

T5.2 Case study report (Code FR5A)

The Versailles Plain's Association and peri-urban agriculture diversification

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The Versailles plain: A preserved space in an increasingly urbanized metropolis

The Versailles plain is an agricultural and natural area in the middle of centralized and urbanized metropolis: Paris. Its geographical context is complex, because the plain has an important historical heritage in relation to Versailles palace. Thus, it kept a strong agricultural heritage and its agriculture is characterized by relatively small farms and activity especially cereals with little diversification. Furthermore, the Versailles plain is surrounded by big cities with social and environmental issues.

The Ile-de-France region: an urbanized but still very agricultural area

The Ile-de-France region is the richest in France with 30.4% of French GDP in 2017¹. It has a high density: 1,013.5 inhabitants per km² and concentrates 18% of the French population. Its economic hegemony is based for a large part on the tertiary sector, which corresponds to 86% of the regional GDP. The Ile-de-France region has a rather high unemployment rate of 12.5% in 2017 (against 13.9% at national level). It is affected by strong development and social imbalances between a rather rich western part and a poorer eastern part.

Historically, the Ile-de-France region is centralized by Paris with the inner suburbs, the market garden belt of the capital in the 19th century (Phlipponneau, 1956) which during the 20th century became the “red belt of Paris” with strong urbanization and industrialization of municipalities. In the second half of the twentieth century and until today, the metropolis has spread over the other departments, including periurban spaces (Berger & Rouzier, 1977; Poulot, 2008). Today, the urban area of Paris largely exceeds the limits of the region. In recent years, the “Grand Paris” project and 2024 Olympic Games’ planning accentuated the urbanization process (Brédif & Pupin, 2012; Fabre et al., 2016). Nevertheless, agricultural areas occupy 48% of land use, which maintains a still important agricultural activity in the region.

1 <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2011101?geo=REG-11>

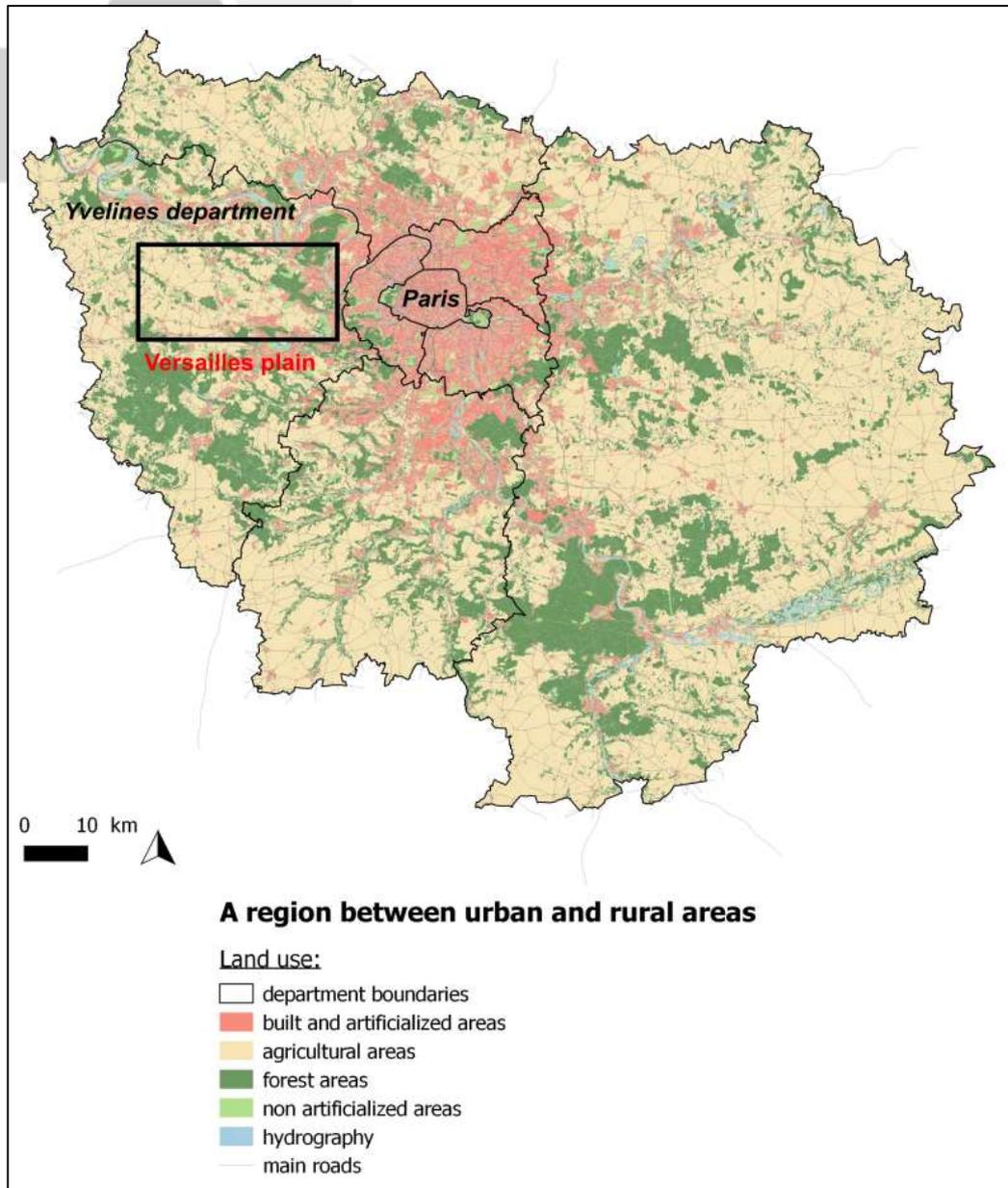


Figure 1. Ile-de-France region: an urbanized but still agricultural area
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Agriculture in the Ile-de-France region is predominantly cereals: 83% of the UAA is in cereals and oil-protein crops (including 50% in soft winter wheat). However, the region also produces watercress and parsley, white onions, broad beans and beets, barley, flax and table potatoes, as well as salad. Market gardening and animal husbandry are therefore present even if they remain marginal compared to cereals. However, the strong presence of

agricultural area at regional level does not prevent the decrease of farms and the aging of farmers, as it's analysed everywhere in France. In 2010, there were 6,347 managers and co-operators, which corresponds to a decrease of 18% compared to 2000, 18% of them are under 40 years old and 25% are women¹. Recent trends are the development of organic farming, which in 2020 represents 3000 hectares and 546 farms (organic or in conversion)², but also the development of short food circuits since the early 2000s (Poulot, 2014a, 2014b). 18% of the region's farms sell in short circuits, and among them 34% are mainly arable crops, 24% in breeding or mixed farming - breeding and 14% in market gardening. The development of short circuits demonstrates a growing interest, from local populations and tourists, for quality food and culinary heritage (local and seasonal food, traditional cheeses, wine, etc).

In this context, the plain of Versailles is located in the west of the region, in a rather rich department with an important natural heritage but also very close to large, dense and expanding cities.

The Versailles plain: a rural area near Paris

The plain of Versailles is located in the Yvelines department and west of Versailles. The Yvelines concentrate agricultural land and large forests, which represent 34% of the area of the department. It is a relatively low density area compared to the Ile-de-France region with 629 inhabitants per km². It is a rich territory with a much lower poverty rate (9.7% compared to 15.6% in Ile-de-France region) and an unemployment rate of 10.4%, which is below the regional average (12.5%). Nevertheless, the Yvelines department also concentrate municipalities with significant social gaps, in particular in the south of Versailles plain.

Limited to the east by the Palace of Versailles, to the west by the Mauldre valley, the Versailles plain extends over an area of 23,000 hectares. Essentially corresponding to the Val de Gally (with Gally rivulet), it concerns 25 municipalities and 5 communities of municipalities, four of which have only a peripheral link with this area. It is a historically

¹ <https://idf.chambre-agriculture.fr/la-chambre/lagriculture-francilienne/chiffres-cles/>

² <https://www.bioiledefrance.fr/>

cereal area with medium and small farms but it also has a rich woodland heritage (Bonin, 2013; Pupin et al., 2008).

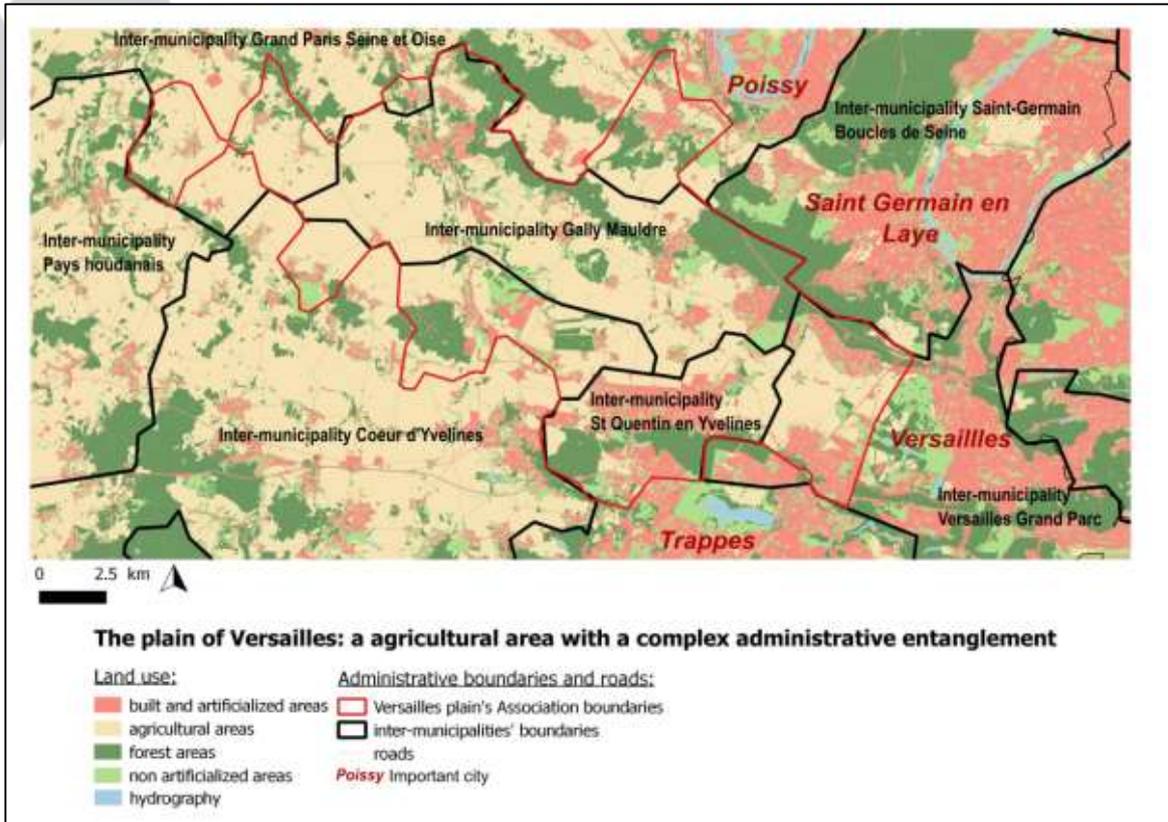


Figure 2. The Versailles plain is an agricultural area surrounded by cities and with no administrative existence © Camille Robert-Boeuf, 2021, QGIS, sources : IAU 2017 & data.gouv.fr

As we can see on figure 2, the Versailles Plain is an agricultural and natural corridor located from east to west in the Yvelines department. At the east, the plain is surrounded by important cities as Versailles, Trappes and Saint Germain en Laye. At the west, the plain is more rural with a large part of agricultural land and small villages (cf. figures).

Description of Versailles plain					
Municipalities number	Inter-municipalities	Population	Density	UAA	UAA in protected areas
24	5	145249	672inhab/km2	≈14000ha	3000ha

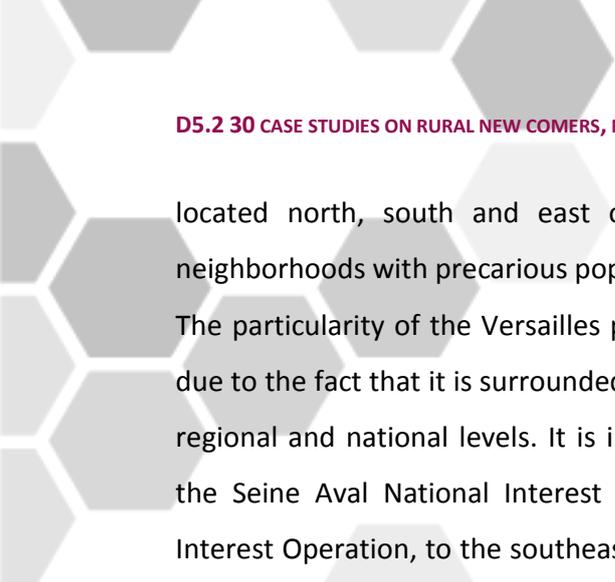
Farms characteristics of Versailles plain in 2018						
Total of farmers	Grain farms	Market gardeners and fruit growers	Beekeepers	Equestrian centres and horse breeders	Horticulturalists	Chicken breeding
124	76	23	4	12	7	2

Figure 3. Statistics of Versailles plain

© Camille Robert-Boeuf, 2021, sources: Insee, 2018 & Study of VPA, 2018 (<https://www.plainedeversailles.fr/les-etudes-de-lappvpa>)

This Versailles plain has a geographical consistency and exist through the Versailles plain's Association (red boundaries in figure 2) but has no real administrative structure. The intermixing of administrative levels (municipalities, inter-municipalities, departments and region) complicates the global understanding of the territory. However, the Versailles plain has a significant historical heritage, because it is closely related to the history of Versailles palace and it has known an important heritage process (Bonin, 2013). That's led to the definition of a landscape and qualities which are promoted by Versailles plain's association thanks to the creation of a landscape charter. The agricultural and forest areas are partly protected and classified, because they are located in the axis of the Versailles Palace, which, as we will see, has limited the urbanization of the municipalities in some cases. However, since 2000, urbanization expands with new neighbourhoods of collective and individual housing and commercial areas (especially south of the plain) in cities and residential housing in rural villages.

Moreover, the social situation is not homogeneous: rural municipalities in the centre of the plain are mostly inhabited by executives of the upper classes, for example in Crespières (a municipality in the center of the plain) 55% of the population come from the upper class, against 21% in Ile de France region. The situation is more diversified in the large cities



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located north, south and east of the plain, because they concentrated working-class neighborhoods with precarious populations.

The particularity of the Versailles plain, to the west of the Ile-de-France metropolis, is also due to the fact that it is surrounded by areas with an explicit project, recognized at the local, regional and national levels. It is indeed surrounded by two Projects of National Interest - the Seine Aval National Interest Operation, to the northwest; the Paris-Saclay National Interest Operation, to the southeast. As such, these two sites benefit from massive financial support from the State to bring about ambitious development projects and have a specific governance system that brings together representatives of the State and local authorities. Further north and south, two Regional Nature Parks, the French Vexin and the Haute Vallée de Chevreuse, have a greater vocation to preserve the landscape and heritage qualities of these areas and benefit, once again, from significant recognition and support from the State, the Île-de-France region and the local authorities. In comparison, the plain of Versailles has none of these labels. It is not identified as a strategic area in terms of economic development and employment on the scale of the region and the country; nor is it identified as a remarkable area in terms of its landscapes, its natural sites and its history. It remains in an in-between area that offers no special status, no specific access to financial support from the region or the state, and no form of global governance (figure below).

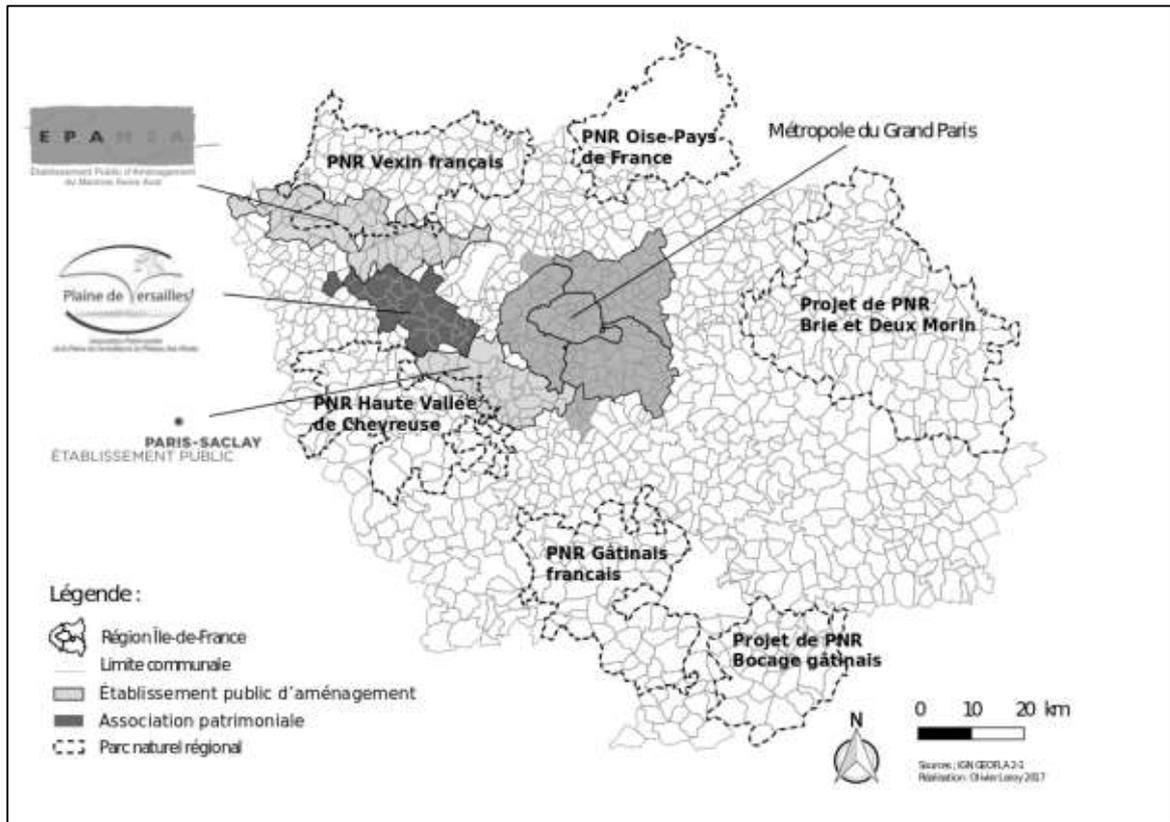


Figure 4. The Versailles Plain, between Projects of National Interest and regional parks

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Methodology

The geographical, historical and social situation of the Versailles plain illustrate the rural-urban issues of the area and questions the maintenance of agriculture and the installation of new farmers and food artisans in the plain. In this context, the Versailles plain’s Association is a central stakeholder who has promoted original and operative responses to these issues and to rural regeneration.

In order to analyse the impact of Versailles plain’s Association, we used a study conducted by AgroParisTech students in 2020 and we conducted 21 in-depth interviews with several and local stakeholders: farmers, entrepreneurs, local authorities and institutions, regional institutions and NGO’s (cf. figure). We also used statistical data and scientific literature’s materials. We also organised workshops to discuss our research with stakeholders.

Fieldwork for the case study analysis			
	Interviews number	Interviews average length	Interviews location
Study with AgroParisTech students (march-may 2020)	32	1'30"	by phone or videoconference (because of the pandemic)
Fieldwork of CNRS team (march-may 2021)	21	1'30" (and 30hours in total)	In Versailles plain or by phone

Figure 5. Fieldwork summary carried out for the case study

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Origins of Versailles plain's Association

A combination of several factors is at the origin of the creation of the Versailles plain's Association (VPA), of its singular purpose and of its specific modus operandi in the institutional Île-de-France and France's landscape.

A conservation classification project that was very badly received by farmers

In the 1990s, the west of Paris was undergoing major development work: road infrastructures, urban facilities, large-scale shopping centres in the communes of Le Chesnay and Rocquencourt. Located in the extension of the park of the Château de Versailles, the Val de Gally, protected by the SDAU (Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme de la Région IDF), has partially escaped the phenomenon. However, with the end of the SDAU, new urbanisation projects were announced; the State tried to react by classifying 2600 hectares of agricultural land located in the immediate vicinity of the Château de Versailles. The surveillance and the resulting severe restrictions on the farmers led them to propose annexing a management book to the "classified site", but this document, which was not provided for by the law, was rejected by the State services. This decision was seen as a dispossession of their destiny by the farmers immediately concerned. They are convinced that it will not provide any long-term guarantee for the problem of urban pressure, but will, on the other hand, lead to a weakening of the agricultural structures of the plain.

Concerned and enterprising farmers

This classification decision is in addition to other concerns for Gérard Laureau, head of the "Fermes de Gally". He is one of those farmers who, like Jean-Marie Dupré (Ferme de Viltain, on the Saclay plateau, about twenty kilometres away), have been successfully diversifying their farms for several years to serve urban populations. Beyond the entrepreneurial

dimension of the project, this diversification (picking on the farm, local produce shop, etc.) is the result of a well-thought-out project and a desire to bring quality products and amenities to urban populations cut off from any contact with nature and agriculture. The success of these particularly innovative and dynamic "farmer-entrepreneurs" leaves them incompletely satisfied, however, when they realise how little weight the subject of agriculture carries in local political bodies. Indeed, for many farmers around them, the future is full of uncertainties (future of the CAP, low visibility on land, weakened links with urban areas and increasing challenges to the intensive agricultural model). In addition to exogenous urban pressures, there is the endogenous problem of the capacity of agricultural activity to maintain itself in its areas. Its future as an economic activity is no longer certain; in the plain of Versailles, where the soil is not very fertile, the very future of agricultural activity is at stake, as the succession of farmers is not assured.

A strategic initiative supported by the Ile-de-France Region

After reactivating an old learned society, the "Société d'Agriculture et des Arts d'Île-de-France" (Society of Agriculture and the Arts of Île-de-France), Gérard Laureau and Jean-Marie Dupré tried everything: they asked for an interview with the President of the Region at the time, Jean-Paul Huchon. They wanted to know for sure: did agriculture in the vicinity of a world metropolis like Paris still have a meaning and a reason to exist? The meeting with President Huchon took place in the company of René Lacombe (former President of the FNSEA¹). The exchange with Huchon was frank and cordial. He assured them of the importance of maintaining agricultural activity, which in his view was essential to the general balance of the Paris metropolis and he was prepared to finance a facilitation process that Laureau and Dupré had discussed with Henry Ollagnon, a professor at AgroParisTech. However, the region will only be able to provide financial support for a facilitation approach if local associations are created and apply to implement and support this approach. Four territories have applied (Cergy and Sénart plains, in addition to Saclay and Versailles). The facilitation process initiated in 2020-2021 (with audits, in French "audit patrimonial") involves in-depth interviews with ninety stakeholders potentially concerned by the future of

¹ Majority agricultural union in France.

the agricultural and natural areas of the Versailles plain. In the space of six months, elected officials, farmers, environmental protection associations, State services and the Yvelines department were invited to give their opinion on the following question: Interests, conditions and means of maintaining and improving agriculture in the plain of Versailles for better management of the quality of life in the Ile-de-France metropolis. At the end of these interviews, the people who agreed to provide their expertise were brought together for a presentation-discussion on the main lessons learned from this mobilisation of expertise.

Three key ideas emerged:

1. The plain of Versailles is experienced as a space of separation between a well-off North and a more working-class South (along line C of the RER); a space in which urban people have little idea of what farmers are and what they do and, conversely, the farmers have relatively few opportunities to exchange with urban people.
2. Almost all of the people we met fear above all the creeping and insidious sprawl that is rampant on the plain of Versailles and predict a rapid deterioration of this area if nothing significant is done (this convergence is revealed by the audit process, but was not, until the audit process, a recognised or publicly debated subject).
3. Even if the agriculture currently practised in the Plain of Versailles is the subject of a number of criticisms and questions, the vast majority of the actors we met agree that it is an area whose agricultural qualities deserve to be preserved and developed.

The VPA, a body for facilitating and coordinating energies and projects

This approach will thus show that there are essential convergences of views on the subject of the Versailles plain. Convergences between actors who, until then, had not met, but who nonetheless shared the same overall concern about the future of the Versailles plain.

Three years later (in 2004), at the end of a long process of mobilisation, listening and dialogue, the Heritage Association of the Plain of Versailles and the Plateau of Alluets (APPVPA)¹ was created. According to the founding charter of this Association, its *raison d'être* is to "*create a space for communication in order to bring together individuals and legal*

¹ It is the previous name of Versailles Plain Association

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entities representing the various local interests. More precisely, the aim is to study and formulate proposals for local authorities, in order to establish a sustainable development project common to farmers and city dwellers, on the territories of the Versailles plain and the Alluets plateau". In short, the aim is to set up a multi-party governance operator to facilitate the emergence of projects of common interest around the agricultural areas of the plain.

The Association is made up of three colleges (college of elected representatives, college of farmers, college of associations, individuals and companies (or Civil Society)). It is based on a tripartite organisation comprising a consultative body (the three colleges), a technical team and an executive body (bureau and heritage council made up of the vice-presidents of the three colleges and 9 members from each college). The presidency of the association is entrusted to an elected official (mayor of Feucherolles, then mayor of Noisy-le-Roy, currently the mayor of Bailly) (figures below).

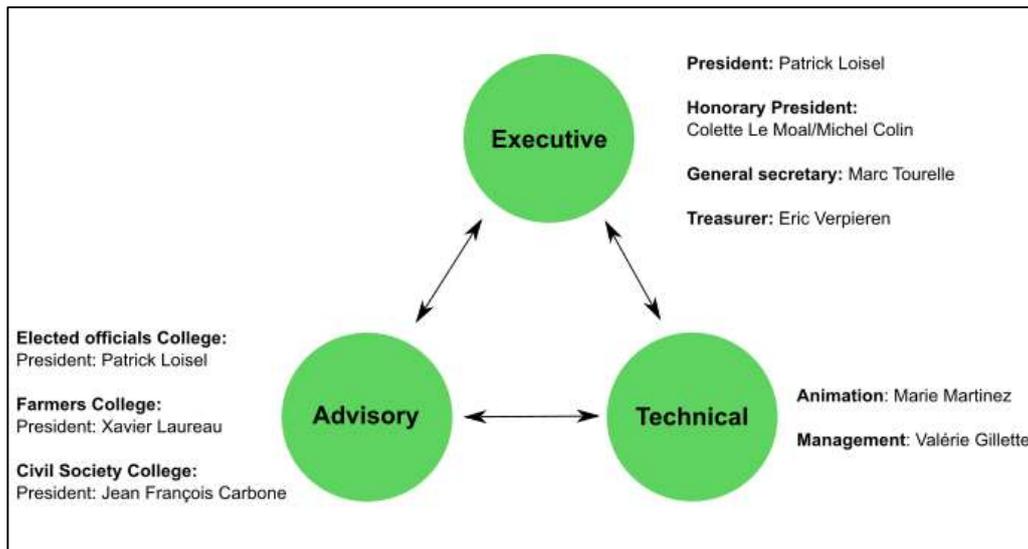


Figure 6. Organisation of VPA
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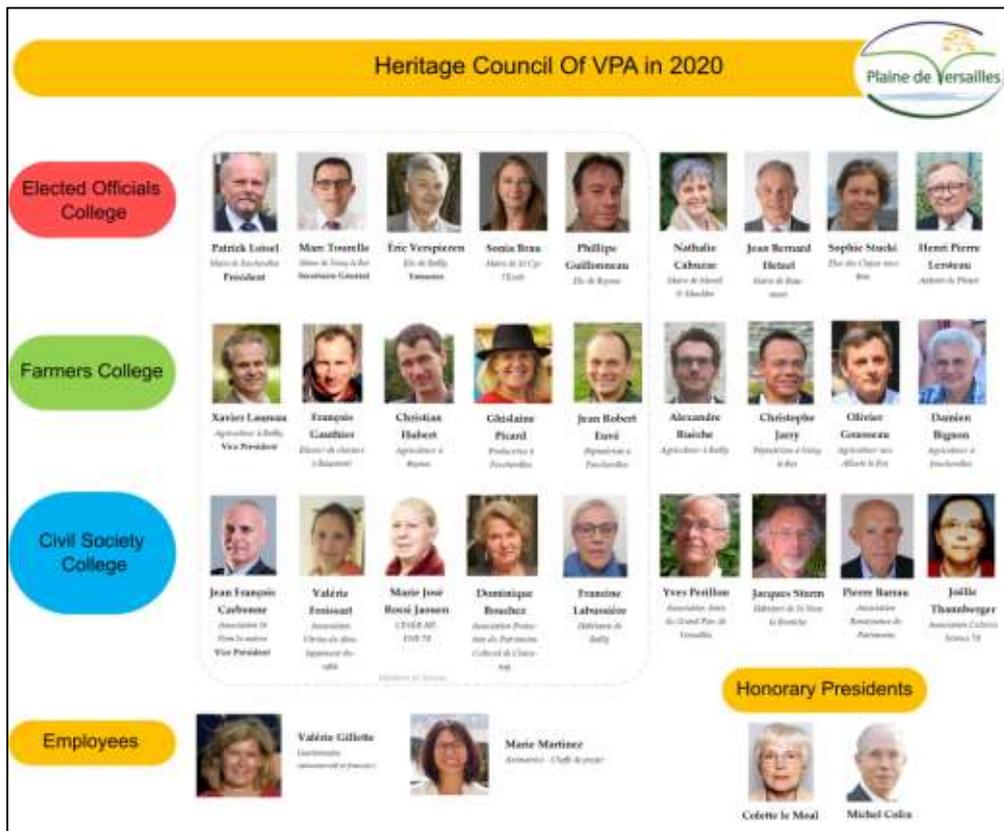


Figure 7. Heritage Council of VPA
© Camille Robert-Boeuf, 2021, sources: <https://www.plainedeversailles.fr/>

Actors involved: an active microcosm of entrepreneurs, farmers, associations and local elected officials

Versailles Plain's Association (VPA) brings together several stakeholders who usually rarely communicate together and it manages to unite them around common values and projects. The association is based on 3 different colleges: i) farmers, ii) elected officials, and iii) members of civil society. Each of these 3 colleges has 9 members and together they form the Heritage Council. This original structure with different members promotes a rich diversity of actors involved in the promising practice.

Farmers involved in actions of VPA represent around a third of the farmers present on the plain. They represent the diversity of agriculture sector in this area: there are of course cereal growers, historically located in the plain, but also market gardeners, beekeepers, nurserymen, herbalists, tree growers and to a lesser extent chicken breeder. Indeed, breeding is less implanted in the area, as in all Ile-de-France region. The majority of these farmers sell their productions in direct sales or in short circuits but more conventional farmers are also involved. These farmers are also often food artisans because they transform their own productions; local and autonomous food artisans also exist in complementarity because they use in priority local agricultural productions. These food artisans are also very active in the association's actions.

The majority of elected officials are local or regional stakeholders; interviewees rarely mention political stakeholders at national and European level. We noticed that the association's network is largely based on local and regional political actors as: mayors, inter-municipalities, Yvelines department and Ile-de-France region. The originality is also that Versailles plain's association brings together urban and rural political actors. Indeed, some mayors of rural and urban municipalities are members of the association and/or participate to its actions. For example, the association brings together the Crespières' mayor, a rural municipality with 1641 inhabitants; and the Villepreux's mayor, a city with 10975 inhabitants, in order to build political reflexions and actions about survival of agricultural sector in their municipalities. These relationships are created beyond the belonging to inter-municipalities or other administrative structures, because the common objective is to

protect and promote the Versailles plain, not as an administrative entity but as a geographical and historical area.

Moreover, the VPA built privileged relationships with agricultural institutions and is an important link between these institutions and other local actors (especially farmers and political stakeholders). As it concentrates a large group of farmers, the association has a good knowledge of the agricultural institutions' functioning and it can relatively well communicate with them. The association collaborate with the SAFER (Land development and rural establishment organization) and the Agricultural Chamber when there is land to sell in the Versailles plain or when new farmers (new entrants or successors) want to establish in the plain. Therefore, the association is a concrete connexion between stakeholders and institutions, it helps them exchanges and disseminates its knowledge on institutions, installation procedures, aid and financing for agriculture.

The Versailles plain' association rallies also several stakeholders from civil society. Several environmental, residents' and hunters' associations are members of the association. Thanks to theses others associations, Versailles plain' association shares the information of the territory and can communicate with very different actors who don't speak to each other or are often in conflicts as, for example, environmental association and hunters' associations. VPA then appears as a structure giving a proper space to debate. It can also be considerate as a representative structure of the plain.

One of the strengths of the VPA is to connect not only different types of actors but also different generations of actors. Indeed, NGOs and farmers' groups connected with the VPA concentrate young and holder stakeholders that sometimes hardly communicate, thus VPA promotes peaceful relationships between them and respond to their specific issues, for example issues on new establishment or retirements of farmers.

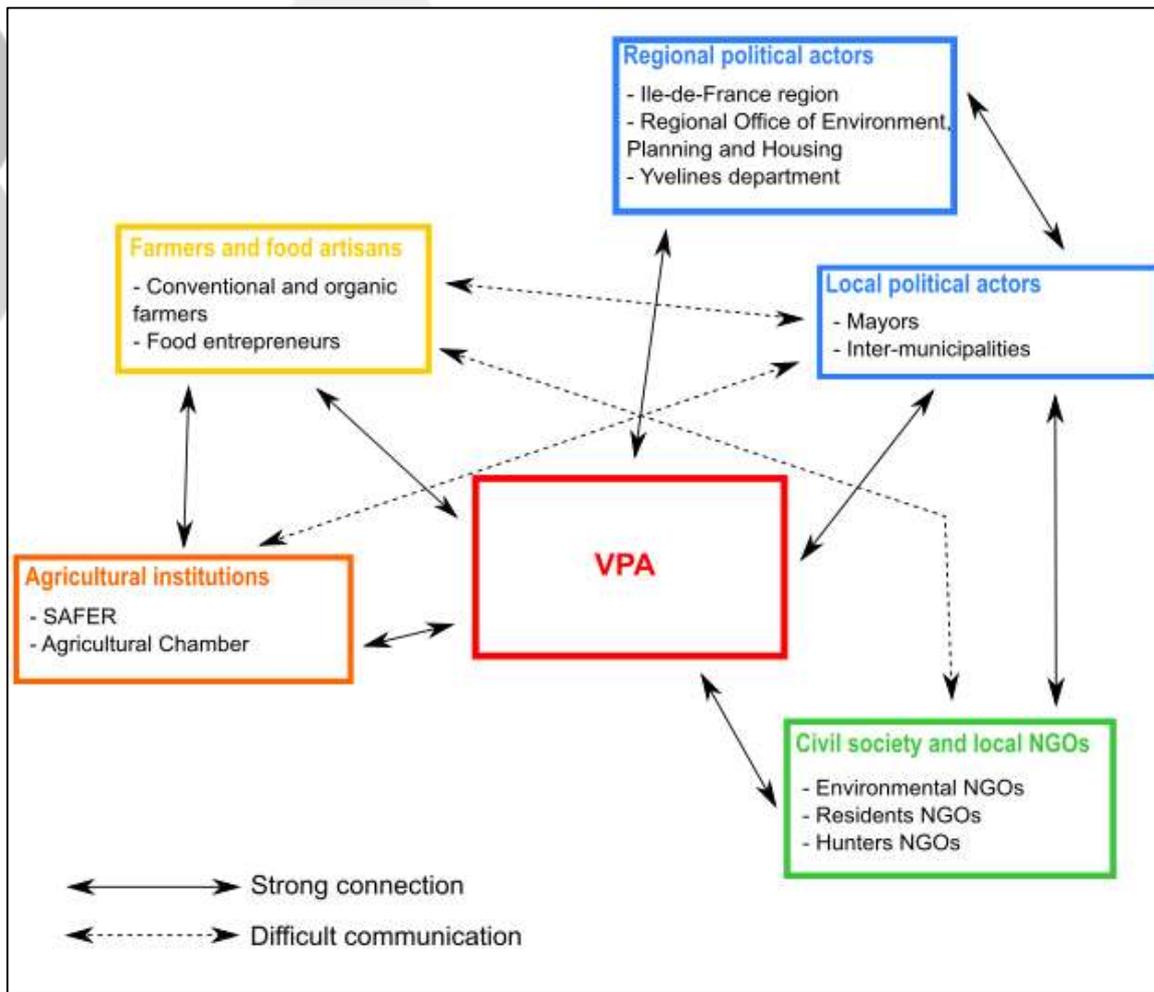


Figure 8. The VPA as link between various actors in the local network

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The VPA network is mostly based on local actors and is really effective at local level, because since the 2000s' it managed to define common values. We will define with more details these values further in the following sections but we can already say that these values are based on i) a precise role and characteristics' definition of Versailles plain; ii) the defence of agriculture as an economic activity and as an inherited landscape; iii) an openminded comprehension of the "new agriculture" and a promotion of local agriculture without opposition between conventional and organic agriculture. Nevertheless, this network has difficulties to extend outside the plain and especially with urban actors of cities located outside the plain and is relatively little recognized at regional and national level. But we will discuss this further.

Promoting local agriculture, generational renewal of farmers and new entrants into farming

The creation of the VPA is in itself a real innovation: it is not an association of residents fighting against the projects of elected officials or farmers; nor does it constitute an farmers' group focussed on agricultural issues and demands; it still differs from an inter-municipal association or a regional natural park, which rely on their own employees. It is a local initiative originating from farmers but which aims to respond to broader issues and is open to other types of actors. The association lives on contributions from its members, who are free to join or leave each year, as well as from grants that are constantly being renewed. Its existence is therefore based only on the conviction of its members to form a plural community concerned by the future of the plain and which can reflect on issues of common interest and translate them into concrete actions.

First actions of VPA: a significant impact on acknowledgement of Versailles plain as agricultural area

Since its creation, the VPA has implemented several significant actions:

From 2004 to 2008, VPA boosted the associative dynamic. It is at the origin of a widely adopted "commune of the Versailles plain" signage. It is also developing a guide to hiking trails. These actions help develop a heritage and territorialization process around the Versailles plain which was poorly identified a few years earlier.

Its structuring and its role in facilitating the emergence of projects led the Ile-de-France Regional Office of Agriculture to suggest that it apply for the 2007-2013 LEADER call for projects. Transformed for the purposes of this project into a LAG (Local Action Group), the VPA will ensure that the Leader project matures with farmers - twenty-five farmers will be actively involved - before seeking the involvement of elected officials.

The VPA obtains the Leader project that allows it to develop several large-scale projects:

- Feasibility study of a "Flour of the plain" sector;

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- Creation of the "Circle of producers" which brings together seven processing companies (biscuits, dairy products, soups, jams, rapeseed oil);
- Creation of a cooperative for the use of agricultural equipment (Cuma in French) for specialized producers;
- Launch of a bee health project that brings together beekeepers and farmers.

In 2010, the College of Farmers in the VPA requested a landscape charter, which can serve as a guide for municipalities, farmers and individuals. Established in collaboration with the National School of Landscape, all the mayors of the plain signed officially the Charter in 2014. This charter reflects a now shared desire to control the urbanization and sprawl of Versailles plain. Without being completely under control, this major problem (although not openly shared in the early 2000s) is now taken care of; the VPA has fulfilled its role in this regard. Indeed, in our interviews, urbanization is not considered as the principal problem anymore for most of the stakeholders. Farmers feel protected and do not think their land will be urbanized in near future. We will see (in section "Innovative but unsettled Policies and Institutional supports") that this feeling is caused partly by specific legislation on classified areas, but VPA also had an impact on representation and on project of political and local actors: mayors now acknowledge agriculture in the plain and consider it as a heritage to protect (as they signed landscape charter).

Recently, VPA promote new generation of farmers and new agriculture

Since 2012, the VPA respond to several issues concerning agricultural regeneration and promote a local and diversified agriculture. Thanks to its important network, the VPA help new entrants and successors to establish in the plain: transfer of information on the sale of agricultural land or farm buildings; help for funding applications; putting in contact with local political actors who can offer their support. Fieldwork showed that in a few years several new entrants into agriculture and food artisans could establish with the help of VPA (cf figure 4).

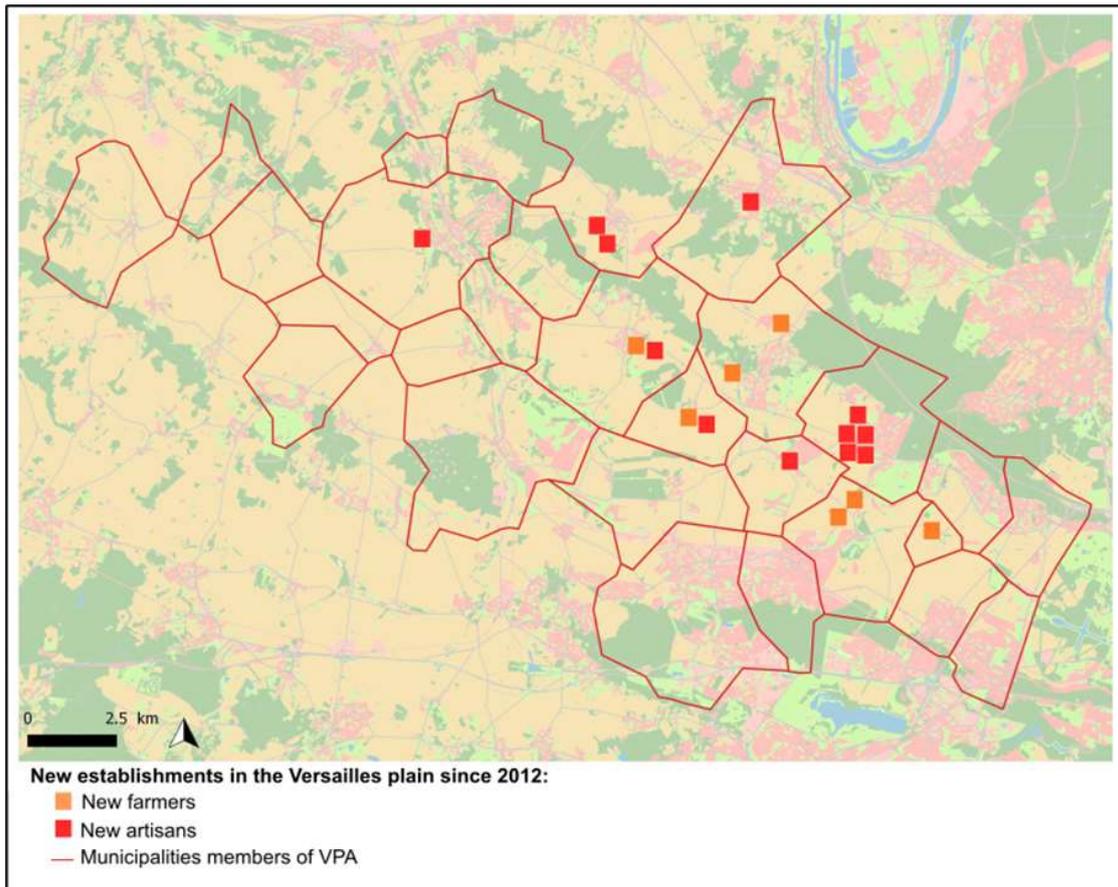


Figure 9. New establishments of farmers and artisans in the Versailles plain

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This new generation of farmers transform the agricultural landscape of the plain: there are more and more market gardeners and not only cereal growers, so subsistence agriculture is more established in the plain. This new generation establish on little surfaces and they diversify their activities as much as possible (market gardening activity associated with livestock; sale of transformed products at the farm, in local shops and markets, etc.). These new farmers have a common philosophy about environment. The environmental impact of agriculture is important, organic agriculture is promoted but not obligatory. Those who are in conventional agriculture are also greatly reducing the use of chemical inputs and are planting hedges. More generally, farmers integrate preservation of biodiversity in their practices. They also promote local production and they are attached to the territory of the Versailles plain: they know each other; they know activities of the plain, its characteristics and limits. They promote mutual aid and exchange of experiences between different farmers. Generally, they are also more open to other types of actors, so they more often join

actions of the VPA about agricultural awareness for urban stakeholders. Sometimes, they organize activities on their farms and welcome the public. For example, a farm hosts the "Fête de la Plaine" (the Plain Party) several times a year to reunite farmers, food artisans and urban dwellers.

Besides, the VPA truly articulate needs of farmers with needs of food artisans. Farmers more and more want to transform their own production but do not always have skills and equipment. Food artisans have regularly difficulties to establish in Ile-de-France region, because land and premises are not adapted for food transformation (which need to have strict health standards) or are too expensive. By centralizing information and mobilizing his network, VPA succeeded to settle an artisan in a farm, where the farmer had premises and could host food-processing activities. The association helped for political support and put in contact the artisan and the farmer who agreed on a rental contract and. The artisan will offer his own products but will also offer the possibility to farmers to come and transform their own products according to local needs. Thus, VPA plays a role in the relocation of the food chain from the farmer to the consumer. Of courses, its relationship with local political actors encouraged this impact on food supply chain, because mayors of local municipalities support short circuits and especially AMAPs (Association for the Maintenance of Peasant Agriculture).

Assets of the Versailles plain and new challenges

The geographical situation of the Versailles plain facilitates the recent development of this local and diversified agriculture. Indeed, the Versailles plain offers large consuming population with high incomes, so new local food supply can easily find customers attracted by quality food. All interviewees who established a farm or new shop on the plain explained that they had no difficulties to find outlets for their agricultural production or their processed products and according to them, on the contrary, the plain offers very interesting economic development prospects.

Moreover, the Versailles plain is an in-between city and countryside. For lot of interviewees recently established in the plain, the Versailles plain propose a rural and agricultural area but near city and it is very easy to go from one to the other by car or public transport. It is a

flexibility that is valued by new entrants into farming or new food artisans because it facilitates the transition from the previous life (in the city with an office job) to the new life (work in a farm or set up a local food business). For example, a new tree grower has been established since 2018 in the commune of Feucherolles. Before she worked in the food trade sector. Since her installation, she has not moved to the Versailles plain. She still lives in Paris and comes to her farm every day. This proximity to Paris has enabled her not to have her whole family move and to wait until the farm is profitable before moving permanently. Young farmers and food artisans appreciate this proximity to the city also for the services they can have access to rapidly as museums, cinemas, etc. So, the Versailles plain can be really attractive for young new entrants into farming who wants to live near urban facilities and in the same time have a more rural lifestyle close to nature and a job in the agricultural sector.

However, the Versailles plain territory has also several difficulties that are now challenging the VPA. The Parisian agglomeration closeness causes negative impacts on access to land, organization of agricultural work, farmers' lifestyle and provokes conflicts of use.

Opportunities for access to land are rare and the farms for sale are often too large and therefore too expensive for new farmers who wish to settle. In fact, the available lands are limited (because of land pressure) and the farms traditionally present in the plain are large cereal farms, while new farmers are more often arboriculturists and market gardeners who do not want (and have not the means) to buy large agricultural areas. Those who have the means to acquire a farm are then either successors of the farmer who retires; or new entrants to agriculture who had enough capital to be able to buy land and farm buildings. The question of farm buildings is also central, agricultural buildings are particularly expensive in the Versailles plain, because they are often heritage assets or have to be renovated. Nevertheless, they are also rare and many new entrants into farming do not live on their farms. A social gap is then created between farmers who have a significant heritage (often because they are the successors of a farming family formerly established in the plain or because they are new entrant with significant economic capital) and farmers with low income who cannot afford a house on the plain and even less close to their farm. Being a farmer in the plain can therefore entail relatively high costs for professionals whose wages are often limited despite direct sales and short circuit systems, and this is particularly

difficult for new entrants into farming. Several new farmers, installed for a few years, say that they do not yet earn their living thanks to agricultural work, even if they are optimistic thanks to the large presence of customers.

In addition, there is the need for labor, particularly for new market gardening farmers. Proximity to the city and the high cost of living makes the profession of agricultural worker unattractive (difficult working conditions and low wages) and, at the same time, few people really have the skills necessary to satisfy the needs of farmers. For several market gardeners we met, it is therefore difficult to find seasonal workers or agricultural workers.

Proximity of the city also causes use conflicts. First, the proliferation of construction sites around Paris (in particular with the “Grand Paris” project and the preparation for the 2024 Olympic Games) is leading to aggressive canvassing from construction companies who wish to get rid of their backfill land in farmers' land. Unauthorized dumping of waste is also frequent in fields close to principal roads and large cities, which can cause dangerous pollution.

Proximity of important cities and the covid-19 pandemic reinforced the inflow of urban dwellers into the plain. If these urban residents have been able to constitute a new type of clientele for farmers and food artisans who sell directly their products, they have also created tensions with the farmers. In fact, urban dwellers are often very unfamiliar with agricultural activity and do not respect the boundaries of farms: they cross fields, have picnics there, tree growers see the inhabitants using their trees, etc. which affect farmer productivity. These recent evolutions are added to a context of strong mistrust between city dwellers and farmers, city dwellers accusing farmers (sometimes even organic farmers) of polluting the fields and poisoning them.

This year, tensions between urban dwellers and farmers are a big challenge for the VPA who organized several meetings with political actors and farmers about this issue, but no solution has been yet implemented.

Synergy and networks: good synergy but still tensions between actors

The VPA has truly succeeded in building synergies and an effective network as we have already shown just before: this network has made it possible to defend the agricultural plain and the establishment of new farmers and food artisans. This synergy is based on common values and a common representation of the plain of Versailles. However, there remain tensions and dissonances between actors, which make acknowledgement and projects of the VPA difficult to go above the local territory and does not always manage to mobilize all the actors at regional level.

Synergy thanks to common values and representations

Since 2000, the VPA and other stakeholders of the Versailles plain have built an effective network based on common values and representations.

Since 2014, the VPA landscape charter helped to register the Versailles plain in the local and regional heritage. The plain is recognized by all the stakeholders for a set of characteristics building a common representation. The Versailles plain is thus defined by all the actors as an important historical agricultural and natural territory. The landscape is characterized by an alternation between fields and wooded areas and the view is unobstructed. One can easily recognize the agricultural plain with the Ru de Gally (rivulet) in the center and the wooded hillsides to the north and south. The agricultural plain is above all a cereal plain and allows an unobstructed view (cf figure 5). This view is central, because it refers to the will of Louis XIV who wished to preserve an open perspective from the Versailles palace and throughout the plain. This reference to Louis XIV is also used by several actors to justify the strong presence of cereal agriculture. All the interviewees claim to work and / or live in a territory rich in terms of biodiversity (farmers and local NGOs in particular are well aware of the flora and fauna of the plain) and consider that they are lucky to be able to have settled there. The last significant characteristic of the Versailles plain is the proximity of the city, as we already

mention, and this proximity is very abrupt without any transition: we suddenly go from the dense city to the grain fields with small villages.

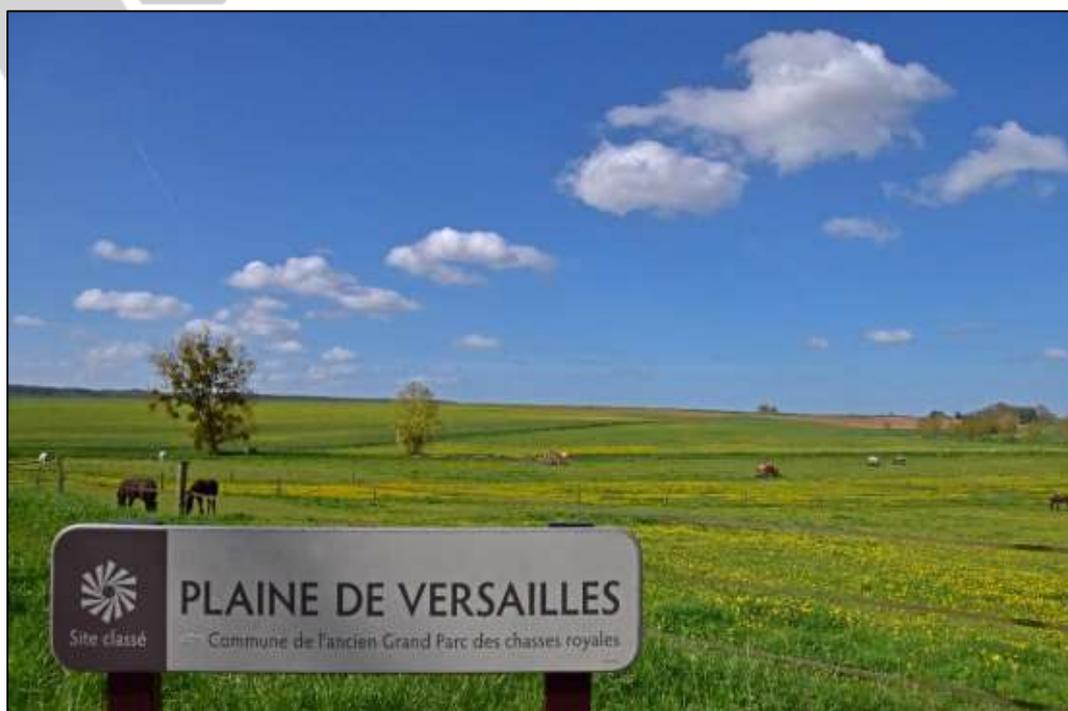


Figure 10: View of the Versailles plain: wheat fields as far as the eye can see

© Jacques de Givry in Brédif & Montbel, 2019, p.287

This representation of the plain was affirmed by the VPA and federated local actors in order to protect it. This global landscape of the plain help to strengthen the local network with one unique identity. Thus, the network affirms the agricultural, economic, landscape aspect of the plain, and reinforce the place of farmers as central stakeholders.

The VPA network have also common values that determine who is integrate in the network and who is excluded. Indeed, the network is very inclusive and based on an open-minded philosophy. All farmers on the fieldwork asserted that they don't want to oppose stakeholders and they work with everyone to go "in the same direction". In the speeches of farmers and other network actors, there is no strong opposition and criticism of the conventional agricultural model or organic agriculture. All together, they claim to participate to the same goal of protect and develop the agriculture in the Versailles plain. Indeed, the only farmer who declared herself isolated in the plain was a farmer who clearly showed her

opposition to conventional agriculture and to hunting and clearly opposed conventional and organic agriculture.

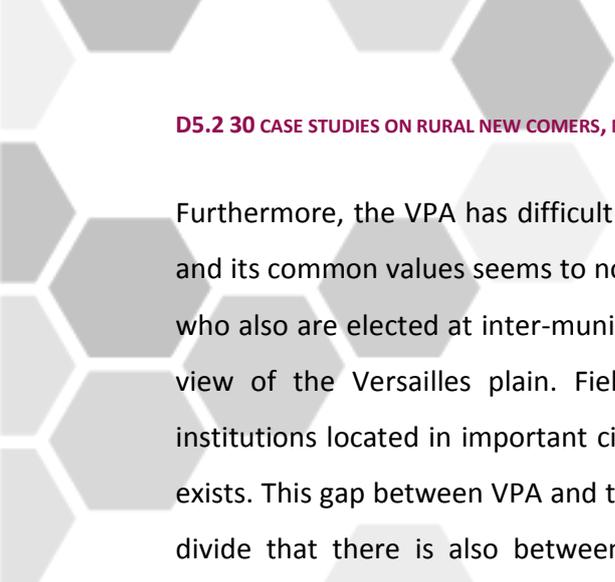
The size of the network and territory in which it is located also explains the strength of this common philosophy: all the farmers and artisans know each other; they also know local associations and local political actors. As they often said in the interviews: “we know everyone here, it’s a small world”. The strength of VPA has been to capitalize on this geographical proximity and transform it into a real functional network with a space for meeting and debate to put this common philosophy into action and to lead to concrete projects.

The limits of the VPA network: integrate diverse actors on a smaller scale

However, this local and strong network has difficulties opening up to other types of actors and in particular to actors located outside the agricultural plain.

First, the VPA do not integrate all the farmers of the plain, it actively works with a third of the farmers and 2/3 of them are outside its network. The majority of the farmers, who participate to VPA actions are from the new generations, have a diversifying activity and sell locally their products (as we explained in section “Promoting local agriculture, generational renewal of farmers and new entrants to farming”). Therefore, more traditional farmers and older farmers are less integrated; we can say that there is a generational gap between them. Thus, the majority of farmers who do not promote local and subsistence farming and have a more traditional agricultural activity are hardly integrated in the network, while VPA claims to represent and defend all the farmers of the plain.

And despite the action of VPA, tensions exist between organic and conventional farmers, or between cereal growers and market gardeners, because they speak little to each other except at VPA meetings. Several farmers said that they do not have the same practices and issues, thus they do not speak to each other so often, except when they are neighbors. The issues are also not the same for farmers with large economic capital and little and new farmers with economic difficulties. Therefore, the agricultural world seems more divided than what the VPA thinks and it’s sometimes complicated to speak to all of them.



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Furthermore, the VPA has difficulties to exist outside the Versailles plain. The VPA network and its common values seems to not integrate other urban actors, except some local mayors who also are elected at inter-municipal level and, thus, have an interest in having a political view of the Versailles plain. Fieldwork showed that inhabitants and even local social institutions located in important cities near the Versailles plain do not even know the plain exists. This gap between VPA and the urban areas that surround it is reinforced by the social divide that there is also between the two: surrounding cities have many working-class neighborhoods and they have other socio-economic problems to which the VPA is not responding (yet?). In fact, The VPA promote local and quality food which is also more expensive and thus a food that is reserved for wealthy populations. Thus, the VPA network is not fully capable to propose a common project for a larger area than the agricultural plain because it do not integrate issues of youth, unemployment and social inequalities.

Then, from an external point of view, the Versailles plain area is also often mixed up with the VPA and some of the actors encountered find it difficult to distinguish the two. Hence, the plain seems to exist today, for external actors, only thanks to the association, which is yet rarely known at regional or national level.

Innovative but unsettled Policies and institutional supports

The Versailles plain offers very interesting cases of institutional supports to maintain agricultural land and the VPA was an active stakeholder in their development. The relationship of the plain with Versailles palace is also a strong support with classification of 3000 hectares as protected sites. But traditional institutions seem less capable to supports new alternative projects because they reveal very little flexibility and are not participating in the stakeholders' network.

Cases of effective political support for the maintenance and development of agriculture in the plain of Versailles

In the plain of Versailles, we can observe three cases of interesting political support which made it possible the maintenance of agriculture and made it possible to strengthen and / or continue the action of the VPA.

First of all, the plain of Versailles has 3000ha of agricultural land in protected sites, which means that these lands cannot be built and that even agricultural activity is monitored; farmers must apply for exemptions in order to be able to build agricultural infrastructure. The protected sites are managed by the departmental services of the Regional Organization for Environment, Planning and Housing (DREAL in French). The DREAL services are responsible for supporting farmers when they wish to carry out construction work and renovations to meet the requirements of classified sites. These services promote respect for an open landscape and prohibit urban sprawl. Traditionally in the Versailles plain, they favor the installation of grain farms. However, with the arrival of market gardeners or small chicken breeding that need more structures such as greenhouses or animal shelters, adaptation needs are greater and control services are sometimes forced to ban certain building. The uncompromising of the DREAL services can create conflicts with farmers who see their activities strictly controlled and the cost of constructions increase considerably.

Indeed, when they are allowed, these buildings must be made of ecological materials and with the least possible impact on the landscape. In addition, certain prescriptions are contradictory with what is also recommended by the State. For example, farmers are encouraged to make hedges for the protection of biodiversity, while, in the same time, the DREAL services prohibit hedges because they are cutting the landscape of the plain.

Nevertheless, in the Versailles plain, the articulation between farmers, local elected officials who support the farmers' installation and DREAL services are facilitated by the VPA. Thus, DREAL services are a strong institutional support against the urbanization of agricultural land in the Versailles plain, because they can prohibit the construction of buildings on protected sites. This strong mechanism, which sometimes arouses incomprehension from farmers, is then facilitated and takes place in dialogue through the intermediary of the VPA.

Second, the Yvelines department has also offered significant institutional support. In 2018, a vineyard was established on 27 hectares in the Versailles plain by submitting an application to SAFER (Land development and rural establishment company). In order to be able to buy the land (relatively expensive in the plain) and to be able to make the necessary investments for the plant and the maintenance of the vines, the Yvelines department has agreed to support the winegrowers with the SAFER and to ensure the land portage of the farm. Thus, the Yvelines department advanced the necessary money and the farmers agreed to repay them in ten years according to a price agreed in advance. This allows the farm to ensure its installation and the first years of establishment. This example is very interesting, because it shows that the public authorities can ensure the installation of farms with solid projects and thus invest without, in the end, spending a significant budget. It was able to emerge because the farmers approached the Yvelines department very early on, presented a convincing project and already had a budget thanks to a previous wine-growing activity (the winegrowers had created a wine house in Ile-de -France region a couple of years ago). The experience of wine growers abroad promoting viticulture and their training in trade and communication has also facilitated the construction of their project and the support of regional institutions.

Third, a municipality in the centre of the Versailles plain, with the help of the VPA, took advantage of a sale of organic agricultural land on a classified site by SAFER to help set up a market gardener and his wife (new entrant into farming) and an arboriculturist (successor

who wanted other lands) on its territory. The market gardener who was looking for land met the municipality and the VPA and worked with them to apply and to be accepted by the SAFER. However, at the start, SAFER refused the application, because according to the evaluators, the farms in the Versailles plain are traditionally grain farms and therefore they didn't want to divide the land to set up smaller farms in market gardening or tree farming. The municipality therefore decided to meet the SAFER employees, along with the VPA, to explain their interests in seeing a market gardener set up in its territory. In the end, the project was validated and the market gardener was able to buy the land. The tree grower, who is successor to his parents and already have agricultural lands outside the plain, was able to buy neighbouring land more easily. Nowadays, municipal support continues with the participation of the VPA to support these two farmers in their infrastructure construction projects for their activities despite the status of classified sites of their agricultural land. They are in long-term discussion with the DREAL services that we have presented above.

Thus, these three examples showed that Versailles plain and the VPA network achieved to take advantage of institutional support, even if, the third case also demonstrates that sometimes institutions can be an obstacle to the diversification of agriculture in the plain.

Agricultural institutions disconnected from others stakeholders and little adaptable

Indeed, institutions are less integrated in the stakeholders' network and are less openminded about establishment of new entrant into farming proposing a local and diversified agriculture in the Versailles plain. Moreover, they are little adaptable for specialised farming.

Agricultural institutions and DREAL services promote the traditional agriculture of the Versailles plain (that is to say cereal farms) and are often not inclined to help the installation of other forms of more local and subsistence agriculture, unlike the VPA and local political actors (Yvelines department and local municipalities). They have a traditional understanding of the plain and keep promoting large farms and grain farms in order to maintain wheat fields landscapes. The VPA has succeeded in making this agricultural landscape a heritage and having it recognized by all local stakeholders. However today, it insists on the

diversification of the plain's agriculture, and this implies changing the representations of what agriculture is, changing the representations of the agricultural landscape and changing the practices in terms of support and installation for new farmers (and especially new entrants into farming). This is particularly difficult in a French context where agricultural institutions (SAFER or the Chamber of Agriculture) are completely autonomous from other regional and local stakeholders and seem opaque to many interviewees. Thus, a better understanding between SAFER, DREAL services and local authorities is required by several stakeholders in order to reflect together on the "new agriculture" (term used by interviewee – Fr5A/int-14) desired in the Versailles plain.

Besides, the difficult institutional development of diversified agriculture is strengthened by the little adaptability of farmers' support policies. These policies are ill-suited to new entrants into farming who have few means and need long-term visibility: aid for installations takes into account the immediate installation of the farmer while tree growers, for example, do not have profitability for three years. Then new entrants into farming, who do not have family support, feel particularly left behind, especially in a context where climatic hazards are frequent, which weigh on agricultural production and weaken new farms without treasury. Indeed, climate change and episodes of drought or frost weaken small, new and even organic farms. Therefore, the support policies do not take into account farmers establishment in the long run and do not allow farmers to develop their farm over a sufficiently long period to make it profitable and sustainable, especially for crops that require several years to develop.

Perspectives

An operator promoting the emergence of projects of common interest

The Versailles Plain Association is an extremely important facilitator in a complex area subject to numerous pressures, but nevertheless fragmented by institutional and administrative logics. As many of the actors we met stated, "if the Association did not exist, it would have to be invented". In fact, this body brings together energies and projects of the various actors concerned by the future of the plain, its agriculture and its landscapes. It has succeeded in curbing the main threat that existed twenty years ago, an insidious sprawl, with the risk of an accelerated degradation of the landscape and agricultural qualities of this area.

Beyond this risk, which now seems to be contained, the Association has succeeded in promoting structuring projects on the scale of the plain and is helping the gradual transformation of existing agricultural structures, their diversification and the installation of new activities related to agriculture or the processing of agricultural products.

Despite these significant successes, which show how a facilitation body of this type is a promising practice that can certainly be transposed to other territorial contexts, difficulties persist.

- Following the last municipal elections, many local elected officials have changed and a major effort to raise awareness of the Association's roles and missions must be resumed.
- The elected representatives of the large agglomeration communities around the Plain of Versailles are not very involved; in front of the major problems and issues they experience on a daily basis (housing, social diversity, poverty, etc.), it is not certain that the Versailles plain area appears to them as a provider of solutions or answers.
- The permanent structure of the Association remains fragile, as the financial support of the various institutional partners is not guaranteed.

A critical threshold remains to be crossed

In other words, the challenge now is for the Versailles Plain Association to succeed in moving from a project aimed at maintaining agricultural activity to a more global project, likely to interest the many actors and partners who gravitate around this area. This challenge does not *a priori* require a major change in the governance of the Association and its three colleges system. It does, however, require that those currently involved in the future of the Versailles Plain recognise that they need to "change gears": to move from a project that is primarily formulated in terms of preserving an agricultural area against the urbanisation offensive to a much more global joint project, in which agricultural and natural areas will appear as solutions and levers of positive change for the various human communities that surround this area. The Association must now succeed in encouraging the emergence of a broad and positive vision around the Versailles plain.

With regard to the idea of **rural regeneration**, several considerations emerge. Firstly, it can be said that the Association's role is very favourable to rural regeneration, insofar as it has clearly contributed to counteracting a process of degradation through insidious sprawl of the plain and its agricultural activities. Insofar as it contributes to encourage the emergence of groups and networks of actors around agricultural activities, and even to facilitate the new actors' establishment in the field of short circuits, organic farming or local food. Insofar as it intentionally contributes to the maintenance and advent of a "new" agriculture, giving more importance to local and food supply. Thus, the Association works in favour of a form of rural regeneration.

Secondly, there are contrasting views on the term rural regeneration itself. While for some, the term is sobering and fits relatively well with the feeling they have with the Versailles plain, others do not agree with it, considering that the Versailles plain is more similar to a peri-urban space. This difference in perspective is perhaps due to the fact that the more global project (mentioned above) is not yet sufficiently explicit and shared and that the idea (of a new rurality emerging in the Versailles plain) is not yet widely accepted.

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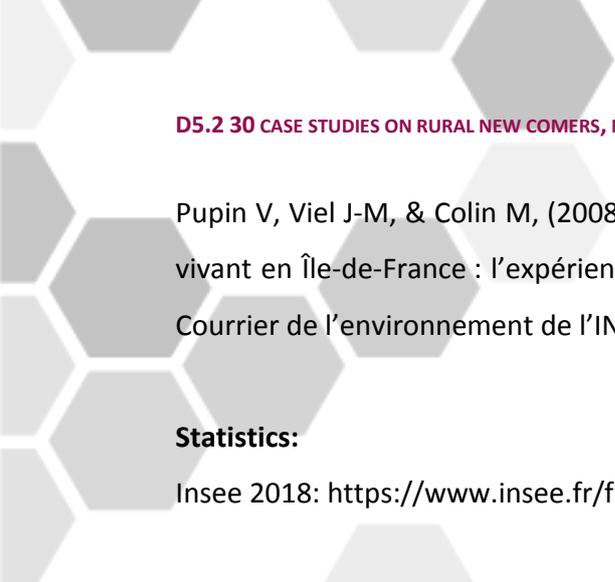
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Other sites:

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Annex 1. The List of interviews

Code	Gender	Role	Place and date	Other information
FR5A/Int.1	Male	Member of VPA administration council	Versailles Plain 02/03/21	
FR5A/Int.2	Female	Member of VPA administration council	Versailles Plain 02/03/21	
FR5A/Int.3	Female	Farmer n°1	Remote interview 25/03/21	Successor
FR5C/Int.4	Female	Farmer n°2	Versailles Plain 22/03/21	New entrant into farming
FR5C/Int.5	Male	Farmer n°3	Remote interview 02/04/21	New entrant into farming
FR5C/Int.6	Male	Farmer n°4	Remote interview 01/04/21	successor
FR5C/Int.7	Male	Farmer n°5	Versailles Plain 31/03/21	New entrant into farming
FR5C/Int.8	Male	Farmer n°6	Versailles Plain 30/03/21	New entrant into farming
FR5C/Int.9	Male	Farmer n°7	Remote interview 26/04/21	New entrant into farming
FR5C/Int.10	Male	Farmer and food artisan n°1	Versailles Plain 23/03/21	Successor
FR5C/Int.11	Male	Food artisan n°2	Versailles Plain 24/03/21	
FR5C/Int.12	Male	Food artisan n°3	Versailles Plain 23/03/21	
FR5C/Int.13	Male	Food artisan n°4	Versailles Plain 25/03/21	New comer
FR5C/Int.14	Female	Elected official n°1	Remote interview 01/04/21	
FR5C/Int.15	Female	Elected official n°2	Remote interview 26/04/21	
FR5C/Int.16	Male	Elected official n°3	Versailles Plain 31/03/21	
FR5C/Int.17	Female	local NGO n°1	Remote interview 30/03/21	
FR5C/Int.18	Male	local NGO n°2	Versailles Plain 01/04/21	
FR5C/Int.19	Male	local NGO n°3	Remote interview 30/04/21	
FR5C/Int.20	Male	Social local institution member	Remote interview 27/04/21	
FR5C/Int.21	Female	Regional institution member	Remote interview 12/05/21	

Table 1. Interviews