

Appendix 13: Occitanie Region (France, NE6)

Organising partner:	Terre de Liens	Innovation Type
Practice:	Farm collectives: a lever for an agricultural and rural transition, (France, FR6A)	
Practice context:	Toussaq, Belètre, Champ Boule - Predominantly rural	
Confrontation context:	Larzac, Occitanie Region - Predominantly rural	
Workshop location:	Online	
Date:	November 4th 2021	

Summary

A confrontation of RURALIZATION case study “Collective farms: a lever for a rural and agricultural transition?” was organised on the Larzac plateau, south-west France (Occitanie region), on November 4, 2021. This event gathered mainly farmers (9), rural development organisations (11), as well as local policymakers (3) interested in supporting the emergence and upscale of this practice. Among critical factors participants identified for the development of collective farms were: access to proper land and farm opportunities; use of specific tools and resources on how to farm as a group; availability of specialised counselling on group farming issues. The barriers, on the other end, often related to financing such critical factors (accessing land and paying for counselling in particular) as well as to the relative lack of recognition of collectives by the farming world and institutions. As a result, farm transferors and public institutions (advisory, state or local services) are key actors to facilitate further development of collective farms. The former must be further sensitised regarding the possibility to transfer their farms to new generations with collective models. Public institutions must be trained to better promote this form of farming and better welcome collective projects. Participants in the focus group also outlined ideas for specific public aid schemes targeted to collective farms.

Context

Held on November 4, 2021, the confrontation event gathered a total of 26 participants (15 female, 11 male). It aimed to discuss how to facilitate the emergence of more “collective farms” as a promising practice for rural development and generational renewal in agriculture.³³

The area chosen for the event, Larzac, is located in the department of Aveyron, Occitanie region. Larzac is a high mountainous plateau covered with natural pastures. It has most similarities with the context of one of the collective farms studied in RURALIZATION named “Champ Boule”. Champ Boule is located in Barjac, Ariège department. Both areas (Larzac and Barjac) are predominantly rural mid-mountain regions where animal raising is the main type of agricultural activity.

However, the RURALIZATION study also looked at two other collective farms named “Belêtre” and “Toussacq”, located respectively in the Indre-et-Loire and Seine-et-Marne departments. These farms are located in rural areas composed of flatter plains where the main agricultural activity is cereal and oil-seed crops. Given the diversity of the three farm contexts studied in the RURALIZATION report, a point-by-point comparison with the area of Larzac could hardly be established.

Nevertheless, some characteristics common to all three originally studied contexts (Ariège, Indre-et-Loire and the Seine-et-Marne) can also apply to Larzac. These are the following:

- declining social dynamics (tendency towards depopulation and ageing of the local population);
- economic contraction (reduction of local jobs, closures of shops in village centres);
- influential agricultural sociology (important place of farmers in political institutions).

Having established these preliminary observations, we should state that contextual factors have a rather reduced influence on the emergence of promising collective farms. During the RURALIZATION case study interviews and focus groups, the question of the context was indeed expressly tackled but no strong conclusion could be drawn regarding its influence on the establishment of collective farms. Rather, according to farmers, the choice of a location to establish had been primarily a matter of opportunity : they settled where they found a farm to take over and farm transfers open to their projects. These factors carried more weight than local features such as social dynamics, type of agriculture, climate, or else.

Consequently, the Larzac area was also chosen for reasons beyond its comparability with the contexts studied in RURALIZATION. It hosts a rich ecosystem of stakeholders, which seemed favourable to supporting and strengthening the development of this promising practice. These stakeholders include rural development organisations such as the ADEAR (Association for the Development of Agricultural and

³³ The T5.2 case study “Martin-Prével A., Rochette T. and Crequy A. *Collective Farms: a lever for an agricultural and rural transition?*” was chosen as a basis for this confrontation event.

Rural Employment) whose staff attended the meeting. ADEAR is an organisation supporting alternative farming models and was a precursor in accompanying collective farming projects. Local Terre de Liens associations (non-partners in RURALIZATION) also attended the meeting. These associations can play a complementary role. While ADEAR's counselling focuses on economic, agricultural, and human aspects, Terre de Liens can advise new entrants specifically on land aspects (how to access it, evaluate it, purchase or rent it...) and support community-funded purchase of farmland for collective farms.

In addition to these organisations, numerous farm collectives originating from nearby locations attended the meeting. The discussions further identified and specified key ways in which farmers themselves can support the development of new collectives. This includes:

- Making known and visible their ways of working and documenting their experience as existing collective farms.
- Welcoming some interns or groups on their farms.
- Connecting with other farms and rural development organisations to be able to advise aspiring farmers who reach out to them about where to get support.
- Contributing with their own voices, experience, and good examples to building advocacy and raising local awareness in favour of collective farms.

Farm collectives is not a new practice and has developed well in diverse regions of France. However, it deserves to be amplified and more widely adopted in its most innovative forms—like those studied in RURALIZATION which include for instance the use of horizontal governance principle or alternative juridical statuses. The Larzac region, which also has a history of hosting alternative agriculture movements, gathers key ingredients of a confrontation context where this practice could be up-scaled.

Results

Acceptance and interest in implementing the practice

The collective farm practices studied in RURALIZATION largely raised interest and enthusiasm from local stakeholders. Before detailing positive feedback, however, we shall cite the doubts or specific questions that this practice raised. These concerned mainly:

- The benefits of the specific/unusual legal statuses adopted by some of the collective farms studied in RURALIZATION. The Belêtre farm chose a cooperative and participative company (SCOP) status while Toussacq chose the cooperative society of collective interest (SCIC). These forms of organisation are considered “non-agricultural” and don't allow benefiting from agricultural subsidies. However, they present other advantages, which were debated by the participants. For instance, the SCOP allows it to enshrine in the company's statuses workers' equal rights and duties regarding decision-making, risks, or profit sharing. It also allows farmers to be considered “salaried workers”, which provides better social coverage (unemployment rights, higher retirement

pensions, etc.) and facilitates the entry of new associates in the company as well as later transfer of the farm to new generations.

- The reasons why new entrants may find collective farming models appealing were also debated. In particular, the statement from the RURALIZATION study that collectives can allow easier entry and exit from agriculture raised questions for some stakeholders. They considered this activity should remain a long-term if not lifetime commitment and a “short-termist” vision of agriculture should not be promoted. Others responded that it is important to take into consideration that many new entrants are career-changers who had prior professional experience and could aspire to have others after farming. They saw a positive side to allowing a greater number of people access and test agriculture, even if some chose to “exit” after a few years.

Regarding acceptance of the practice, it was high due to the fact that, as previously mentioned, the event appealed to people already interested in the matter. Among the motivations farmers expressed to be or become part of collectives were:

- The idea of “creating a business together”, developing businesses with new forms of organisation and “with values of equality”.
- The appeal to “return to the rural” and “gain autonomy” by working as a group and on a diversified farm.
- The fact that collectives can allow to “get out of domination relationships” and “change the agricultural model reduced to setting up alone or as a couple”.

For the rural development organisations, it was important to further develop this practice to meet the various challenges that new entrants encounter to establish in agriculture. This includes the challenge to access land (collectives can allow pooling money from various individuals and/or taking over larger farms), to access appropriate equipment (collective can share investment), but also challenges related being new to the agricultural work and world in general (collective allow overcoming some fears, sharing knowledge and know-how among individuals, mutualising difficult or time-consuming tasks like marketing/delivery of products, etc.).

Identified critical factors related to the implementation of the practice in the context

The group identified many decisive factors to support the implementation of the practice. None were specific to Larzac (they can apply to all regions where these elements are found). Yet a specific Larzac asset is the long-standing tradition to welcome new entrants, which stems from a culture of openness and rural innovation.

1) Access to proper land and farm opportunities for collective farms

Although access to land is not a challenge specific to collective farms, looking for land as a group can raise particular obstacles (sometimes fuelled by negative perceptions of collectives as “hippy communities” as well as other barriers detailed in the next section). Therefore, various dimensions are key for a land opportunity to materialise.

- **Willing and open farm transferors.** Testimonies harvested in the focus group emphasized the facilitating attitudes retiring farmers can adopt when transferring land to a group. These include: being open to a different type of agriculture being practised on their land; being amenable to sharing networks, contacts, and knowledge with the successors; and, most importantly, showing

willingness to leave the farm and let the group synergies develop on their own after an initial period of mentoring.

- **The farm/land should be suitable for restructuring and diversification.** Collectives can take over larger farms, provided these are compatible with a diversification of activities (e.g. from a family practicing cereal monoculture to a group of people implementing polyculture and animal raising). Beyond diversification, this often means the farm infrastructure themselves have to be adapted. Such “restructuring” can entail creating new buildings or repurposing old ones, changing the location of some activities on the farm, creating hedges, fences, irrigation systems, etc.
- **The ability to organise collective financing of the land is also critical.** Collectives can be appealing to new entrants because they allow pooling together money to invest in the land. However, proper juridical schemes to share investment and risks are critical. The ability to appeal to external financing also is key, whether through classical bank circuits (which entails finding financiers open to group agriculture projects) or solidarity investment schemes.

2) Leveraging specific tools and resources to support living and farming as a group

Collective farms respond to new entrants’ aspirations to question traditional models of setting up in agriculture as a single farmer or a couple. In this practice, the farm becomes a shared enterprise whose conduct and future are decided among individuals who have equal status and power as associates in the farm. While this is an appealing ideal, it can quickly lead to conflict and failure if groups don’t have tools and resources to support/implement their transformative approach to farm work.

Among critical tools identified to support the development of collectives, we can cite:

- Tools to support dialogue or, as a farmer put it during the event, tools to “know how to discuss, get around the table to advance in these processes”. This means for instance getting informed and trained on how to organise meetings which includes managing type of meetings (in-depth/strategic or just weekly/logistical), frequency, agenda, speech distribution, rotating organising responsibility, etc.
- Tools on governance, to help collectives adopt agreed-upon and operational statuses and value charters, work on responsibility repartition, develop decision-making processes that satisfy the group, create conflict-resolution mechanisms, etc.
- Tools on financial and technical aspects of working as a group (e.g. schemes to collect/count work time of associates; tools to know how to share investment, risk, equipment; juridical tools to use to set up a collective enterprise etc.)

Other important resources to prevent the failure of collective projects are “in kind” resources. For instance, successful collectives emphasised how key it had been for them to benefit from the testimony or mentoring of other collective farms. Furthermore, in building their projects, it was also crucial to forge group dynamics by concretely testing collective work, e.g. by interning on farms or carrying out small projects with future associates. Such “back-and-forth” between project and reality allows seeing how theoretical ideas regarding “working together” hold up in practice. Furthermore, this can be a way for future associates to gain skills, gain more recognition in local agricultural networks, and possibly access farm transfer opportunities.

3) Availability of specialised external counselling on collective farms issues

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of informed counselling to support the development of successful collective farm projects. Farmers themselves revealed how critical this aspect can be:

“The ten of us worked together for a long time, because getting external support required a financial commitment. (...) But now that we have it, we are making giant leaps.”

“The work we did with ATAG [a specialist collective farm counselling structure] was invaluable. In fact, it should have been mandatory.”

Key qualities of a counsellor include:

- being aware of the specificity of farming as a group (both technical and human aspects);
- striking a balance between helping the group define its common values and desires and pointing out possible tensions or problems to take into account;
- preparing groups regarding the concretisation of their project, e.g. making them aware of the difficulties they might encounter when starting to look for farm opportunities (as this is a phase where groups may split because a given farm is found suitable by some but not others and may have to review their project to adapt to the location);
- preparing groups regarding the future evolution of their projects, particularly tooling them up on human aspects to deal with conflict and possible evolutions of the project (e.g. adopt processes to allow the entry/integration of new members).

Key issues and barriers for implementing the innovative practice in the context

Again, the barriers identified by the participants were hardly specific to Larzac but can apply there too. Among the most important ones, participant identified:

1) Financing and accessing land

In all regions of France, even if land prices are low, there is competition on access to plots to capture subsidies connected to land surface. Furthermore, not all banks are open to finance atypical agricultural projects and solidarity investment solutions remain rare. Farmers also expressed difficulty linked to the lack of data on who owns the land and where land opportunities suitable for collectives may be found.

2) Unwelcoming territories or agricultural networks

Much work remains to be done to sensitise retiring farmers about transferring their land to family outsiders and specifically to collectives. Collective farms can be negatively perceived by the rural and agricultural world as “non-productive”, “sectarian”, “hippy”. This affects groups’ ability to be trusted to take over a farm but also, once they have set up, creates barriers linked to defiance from neighbours, consumers, or other local farmers (e.g. inability to rent additional land, inability to enter equipment-sharing cooperatives, etc.). Connected to this, traditional agricultural institutions such as the agricultural chamber or SAFER land agencies can lack training on how to accompany group projects or also be biased against collectives. This can bear negative impacts on a group’s access to land or agricultural subsidies for instance. Finally, some participants also highlighted a lack of networking opportunities among collectives due to farmers’ reduced capacity to organise solidarity outside of their own farm.

3) Financial counselling

The French VIVEA³⁴ was recently reformed. This led to a drastic cut of funding available for aspiring farmers during the “project emergence” phase. The maximum subsidy is about €2000, which barely covers technical training costs. Therefore, access to more in-depth counselling on juridical or human aspects is difficult to finance. While this is a key barrier for candidate farmers, the difficulty to finance counselling also concerns existing farms. Collective farms need to ensure the availability of external mediation/help to manage social and human dynamics in the long terms. Events like the entry or exit of associates often require support from a counsellor, but money can be difficult to find, particularly if the group is going through a tense period.

Identified measures and actors that need to be involved to overcome the obstacles and succeed in the implementation of the practice

The group identified the following actors as key targets:

- 1) Retiring farmers, who can be sensitised to transferring their farms to collectives and/or trained to adopt facilitating behaviours during the transfer process.
- 2) Traditional agricultural institutions, who are close to retiring farmers and agricultural networks and can lift barriers for collective projects.
- 3) Existing collective farms, who can play a key role as a support network for aspiring farmers and exemplify/fuel positive perceptions of collectives through their successful practices.

Possible measures to support the practice include:

- increase funding available to new entrants during the “project emergence” phase and throughout farm life, particularly to finance external counselling on human aspects of collective farming;
- improve existing legal statuses for group agriculture;
- ensure collectives can and are properly accompanied to receive CAP as well as other forms of subsidies (whatever the legal status chosen);
- deploy other new land solutions: land financing, progressive land transfer...

Most other measures suggested in the RURALIZATION study were also agreed-upon by participants.

Further innovative ideas to foster rural regeneration and development

The development of incubators or “test areas” dedicated to collectives can be an additional idea to foster emergence of this practice. The conditions participants outlined for test periods to be operational and relevant are that: (a) there should be remuneration/allowance that makes the “test” period viable for the individuals taking part in it; (b) the test should be accompanied by strong tutoring all aspects of farming (technical, administrative, marketing, etc.); (c) it should enable trying out different forms of mutualisation or diverse types of collective organisation; (d) ideally, an external counsellor would follow the group on human aspects during this period (pointing out possible tensions or difficulties arising that should be taken into account later).

³⁴ VIVEAA Fund for the training of professionals in the agriculture sector

Lessons learned and recommendations

An important area of additional learning identified during the focus group was the need to better articulate counselling propositions for collectives. Indeed, as previously mentioned, various advisory organisations exist both on the “alternative” and “traditional” agriculture sides. There is a need to better articulate the skills and methods of these structures to support collectives. Inter-knowledge between these organisations should also be promoted so that each one would be able to orient collectives to the other when needed (to receive complementary information or help, or when structure doesn’t have capacity to take on a group).

Furthermore, the participants evoked the fact that brainstorming sessions mainly dealt with how to facilitate the establishment of groups of farmers who are already formed. However, schemes are also needed to facilitate encounters between people interested in farming collectively who don’t yet have a group to settle with. For instance, events such as “meeting cafés”, farm visits, “speed dating” of future associates could be organised.

One of the next steps identified by the group consists in structuring a network of collective farms to further support the emergence of this practice. This could start at a regional Occitanie level and entail the following steps:

1. Documenting existing farms
 - Make a census of collective farms in the Occitanie region.
 - Contact with collectives via surveys to define/document their features and practices.
 - Create a tool to make these contacts and descriptions available more widely.
2. Organising a network of collective farms
 - Define common values of the network and incentives for members.
 - Organise events for the identified farms to know/recognise each other.
 - Connect with counsellors, mutualise knowledge and ways that farms can communicate to support each other and possibly support the emergence of new entrants.

The role of local authorities could also be upscaled at some territorial levels. For instance, at the intercommunal scale dedicated staff to “welcome” the newcomers and direct them to relevant advisory structures would be beneficial. This staff could also have a role of “land watch” to identify possible opportunities.

Contributors

Workshop facilitation: Alice Martin-Prével (TdL), Aude Créquy (TdL Rhône Alpes)

Reporting: Alice Martin-Prével (TdL)