

HANDOUT

STEWARDED COMMONS FOR NEW GENERATIONS

INNOVATION
IN ACTION
SERIES

Romanian farmers © EcoRuralis

Eco Ruralis



CONTEXT

With 98% of farms using less than 10 hectares of land, Romania is truly a peasant farming country. One of the most valuable and important assets that small-scale farmers have in Romania are the commons. Common pastures allow peasants to raise animals such as sheep, cattle, and goats without having to purchase extra land. This grazing land may be owned by public bodies, private organisations or individuals, but is characterised by multiple grazing rights. Although no exact figures on the distribution of common pastures are available, a rough approximation suggests that over half of the 3.4 million ha of permanent pastures in Romania can be considered common land.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Romanian commons are under threat. The very low rate of intra-family farm succession (under 25%) and the general rural depopulation is legitimising local authorities—often the legal administrators of common pastures—to concession out large parts of these lands to agribusiness investors or to privatise it for non-farming purposes. These areas are particularly attractive to agribusinesses looking for large, uncultivated, and connected areas. As a peasant organisation, Eco Ruralis carried out this action research to shed light on the key role that commons play to sustain small-scale and diversified styles of farming in Romania. A key stake of this work lay in bringing together stakeholders to agree on management models that would allow safeguarding remaining commons and enable new generations of agroecological farmers to benefit from them.

"Innovation in Action". In 2020-21, six RURALIZATION partners conducted eight-month-long participatory action research projects to explore new solutions to leverage farmland in favour of agroecological transition, generational renewal, and rural regeneration. The results of their actions are presented in this series.



INNOVATIVE

- ✓ Re-think the management parameters of a medieval land system to adapt it to modern constraints (innovation rooted in tradition)
- ✓ Foster approaches that take common land out of speculative markets and make democratic access a priority
- ✓ Give national political echo to a subject usually dealt with at local level



IMPACTFUL

- ✓ Build comprehensive understanding about the commons system and how it can support agroecology
- ✓ Generate awareness among young farmers that commons can be an option to increase farming viability (instead of accumulating private land)
- ✓ Foster dialogue and bring together different perspectives (in particular those of farmers and local authorities) on the importance of common pastures

OBJECTIVE

Increase safeguarding of common pastures and work towards ensuring democratic access to these lands for future farmer generations

ACTION PLAN

Task 1: Legal and social analysis

- Review literature and carry out desk research on commons
- Survey Eco Ruralis members to better understand the use of commons among them

Task 2: Engagement with stakeholder

- Organise encounters with established farmers as well as new entrants to understand their perceptions, needs, and aspirations towards access to common pastures
- Engage with local authorities in bilateral meetings and in workshops to harness officials' perspectives and analysis regarding their own competence and bottlenecks in managing commons

Task 3: Disseminating results

- Formalise some findings of the previous tasks as preliminary policy recommendations
- Make public officials aware of the vision of farmers



RESULTS

Commons in Romania have very specific management systems that anchor them locally and distinguish them from other types of land systems. Desk research on the Romanian commons looked at the three main managing systems—the *islaz*, *composesorat* and *obste*—and highlighted their specific characteristics (see table, based on Mantescu 2009).

Commons type	Property rights	Use rights	Administration	Main distribution
Composesorat	Private property of the local community	Can be restricted to members (although not always); membership usually inherited	Elected members	(Hugarian speaking) Transylvania and Northern Romania
Obste	Private property of the local community	Restricted to members; membership sometimes inherited, sometimes through residence	Elected members	Regions of Wallachia and Moldavia
Islaz	Public property of the local community	Any inhabitant of the municipality	Mayor and elected pastoral committee	Throughout Romania

The discussions run with established farmers and new entrants offered perspectives on the value of commons for local development and helped Eco Ruralis harness best practices in managing commons both from a practical and organisational viewpoint. It also allowed identifying main threats and weaknesses regarding these lands, including 1) the fact that the **moderate degree of formalisation** of commons systems can induce **a lack of transparency and vulnerability to commodification**, 2) the fact that greater levels of **democracy and local community involvement** should be implemented by local authorities in charge of managing commons, 3) the fact that commons are **vulnerable to leasing or privatisation** due contextual factors (depopulation, investors' demand) but also to abusive management by certain local authorities and the lack of negotiation powers of the local farming communities.

The main policy recommendations resulting from Eco Ruralis' work are :

- To formalise local producers groups that **steward commons** (e.g. local cooperatives), so as to provide farmers with higher bargaining power.
- To **measure biodiversity of common lands** used by community vs. those used by large agribusinesses.
- To **increase community participation in the development of grazing plans** and in the management of unused public land.
- To promote **a more comprehensive inventory of Romanian commons**, taking into consideration existing informal tenure and customary rights.
- To ensure **transparency in the attribution of public subsidies** attached to commons (especially agro-environmental and high nature value farming) and that benefits go to stewards from local communities.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE!

BUILDING LEGITIMACY

- Eco Ruralis gained legitimacy on the topic of commons **by building first-hand expertise on the issue through research**. This enables it to put forward an original, peasant-rooted analysis of this topic.
- An important element of social research and public engagement was to gather **a plurality of stakeholders** with sometimes **conflicting perspectives** to grasp all aspects of commons management issues.

LEVERS & OBSTACLES FOR ACTION

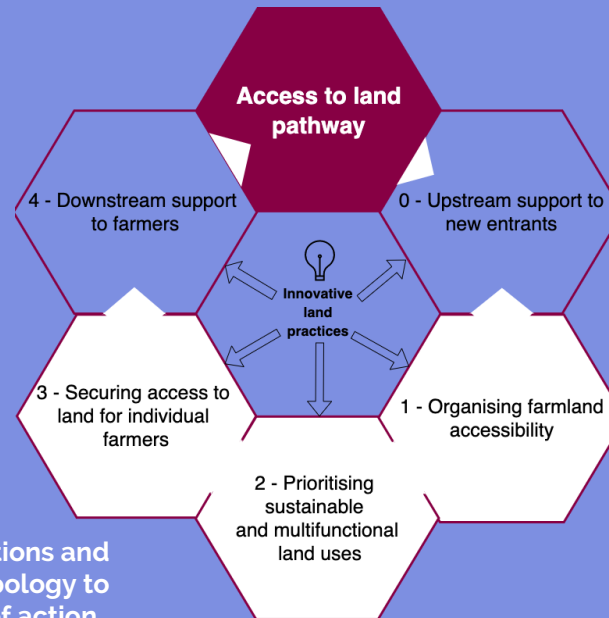
- The **lack of trust between Romanian farmer communities and local authorities** prompted the organisation of separate workshops for each type of stakeholder. While this enabled freer expression of both sides in a first stage, organising a dialogue between communities and institutions will be necessary in the future.
- It can be difficult to **carry out engagement activities on a topic while at the same time building first-hand knowledge on it**. This requires balancing the timing of work and calibrating with care the inputs one is able to give to workshop participants.



AN ADAPTED RESPONSE TO LOCAL LAND CHALLENGES

This action aims to improve democratic oversight on the system of commons and more participative management of these lands. This contributes to organising land accessibility and securing access to land for agroecological farmers and new generations.

In addition, Eco Ruralis' work aims to steer the use of these lands towards sustainable and community-connected uses, putting forward the need to safeguard the many social, economic and environmental roles of common pastures. With more importance and legal security given to common pastures in the future, the action would result in improving the viability of small-scale farming operations over the long term (downstream support to farmers).



What is the "Access to land pathway"? Innovations use a wide range of actions and strategies to provide effective access to land. The pathway provides a typology to categorise innovative practices' different modes of action.

WHO WE ARE

ECO RURALIS

Eco Ruralis is a Romanian association of peasants and agroecological food producers. Established in 2009, it now counts with over 14,000 members nationwide. Structured as a farming union and a member of the European Coordination Via Campesina, Eco Ruralis carries out work on key topics such as land, seeds, markets, peasants rights, agroecology, migration, CAP.

Learn more at: www.ecoruralis.ro

ACCESS TO LAND NETWORK

The Access to land network brings together grassroots organisations from across Europe to share experiences and promote the significance of access to land for agroecological transition and generational renewal. Established in 2012, it functions as an informal network of about 15 organisations.

Learn more at: www.accesstoland.eu



Romanian farmers © EcoRuralis

CONTACT

For more information on this innovative practice please contact: attila@ecoruralis.ro

Learn more at : ruralization.eu

The RURALIZATION project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Grant Agreement N°817642. The publication content is the sole responsibility of authors and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the EU Commission.