for the SW Ohio region. Work has been done identifying stakeholders, developing survey materials and building partnerships.

Making Local Food More Accessible – Julia and Tim Honchel

When talking about local food, accessibility frequently rises to the surface of conversation. Whether it is monetary access to fresh local food, farmers’ access to a large enough consumer base, consumers’ access at a time and place that fits their schedule, or restaurants and institutions overcoming logistical barriers to procure local foods – access is often part of the picture. Julia Honchel (Food Systems Analyst) and Tim Honchel (Community Economics Project Manager) have been working on various projects to make local foods more accessible in this region.

After months of collaboration with Michele Burns (Yellow Springs Farmers Market Manager), Clayton Genth (Development Assistant at Homefull), and the Yellow Springs Credit Union, Community Solutions has finally secured EBT equipment for the Yellow Springs Farmers Market and a Springfield farm stand! In other words, food stamps may now be used to buy produce at both of these locations. Consumers simply use their EBT card to purchase tokens, which can be exchanged for food at the vendors’ stands. When the vendor leaves, they may exchange their tokens for cash. EBT processing will launch Saturday, May 6, 2017 and remain available throughout the year as long as the markets are open. Efforts are currently underway to establish the Double Up Food Bucks program at these markets. The program would provide matching funds so that a $1 EBT token could buy $2 worth of food.

Community Solutions is also looking to establish an online food hub software to streamline local food procurement for area institutions. The project is in its early stages, but in time could include easy identification of local producers, facilitated online transactions, and coordinated aggregation and distribution for large orders. It could also enable online ordering for farmer’s markets.

Miami Valley Community Organizing Conference – Jonna Johnson

The Miami Valley Community Organizing Conference was held March 18 at the Central State University (CSU) Dayton Center. Sixty activists gathered from Dayton and the wider region to share experiences and reflect on ways of being more effective organizers. This was a collaboration of Community Solutions, CSU and the Dayton Community Action Network that began a year ago with a brown bag lunch that led to sessions on organizing at the Community Solutions fall 2016 conference.

Clay Dixon, former Dayton Mayor, full of wonderful observations, finished the conference day with a few of his signature observations, including that community organizing efforts often look similar to the conference—the day begins with a full house, eager eyes, steady hands; as the day wears on a few people duck out, a fresh face joins in, our eyes are less sprightly and our hands are tired. And yet, we fight on.
Reece Freeman, who announced that she is moving to New Orleans for a prodigious chef gig, explained that evaluation, real-life data-based reflection, is habitually under-utilized and therefore becomes the key piece of the puzzle—why do we ignore this piece? — and she fervently advises that we do not ignore systematic and meaningful reflection of our efforts, throughout the whole process (beginning, middle, later that night, re-beginning, and so on).

Darryl Fairchild’s deep experience in organizing Dayton showed through, particularly when he was asked the questions everyone asks but rarely get answered with the incisive know-how that deep experience and honest reflection can offer. Such as, how? Sure, we should build relationships, but how? Sure, we need to strategize, but how? Sure, we want to take considered action, but how? It takes a lot of gumption, intelligence (emotional and otherwise), and wherewithal to build, reflect upon, and share (accessibly) relevant experiences like his.

Karil Sampson presented one of my favorite tools – the why game. Young people are so right to ask why. And we are doing them, and the planet, a disservice when we shut down that impulse. Getting to the core, the root, the crux is key to most if not all of life’s wonders – including organizing efforts, healing historic wounds, moving forward down healthy and just paths. Keep asking why!!!

Amaha Sellassie delved into my absolute favorite piece of this puzzle, my absolute favorite piece of life on earth—Relationship. Trust. Connection. I wonder, are we able to reframe the grand narrative, can we get to the place where we are building just relationships, making healthy connections, striving for trust as ends unto themselves? It is my hope. It keeps me going. It is that possibility that keeps me fighting on.

Naim Edwards began our day with a reflection on the immense sacrifice that it takes to be successful advocates, allies, accomplices for peace on earth. I want to include a special note of appreciation for Naim’s sacrifice. While it was not 381 agonizing days, the sacrifices that helped make the Montgomery Bus Boycott a success as Naim highlighted that morning, he was willing to ride a bus [wonder what seat he sat in?] from Detroit, put up with a Community Solutions gathering, sleep in unknown quarters, prepare a talk, facilitate four small group discussions, and more, without monetary compensation. Hopefully he was able to gather other forms of compensation; I know I am enhanced for his sacrifices.

Our all-volunteer force included:
Basim Blunt, WYSO Community Voices Program
Isaac DeLamatre, Antioch College Kitchens
Clay Dixon, Dayton Mayor 1987-1993 and Organizing Collaborative
Naim Edwards, Voices for Earth Justice in Detroit
Darryl Fairchild, Chaplain Services at Dayton Children’s Hospital
Reece Freeman, former Sinclair Community College Professor of Sociology
Michael Gaines, Central State University Dayton
Jonna Johnson, Community Solutions and former Highlander Center staff
Brian Keith, Educator and Organizer in Springfield, OH
Karil Sampson, Dayton Community Action Network
Amaha Sellassie, Center for Applied Social Issues at Sinclair and Dayton Human Relations Council
Eric Smith, Rural Action
Arlinda Vaughn, Dayton Community Action Network
Kat Walter, Yellow Springs Resilience Network

A follow up program on Project Management was held May 17 and plans have begun for a second Miami Valley community organizing conference in 2018.
Economics of Happiness 2017 Conference
October 20-21, Yellow Springs, OH

Join us as we explore the creation of vibrant, local economies with a radically different paradigm—a paradigm that focuses on meeting real human and ecological needs through our ties to community and nature – through an ‘economics of happiness’.

We’re gathering internationally-recognized leaders from the localization movement together with local leaders and activists for two days of plenary talks, panel discussions, workshops and tours on the global-to-local theme. Topics include the economics of local food systems, promoting local investment, social impact investing, workers cooperatives, mutual aid networks, closed-loop local systems, local currencies, and working together to create, as Charles Eisenstein writes, the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.

Highlights include tours of Agraria fields and barn, a preview of Jim Merkel’s film Saving Walden’s World and a closing performance by the World House Choir.

Co-sponsored with Local Futures of East Hartwick, Vermont, and Totnes, England

Keynotes include:

Author and filmmaker Helena Norberg Hodge, a pioneer of the local economy movement. Through writing and public lectures on three continents, she has been promoting an economics of personal, social and ecological well-being for more than 30 years. Helena’s seminal book, Ancient Futures, has been described as “an inspirational classic,” providing insightful solutions to the unintended impacts of development, based on her decades living and working in Ladakh, India. Together with the film of the same title, it has been translated into more than 40 languages, and sold about half a million copies. She is also the producer and co-director of the award-winning film, The Economics of Happiness, and the co-author of Bringing the Food Economy Home and From the Ground Up: Rethinking Industrial Agriculture.


Charles Eisenstein, a speaker and writer focusing on themes of human culture and identity. He is the author of several books, most recently Sacred Economics and The More Beautiful World our Hearts Know is Possible. His background includes a degree in mathematics and philosophy from Yale, a decade in Taiwan as a translator, and stints as a college instructor, a yoga teacher, and a construction worker. He currently writes and speaks full-time. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina with his wife and four children.
Toward a Soil Conservation Corps – Peter Bane

Excerpts from the article *Tough Thinking for Urgent Action: Climate Cooling Front and Center*

(First published in *Permaculture Design Magazine.*)

If, as we believe all thoughtful persons must now recognize, overheating of the planet is an existential crisis for humanity, then we must ask, are there answers to this challenge? And why do we not adopt them now?

We have powerful, simple, and inexpensive solutions available to repair land, stop erosion, build soil, and regenerate water cycles, vegetation, and biodiversity.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt put millions to work through the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration to repair landscapes and infrastructure across the United States during the New Deal era of the 30s. Many of the earthen structures: swales, terraces, infiltration pits and ponds, as well as the bridges, culverts, forest trails, and more that these agencies built are still in place, working quietly to regulate stream flow and improve conditions for people and wildlife. More recently, the Slovak Republic undertook a pilot program of waterworks to similar purposes in 2010-2011.

Nor are microengineering works the only approach, though these are directly and progressively restorative in damaged lands, and once installed can work passively for decades where no agriculture is presently sustainable. Where farming is active, cover crops, zero-tillage implements, elimination of fallow, intensive rotational grazing, polycultures, and a suite of agroforestry techniques (sylvopasture, alleycropping, and more) are available to improve yields and nutrition, build soil carbon, eliminate erosion, enhance profit, and support ecosystem services such as pollination, microclimate, and amenity.

All these methods are proven and available, but are too little adopted because of institutional inertia, resistance by some corporate interests, and a lack of information by land managers.

Extensive grassroots networks are familiar with land repair tools and have the capacity to expand these practices rapidly by training teams of local workers.

The concepts behind restoration waterworks are simple and the engineering required for success can be conveyed with simple models and diagrams. Initial oversight of crews can lead to team self-management within a short time. The diverse solutions implemented in the Slovakian experience testify to the wisdom that there is no one right way—a thousand flowers may bloom, or a thousand check dams, each different, may leak and hold at the same time—and all contribute to the wellbeing of the land. Specialized skills such as the use of earth-moving machinery, chainsaws, and the careful laying of masonry, are either widely distributed or can be organized in most regions. The scale of work supports amateur efforts, which can be both varied and surprisingly capable.

The knowledge of intensive rotational grazing, of the timing and installation of agroforestry systems, and the specialized equipment needed for zero-tillage cultivation of crops are also well developed and widespread at this point, though still not practiced by enough farmers. A key insight from the Holistic Management movement, inspired by Allan Savory, lies in the development of self-help cells or small groups of practitioners in a region who can provide mutual support and regular learning to each other based on empirical findings of greatest relevance.

Drawing on these grassroots networks to stimulate the spread of skills and practice is equivalent to the decentralization of operational decisions by the US and British forces during WWII. While the war effort as a whole was directed with great precision from headquarters locations and at the highest strategic level, the solving of logistical problems, which were immense, fell on G.I.s and officers in every imaginable situation on the ground. The ingenuity, resilience, and positive attitude of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and support personnel made possible adaptive responses that were decisive as a whole.

A similar urgency and reliance on the good sense and goodwill of ordinary people everywhere is now required to mobilize a full effort by humanity to secure its own survival.
Saving Walden’s World: Filming in Slovenia – Jim Merkel

The documentary film collaboration with Community Solutions previously titled “The 100-Year Plan” now has a working title of “Saving Walden’s World.” In 2016 I reported on our filming in Cuba.

After attending a Degrowth Conference in Budapest, Hungary, last year, I boarded a train to Slovenia, one of the countries highlighted in the film. The beat of train wheels upon steel rails accompanied me as we headed west out of Budapest toward the Slovenian countryside. At the border, sagging rooflines gave way to neat homesteads, vegetable gardens and orchards lining the tracks and beyond. The train snaked along sparkling rivers into canyons with lush forests clinging to mountainsides, through villages, and past people at work splitting and stacking wood or scything and drying corn and hay.

Once in the capital, Ljubljana, I bussed to Robin Turk’s home to borrow a bike for three weeks. Robin has cycled in 50 countries and, through the organization “Warm Showers,” opens his home to cyclists. In the morning my 25-pound backpack’s contents of camera and personal gear were divided into pannier bags, and I was off.

Ljubljana has earned the title of “European Green Capital” for its sustainable practices. The inner city is car-free, and tourists are drawn to its vibrant cafes and quiet streets. A zero waste program is in place. Forested green spaces surround the city. Community gardens, co-ops and the use of renewable energy are increasing.

Gaja Brecelj, who works with Umanoterra, an NGO focused on sustainability, explains: “It is not just living within the planetary boundaries, but it’s also, as a society, how we can be in solidarity, respect each other.” And, she adds, referring to the refugee crisis, “how we can be open to people who need to move or are forced to move.”
“Ten years ago everyone knew we could go anywhere by car,” she said, noting that there was resistance in the beginning to making the town center car-free. “That’s why this strategy of doing it bit by bit, was very good. You take one small road, you close it… ahh, people would complain, but it’s not so bad.” Every year they broadened it and now, Gaja says, “nobody wants to go back.”

Slovenia’s 11-acre per capita ecofootprint is well below that of the US (17 acres). The country also has a lower infant mortality rate, lower gender pay-gap, and less poverty while having higher literacy and more women in politics.

Živa Kavak Gobbo is the president of a sustainability group call FOCUS. She loads her four-year-old boy into a child carrier on her bike, drops him off at a government-funded childcare center, and cycles in to work on bike lanes. When asked to describe the safety net for young women, Živa responded: “We have good access to education. We have good access to health care. The healthcare is free, for us and for the children. If we decide we want to be mothers, we have access to all the doctors we need. We have a one-year maternity leave, so you can have your child, you can breast feed and then go back to work.” It is common for grandparents to care for the children during year two. However, childcare is free and available to anyone who needs it.

Živa continues: “If you don’t want to be a mother, you can still use contraceptives, which are for free. You can abort. It is also for free. And it’s not a taboo. This is something that we have and we want to keep as a woman’s right. I think women are strong enough to demand this right, to take care and decide about your own body. I don’t see why a society should decide what is going on with my body. I mean, it’s me who is the mother, and it’s me carrying the child for nine months. Being pregnant and having a child, if I don’t want the child—is it good for the child? No.”

I met with Dr. Vesna Leslosek, the Dean of Postgraduate Studies at the University of Ljubljana, who focuses on gender and welfare. “To control your reproduction is very important,” she said. This gives you the power to control yourself. If you don’t control how many children you will have and when you will have them, then you do not have a control over your life.” Slovenia’s abortion rate is half that of the U.S., and the teen pregnancy rate is 12 per 1000. In the U.S. it is 57 per 1000.

Back in the U.S., salaries, on average, are higher and taxes are lower. But those with lower incomes are struggling. These folks work several jobs. Put your kids through college? Tough. Dental care? On your own.

Our youth are saddled with an average of $37,172 of student loan debt per student (college class of 2016). If your parents can’t pay, or don’t have a home to remortgage, you could work nights. It isn’t easy. Along comes Romeo—handsome, nice car—you know the story. In Maine, 58 percent of women without college degrees are single moms. Only 12 percent of women who graduate college become single moms.

What does all this have to do with a sustainable planet? As the status of women rises, more go to college. They have fewer, healthier children later in life, which eases population pressures, but more importantly, this increases the quality of life for the child and mother. Low infant mortality rates could be considered a better measure than GDP of how well a society is doing. In Slovenia, 2.9 children die per 1,000 born. In Cuba, one of the other nations featured in “Saving Walden’s World,” the rate is 4.3. The U.S. stands at 6.7.

It is clear that in the land of too much, millions are struggling unnecessarily. For my son, Walden, and his generation’s sake, I don’t have the luxury to do nothing. It feels more necessary each day to share the stories through this film of people and places that are showing the way toward a more sustainable and just world.
As a nonprofit organization, dedicated to providing knowledge and practices for community-based, low-carbon living, we depend on your support. Please consider giving a tax-deductible contribution.

To receive regular email communications, write us at info@communitysolution.org.

© 2016 Arthur Morgan Institute for Community Solutions. All rights reserved.