

Appendix 15: Clermont-Ferrand (France, NE8)

Organising partner:	Terre de Liens	Innovation Type
Practice:	The Versailles Plain’s Association and peri-urban agriculture diversification (France, FR5A)	
Practice context:	Versailles Plain, Yveline department - Predominantly urban	
Confrontation context:	Clermont-Ferrand, (NUTS3 Puy de Dôme) - Predominantly urban	
Workshop location:	Online	
Date:	October 11th 2021	

Summary

The focus of this confrontation was the CNRS study on the “Versailles Plain Association (VPA) and peri-urban agriculture”³⁵. The VPA is a successful practice associating multiple actors—farmers, local authorities, civil society—to preserve a peri-urban plain located near the Versailles castle (Yvelines department). The VPA implements actions to protect the rural patrimony of the area and support its farms and farmers. The stakeholders invited to the confrontation, on their end, are involved in a common effort to preserve the peri-urban Sarliève plain near the Clermont-Ferrand metropolis (Puy-de-Dôme department). However, their context is much less successful. Urban development has already greatly reduced the Sarliève peri-urban agricultural area with a clear threat that farming could disappear in the coming years. During the confrontation, some of the critical factors identified to overturn this situation were: relying on the collective work of local civil society organisations motivated to protect the Sarliève plain and regenerate its agriculture, using land acquisition as a tool for preservation, and working to increase the number of actors involved in this regeneration effort. However, the obstacles are high due to intense land pressure, lack of adequate infrastructures for new entrants, and lack of legal land protection mechanisms. Among the key actors and measures identified to carry out the work, participants cited: working with local farmers and traditional farming networks, working with

³⁵ Robert-Boeuf, C. and Brédif, H. “The Versailles Plain’s Association and peri-urban agriculture diversification (FR5A) ». RURALIZATION Case studies on promising Practices, 2021

landowners, and involving local authorities in the governance of an agricultural project in the Sarliève plain.

Context

The practice studied in RURALIZATION is located in the Versailles plain, “an agricultural and natural area in the middle of centralised and urbanised metropolis: Paris” (Brédif & Robert Boeuf 2021). This area has a long-standing tradition of farming and currently hosts over 100 farms, with a dominance of large arable crop farms (rapeseed, cereal). However, the plain is also close to dense and expanding cities and its territory is bordered by important urbanisation projects (the Seine Aval National Interest Operation, to the northwest; the Paris-Saclay National Interest Operation, to the southeast) (Brédif & Robert Boeuf 2021). This creates pressure on land and agriculture. The Versailles Plain Association was created in 2004 to value the cultural, social, and landscape patrimony of the plain, notably through supporting the agriculture sector’s economic and social dynamism.

The Sarliève plain where the confrontation was held shares similarities with the Versailles context. It is also a traditionally agricultural area, where large farms cultivate cereals and arable crops. The land is of great agronomic quality and there is much local demand from urban dwellers for organic food produced locally. However, the proximity of the large and expanding metropolis of Clermont-Ferrand has led to a drastic reduction of the farmland area and farm numbers and the pressure on agricultural land keeps rising.

In this sense, the Sarliève context is much less successful than the Versailles one, as the agricultural area has been reduced to 300 hectares (while it still covers 23,000 hectares near Versailles). Only a few farms remain active in the proximity of Clermont-Ferrand and the farmland is owned by a limited number of families, some of whom no longer have ties to agriculture. Nevertheless, as in the context of Versailles, there is interest from some local groups to preserve the remaining agricultural patrimony of Sarliève. In both cases, fruitful alliances emerged between civil society actors and with research to bring expertise and support to a land protection effort.

Results

Acceptance and interest in implementing the practice

The presentation of the Versailles practice incited mixed reactions from stakeholders. On the one end, the positive feedback from participants highlighted similarities between the goals pursued in both territories. These concern preserving land and rural patrimony but doing so in a “dynamic” manner, by enabling the thriving of farming businesses and valuing agriculture as a local economic, social, cultural and landscape asset. The participants thus underlined that the Versailles example could:

- Provide ideas on the type of actions to carry out to promote the agricultural and rural patrimony of a peri-urban area, for instance by writing a landscape charter, structuring local value chains, supporting farm transmission, and so on.
- Provide inspiration on how to structure a collective governance in an organisation aimed at fulfilling these goals. The VPA's organisation in three colleges of farmers, civil society, and elected officials and its concertation practices were recognised by focus group participants as a strong asset to achieve its missions and federate a diversity of actors around a common "goal" or "vision" for the territory.
- Provide a model in terms of its capacity to leverage financing for its work, since the VPA has been able to mobilise large sources of institutional funding (e.g. LEADER funds).

However, there were also doubts regarding the applicability of the practice in the Clermont-Ferrand/Sarliève context. Indeed, while about 10% (2000 ha) of the Versailles plain territory is protected by a very strong legal mechanism designating the area as a "classified site", which cannot be urbanised, no such legal protection exists in Sarliève. Therefore, participants in the confrontation advocated for stakeholders working in Sarliève to implement more proactive strategies. This includes mobilising collective and community investment to concretely acquire and preserve land, as concertation and dialogue facilitation strategies elaborated in Versailles may not be enough to achieve this goal in such a pressured context. Furthermore, near Clermont-Ferrand, the agricultural fabric has already been largely dismantled, making it hard to federate and involve agricultural actors in a land protection effort. Participants expected that much of this work would have to rely on citizens and that a key aspect would be to create alliances with urban dwellers who may care for the quality of their food and environment. Finally, the VPA reached a fairly institutionalised status through financing and public support for the project. Even though there is moral and financial support of some public authorities for the land protection effort in Sarliève, the participants doubted that the initiative would ever achieve a similar recognition, status, and level of formalisation as the VPA's.

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

Based on contextual observations, participants defended as a critical entry point strategy the community-funded acquisition of a large area of land in Sarliève (between 80 and 150 hectares). The goal would be to implement a flagship project on this land, i.e. a "territorial farm" where various new entrants could establish, as well as a farm incubator and food processing and artisanal activities. This farm could also become an experimental site for emblematic actions to improve the biodiversity and environmental management of the area. Participants viewed such locally-anchored action as a lever to support a wider preservation effort on the Sarliève plain. It would demonstrate the feasibility of an agricultural re-dynamisation project, and become a "beacon" around which citizen and public actors mobilisation could be organised.

One of the critical factors in carrying out such work lies in the tight collaboration between local civil society organisations involved in the effort to protect the Sarliève Plain. Three leading organisations—Terre de Liens Auvergne, Îlot Paysans, and Bio 63—have joined forces to carry out the land acquisition project.

They have complementary skills: while Terre de Liens has land expertise and land acquisition capacity, Îlot Paysan is specialised in the creation of farm incubators and Bio 63 supports the development of organic farming and organic supply chains on the territory. Through their long experience and local anchorage, these organisations have already managed to secure funding for the project and to muster significant local support (involving citizens and local authorities).

Finally, the participants brainstormed on the appropriate governance to carry out such a project. Compared to the Versailles experience, it was clear to them that the barriers are too high in Sarliève to create three-prong governance divided between farmers, elected officials and civil society. CSOs are already at the forefront of organising a preservation effort in Sarliève and the creation of a local “territorial farm” structure will necessarily rely much on their leadership. However, some avenues were imagined to diversify the consortium of actors involved in the “territorial farm”. On the one hand, participants cited the creation of thematic “working groups” and “commissions” as a way to involve in the project larger circles of citizens and organisations with interest in specific topics (e.g. environment, economic aspects of the farms, partnership development etc.). On the other hand, it was suggested that the creation of a cooperative society of collective interest (SCIC) to manage the “territorial farm” should enable diverse colleges of actors (local authorities, farm workers, citizens) to take up shares and decision-making power in the company.

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

As previously mentioned, one of the key bottlenecks in Sarliève lies in the very intense urban development pressure in the area. While this is not entirely different from the situation in Versailles, the lack of strong legal mechanisms to protect the remaining farmland near Clermont-Ferrand is a key barrier. While territorial development plans do mention the need to preserve the plain’s farmland and to work on the issue of food self-sufficiency, they fail to define clear orientation regarding agricultural and food models to be promoted and do not provide clear guidance to arbitrate between antagonistic projects. Participants cited the example of the “Urban Village” project supported by real estate developers to create a commercial, recreational, and office complex on 27 hectares of farmland. While this project was largely opposed by all actors interested in the preservation of the plain, it still received a favourable opinion from public investigators.

In addition to this, the maintenance and renewal of agricultural activities on the plain is a difficult matter. The land is of good quality, but mostly geared towards large monocultures and few infrastructures exist to transform and sell food locally. Therefore, supporting the establishment of new entrants on human-size and locally-oriented farms requires important efforts to change the farm/land structure. Lack of biodiversity, difficult access to water, lack of permits to establish agricultural buildings are also among the barriers that the Sarliève stakeholders identified in making their diversified “territorial farm” project a reality.

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

To overcome these barriers the stakeholders have outlined the following strategies: working with local farmers and traditional farming networks, working with landowners, involving local authorities in the governance of a concrete agricultural project in the Sarliève plain.

In the Sarliève context working with landowners is an uneasy but important alliance. Few families remain that own land on the plain. They are key actors to convince if this land is to remain in farming use. One of them, a family of five joint owners (brothers and sisters), agreed to sell part of their large property to Terre de Liens. This provided the first concrete opportunity to carry out a flagship food re-localisation project on the plain. However, in parallel with this philanthropic gesture, the family of owners is also pursuing a strategy of asset valuation (trying to turn another part of the land into a buildable area to sell it for more money). Such ambiguity creates difficulty for the CSOs, who don't want to participate in the "greenwashing" of an operation to convert some land for urban development. During the focus group, it was raised that the orchestration and facilitation techniques exposed in relation to the Versailles example could be of interest to learn how to better manage the relationship with landowners in Sarliève.

Regarding the work with agricultural actors, the VPA case study also provided an inspiration. The association maintains close ties with farmers, unions, and agricultural institutions. Its representatives also explained the importance of mediating conflict that can arise between peri-urban city dwellers and the land workers (conflicts over noise, use of phytosanitary products, etc.). Focus group participants concluded that Sarliève CSOs could engage further with the local SAFER land agency and Chambre d'agriculture and that perhaps a broader survey of neighbouring farmers' view of the "territorial farm" project could be planned. They also identified as a priority the maintenance of a good relationship with the tenant currently farming the land targeted for acquisition by Terre de Liens, as this could help "maintain ties with the agricultural profession". Furthermore, the farmer can support the organic farming conversion process and enable gradual transfer of the land as new entrants start farming.

The relationship with local authorities has been ambivalent in the Sarliève context. Some of them support the territorial farm project while at the same time validating urban development (e.g. the 27 hectare "Urban Village" leisure centre project). In this regard, a comparison could be established with the Versailles example where such ambiguity is also a concern. The VPA representative further acknowledged that mayors from more urban municipalities bordering the plain, although part of the "elected officials" college, were less involved than rural mayors who share more goals and concerns with the VPA. However, the existence of an association where debates and decisions regarding the future of the plain can take place remains a strong asset to maintain a sense of community and duty from all actors towards the local patrimony (the VPA's actions are led only when the association's three colleges agree on them). Involving local authorities in project governance was thus identified as a key strategy during the focus group. In particular, the level of responsibility that local authorities should or could take in the company that will be created to handle the "territorial farm" was discussed. A consensus that at least 10% of the company

shares should be reserved to them emerged (farmers and farm workers would hold 30%, and other colleges such as citizen, rural development organisations, etc. would divide the rest between themselves).

Further innovative ideas to foster rural regeneration and development in the context

Both Versailles and Sarliève actors maintain a relationship with academic and scientific actors. In the former, the alliance with an AgroParisTech professor enabled carrying out the first surveys and concertation efforts on the Versailles plain. In Sarliève, two researchers have been strongly involved since the beginning of the project participating both in its operational development (debate, strategic orientations, partnership and funding research, etc.) and in its documenting the project progress.

The strategy which consists in documenting the work done in Sarliève was largely endorsed by focus group participants as a way to foster the progress of this initiative. Participants highlighted the following benefits:

- giving visibility to the project;
- identifying tensions and successful trajectories;
- enabling cross-analysis of issues;
- facilitating the appropriation of the project by volunteers and external actors.

Further ideas to foster the development of the project included forging links with other “territorial farm” examples, organising visits to other sites for inspiration, and holding practice-exchange seminars between promising innovations.

Lessons learned and recommendations

A strong area of further learning regarding the Versailles practice concerns its long experience in territorial facilitation and stakeholder engagement. Indeed, while these aspects were mentioned during the event, participants pointed out that further transfer would be needed to be able to dive into the methods applied and learnings from the VPA’s 17-years long territorial work.

Some of the specific steps to foster stakeholder dialogue that could be applicable in the Sarliève context include:

- learning about how actors identify the peri-urban plain problem;
- identifying areas of agreement and disagreement;
- making areas of agreement and common interest a more central aspect in the Sarliève “territorial farm” project to incite participation and support.

Some of the ingredients to make this successful could be to rely on scientific actors to support the stakeholder engagement effort, to formulate open questions or find other ways to allow the expression of diverse territorial visions, to use prospective scenarios to enable actors to “project” themselves as well as identify their own responsibility in the future of the plain.

While facilitation and orchestration would certainly be a strong asset to go beyond the “territorial farm” project and towards successful preservation of the larger Sarliève plain, it was clear for participants that the difficult local context mandated adaptations compared to the Versailles example. Stakeholder engagement and facilitation are tools which can take time to put in place. Some stakeholders feared this would divert the attention from the strategy to develop quick, proactive, field-based projects, even if those can create antagonisms and raise defiance from some actors. The need to achieve tangible and visible results through interventionist strategies was therefore also viewed as a necessity in the face of the high pressure from urban development projects and the already advanced state of degradation regarding local farmland resources.

The settlement of new entrants and of a farm incubator on the land acquired by Terre de Liens in Sarliève is a key next step. This will demonstrate the feasibility and concrete progress of a local, territorial farm project in this tense area. The three leading organisations and volunteers who have been supporting the effort from the beginning should be involved in the research and selection of farming candidates. Finding additional funding and growing partnerships is also a key step. Collective work is planned on the rehabilitation of the site—e.g. planting of hedges or trees. These actions can be open to the public and become a widely-communicated emblematic effort to help grow the supporter base for the territorial farm project. Another key next step will be to mobilise largely against the development of the “Urban Village” and to refine the strategy to work more largely for the preservation of the Sarliève plain (beyond the territorial farm).

In concluding the discussions, stakeholders indeed underlined that time and financial means should be found to carry out both the local project and larger plain preservation effort at once. While some expressed interest in being more involved in one rather than the other, all agreed that both strategies would be mutually-reinforcing.

Contributors

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