

HANDOUT

CREATING A COMMUNITY LAND TRUST

INNOVATION
IN ACTION
SERIES

Romanian farmers © EcoRuralis

Eco Ruralis



CONTEXT

In Romania, transfer of land property is difficult for several reasons: land fragmentation is very high (average plot size of 0.45 hectares); there is a lack of land registration in the official cadastral system (only about 59% of land registered in 2021), and land is also subject to increasing concentration and even land grabbing. According to the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, between 2002-2010, 150.000 small farms disappeared while large farming increased by 3%. A total of 12.000 farms over 100 hectares, representing 0.3% of Romanian holdings, control 34% of the country's utilized agricultural area. In addition to these important land thresholds, the farming population is rapidly aging—66.4% of peasants over 55 years old and only 7.3% under 35—and low retirement pensions (€280 on average in 2020) incite older farmers to sell their land to the highest bidder instead of passing it on to a family member. This further reinforces the concentration tendency and lack of generational renewal. .

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Such complex interconnected issues of land concentration and farm succession require urgent responses to provide access to land to a new generation of Romanian farmers. Eco Ruralis' action aimed to pioneer an initiative to collectively purchase and manage land for agroecological new entrants. While many foreign examples of community land trust can be studied for inspiration, this does not exist in Romania and represents a groundbreaking enterprise. Eco Ruralis' work consisted in studying the project's feasibility from a legal, political, and organisational perspective while fostering stakeholder support for this effort.

"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

✓ Putting forward access to land for agroecology as a visionary approach

✓ Foster solidarity-based tools for land acquisition in a post-communist country (where there is reluctance with regards to collective property)

✓ Develop partnerships between farmers' organisations and land conservation organisations, which currently do not exist in Romania.

IMPACTFUL

✓ Generate knowledge about possible legal status for a community land initiative in Romania

✓ Strengthen cooperation between core partners and enlarge the circle of stakeholders to potentially involve in the initiative

✓ Foster dialogue within Eco Ruralis' own coordination committee on strategies to prioritise for tackling access to land issues

OBJECTIVE

Pioneer the establishment of a Romanian initiative to provide access to land for agroecology

ACTION PLAN

Task 1: Legal and social analysis

- Internal discussion in Eco Ruralis about the importance/political implications of setting up an access to land initiative in Romania
- Desk research, legal expert consultation, and comparative analysis
- Surveys to benchmark the needs of new entrants and retiring farmers

Task 2: Engagement with stakeholders

- Map out and engage with different stakeholders
- Run a webinar on new models for access to land

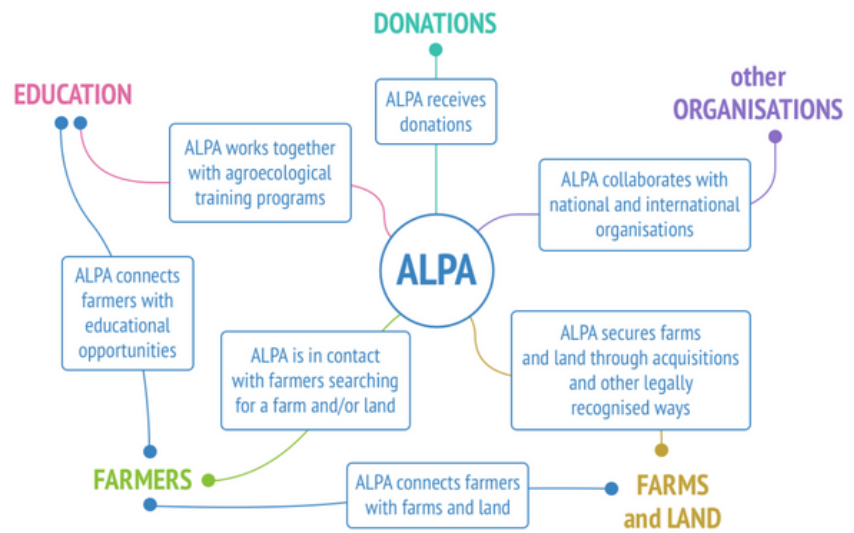
Task 3: Building a shared vision

- Discussion between stakeholders in order to build a common vision, upscaling partnerships and collaborative action through a Memorandum of Understanding for the creation of a commonly assumed juridical entity



RESULTS

The Eco Ruralis action built on previous work to establish "Acces la Pământ pentru Agroecologie" (ALPA). This association, created in 2019, aimed to secure equitable access to land through ethical means and empower resilient agroecological farms (see figure on the envisioned goals of ALPA). Nevertheless, it faced many hurdles. A first step towards exploring possibly more successful schemes was to work with ALPA founders to co-analyse reasons for past failures.



Interviews highlighted **hurdles related to the NGO status of ALPA**, useful to implement a charity approach (receiving donations in cash or in the form of farmland), but not to involve people as shareholders buying into the company to support farms. Furthermore, **a political and legal "red thread" needed to be deepend** to ensure purchased farmland was freed from the speculative market and maintained in agroecological food production. Finally, at the moment of establishment, **a wider network debate on the issue of fundraising for securing farmland would have been needed** to discuss ethical implications and needs of target groups (i.e. new entrants, land owners, retiring farmers).

To conclude, a different legal status was needed. Eco Ruralis explored two options during its action: **1) a shareholders company unlisted on the stock exchange market, 2) an agricultural production cooperative**. As proved by the ALPA experience, however, a suitable legal form is not enough. Many historical, mental, and economic barriers related to Romania's communist past of forced collectivisation must be lifted. Therefore, a last step of the action was to engage with wider circles on the needs and aspirations regarding such initiative.

Stakeholder engagement was carried out by Eco Ruralis through ;

- **A survey to benchmark the needs and aspirations of new entrants and retiring farmers.** The 513 answers notably revealed an appetite of new entrants regarding new forms of collectives to access land.
- **Discussions with an enlarged core group of partners**, including Eco Ruralis' coordination committee, Provision Transylvania (a center for agroecology and nonviolence), Hosman Durabil (an NGO working with small farmers), Trifolium Kajo (an agroecological goat farming business).
- **Outreach to more remote organisations**, including the conservationist Foundation Carpathia, (engaged in fundraising for conserving forests).

Despite this, the action fell short of delivering on expectations for an agreed-upon shared vision for an access to land initiative. This will require more time and engagement from the core group.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE!

BUILDING LEGITIMACY

- Eco Ruralis' **national notoriety and strong membership base** provide access to target groups (retiring farmers, new entrants), and better possibilities to understand their demands and tailor the initiative to local needs.
- Despite the aura of Eco Ruralis, there is **a clear need to federate more actors from diverse backgrounds** to generate a broad enthusiasm and support for such a ground-breaking project.

LEVERS & OBSTACLES FOR ACTION

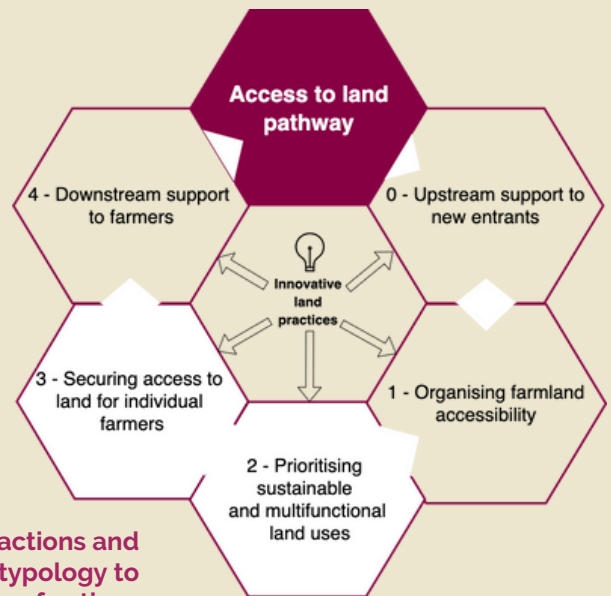
- **The context is particularly adverse** for creating a community land organisation in Romania not only because of the communist past but also due to weaker civil society networks and more difficulties to mobilise local funding for collective land purchases.
- **Internal factors were an important bottleneck.** Eco Ruralis' coordination committee was divided between members defending an ALPA-like direct and local initiative and partisans of a broader political strategy to push for better national legal safeguards for land. In the future, pre-agreement on resources to be devoted to both strategies could facilitate further action.



AN ADAPTED RESPONSE TO LOCAL LAND CHALLENGES

The work of Eco Ruralis addresses a need local solutions to secure land for individual farmers (block 3 of the access to land pathway).

This is done with the clear political objective to facilitate a specific land use, i.e. a peasant, agroecological type of farming which supplies many environmental, social, community, and economic services (block 2). In the future such an initiative will have positive effects on maintaining viable small-scale peasant farms and preserving land in the long term for a new farming generation, thus contributing to better land accessibility in Romania.



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



Young farmers © EcoRuralis

CONTACT

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