

Making Farmland Work for the Public Good

Summary of the Access to Land seminar for local authorities | Brussels, March 23 2023



On 23 March 2023, we held the first Access to Land seminar for local and regional authorities "Making Farmland work for the public good ». More than 70 of us – elected officials, technicians, public agencies, networks of local authorities, civil society and researchers – came from seven European countries to exchange and reflect collectively on ways to promote an agricultural and ecological transition in European territories. This document offers you a summary of the exchanges. Here is the table of content:

- 1. Accès à la terre en Europe, des bases communes 2
- 2. Penser global, agir local : le rôle des collectivités sur le foncier agricole 2
 - 2.1 Agir en tant que propriétaire 2
 - 2.2 Agir en tant que facilitateur 3
 - 2.3 Agir en tant que régulateur 4
- 3. Les prochains pas : consolider la solidarité européenne à consolider pour agir sur le foncier agricole 5
- 4. Résumé des ressources utiles 6

This event was organised in the framework of the H2020 [RURALIZATION](#) project, with the support of the European Union.

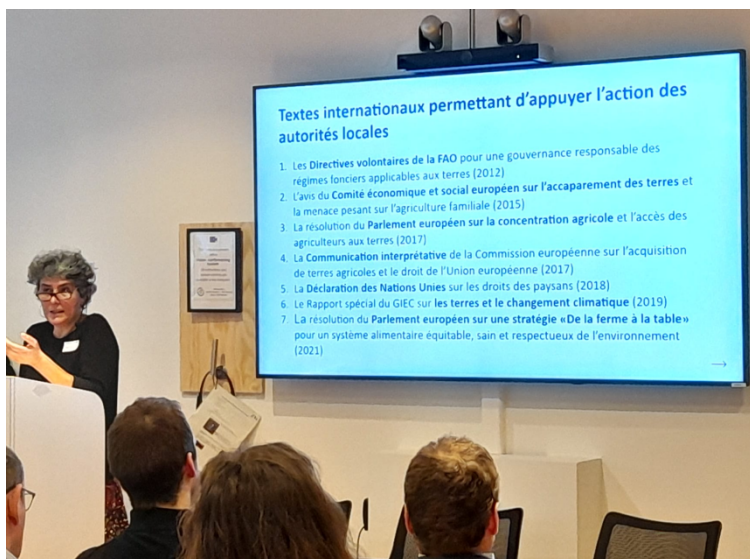


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1. Access to Land in Europe, acting on common ground

Why talk about *local* land action at a *European* scale? Beyond the specificity of national land situations, environmental lawyer Isabelle Verhaegen reminded during the seminar's introductory session that **there are fundamental rights and international texts to guide and legitimise the action of local authorities**. From the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines on land tenure adopted in 2012 to the most recent resolutions of the European "Green Deal", the introductory conference addressed various international treaties, reports and declarations reminding us that access to healthy food, a healthy environment and a decent income – including for farmers – are principles endorsed by the international community.



In addition, European countries face common threats to agricultural land: hyper-concentration, financialisation, market opacity... In this context, it is important to broaden local alliances for the common good. Members of the Access to Land **network have published an [online handbook](#) that explores the ways in which local governments can act on land as owners of agricultural land, as facilitators of local land systems, and as regulators of local tools for regulating markets and rights related to agricultural land**. This publication, presented by Alice Martin-Prével during the introductory conference, compiles principles, resources, and practical tools to support local government action on agricultural land.

- [Click here](#) to access Isabelle Verhaegen's (*Terre-en-Vue*) presentation and the links to international texts presented during the introductory conference
- [Click here](#) to access Alice Martin-Prével's (*Terre de Liens*) presentation and the infographics on the role of local authorities (in several languages)

2. Think global, act local: the roles of local authorities on farmland

2.1 Acting as a landowner

Two workshops explored aspects delved into the role of landowner during the seminar. One looked at ways to identify public land and its potential, the other explored how to lease and transfer public land in a responsible manner.



The identification of public land is a delicate step. Although necessary for diagnosis, it consumes time and resources that local authorities may not always have. During the workshop on this issue, Hélène Hainaut (City of Charleroi, Wallonia) and Sam Evans (Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, Wales) shared their territorial approaches to a) identify land and its potential –

through mapping, analysis of existing soils and contracts, etc. – and b) establish decision-making processes to prioritise the plots where to engage actions such as renting to new entrant or transferring land to community groups. Simona Elmo from the National Association of Italian Municipalities shared a nationwide project to support Italian towns in identifying, managing and leasing abandoned land (both public and private). Finally, Hans Vandermaelen, researcher at ILVO, explained the difficulty of accessing information on public property in Flanders and provided a more general analytical view of the obstacles that can prevent the mobilisation of this common heritage.

Several local authorities also gave testimonies on how they are trying to overcome the obstacles to a virtuous use of public land and to act as responsible landowners themselves. Eliza Van der Zand (City of Leuven, Flanders) and Jean-Luc Hallé (Douaisis Agglo, France) shared their experiences of organising calls for projects and leasing public land for sustainable agricultural enterprises. Furthermore, Cécile Vô, lawyer at D. Sight Consulting, presented work on the development of criteria and conditions for the lease and/or sale of public land, while Malin Tiebel and Michael Grolm from the German farmers' union AbL presented a national campaign for "public welfare leasing".

- [Click here](#) to access the presentations from the "How to lease and transfer public land responsibly" workshop
- [Click here](#) to access the presentations from the "Identifying public land and its potential" workshop

2.2 Act as a facilitator

Beyond acting on land they own, **local authorities are central and legitimate actors to convene actors and organise local dialogue on land issues.** During the seminar we discussed how they can act as intermediaries (in particular to link farmers with private landowners) and to raise awareness and renew narratives on agricultural land.

The workshop on the **role of public actors in mobilising private landowners explored a field of action that raises many taboos.** Nevertheless, **several of the experiences presented demonstrated that beyond the myths on the impossibility to act on private property, common interests often unite communities and owners.** This is the case in Catalonia, in Lluçanès, where the Association of Forest Owners (APF) of Lluçanès works with the intermunicipal authorities to promote contracts

between livestock farmers and forest owners to reduce wildfire risks. As [Jordi Sola Roca](#) of the APF Lluçanès explained, through the contracts brokered by the association landowners make their plots available and farmers can bring their herds to graze and maintain the forest. The intermunicipal authority, on its end, invests in the infrastructure necessary for farmers (fences, water points, tracks, etc.). [Rosa Busqué i Bonamusa](#), from the city of Mataró, presented similar initiatives for the management of forests, hunting grounds, as well as land bank projects to link supply and demand for land locally. Finally, [Daniel Leblay](#) from the municipality of Mouans-Sartoux explained the long-standing work of the town council to reclassify private plots of land as agricultural zones in the local urban planning scheme. More recently, the town council is working to make the recultivation of these lands a reality through dialogue with the owners.

Focusing on local narratives and dialogues around agricultural land, **a workshop on "land as opportunity in times of multiple crises" looked at how local initiatives are recreating regenerative agricultural narratives and projects.** [Charlotte Keeley](#) (Glasgow Community Food Network, Scotland) explained about how citizens are launching high social and environmental value projects on former golf courses of the city of Glasgow. [Ann Davies](#), a local councillor in Carmarthenshire County (Wales), explained how municipal farms where the infrastructure for dairy production is becoming inadequate and too expensive to replace could become opportunities to set up a new generation of market gardeners, which the county sorely needs. To conclude, [Franco Llobera Serra](#) presented the social inclusion approach developed by the TERRAE network – which works with some forty municipalities throughout Spain – to gradually train unemployed people in agricultural entrepreneurship. The workshop participants then shared their stories of hope and ideas to rethink the place of agricultural land in local development strategies.

- [Click here](#) to access the presentations from the “Public actors mobilising private landowners” workshop
- [Click here](#) to access the presentations from the “Land as an opportunity in times of multiple crises” workshop

2.3 Act as a regulator

Beyond the specificities of national regulatory frameworks, **the seminar proposed to address local authorities’ prerogatives in land regulation.** We addressed the issue of urban planning, as well as the ways in which local authorities can intervene in land markets.

The “agroecological urbanism” workshop looked at how cities can move towards greater harmony with nature and agriculture by integrating into urban planning tools to preserve land, take into account agricultural needs, and objectives related to green spaces (carbon storage, water management, food production, etc.). [Catherine Fierens](#) presented the BoerenBruxselPaysan project, which aims to support market gardening and short supply chains around the city of Brussels. [Thomas Müller](#) from the rental department of the Berliner Statdгүйther explained the action of this company with a unique status and history, which manages 17,000 ha of land and more than 300 buildings (many of them agricultural) around Berlin. The existence of the Statdгүйther has largely contributed to limiting urban expansion in the municipalities around the German capital. Finally, comparing the urban development strategies of Brussels and Copenhagen, [Jeroen De Waegemaeker](#), researcher at ILVO, showed that taking into account food production in urban planning is a new area of work that

requires strong political strategies and a rigorous and long-term application of planning guidelines. Finally, [Bram Vandermoortel](#) (Architecture Workroom) presented the “Urbanising in Place” project, which has helped to define concrete interventions to improve the links between urban spaces and agriculture – for example through the recultivation of fragmented plots, agro-ecological parks, farm incubators, etc.

A policy to preserve agricultural land can be reinforced by **intervention mechanisms through which local authorities can acquire land and prioritise certain uses or users, or influence the local land market** (by limiting speculation for example). The workshop “Local authorities’ levers of intervention on land markets” introduced the concept of land banks that the TERRAE network helps municipalities to set up in order to better identify available land and improve information on land supply and demand. It also discussed the possibilities for citizen groups to reclaim unused land or to benefit from processes of public assets transfer, as some Scottish groups are currently experimenting (Glasgow Community Food Network). On the scale of the Grenoble metropolis, [Lilian Vargas](#) demonstrated the effectiveness of a policy combining stable planning guidelines and intervention mechanisms in conjunction with the SAFER (rural land agency) and the Établissement public foncier local (local public land agency) to preserve land. By working with these actors, Grenoble can acquire plots for sale, bank land, and then conduct calls for projects to favour sustainable farms geared towards local marketing. According to Lilian Vargas, the success and legitimacy of this action also stems from the political support and the global approach taken by the metropolis on food policy (local processing of products, short circuits, etc.).

- [Click here](#) to access the presentations from the “Agroecological urbanism: aligning land planning with sustainability goals” workshop
- [Click here](#) to access the presentations from the “Levers of local authorities to intervene in land markets” workshop

3. Next steps: consolidating European solidarity to act on agricultural land

To conclude the seminar, we returned to the European level in order to link our vision of the role of local authorities in agricultural land to current EU initiatives. The closing plenary session brought together Marion Maignan from DG Agri and Henrike von der Decken from DG Envi, who presented two laws currently being drafted by the European Commission on **sustainable food systems** and **soil health**. These texts, planned in the framework of the European “Green Deal”, could provide ambitious definitions of what a “sustainable” food system and “healthy” soil are and concrete proposals on product labelling, minimum sustainability criteria, public procurement, governance of food systems (as regards with the food law) and proposals to monitor and curb threats to soil such as erosion, pollution, salinisation (as regards the soil law). The Commission representatives explained how these proposals would soon be submitted for discussion with the Member States, where support from national coalitions and local authorities could help convince national governments to adopt ambitious laws.

4. Summary of useful resources



- Read the [European handbook](#) for local authorities
- [Access here](#) the “Making Farmland Work for the Public Good” Seminar archive file with the programme, presentations, and pictures.
- Read the articles in several languages by our partners, [Shared Assets](#), [Terre-en-vue](#), [Red Terrae](#), [XCN](#).