Art Of Soil

A guide to community initiatives connecting soil, art and food

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I. Introduction

"Mum! So that means soil is the most precious part of the world!"
Noe, age 6, Art of Soil participant

These words were spoken during a conversation inspired by Art of Soil. They capture, very simply, what became our starting point: soil feeds us and gives us life, and yet most of the time we don't give it the attention it deserves.

Art of Soil was an invitation to look at soil differently: not only as the ground in which plants grow, but also as a living ecosystem, a record of a place's history and the source of what we eat. We wanted to tell the story of soil through art and creating together. The idea seemed unusual, but thanks to the food cooperative community, it was one we could bring to life.

We invited five cooperatives from different regions of Poland to take part. In each of them, the local community worked with an artist on its own story about soil. Each group began somewhere different: in Silesia, with its industrial past and agricultural present; in the Lublin region, with putting down roots and the fire in the Solska Forest; in Warsaw, with how far city dwellers are from the land; in Podbeskidzie, with



the layers of soil; and in Kashubia, with the bonds between soil, grain and bread.

The result was five very different works. But throughout the creative process, the journey mattered to us just as much: the meetings, conversations, experiments, shared decisions, changes of plan, setbacks and discoveries. We learned about soil, but also about collaboration and how to organise the work so that everyone could bring their own experience and skills to it.

In this guide, we describe how to organise a similar initiative in your own community, so that you can discover your own story of soil and tell it together. We have gathered the methods that worked, the problems we ran into and the solutions we found along the way.

We hope our experience will help you get started. And that, as a result, more people will be reminded of the most precious part of the world.

Why now?

Soil is full of life. It is a complex ecosystem of minerals, organic matter, water, air and countless organisms, from bacteria and fungi to earthworms and insects. When it is in good condition, it nourishes plants, retains water, stores carbon and helps us weather both drought and sudden downpours. Its condition therefore affects not only farming, but also the climate, nature and our everyday lives.

Almost all of the world's food depends, directly or indirectly, on soil. It is home to more than a quarter of all species on Earth, though most of them are invisible to the naked eye. It is thanks to their work that soil stays alive and can feed us. At the same time, Europe is losing soil, and what remains is declining in quality due to erosion, building development, pollution and falling humus levels. Restoring fertile soil takes years, yet it can be destroyed in just a few seasons.*

It is all one interconnected system, and cooperatives hold a special place within it. Here, the journey from soil to plate is not anonymous. It becomes a relationship between the people who work the land and those who eat what grows from it. That's why we are calling on you to act! Ask your farmer how they look after their soil. Bring a jar of soil from your own garden to your next meeting. Set aside one afternoon for clay, paper or fabric, and see what comes of it. Every conversation like this makes soil part of our lives and brings it into the circle of things that matter

* Joint Research Centre, "Healthy soils, a necessity for the EU".

to us. Today we are largely cut off from nature, and deep connections grow out of real, first-hand experiences. We need these connections, because it's easy to forget that food doesn't come from the shop, and that caring for soil means caring for our future. When one Art of Soil participant was asked what she would say to someone unsure about joining in, she answered simply: "Experience it."



II. What was Art of Soil?

Art of Soil grew out of the experience of food cooperatives. Our day-to-day work revolves around food: we look for good products, get to know the people who make them, organise orders and think about how our choices affect people and the environment. We rarely go one level deeper, down to the soil where it all begins.

We wanted to draw attention to it. We were curious what would happen if we combined knowledge about soil with art, the experience of local communities and collective artistic work. Would it then be easier to understand why healthy soil matters, and to feel that its condition is connected to our everyday lives?

We invited five food cooperatives from different parts of Poland to take part in Art of Soil. Each one formed a local team: a coordinator, an artist, a soil expert and cooperative members. In some places they were joined by farmers, gardeners, children and people who had never been involved with the cooperative before.

From the start, it was important to us that the activities looked different in each place. We didn't arrive with ready-made workshop plans or designs for artworks to produce. Each group started from its own surroundings: local history, the landscape, the problems facing local soil and people's relationship with food.



Depending on needs and resources, there were meetings with people who work with soil (scientists and practitioners alike), visits to farms and gardens, open events for local residents and art workshops. Participants touched and examined the soil, brought samples from their own gardens, checked its structure, talked about growing methods and translated all of this into the language of art.

We worked with clay, paper, fabric, seeds, plants, natural pigments, coal, charcoal, metal and reclaimed materials. Ideas often changed along the way. Sometimes the direction was set by an unexpected event, the weather or a material that behaved differently than we had expected. Sometimes a group had to find a compromise between the artist's vision and its own need to have a say in decisions. The end result mattered to us, but so did everything that happened in the process.



We used art to ask questions, stir emotions and build a shared experience, not to decorate lessons about soil. Knowledge about soil, in turn, helped us better understand the materials, the local stories and how the condition of the land shapes the food that ends up on our tables.

Art of Soil was also a test of whether a cooperative can be more than a place to shop together: a place for learning, creativity, meeting farmers and talking about how we want our food to be produced and how we want to care for our surroundings.

III. What if you don’t have the funding?

We know what it’s like to read a guide like this and think: great, someone had funding, a team, materials and the means to invite experts – but how are we supposed to do something similar without any money?

It’s true that Art of Soil was made possible by external funding, and we won’t pretend that didn’t make a difference. Nor are we claiming that everything can be replicated on the same scale without a budget. Do it your own way, within your means. You can start with one meeting, one place and whatever your community already has. Perhaps one of these ideas will work for you:

- find out what skills and interests the people in your cooperative or group have – maybe someone is involved in art, crafts, gardening, education or facilitating meetings;
- consider whether preparing the activity could count as a shift or another form of member contribution – provided, of course, that the person taking it on agrees;
- check whether there is an artist or a maker among you, or someone who enjoys working with people and materials;
- organise paid sessions, or ones with a whip-round to cover materials and a fee for the person leading them – on a small scale, this is often the simplest solution;
- ask your suppliers – a local farmer can talk about soil during a farm visit, a pick-your-own day, a day of working together in the field or when orders are being collected;
- look for a partner who can provide space, materials or equipment, help with promotion or cover a small fee – this could be a community centre, library, school, local organisation, city council, municipality or district office;
- tie the activity in with an event that’s happening anyway: a cooperative celebration, a market, a picnic, a farm visit, a gardening workshop or a neighbourhood get-together;
- look for small grants, local micro-grants, district funds or programmes that support grassroots initiatives.

We are not suggesting that artists, experts or farmers should be expected to work for free. If someone is going to prepare and lead an activity, agree openly from

the outset on what you can offer them: a fee, an exchange, help with other work or another form of reciprocity that the whole group agrees on.

Scale isn't what matters most here. What counts is that people come together, touch the soil and look at it a little differently than usual.



IV. How to run your own initiative – step by step

There's no single blueprint for running an initiative like this. In each of the five regions we worked differently, with different people, materials and resources. Still, there are a few steps that can help you get from the first conversation to working together.

You don't have to follow them in exactly this order. Sometimes an idea for a material will come up before the theme, and the person who knows about soil will only join halfway through. Treat these steps as signposts, not an instruction manual.

Step 1: Find your own theme

Don't start by asking, "What can we make out of clay?" or "What kind of work do we want to create?" First, talk about the place where you live.

Ask yourselves:

- What does the soil in your area remember?
- What threatens it?
- Does this place have an agricultural, industrial or gardening history?
- What grows from this land today, and who looks after it?
- What is your relationship with local food?
- Is there a story, an event or a problem you'd like to talk about?

In Silesia, the starting point was the meeting of industry and agriculture. In Warsaw, it was the distance between city dwellers and the land, and the journey from soil to food. In the Lublin region, the fire in the Solska Forest changed the course of the group's work.

Don't force yourselves to find a universal theme. The best one is the one that truly relates to your place.

Step 2: Put together a small team

To begin with, you don't need twenty participants. What matters more is having people who genuinely want to give some of their time and take responsibility for the shared work. Ideally, your team will include:

- someone to look after organisation, scheduling and communication;

- someone to lead the creative work;
- someone who knows something about soil, farming or local nature;
- a few people who want to take part in the whole process.

One person can take on several roles. In Gliwice and Warsaw, the coordinators had soil expertise themselves. Elsewhere, the knowledge came from farmers, gardeners or scientists. Titles don't matter here – what's important is that the group brings together different experiences.

Step 3: Agree on a realistic scale

Before you start, answer a few questions honestly:

- How many meetings are we able to prepare?
- How much time can we put in between them?
- Do we want to create a small object, a one-off event, or a larger installation or piece?
- Where will we work and store our materials?
- Will the finished work need to be transported anywhere afterwards?
- How much money do we have, and what can we get for free or borrow?

It's better to create a smaller work together than to plan a huge installation that one person will end up having to finish alone. The scale of the work should reflect what the group can actually do, not the ambitions set out at the start (more on this in the section "The hidden work you don't see in photos" in Chapter VII).





Step 4: Meet the soil

Before you start creating, try to genuinely engage with the subject. You could, for example:

- visit a farmer;
- go to a garden, a field, a patch of wasteland or a riverbank;
- bring soil samples from your own gardens and balcony planters;
- examine the structure or pH of the soil;
- take a look at what lives beneath its surface;
- talk about growing methods and how food is produced;
- collect local materials, colours, plants and stories.

In Gliwice, asking people to bring their own soil sample turned out to be one of the best ideas. Soil stopped being an abstraction, because everyone was examining the earth in which their own vegetables, flowers or trees grew. In Lublin, a trip to Łukawica played an important role: a walk around a permaculture garden and gathering silt, clay, plants and charcoal from a bonfire.

You'll find a ready-to-use plan for a simple workshop in which participants test the pH of their own soil in Chapter X.



Step 5: Get to know the materials and experiment

Don't expect your first attempt to go straight into the finished work. Give yourselves time to touch, mix, test and make mistakes.

Natural materials often behave differently than we expect. Dyes fade, paper takes a long time to dry, clay cracks, and a structure that looks good in a sketch turns out to be unstable once assembled. That doesn't make the workshop a failure – often, this is exactly when the group really starts looking for a solution together.

Prepare a space for free experimentation, but also simple, concrete tasks for those who feel uncomfortable facing a "blank page".

Step 6: Bring the individual pieces together

A shared work doesn't mean everyone does the same thing all the time. In Bielsko-Biała, each person made their own sheets of paper, which were then combined into a three-dimensional installation. In Bytów, individual ceramic pieces came together to form a shared mosaic. In Warsaw, each workshop added new parts of a table: a soil profile, dishes, napkins and cutlery.

It's important that participants know how their work connects to the rest. Also

leave room for shared decisions: what we choose, what we let go of, how we arrange the elements and what the finished work should mean.

Step 7: Test, present and bring the process to a close

Before the public presentation, do a trial assembly. Check whether the work stands securely, how many people are needed to set it up, how to transport it and what might get damaged.

Also prepare a short description. Without it, viewers will see a beautiful object but won't learn the story of the people and the soil behind it.

Consider pairing the opening with a talk, a meeting with a farmer, a shared meal or a simple activity for visitors. Once it's all over, make time for a group conversation:

- What did we create?
- What did we learn about soil?
- What happened between us?
- What was difficult?
- What would we do differently?
- Do we want to carry anything forward?

The finished work matters, but it's the answers to these questions that will show you what really happened while you were working together.



V. Five places, five different paths

All the groups started with soil, but each one ended up somewhere different. They differed in their local histories, the materials available, the number of participants, the artists' experience and what happened along the way. The examples below aren't templates to copy. Rather, they show how a shared starting point can be adapted to a particular place and its people.

Bielsko-Biała: going beneath the surface

Born of the soil, returned to the soil

Bielsko-Biała lies at the foot of the Beskid Mountains. The mountains and forests are close by, but there are few fields, and the land can be difficult to farm. The Beskidzka Paczka cooperative decided to look inside the soil: at its layers, its structure and the life we usually don't see. Their point of reference was the local podzolic soil.

The meetings were attended mainly by cooperative members and their friends. At first, the group wanted to show the contrast between healthy soil and land damaged by pesticides and herbicides. Their main material was paper they made by hand from waste paper. Participants dyed the pulp with red cabbage, beetroot



and turmeric, and into the wet sheets they embedded seeds, leaves, grasses and flowers gathered on walks.

Over the following sessions they made traditional sheets, delicate openwork forms from paper pulp and anthotype prints, which are images created by exposing turmeric-coated paper to light. The paper required patience: the final colour and appearance of the sheets only became visible after a few days.

Along the way, the original concept began to change. The group found it much easier, and far more joyful, to create colourful layers of healthy, living soil than images of its degradation. So the participants began telling the story of the beauty and diversity of the world beneath our feet. No one planned this shift – it grew out of what the group needed during the sessions. The idea of showing damaged soil didn't disappear entirely: the group kept open the possibility of a performance in which part of the installation would be "sprayed" and lose its colours. The coordinator admits, however, that she wouldn't be able to bring herself to do it, as she has grown too attached to every sheet.

The sheets were joined into chains and hung on a supporting mesh. The result is a large, three-dimensional installation that you can step into like a small creature living between the layers of soil. The materials are delicate and biodegradable. This is part of what the work is about, but it also makes installing, transporting and displaying it outdoors quite a challenge.

Key takeaways

- gathering plants before a workshop means the process starts even before the session begins;
- you don't always have to stick to the original concept – what the group most enjoys creating sometimes says more than the idea written down at the start;
- natural materials need testing, time to dry and space for storage;
- turmeric anthotypes are beautiful but short-lived – the print fades in the light; for elements that will hang in the sun, cyanotype is a better choice;
- match the scale of the work to the number of hours it will really take: in Bielsko-Biała, on top of around 30 hours of workshops, the artist spent roughly another 100 hours preparing additional sheets and the supporting mesh.

Bytów and Kashubia: soil, root, rye and bread

The fabric of life – a collective mosaic

In Kashubia, the starting point was a set of motifs closely tied to the place and to everyday life: soil, root, grain, the ear of rye and bread. What grows from the soil and feeds us became intertwined with questions about memory, tradition and community.

The work was divided into stages. First, the cooperative explained what it is and how it works, and announced the project. Then the group worked out the theme together – some participants count this “brainstorm” among the most valuable moments of the whole project. The next step was a series of ceramics workshops: first the mosaic pieces were made, then individual forms, and finally the works were glazed and raku-fired, a technique that produces unpredictable colours and surface effects.

Alongside this, Dr Bartosz Głąb led short sessions on soil: its biology, chemistry and structure. Each one was paired with one of the clay workshops, so knowledge came in small portions as the work progressed.

The result is a shared mosaic made up of separate ceramic pieces. It tells of the relationship between people and the land, the cycle of nature, and bread as a fundamental common good of the community.



In the installation, soil is both the place where life happens and the ground without which nothing could develop. It holds the roots without which nothing would grow above the surface. It is also where life ends and begins anew. The work grows out of a respect for the land that is close to the ideas of regenerative agriculture and ecology.

For the group, the mosaic itself is an image of collective action that doesn't erase the individual. Each participant put their own associations into it, and from these differences a single fabric emerged. Everyone keeps their own character while drawing strength from the whole community, connected like mycelium. What this collective invites people into next is up to the group.

Key takeaways

- local tradition can be a good starting point, as long as you don't treat it as decoration but ask what it means today;
- dividing soil knowledge into biology, chemistry and structure brings order to the topic and lets you return to it at later sessions;
- a mosaic is a good way to bring individual pieces together into a shared work; it's also worth naming why you're doing this – in Bytów, conversations over the clay turned to the collective, community and shared responsibility;
- firing ceramics requires its own time, equipment and an experienced person, as well as accepting that not every piece will survive.



Gliwice: Silesia's two black diamonds

Salt of the black earth

Silesia is associated with mines, steelworks and industry. Yet in the rural areas around Gliwice, cereals, vegetables and fruit are still grown. Both histories meet in the local soil. Industry has left behind land subsidence, disrupted water conditions and heavy metals, while farming is a reminder that this same land still feeds people.

The TOMATA Food Cooperative in Gliwice decided to tell the story of Silesia's two black diamonds: the coal hidden underground and the humus that forms on the surface.

Arriving at a shared concept wasn't easy. The artist came to the first meeting with a clear idea, while the participants wanted a real say in the work and its meaning. On top of that came the technical side: the large installation had to be stable, yet also possible to dismantle and transport. Only a long conversation made it possible to bring together the artist's vision, the local history and the group's need to share in the decisions.

At the following sessions in the studio, the participants shaped two large craters out of clay: one symbolising the mines, the other the steelworks. After firing, they covered the first with coal dust and the second with iron filings. The artist made hanging plant pots, and the group spent a long time choosing glazes for them so



that the colours moved from the browns of polluted soil to vibrant green. The metal frame, made from scrap, was built by the father of one of the participants.

An important breakthrough came when another participant, an engineer by profession, worked out the dimensions of the frame and how it would be assembled. It turned out that the knowledge needed to create the work didn't belong only to the artist and the expert – it was also within the group itself. The group then did a trial assembly of the whole piece in a garden in Ostropa.

The artistic work went hand in hand with soil activities. At the Targ na Zielonym market, during the "Zasadź się na Zielonym" event, the cooperative ran a stall with a short talk on soil pH. Many people brought soil samples from their gardens and tested the pH on the spot. Two weeks later, members of the TOMATA cooperative met in the garden in Ostropa. Everyone brought soil from their own vegetable bed; we examined its structure and talked about how to sustain life in the soil. We also presented the finished installation.

The finished work combines clay, coal, steel, wood and living plants. It shows the wounds industry has left in the land, and that nature is able to regenerate.

Key takeaways

- before your first meeting with the artist, talk among yourselves and put into words what you want to say as a group;
- a local contrast can become a very powerful theme for the work;
- find out what participants can do from the very start – the solution to a technical problem may already be within the group;
- a soil sample of your own makes knowledge about soil much less abstract;
- do a trial assembly before transporting the work and presenting it in public.



Lublin: a banner that grew out of the process

A banner for the Solska Forest

The Lublin region has some of the most fertile soils in Poland, but it also faces erosion, drought, water shortages and falling humus levels. The workshops took place in Lublin, but also outside the city. They were attended by members and supporters of the cooperative, adults and children alike. Some people were there from the start, while others joined along the way.

The first meeting was supposed to begin with a walk, but freezing rain and cold weather put paid to those plans. Instead of going out into the field, there was a long conversation over tea in a small, intimate group. We talked about relationships, care and underground networks: roots, mycelium and the connections between people.

At the next meeting, in Łukawica, the group explored a permaculture garden, gathered silt, clay, plants and charcoal from a bonfire, and tested how soil can become a creative material. The day ended with a shared feast around the bonfire. Later, back in Lublin, participants dyed fabrics with soil, vegetables, fruit and spices, embroidered, sewed on ropes and created three-dimensional forms resembling roots.

The most significant change of direction came after the fire in the Solska Forest. The work, which until then had been mainly about relationships and putting down roots, also became a way of remembering the destroyed forest. One participant called it a memory map of the forest. The children brought very bold colours onto the fabric, adding a thread of nature's renewal to the story.



Alongside the art workshops, the cooperative organised a soil workshop (covering, among other things, effective microorganisms and bokashi balls) and a meeting during the opening of the “Pod Globusem” Intercultural Community Garden.

The finished banner was made from second-hand fabric, soil, silt, charcoal, natural dyes, thread, ropes and string. It hangs from a serviceberry branch taken from one participant’s garden. Every stitch, stain and piece of string is someone’s individual contribution, but together they tell a single story.

Key takeaways

- a change of plan doesn’t mean a failed meeting – an intimate conversation can become the starting point for the whole work;
- prepare tasks both for people who enjoy free expression and for those who prefer clear instructions;
- a short introduction at the start of each meeting helps newcomers join a process that’s already under way;
- sharing a meal and having time to talk build relationships just as much as the artistic work does;
- natural dyes can turn pale once dry – in Lublin, some sections were strengthened with liquid dye and embroidery;
- the work can respond to what’s happening around it – there’s no need to defend the first idea at all costs.



Warsaw: from soil to a shared table

Soil Table

In Warsaw, direct contact with the earth is hard to come by. Most of the city is covered in concrete, and we mainly encounter soil in parks, on allotments or on trips out of town. And yet city residents make countless decisions about food every day, usually without ever seeing the soil where it all begins.

Kooperatywa Dobrze decided to trace the journey from soil, through seeds and plants, to the food on our tables. The coordinator and the artist live far from Warsaw, so they developed the overall concept of the work together before the workshops began. At each session, however, participants had plenty of freedom in how they expressed their own approach to soil and food.

At the first session, participants explored the life of soil through sand animation and got to know different types of earth through touch, smell and observation: from sand, through soils of varying quality and compost, to clay. Using six types of soil, they built a shared soil profile, which became part of the tabletop. During the workshops we also talked with a farmer about the stages of working the land, from autumn tasks to harvest.

The next workshop was about seeds. Participants made papier-mâché dishes with seeds embedded in them. A dish like this can later be buried: the paper holds moisture and slowly breaks down while the seeds germinate.



At the following session, they made napkins printed with the marks food leaves on fabric. Along the way, we talked about good food and the consequences of our everyday choices. The final workshop was used to bring the soil profile, dishes, napkins and clay cutlery together into a single installation.

The table isn't a closed, finished work. It is a meeting place and an invitation to sit down with soil, to remember that it's alive, and to see the web of connections that runs from the land to our food.

The Warsaw series ended with a soil workshop. It took place during Kooperatywa Dobrze's 13th birthday celebration, in the Motyka i Słońce garden at Jazdów in Warsaw. Marcin Iwankiewicz from the Moc Korzeni association led a session entitled "Food quality starts in the soil". We talked about how the soil microbiome affects the vitamins, minerals and flavour of crops, and how caring for life in the soil helps in the face of the climate crisis, because living soil retains water and stores carbon.

Key takeaways

- a single work can be created in stages, with each session focusing on a different part of the journey from soil to food;
- a homework task of bringing in "your own" soil connects the topic to participants' personal stories;
- a shared table is not just an object but also a natural place for conversation and building relationships;
- it's worth holding workshops alongside an event people are coming to anyway – for us, the cooperative's birthday worked well.



VI. What did Art of Soil bring? Voices of the participants

After the workshops ended, we asked participants to fill in a short survey. The answers are consistent: almost everyone gave their participation the highest possible rating, and almost everyone felt they had genuinely co-created the project rather than just watching from the sidelines. Two things come up again and again in the responses: the people, and soil you could actually touch.

Meeting people

This was the strongest outcome of the whole project. When asked what was most valuable, participants most often answered simply: the people. They wrote about meeting others with similar values, about an enthusiastic group, about people "crazy about gardening" and about connections that, as one person noted, have a chance of lasting. Almost everyone wrote that the project helped them get to know others better.

In Bielsko-Biała, one person summed it up like this: "The regular meetings and their length created a great space for getting together. I think that's something our co-op has been missing for a long time." There, the project mainly strengthened bonds within the cooperative. In Lublin, participants more often wrote about feeling connected to the local community and to nature.



Soil up close

The vast majority of participants say that, since the project, they think about soil differently. What made the biggest impact was what they could do with their own hands. In Gliwice, where everyone brought a sample from their own garden, one person wrote that the most valuable part was “testing my own garden soil live, on the spot”.

The responses included specific knowledge: pH, humus, salinity, physiological drought, the right proportions of ingredients in compost, effective microorganisms, bokashi balls. One person noted that the reason crops fail isn’t always pests or disease – it’s often simply depleted soil. Another wrote that “a garden doesn’t begin with a seed, but with getting to know the soil”. A participant from Bielsko-Biała said that we usually see soil “as dead brown matter”, but thanks to the meetings he came to see it as a living microcosm full of interdependencies.

Art that works through the hands

Participants rated the idea of talking about soil through art highly, and most felt it helped them see the land differently. It had the strongest effect on those who were creating themselves.

One person from Lublin wrote that soil combines beautifully with fabric, giving it character and durability – and that fabric soaked in this way is very hard to push a needle through. The same person added that the work sparked their curiosity



and encouraged them to look for colours in nature. Someone from Bielsko-Biała described “a feeling of immersion, of going deep into the soil”. Another person from Lublin noted that working together taught them that some things can’t be predicted – you have to observe and adapt.

Participants wrote about joy, curiosity, excitement, focus and relaxation. Art was also able to hold more difficult emotions: sadness while working on the banner for the burned forest, and anger at how badly humans are damaging the soil. In Warsaw, participants stressed that it is precisely through art that we can talk about important and difficult issues.

What stays with people

After the project, participants want to take part in similar events, pay closer attention to where their food comes from, learn more about soil and get more involved in the cooperative. In Bielsko-Biała, someone added in their own words that they want to “keep meeting up for coffee at the co-op”.

We also asked them to complete the sentence “After Art of Soil, to me soil is...”. The answers included: the basis, the foundation, life that needs caring for, the beginning and end of everything, a new, undiscovered world, easier to understand, an even more complex thing. Someone from Lublin wrote that soil is “inextricably linked to my existence; it feeds me and connects me with other people”.

And when asked what they would say to someone who is hesitating, they answered briefly: “It’s worth it”, “Go, or you’ll regret not being there”, “Come along, it certainly won’t do you any harm”.

What does this mean for you?

- the biggest impact comes from contact with your own soil – ask participants to bring a sample from their garden, allotment or plant pot; you’ll find a plan for this kind of session in Chapter X;
- relationships are the main benefit of a project like this – plan time for eating and talking, not just for working;
- art has the strongest effect on those who create it themselves – put materials into people’s hands instead of showing them a finished work;
- in every group there are people who already know a lot – leave room for sharing experience.

VII. What to know before you start

Looking back at the experiences of the five regions, we can see that the hardest part wasn't working with clay, soil, paper or fabric. What required the most attention was organising everything so that different people could genuinely create something together.

A good atmosphere doesn't come out of nowhere. Neither does good attendance, an equal partnership with the artist or the safe transport of the finished work.

Below, we've gathered what we learned during Art of Soil – including from the things that didn't go to plan.

Working with an artist

Inviting an artist isn't the same as commissioning a finished work. Nor should the group become a team of assistants carrying out someone else's idea. The most interesting things happened where the person leading the work brought their own experience, techniques and imagination, but left room for the community to make decisions.

It wasn't always easy. In Gliwice, the artist came to the first meeting with a clear vision for the installation. The group appreciated his idea, but wanted a say in the meaning, materials and final shape of the work. It took a long conversation to bring





the artist's concept together with the history of industrial and agricultural Silesia. Looking back, the participants felt they should have talked among themselves before the first meeting with the artist and put into words what they wanted to say.

In Lublin, the artist acted more as a guide. She brought inspiration and suggested techniques, but allowed the direction of the work to emerge from shared experiences. Thanks to this, after the fire in the Solska Forest, the group was able to change its original concept and create a banner commemorating the event.

Both experiences lead to a similar conclusion: the group should meet before it starts working with the artist and find its own voice. It doesn't need a ready-made idea for the work, but it should know what stories, questions and emotions it wants to bring to the conversation.

Not everyone who makes art has experience of working with communities. A great artist isn't always good at leading a group process – and vice versa. Before you start working together, talk not only about their artistic track record, but also about their willingness to listen, change their own ideas and share authorship.

Before you start, check:

- Has the group already talked about what it wants to say?
- How does the artist understand co-creation?
- Which decisions will we make together?

- How much work will need to be done between sessions, and who will take it on?
- How will we credit the finished work?
- Who will own the work, and who will decide what happens to it afterwards?
- Can the idea be realised within the time, space and budget available?

How to invite people into genuine co-creation

Not everyone comes to a workshop convinced they're creative. Some people reach for the materials straight away and start experimenting; others need detailed instructions and want to know exactly what they're supposed to do.

In Lublin, some people felt comfortable with free painting, sewing and composing the fabric. Others preferred to be given a clear task: sewing on a rope, preparing a fixing or finishing a specific section. When we made room for both ways of working, everyone found their place.

A well-prepared session therefore has at least two paths:

- an open space for experimenting and making your own decisions;
- simple, concrete tasks for those who prefer a clear structure.

It also matters whether participants really have an influence on the work as it takes shape. Choosing a colour isn't enough if all the important decisions have been made beforehand. Co-creation can involve the theme, the materials, the meaning of the work, its form, how it's presented or how tasks are divided. Not every decision has to be made together, but be clear about where the group's freedom ends.

Don't assume that everyone will take part in the whole process. In our case, there was usually a small, steady core group alongside people who came to individual sessions. This worked as long as we started each session with a short recap: what had happened before, what had already been made and what we were working on that day.

Children brought a lot: spontaneity, courage and a readiness to experiment.

In Lublin, the bold colours added by the youngest participants changed the message of the work – alongside the story of the fire, a sense of hope for nature's renewal emerged. In Gliwice, the children's energy eased tension and made working with clay less formal.

Children shouldn't, however, be an add-on to activities designed for adults. They need their own workstation, safe materials and the option to step away when hours of work start to bore them.



Before you start, check:

- What will participants genuinely have a say in?
- Have we prepared both open-ended and concrete tasks?
- How will we bring in people who join partway through?
- Can tasks be done at different speeds?
- Is there a place for children, older people and people with no artistic experience?
- Will everyone be able to see their contribution in the finished work?

Attendance

An interesting theme and good promotion don't guarantee that people will turn up. Low attendance was a problem in several regions, including in large and active cooperatives. The coordinators from Lublin and Warsaw admit they were surprised by the low turnout – free participation and an interesting format weren't enough.

In Lublin, the weather kept many people away from the first meeting. Because of freezing rain and cold, instead of a walk there was a small brainstorming session over tea. But a small group didn't mean a failed meeting – it was then that the foundations for all the later work were laid.

In Gliwice, the core group working on the installation was small but well organised. The stall at the Targ na Zielonym market, on the other hand, made it possible

to reach many more local residents. These two kinds of participation aren't mutually exclusive: a small group can create the work, while a larger event can serve conversation, education and inviting new people in.

Instead of only asking how to attract as many people as possible, think about how many you actually need for the initiative to be meaningful. Five committed people can achieve more than twenty who just happened to drop by.

What worked best were personal invitations, a reminder sent just before the meeting, and linking the activity to something that brings people together anyway: collecting orders, a market, a farm visit, a cooperative celebration or a neighbourhood event.

Refreshments helped too. Shared tea, snacks or a meal aren't just an add-on to the programme. Over food, people talk, get to know each other, relax and stay longer.

Before you start, check:

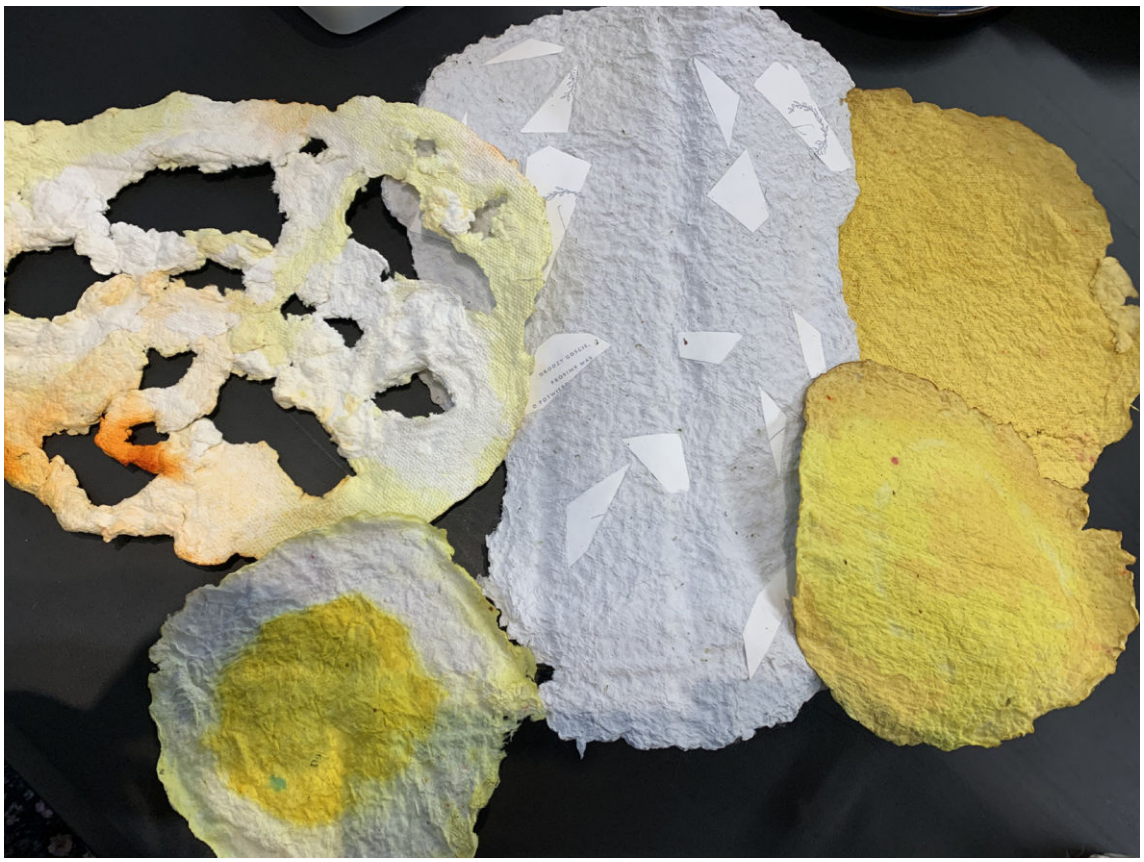
- What is the minimum number of people for a session to still make sense?
- Does the date fit our group's usual rhythm?
- Is the venue easy to reach without a car?
- Can we link the activity to an event that already exists?
- Who will personally invite the people we particularly want to be there?
- When will we send a reminder?
- Do we have a plan for bad weather?
- Have we set aside time and space for eating together?

Logistics, or where will we dry two hundred sheets of paper?

Soil-related materials can be wet, heavy, dusty or messy, or take several days to dry. That's why, when choosing a venue, it isn't enough to check whether everyone will fit in the room.

In Warsaw, finding a suitable room took considerable effort. We needed tables, chairs, running water and kitchen facilities, as well as the option of using the room on several dates. In the end, we found the ideal place at the KADR Cultural Centre.

In Bielsko-Biała, the handmade paper required lots of water, space for preparing the pulp, work surfaces and an area where hundreds of sheets could dry



undisturbed. The weather affected drying times, and participants often only saw the results of their work at the next session.

In Gliwice, the group needed a ceramics studio with a kiln, a place to store the clay parts and space for a trial assembly of the whole structure. Some of the work was only possible thanks to the artist's own studio and equipment.

Before you choose a venue, map out the whole life cycle of your materials:

- Where will we bring them from?
- Where will we work with them?
- What needs to dry, be fired or be sealed?
- Where will we store the pieces between sessions?
- Who will clean up?
- How will the finished work leave the building?

The pace matters too. If your plan includes a presentation, a discussion, a walk, hands-on work with materials, a meal and cleaning up, you probably won't fit it all into three hours. It's better to plan less and leave room for surprises than to march the group from one item to the next with one eye on the clock.

Before you start, check:

- Do we have access to water, electricity, a toilet and somewhere to wash tools?
- Can the tables and floor be protected?
- Where will materials dry or wait for the next session?
- Can we leave the work on site?
- Who opens and locks up the room?
- How much time do we need to set up and clean the room?
- Is the venue accessible to people with limited mobility?
- What will we do if an outdoor session has to be moved indoors?

Transport starts with the first sketch

With a large installation, it's easy to focus on how it will look and only ask at the very end: how are we going to transport this?

In Gliwice, transport requirements shaped the conversation with the artist from the start. The installation had to be stable, yet also possible to dismantle. The solution turned out to be a collapsible frame made from reclaimed metal, with the ceramic parts transported separately. Before the work went to the exhibition, the group did a trial assembly in a garden. This allowed them to check the stability of the structure and work out what was still missing.

In Bielsko-Biała, the problem wasn't only the size of the installation, but also the fragility of the paper. The work was meant to be biodegradable, yet still survive transport and several exhibitions. The group had to figure out how to protect it from rain, damp and evening dew (a tarpaulin over the installation, taking it down overnight) and how to install it without damaging the paper elements.

The Lublin banner grew heavier with every piece of fabric, embroidery, rope and string. It had to be stiffened, and a sufficiently strong way of hanging it had to be found. The Warsaw table was made up of many smaller elements that had to be labelled, packed and then reassembled.

Transport should be part of the concept for the work from day one. Agree on the maximum dimensions and weight, how it will come apart and how many people will be needed to install it. Also think about what could break, get crushed, get wet or go missing.



Before you start, check:

- What are the maximum dimensions and weight of the finished work?
- Will it fit through the door, into the car and into the lift?
- Can it be taken apart into smaller, labelled parts?
- What packaging and protection do we need?
- How many people will be needed to carry and install it?
- Have we done a trial assembly?
- Do we have photos or simple instructions for putting the work together?
- How will we protect elements that are delicate, living or sensitive to moisture?
- Who is responsible for the work after the exhibition ends?

The hidden work you don’t see in photos

The photos show a group gathered around a table, people working with clay, colourful fabrics and an exhibition opening. What they don’t show are the hours spent on the phone, shopping, sending reminders, transporting materials, preparing the room, drying paper, firing ceramics, cleaning up, captioning photos and repairing whatever got damaged in transit.

This work also easily disappears from the schedule and the budget.

Bielsko-Biała illustrates this most clearly. The workshops with participants lasted

around 30 hours, but for the installation to reach its planned scale, the artist spent roughly another 100 hours making paper elements and the supporting mesh. Without that work, the piece would not have taken the form it did.

There was hidden work in every region. Someone had to prepare paper pulp in advance, gather plants, fire the ceramics, find the right branch, build a frame from scrap metal, send a dozen or so reminders or drive materials halfway across the region.

That's why, before you even start, list all the tasks, including those carried out between sessions:

- planning the programme;
- communicating with participants;
- shopping for and gathering materials;
- preparing materials before each workshop;
- travel;
- setting up and cleaning the room;
- drying, firing and protecting the pieces;
- storage;
- documentation;
- installation, transport and dismantling;
- repairs;
- financial reporting and coordination.

For each task, write down who will do it, how much time it might take and whether it is paid work, a member contribution, volunteering or an agreed exchange. Don't assume someone will "somehow get it done" because they know what they're doing or because they care.

If you don't have the money or the people to do the work between workshops, scale down. A smaller work that is genuinely created together can be far more valuable than a huge installation built on the invisible, unpaid work of one person.

So plan not only for the time when everyone is together, but also for everything that has to happen before and after each session.

A brief note on safety and consent

Working with natural materials may seem completely safe, but it isn't always. Not all soil is suitable for handling with bare hands, especially on post-industrial land, near busy roads or in places where waste may have been dumped. If you don't know where a sample comes from, don't use it with children, and avoid raising dust.

Kilns, UV lamps, alcohol, glues, sharp tools and heavy structures should be handled by people who know how to work with them. Natural pigments can also cause allergic reactions, permanently stain skin and clothing, or require the use of mordants and other auxiliary substances.

If you use seeds in your work, check what species they are and whether they can safely be sown in the given location. Don't scatter random seed mixes or plants that may be non-native to the local environment.

Also agree on rules for photos, quotes and authorship. Everyone should know where materials featuring them might be shown. For children, consent from parents or guardians is required. A shared work also has authors – it's worth agreeing how it will be credited before the first exhibition.



VIII. How to document the process

A few months on, it's easy to remember the finished work, but much harder to recall why you made a particular decision, when the direction of the work changed or what one of the participants said while you were all sewing together. That's why documentation doesn't start at the end.

Collect it on three levels. Facts: the date, place, duration, number of people and materials. Process: decisions, changes of plan, difficulties and solutions – knowing that a material didn't dry or that only three people turned up to a session will be more useful to the next group than a description of a successful exhibition opening. Meaning: participants' reflections, emotions, new questions and how their thinking about soil has changed.

The simplest approach is to appoint one person who will take a few photos at each session and note down the most important things. They don't need to write a full report – a ten-minute chat after the workshop or a voice memo on the way home is enough.

Don't just photograph the finished work. What says the most about the process is hands at work, materials laid out, the moment a decision is being made, failed attempts, the mess before cleaning up and putting the work together for the first time. Photos of the whole group, the people leading the sessions and the surroundings will also come in handy. Write down quotes straight away, along with who said them – you'll find the rules on consent in Chapter VII.

Organise your files as you go. Six months later, a folder called "misc workshops" containing a hundred photos with names assigned by your phone won't tell you much.

After each session, it's worth noting down:

- What did we do, and who was there?
- What decisions did we make?
- What surprised us?
- What was difficult, and how did we deal with it?
- What do we want to change next time?
- Did anyone say something worth holding on to?
- What photos or recordings are we still missing?

IX. From idea to grant application

It's impossible to write one application that will fit every funding call. A neighbourhood micro-grant looks different from an environmental education grant, and a large partnership project is different again. You can, however, prepare the basic elements in advance and then assemble them into answers to a specific funder's questions.

Treat this chapter as a set of building blocks, not a ready-made application. Choose only the objectives, activities and results that fit your place, your people, your time and your capacity.

What need are we starting from?

Don't start with the sentence "We want to run workshops". Workshops are an activity, not the reason you need funding. Needs might sound like this, for example:

- local residents have few opportunities to learn about the role soil plays in producing food;
- city dwellers have limited contact with the land and with local farmers;
- soil is mostly talked about in specialist language;
- the local community needs opportunities to do things together and get to know each other;



- the history of local soil, farming or industry is little known;
- the cooperative wants to open up to new residents and develop its educational activities.

Choose one or two needs that you really see in your own community. Don't try to solve every problem at once.

What do we want to change?

An objective should describe a change, not a list of events. Example main objective: to help local residents understand the importance of healthy soil through shared artistic activities, meetings with people working in farming and hands-on experience.

Possible specific objectives:

- to broaden participants' knowledge of the link between soil and food;
- to create opportunities for residents, artists and farmers to work together;
- to strengthen relationships within the local community;
- to show the cooperative as a place for doing things together, not just for shopping;
- to create a shared work that tells the story of the local land;
- to share the results with a wider audience.

You don't have to use all of them. Two or three objectives that fit your idea well are enough.

What activities can we plan?

A small series might look like this:

- a group meeting and a conversation about the local history of the soil;
- a meeting with a farmer or someone who works with soil;
- a walk, a farm visit or testing your own soil samples;
- two or three creative workshops;
- preparing the shared work;
- a public presentation combined with a discussion or refreshments;
- documentation and a wrap-up meeting.

If the grant is small, cut down the number of activities. One meeting with a farmer, two workshops and a presentation at an existing event can make a complete and meaningful whole.

What will the results be?

Applications often ask about results, indicators and change. It's easy to mix these up.

Results you can count (outputs):

- number of meetings and workshops;
- number of participants;
- number of artists, farmers and partners involved;
- one shared artwork;
- one public presentation;
- photo documentation or a short film;
- a workshop plan or educational materials.

The change we're aiming for (outcomes):

- participants have a better understanding of the link between soil and food;
- they get to know local farmers and farming methods;
- they build new relationships;
- they feel they have a say in the work being created;
- the cooperative becomes more visible in the local community;
- partners want to continue working together.

The simplest example of the difference:

Result: we ran three workshops for twenty people.

Change: 18 participants say they can explain how farming methods affect the condition of the soil and the quality of food.

Don't promise changes you won't be able to notice or check. For a small initiative, a short survey, a wrap-up conversation, quotes from participants and seeing whether people want to come back for further sessions are enough.

Who are we inviting?

Your audience might include:

- cooperative members;
- residents of the immediate neighbourhood;
- families with children;
- people who tend gardens and allotments;
- farmers and local producers;
- people interested in food, nature and art;
- people who aren't yet familiar with cooperatives.



Don’t write “all residents” if you’re actually planning small, intimate meetings for fifteen people. A more precisely described group helps you choose the right venue, language, times and ways of inviting people.

Who can we invite to work with us?

A partner doesn’t have to be a large institution. It could be:

- a cooperative or another residents’ group;
- a farm or a local producer;
- an artist, a maker or a craft workshop;
- a library, community centre, school or community room;
- a community garden;
- a local community organisation;
- a city council, municipality or district office;
- a university, an agricultural school, an agricultural advisory centre or a soil scientist.

In the application, state specifically what each partner will contribute: a venue, knowledge, equipment, contact with local residents, promotion, materials or leading a session.

What should you remember in the budget?

It's easiest to cost materials and forget about people. Yet coordination, preparing sessions and the work in between them are real costs.

Your budget might include:

- coordination and communication with participants;
- fees for the people leading sessions;
- preparing workshops outside session hours;
- materials;
- venue hire or preparation;
- travel (in Warsaw, the lack of a travel budget severely limited the number of sessions);
- refreshments;
- hygiene and safety supplies: gloves, masks, a first-aid kit and, for kiln firing, a fire extinguisher;
- documentation and promotion;
- transporting, installing and storing the work;
- insurance, if needed;
- accounting and grant reporting, if the funding rules allow it.

A small-grant version

If you're just starting out, you could plan:

- one town, village or community;
- one meeting with someone who works with soil or farming;
- two creative workshops;
- a group of ten to twenty people;
- one small shared work;
- a presentation at an event that's happening anyway;
- simple photo documentation and a wrap-up conversation.

That's enough. You don't have to put on a touring exhibition, make a film and plan a whole series of events straight away.

X. A simple soil workshop: testing soil pH

Two hours, no expert and almost no budget. All you need is a Hellige soil pH test kit from a garden centre and jars of soil brought by participants. It works well as the first session in a series, or as a stall at a market or picnic. Run the workshop in daylight – under artificial light, the colours look different.

What to prepare

- a Hellige soil pH test kit (for groups of more than ten people, two kits);
- distilled water for rinsing the test plate;
- plastic teaspoons;
- paper towels;
- gloves;
- sticky notes;
- a long strip of paper.

What to send participants before the session

Bring a handful of soil from your garden, allotment, balcony or lawn in a clean jar. Scrape away the top layer and take soil from a depth of 10–20 cm, ideally from several spots in the same bed. Remove any stones and roots. Don't use freshly fertilised



soil or soil from places where dogs and cats relieve themselves. Label the jar: where the soil comes from and what grows in it.

Ask someone to bring something unusual: soil from under conifers, from a forest or from a compost heap. The more variety, the more interesting the comparison.

How the workshop runs

1. Jars on the table (15 min). Everyone says in two sentences where their soil comes from, what grows in it and what doesn't do well.
2. Guessing game (10 min). Before you measure anything, line up the jars from the most acidic to the most alkaline soil – by eye or based on what grows in it.
3. A few words about soil pH (10 min). pH is a scale running from acidic to alkaline, with 7 being neutral. It determines whether plants can take up nutrients from the soil. Most vegetables prefer slightly acidic to neutral soil, while blueberries and heathers prefer acidic soil.
4. Testing in pairs (40 min). Use a teaspoon to put some soil into the well of the test plate, add drops of the indicator liquid until a layer forms above the soil, stir with a stick and wait a minute. Tilt the plate so the liquid flows into the channel, and compare the colour with the chart. After each test, rinse the plate with distilled water and wipe it dry. Write down the result.
5. The pH line and discussion (25 min). Roll out the strip of paper, mark the pH scale on it and place the jars along it according to the results. Compare this with your guesses: what surprised you? In places where plants get sick, is the pH different from the rest? Over tea, talk about what everyone will do with their result – sometimes it's easier to choose plants to suit the soil than to change the soil to suit the plants.

Things to remember

Hellige liquid is a chemical reagent: wear gloves, keep it away from your eyes, and make sure children only use it under adult supervision. Put the soil on the plate with a teaspoon, not your fingers – sweat from your hands distorts the result. The test gives an approximate reading; a laboratory test is needed before liming. If the colour comes out pale, the soil was too wet or there wasn't enough liquid.

Pre-activity survey

Date: .....

Description: .....

1. How would you rate your knowledge of soil?
1 – limited, 5 – extensive

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. Can you explain how farming methods affect the condition of the soil and the quality of food?

☐ definitely yes ☐ I think so ☐ I don't think so ☐ definitely not

3. Complete the sentence: "To me, soil is..."
.....
.....

4. What would you like to learn or try here?
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Post-activity survey

Date: .....

Description: .....

1. How would you rate your knowledge of soil?
1 – limited, 5 – extensive

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. Can you explain how farming methods affect the condition of the soil and the quality of food?

☐ definitely yes ☐ I think so ☐ I don't think so ☐ definitely not

3. Complete the sentence: "After taking part in the project, to me soil is..."
.....
.....

4. How much did you learn about soil that was new to you?

☐ a great deal ☐ quite a lot ☐ a little ☐ not much

5. What has stayed with you most about soil?
.....
.....
.....

6. Which event or events did you take part in?
.....
.....

7. How would you rate your overall experience of taking part?
1 – poor, 5 – very good

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

8. What was most valuable for you?

.....

.....

.....

9. Did you feel actively involved in the process?

☐ definitely yes ☐ mostly ☐ hard to say ☐ not really

10. Did taking part in the project help you get to know other people better?

☐ definitely yes ☐ to some extent ☐ not really

11. The project helped me feel more connected to (tick all that apply):

☐ soil ☐ nature ☐ the people who produce food

☐ the local community ☐ our group ☐ none of these

12. How well did art activities work as a way to talk about soil?
1 – poorly, 5 – very well

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

13. Did art help you see the topic of soil in a new way?

☐ definitely yes ☐ I think so ☐ I don't think so ☐ definitely not

14. What emotions or reflections did the creative process bring up for you?

.....

.....

.....

15. After taking part in the project, I plan to (tick all that apply):

- ☐ take more interest in soil
- ☐ pay more attention to where my food comes from
- ☐ deepen my knowledge of farming and ecology
- ☐ get involved in the group's activities
- ☐ take part in similar events
- ☐ not sure yet

16. What would you say to someone thinking about taking part in a similar project?

.....

.....

.....

17. May we quote your responses in the project summary?

☐ yes ☐ no

Art of Soil. A guide to community initiatives connecting soil, art and food

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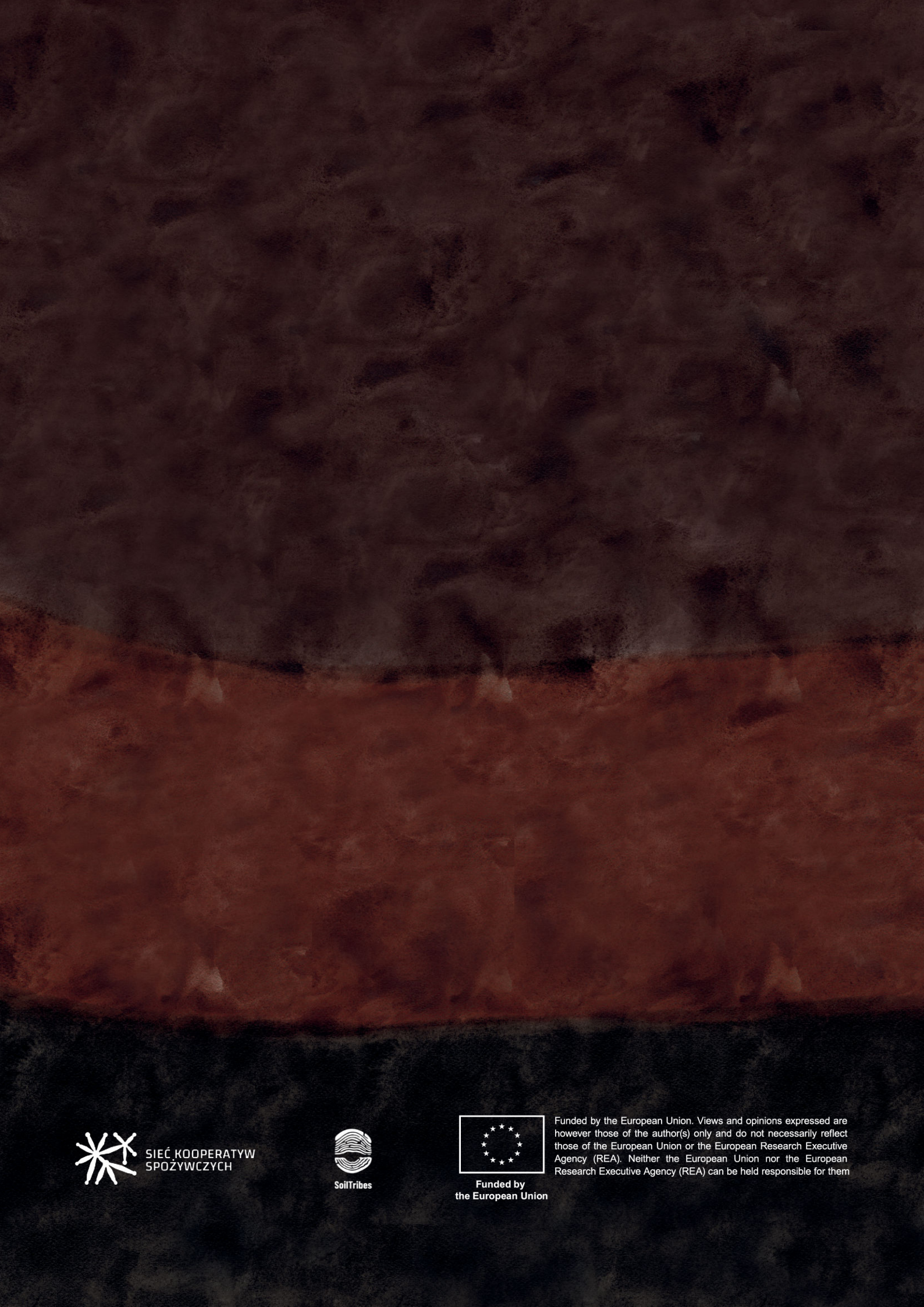

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