

Evaluation of the Access to Land network

Results, lessons learned and recommendations from the external evaluation



Executive Summary

Samuel Féret, 22nd November 2019

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The external evaluation of the Access to Land network (A2LN) assessed its progress and impact over the 2010 – 2018 period. It was carried out according to specifications drawn up by Fondation de France and Terre de Liens, the network coordinator, and aimed to make recommendations on the network's development and its contextual and institutional environment at European level.

This evaluation covered the topic of agricultural land for agricultural use through a network of stakeholders organised at European level. This network encourages the protection and sharing of agricultural land with a view to consolidating innovative contractual strategies for reshoring food production.

Access to agricultural land for new farmers is not only a problem of supply and demand. The cumulative and interlinked phenomena of land concentration and land grabbing, as well as rising prices, soil degradation and a lack of new farmers for generational renewal in agriculture requires political and collective action based on regulation and coordination mechanisms involving multiple actors.

The technical, institutional and multidimensional nature of agricultural land for agricultural use, as well as the fact that soil and agricultural land is very much an area of national competence, justify coordinated European action in order to understand the situation and envisage practical solutions to make it easier for new farmers to access land in Europe. This is the intent of A2LN, an informal network comprising approximately fifteen organisations from around a dozen member states.

The member organisations fall into three categories: i) **Community Land Trusts** which aim to help organic farmers set up; ii) **associations which support new farmers in consolidating local food supply models** (i.e. community supported agriculture (CSA) associations); iii) **organisations for the conservation of the environment of agricultural areas** which promote types of high nature value agriculture and livestock farming.

A2LN is an informal European working space specifically focusing on access to agricultural land for new farmers. This space is considered highly relevant and beneficial by its members and partners. It represents a valuable opportunity for individuals and organisations faced with land-related problems seen as impossible to solve in their own countries without an information and knowledge-sharing network established for the purpose of exchanging best practices and practical solutions.

A2LN has worked on **the following objectives: i) developing the network; ii) capacity-building for members and iii) political advocacy.** Its activities include **several complementary aspects: preserving agricultural land, securing agricultural land for agroecology, supporting a new generation of farmers, and managing agricultural land as commons.** In addition to these objectives, **these activities have guided strategies and influenced interactions between stakeholders and different types of partnerships.**

During the period covered, **the evaluation revealed that A2LN had worked more like a consortium of changeable configuration rather than as a movement, even though the aim of the consortium was to serve the movement.** The progress analysis showed that the network relied on a succession of EU funding programs. **There is a real ambition to establish A2LN as a social movement, but due to its nature, activities and results it has become more of a support service and resource centre.**

The establishment of the network addressed many needs throughout Europe, providing practical, collective, legal, political and regulatory responses to the difficulties encountered by new farmers in accessing agricultural land. **To do this, A2LN launched a community of practice, a unique resource centre for best practices, and co-organised advocacy aimed at the EU institutions together with various partners.** These actions have contributed to the original value proposal which the network offers its contacts and partners.

A2LN has become a vital centre of expertise for issues surrounding access to agricultural land in Europe, due to its network for exchanging best practices, which inspires its members and partners to innovate on a local or national scale via original methods of facilitating access to land.

The external evaluation of A2LN **highlighted its relevance and effectiveness. A2LN's actions were found to be highly complementary, and even in synergy, with its members and partners. A2LN has very high European added value for its members,** due to its activities involving exchange of experience, capitalisation, training, advocacy and dissemination.

A2LN's activities demonstrate different ways of actively assisting generational renewal in agriculture, through upstream intervention based on land market regulation and downstream innovative support of agricultural project developers.

A2LN filled a previously unoccupied niche; the blind spot in European policy on agriculture, rural development and protection of the environment and climate, as the objective of preserving agricultural land with the aim of allowing new farmers to set up is absent from EU agricultural, environmental and climate policy. European public action on land access is still non-existent, as under the treaties the EU has no competence in this area which would justify intervention.

The evaluation revealed that the role of the CAP in facilitating access to land was initially overestimated by A2LN, compared with that of national, regional and local initiatives. The CAP has influenced, and continues to encourage, land concentration, expansion of farms and increasing land prices; however, national and regional authorities can counter these negative effects through national decisions on the implementation of the CAP or through complementary agricultural, environmental or land strategies aimed at protecting agricultural land for the farmers of the future.

The evaluation showed that the impact of A2LN on political change has been indirect, uneven and on a fairly small scale, but still significant on certain points. Along with its partners, A2LN has managed to increase the visibility of this subject which was overlooked at EU level. This has been demonstrated by the incremental advocacy launched by A2LN involving the petition for preservation of agricultural land in 2015, its influence on own-initiative reports from the European Parliament and European Economic and Social Committee, and the Interpretative Communication from the European Commission on land markets.

This limited impact on European political change is due to the lack of an institutional framework and appropriate forum to openly discuss this issue, rather than any failings on A2LN's part. A2LN has had more influence in the political debate on the objectives and instruments contributing to agricultural generational renewal in the post-2013 CAP than within the more specific area of land access. Moreover, some positive results have had a real impact on political change in some member states, and the processes underway are very encouraging for the long term.

The evaluation showed that the media impact of some of A2LN's actions has remained weak, like its European advocacy, as these areas have not been prioritised by its members. To a certain extent, **A2LN advocacy targeting the institutions in Brussels** was carried out by delegation via partners who were already present there.

Finally, **this evaluation revealed the precedence and influence of French political initiatives on agricultural land for agricultural use, which have been and remain a source of inspiration throughout Europe for solutions based on (semi)public regulation of land and on private contractual arrangements:** role of the state, status of tenant farming, SAFERs (rural land organisations), environmental rural leases, Terre de Liens.

Recommendations

Based on the results and lessons learned from the evaluation, the following recommendations are made from two angles: 1) regarding the internal workings of A2LN and 2) regarding external issues related to possible developments on the subject of land in Europe.

Regarding the internal workings of A2LN

- **It would be in A2LN's interests to better position itself as a decentralised European movement of civil society organisations,** through encouraging participation, interest and membership stemming from a political vision, an ambition, and long-term shared values. The governance procedures of the

network could be better formalised, with political leadership and collective or rotating coordination.

- **A2LN should adopt a 2030 European strategy with the objective of curbing the loss of agricultural land through active generational renewal of farmers involved in agroecology.** It follows that the specific objectives should also be redefined and **ranked in order of priority, particularly with regard to the climate contribution of environmental protection and/or agroecological management of agricultural land.**
- **Reinforce and update A2LN's European advocacy strategy on the issue of agricultural land regulation,** particularly exploring the opportunities afforded by environmental regulation on land in the member states and at EU level, which will contribute to facilitating access to land for the farmers of the future.
- **Draw up a communication strategy to increase A2LN's media impact.** This strategy would help define key messages, storytelling and the appropriate target audience, whether internal or external. **The communication strategy** would go further than sharing and disseminating A2LN's messages and results, and **should include mechanisms for involvement, participation and interaction with members, partners, stakeholders and the media.**
- **Better position A2LN to support innovative installation projects at European level.** This would allow A2LN to enhance its support role throughout the land system, at all levels (i.e. **solidarity financing, community-supported tenant farming, agricultural advisory services, etc.) alongside national institutions, practitioners and future farmers requiring specific advice on land.** The supporting or "service point" roles to prioritise include innovative financing of new farmers, expertise on agricultural land markets, agricultural think-tanks and farm incubators, training existing and future farmers, mentoring and support of members to develop these services.
- **Collect information on the characteristics of agricultural and food production holdings and systems implemented thanks to A2LN members,** for better knowledge of land uses and practices, and thus provide information on their impact on the environment, climate, jobs and local economy. This information could be entered into a database managed by A2LN.
- **A2LN provides an original but still relatively isolated contribution in Europe to a complex issue which involves generational renewal of farmers and the protection of land and soil. This requires continuous**

support from the foundations. Funding exclusively from the EU is not enough to ensure the continuation of A2LN.

External approach surrounding the issue of access to land in Europe

Outside of A2LN itself, the evaluation also recommends:

- Looking into **developing a service for observation and analysis of the agricultural land markets** in conjunction with research institutes specialised in the subject, possibly as part of a future project to find new sponsors in order to support European advocacy on agricultural land markets.
- **Explore and analyse the contexts and factors for success in land access in European countries with the highest rates of generational renewal** – bearing in mind the proportional aspect – in order to learn from this and to provide food for thought for countries where generational renewal is lacking and agricultural land is disappearing.
- Alongside the agricultural and food-related aspects stemming from new farmers setting up in Europe, **the social sciences could also examine the profile of these new farmers, new forms of activity and diversification, rural entrepreneurship approaches, and non-agriculture-specific rural activities** that arise due to these new arrivals.
- **Remobilise European foundations to support the creation of networks between several A2LN members at national level** (i.e. Germany, Spain, United Kingdom). **This creation of a national network is a key stage in highlighting land access solutions beyond a local or regional scale, as well as supporting subsequent scaling up.**
- **Developing targeted partnerships for the preservation of agricultural land with alliances and networks of local authorities in Europe.** Local authorities have expertise related to agricultural land and seek more local innovation than the European institutions, which would assist in spreading awareness of A2LN's activities and solutions among European municipalities, departments and regions.