


 VÉRONIQUE RIOUFOL

**An essential prerequisite for developing local, organic agriculture in Europe**

# Securing access to land for new farmers

The smell of freshly-baked bread. The sight of golden wheat and spelt. A stable network of consumers on the local market and through community-supported agriculture schemes. These are the achievements accomplished by Michel in only 5 years. In 2007, Michel became a young baker-cum-part-time farmer, making and selling organic bread in a small village in the department of Drôme, Southern France.

He rents 6 hectares of land, to produce part of the cereals he uses for baking and is progressively enlarging his local clientele by word-of-mouth. Michel set-up as a farmer so as to produce all the cereals that he needs for his bread, and to develop his activity. He heard about organic land for sale in a neighbouring village. He did not

have the financial capacity to buy it, but he knew about a recently created organisation, Terre de liens, which supports farmers in securing access to land. So Michel and Terre de liens joined efforts to raise money from relatives, local inhabitants, consumers, or from further afield. Soon, the necessary amount was collected, and Terre de liens bought 3 hectares of land, which were rented to Michel on a long-term lease. Later, Terre de liens was able to buy two additional plots of 3 hectares each, taking precedence over alternative buyers who had wanted to have a secondary residence, and to keep few horses. With this farmland, Michel has been able to develop his production and to set up a coherent and sustainable system of crop-rotation.

Throughout France, Terre de liens mobilises civic support for the preservation of agricultural land and the setting up or continuation of local, organic farmers. In just 10 years, it has come a long way in building civic support, promoting organic farming, and opening up space for debate about land use and management.

## **Addressing the land barrier**

Terre de liens was born, in 2003, out of the realisation that access to land – i.e. finding available land, being able to rent or buy it, and having a lasting and secure access to it – had become a major hurdle for people wanting to go into farming.

Banks, cooperatives and the main farmers' unions, in cooperation with the government, and in connection with the agro-food industry, tend to support specialised, capital-intensive forms of agriculture. This is particularly visible in the existing criteria for bank loans or public support (e.g. acreage, quantitative output, regular increase in capital and inputs). Community-connected organic farmers are not high on the list, especially when they come from a non-agricultural background.

#### **Mobilising citizens to develop local, organic agriculture in France**

Against this backdrop, the association Terre de liens emerged to give an answer to these issues and show that other ways are possible. Terre de liens preserves agricultural use of the land, promotes and supports land as a commons and support access to land for (established and future) peasant and organic farmers. It results from the cross-fertilisation, in the late 1990s, of three converging movements:

- > Rural development and people's education organisations dedicated to promoting vibrant rural areas and convinced that citizens should have their say in the future of rural areas;
- > Organic and biodynamic farming movements seeking to develop these forms of farming and facilitating the continuation of existing farms and establishing of new farmers;
- > Solidarity-based economy and ethical finance organisations promoting alternatives to capitalist relations to land and money as well as contributing their financial expertise.

The cornerstone of Terre de liens is to inform citizens and consumers, through a series of educational and local mobilisation activities aimed at raising awareness of the connections between consumption patterns, the forms of agriculture, economic and social activities in rural areas, landscapes, and environmental impact. Terre de liens encourages people to take action, by sharing information around them about land issues, investing in farmland, or volunteering in a local group. The aim is to raise civic awareness, create support networks for organic and peasant farmers, raise funds and broaden public debate on territorial planning and the orientation of agricultural models.

Terre de liens also initiates and supports local multi-stakeholder dynamics aimed at supporting a newly established farmer; finding a successor and facilitating a farm transfer; developing a green belt; or, finding and setting up farmers to supply local schools or care homes. It closely works with many local authorities, by providing technical assistance, realising a municipal land diagnosis, facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue, or training agents and elected representatives. Terre de liens has now become a large civic movement, involving 20 local branches and over 10,000 people –members, volunteers, shareholders, etc. - and receiving support from many local groups

of inhabitants and consumers, civil society organisations and local authorities.

In addition, since 2006, Terre de liens has developed original financial tools to directly support farmers in securing access to land.

#### **Innovative financial tools to decommodify land**

In 2007, Terre de liens started a solidarity-based investment company: La Foncière. Its mission is to raise solidarity-based investment from the public and to buy farmland and rent it to local, organic farmers. It chose a little used business status – that of private company limited by shares- which has the following advantages:

It has a variable capital, allowing it to progressively increase its financial capacity to invest;

Following certification by the authority regulating financial markets, it is entitled to make public issues of shares, thereby raising money from the public at large;

It separates management (formed once and for all when creating the Foncière) from shareholders, so as to ensure that the land is preserved and managed in line with the long-term goals of Terre de liens.

La Foncière was created with an initial capital of €57 200, contributed by 47 shareholders. From the start, the Foncière received wide public support and significant investments. The first public issue of shares (price= 100€) exceeded all expectations by raising €4 million from 2200 shareholders in only five months (the objective was to collect €3 million in nine months). In late 2012, after a constant and rapid increase, the Foncière has a capital of over €28 million, owned by about 7500 shareholders.

The main motivation for citizens to invest are ethical values –preserving the environment, promoting organic agriculture, supporting a local farmer- combined with the security of an investment in land, and the liquidity offered by the Foncière. Financially, shareholders are not remunerated for their investment. Their main financial incentive is a tax rebate on their income or wealth tax (although the latter has been largely reduced since 2010).

#### **The Foncière buys land and buildings for projects provided that:**

- They match the principles and goals set out in Terre de liens' Charter;
- The farmers are ready to be tenants and do not wish to own the land;
- The farms are economically viable;
- The farms are sustainable, make agronomic sense, and respect the environment; and
- The farmers receive local support (such as local fundraising, the constitution of a group of supporters and/ or consumers, or interest from the municipality).



## MICHEL, ORGANIC FARMER AND BAKER

In 2009, Terre de liens also created an Endowment Fund, Le Fonds, which collects donations (in cash or kind) from individuals and companies (patronage). It rents (donated or bought) farms to farmers on long-term lease. It also has a more general mission of informing and mobilising citizens and building partnerships with local authorities.

The Foncière bought its first farm in February 2007. At the end of 2012, through the Foncière and the Fonds, Terre de liens owns, or is in the process of buying, 120 farms, amounting to approximately 3000 ha and 220 farmers. In just over 5 years, Terre de liens has thus made significant progress towards freeing land from the commodity market so that it can be preserved in sustainable agricultural production and supporting local organic agriculture. In addition to directly acquiring farmland, Terre de liens advises and brings technical support to about 200 established or aspiring farmers

every year throughout the country. It supports them in their search for available land, in their attempt to set up a collective ownership scheme, in their efforts to continue farming land they are established on, in finding local support, etc. Some find a solution with farms acquired by the Foncière and Fonds; others form collective ownership structures; others farm on communal land.

### **Promoting agricultural models that are beneficial to society and the environment**

Terre de liens' farms are very diverse in size, production and organisation: many are small farms or plots ensuring the viability of an existing farm (10 hectares or less), although there are a few large ones (60 ha or more); most are mixed farms, breeding farms or grow vegetables, while a few specialise in cereals, small fruits, etc.; some are in green belts and peri-urban surroundings, while others are in very rural areas and mountains.





Almost all farms market their products locally, through farm shops, local farmers' markets, shops and caterers, or as part of a community-supported agriculture scheme. They thereby contribute to short supply chains and direct relations between consumers and producers. Many also undertake activities that benefit local communities or are in the public interest, such as apprentice training, conservation of rare or traditional breeds and species, agro-tourism, open days and cultural events. Besides, many farms are multifunctional farms and are engaged in processing activities, thereby creating added value and jobs, and enhancing the local economy. The results are particularly telling in terms of employment: while there are, on average, 7.5 farmers for 100 hectares of land owned by Terre de liens, the national ratio is only 5 farmers for 100 hectares.

Directly owning and managing organic and biodynamic farmland enables Terre de liens to fulfil its goal of keeping land in sustainable agricultural use and protecting the environment. Furthermore, Terre de liens and its farmers agree on agricultural leases, which include legally binding environmental clauses. Today, most leases include the requirement to undertake certified organic (or biodynamic) farming. They also include other aspects, appropriate to each farm. These may concern soil preservation; prohibition of irrigation and drainage; diversification of crop rotation; specific harvesting techniques; and the creation, preservation or management of particular landscape components such as hedges, slopes, terraces, ponds and groves. Such leases provide for a review of the environmental

state of the farm every three years. Terre de liens has also experimented, and will try to generalise the use of, a tool for agro-environmental diagnosis, helping farmers to assess the state of their land and environment and to define priority actions.

Although Terre de liens' 120 farms and 10,000 supporters are marginal compared with the size of French agriculture, they are a strong sign that, if given a chance, large numbers of citizens support the development of local organic agriculture and want to have their say in land planning and management. This has enabled Terre de liens to open up space for debate about the need to maintain agriculture throughout France, to support organic farmers and to develop short-supply chains and green belts.

#### **A still recent movement in need of consolidation**

Terre de liens has developed very quickly over the past 5 years, since the start of the Foncière. It now needs to stabilise its functioning and funding. So far, local branches have benefited from strong support from public (mostly regional) funds. Terre de liens is now seeking to consolidate and diversify its resources. The local branches are the core of all activities: they assist farmers and advise future farmers, engage with citizens, build relationships with civil society organisations, meet local authorities and stakeholders, etc. A new way of raising funds paths, due to a near-disappearance of the tax rebate which, together with the economic crisis, has greatly reduced

investment (5 M € in 2011 versus 9M € in 2010). Ways ahead include reinstating a tax rebate, broadening the circle of investors, developing donations and patronage, and progressively converting investment in (donations).

Terre de liens is also seeking ways to support farmers and manage farms beyond the initial phase. A first challenge is to nurture a relationship between Terre de liens and the farmers, which goes beyond owner/ tenant relations, while respecting farmers' autonomy. A critical dimension is to create and maintain meaningful social dynamics around the farm, drawing from existing connections with local members and shareholders as well as other stakeholders who have mobilised in support of the farm. On a more practical level, Terre de liens is faced with a major challenge in terms of property management. Overseeing and maintaining buildings take up most of the time and resources dedicated by Terre de liens for the administration of its properties. It needs to upscale the skills, resources and management processes to fund the necessary maintenance or improvement works.

In the longer term, Terre de liens is faced with the difficulty of finding adequately trained farmers. Everywhere in France, training in organic farming remains limited and often lacks a practical element. Knowledge and protection of natural resources are also often absent from the curricula. Besides, training in business models rarely includes on-farm processing activities, pluriactive farming, or short supply chains, and totally ignores the creation of direct relations with consumers or the setting up of a collective ownership scheme. Another difficulty is finding farmers ready to take over an existing organic farm. While there are many farmers wishing to get started, most are new entrants who prefer to start with a small farm and a few products. Few farmers have the skills, experience, and financial capacity to take over bigger, diversified farms. Terre de liens is thus supporting several farms which work as incubators for farmers wishing to become organic farmers. Le Gerموir, in Northern France, is one of them, where farmers can farm a plot of land for one or two years, as a means of testing various production and distribution techniques, while having access to support and training as well as building connections with other local farmers, consumers, and public authorities. They can thus strengthen their farming and co-operative business skills before setting up their own enterprise.

#### **Lifting the land barrier: a common challenge for Europe**

Although exceptional in terms of size and rapid development, the example of Terre de liens is not unique in Western Europe. Land access is a growing issue in many parts of Europe,

and a key obstacle to the development of local, ecological, agriculture. While there are significant national differences, some trends are prevalent throughout Europe: a diminution of agricultural land and land concentration, Rising land prices, a disconnection between the land use value of agriculture and its price, problems with farm succession etc. Besides these trends, recent evolutions – such as competition between food, fibre and agrofuels for agricultural land use or massive financial investments in European agricultural land - are a source for concern. In this respect, Europe is no exception to the global context of increasing pressure on agricultural land and food production. Yet, the land question remains largely ignored, or taboo.

IN JUST FIVE YEARS  
TIERRE DE LIENS  
HAS SUPPORTED  
120 FARMS AND  
ATTRACTED 10,000  
SUPPORTERS

**In this context, it is useful to come back to**

**basics:** agricultural land is, before anything else, the basis for food production and the reproduction of lasting ecosystems – hence, life – in the long run. Its price, availability, quality and use must reflect this primary objective. In order to achieve this goal, the land market can, and should, be regulated. Key organic and peasant organisations – starting with IFOAM and Via Campesina – need to mobilise energetically to promote the necessary changes. Policy-makers must ensure that land is used in a way that fulfills long term social needs, in terms of preservation of agricultural use of the land, local

quality food production, conservation of natural resources and biodiversity, a balance between urban and rural territories and populations, the renewal of farming generations and landscape conservation.

In Western Europe, a number of citizen-led initiatives have developed to provide easier land access to local, ecological farmers, connected to their community. They come in different shapes and sizes, some are centred on one or two farms, others have regional or national scope. They engage in different ways with consumers, local inhabitants, and other local stakeholders. Many have already been very successful and bear testimony to the interest and readiness of the public to actively support ecological, local food production and the preservation of vibrant rural areas. Although they are still a loose movement, these initiatives pave the way for inventing new ways of owning and managing land as a commons. They (re)place farmers as part of a long chain of good land stewards, develop a long-term perspective on land use and environment protection and try to reconnect land with its intrinsic and use value, rather than its market price. They have many challenges ahead, but also experiences and reflections to share with all those concerned in the future of European agriculture, food and countryside. ■