

The experience of Terre de liens, France: a “laboratory” for managing farmland as a commons?



Author(s)	Véroique RIOUFOL, European Coordinator, and Sjoerd WARTENA, Co-founder and board member
Affiliation	Terre de liens
Date	September 2013
Framework	<p>The value and claim that “(agricultural) land is a commons” are at the basis of the vision and foundation of Terre de liens. They are a constant reference in our practices and discourse about ourselves. However, this phrase has different meaning for different people engaged in Terre de liens, all the more so given the diversity of people and organisations who have come together to create it (coming in particular from peasant organisations, organic and biodynamic agriculture and ethical finance). Besides, the rapid development of Terre de liens’ activities of supporting farmers/ future farmers, mobilising citizens and community finance, acquiring and managing farmland, and engaging with local authorities has meant that the notion of land as commons has been given flesh over the past 5 years. A series of approaches and practical tools have been developed. So, what can we say now, after 10 years of existence of Terre de liens, of the ways in which it is framing and managing land as a commons?</p> <p>This case study is based on the authors’ personal knowledge and understanding</p>

	of Terre de liens activities and development. It is nurtured by some academic references on the commons, as well as by some exchanges with staff and board members and with external resource persons. It also draws from exchanges and comparisons with like-minded initiatives in other Western European countries
Summary	<p>Terre de liens is a citizen-based organisation which was created in France, in 2003, to support local, organic farmers in getting adequate access to land. Increasing pressures on land (urban sprawl, land concentration, land speculation, etc.) have made it increasingly difficult for organic farmers, in particular new entrants, to be able to buy or rent land. Terre de liens has created a number of tools aimed at creating citizen mobilisation and local dynamics. It is thus putting land issue on the agenda, and engaging with citizens, local authorities and other stakeholders so as to make agriculture “everybody’s business”. Besides, it has raised donations, bequests, as well as citizens savings to acquire land and rent it to farmers on the very long term and now manages about 2300 hectares.</p> <p>Through its activities, Terre de liens contributes to experimenting ways in which land can be managed as a commons. First, because Terre de liens counters the tendency towards land concentration in bigger, conventional farms; it thereby creates positive market distortion in favour of peasant and organic farmers, and contributes to making land less of an excludable resource. Second, Terre de liens reclaims the multiple dimension of land access and land use, such as food production, creation of jobs and local activities, environment protection, access to nature, or a sense of belonging. It thereby also reasserts the rights of a wide range of secondary users: consumers, residents, tourists, public authorities, future generations, etc. Finally, Terre de liens is based on citizen involvement and the construction of multi-stakeholders dynamics, around the preservation and management of farmland. It has invented practices or transferred tools from other sectors/ players, so as to favour citizen involvement and the common definition and monitoring of land use and management.</p>
Keywords	Land; Commons; Agriculture; Ownership; Land use; Land management; Land market; Land Grabbing; Environment protection; Community mobilisation; Citizens; Ethical finance; Citizen-based finance; Extra-financial benefits; People’s education; Local Governance; Rural Development; Local Food Chains; Young farmers; Land Trust; Land stewardship; Generational Renewal
For further documentation	<p>Documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Véronique Rioufol and Sjoerd Wartena, “Terre de liens: removing land from the commodity market, and enabling organic and peasant farmers to settle in good conditions”, case study, November 2011, 16p - Véronique Rioufol and Sjoerd Wartena, “Fair access to land and food: an issue for Europe as well!, note for the Greens-EFA Conference on Land-Grabbing, Brussels, February 2012, 2p - Véronique Rioufol and Peter Volz, “Civic initiatives on access to land for local, sustainable farmers in Western Europe”, paper presented at IFSA Conference in Aarhus, July 2012 - Peter Volz, “The Regionalwert AG: creating sustainable regional structures through citizen participation”, case study, July 2011, 11p <p>Video:</p> <p>Roundtable on “La terre, un bien comm’un autre”, organised by Terre de liens in May 2012, at: http://www.terredeliens-npdc.org/?p=872</p>

The experience of Terre de liens, France: a “laboratory” for managing farmland as a commons?

Written by Véronique RIOUFOL and Sjoerd WARTENA, Terre de liens¹, September 2013

Introduction

Terre de liens was born out of the encounters between people’s education, peasant and organic farming and ethical finance. In just few years, it has had huge appeal to a large number of citizens, and gathered support from over 12,000 people, as well as over 30 million Euros in capital. It is now recognised as a key organisation for mobilising land in favour of local, ecological farmers.

terre de liens, Terre de liens²... Land as a commons is a frequent reference in Terre de liens’ founding principles, reflexions and discourse³. But what do we mean by it? In a cultural context where land is the typical private good, and the founding block of classic economics, can land as commons be anything else than an ethical horizon? This paper seeks to explore how, with its own limits and imperfections, Terre de liens contributes to concretely making it a reality.

1- What is Terre de liens?

Terre de liens (TDL) is a civil society movement created in France in 2003 to address the difficulties faced by organic and peasant farmers in securing agricultural land. Indeed, since the 1960s, France has experienced a decline in its total area of agricultural land⁴. Besides, the number of agricultural holdings has declined rapidly, and land has concentrated in an ever smaller number of large, monoculture, capital-intensive farms⁵. As a corollary, land prices have increased dramatically⁶ and young and/ or “alternative” farmers have found it increasingly difficult to buy or rent land.

According to its founding Charter, TDL main objectives are to:

- Support access to land for farmers who have economically, socially and environmentally sustainable projects but are struggling to get established or to maintain existing farms;
- Promote solidarity and citizen-based dynamics to support these projects;
- Put land on the agenda, by raising public awareness, mobilising citizens and engaging with public authorities.

Terre de liens’ first means of action is to directly acquire land, which is then rented in the long run to local, sustainable farmers. To that end, it has developed two financial structures:

¹ This paper presents the personal views of the authors, not the collective analysis of the Terre de liens movement. We wish to thank board and staff members who shared with us their analysis: Elsa Vidon, Ghislain Nicaise, René Becker, Tanguy Martin, Cécile Dubart, Véronique Guislain, Christine Laurence, Clément David. This working paper is an initial reflection, which will be circulated for internal and external inputs. Please send your comments to: v.rioufol@terredeliens.org

² In French, “terre” means both “land” and “Earth”, “liens” means links, connections.

³ See on our website: <http://www.terredeliens.org/proposer-un-autre-horizon>. See also the debate “La terre, un bien comm’un autre?” which was organised with Ricardo Petrella in May 2012 <http://www.terredeliens-npdc.org/?p=872>

⁴ Between 1960 and 2007, France lost 5,1 million hectares in utilised agricultural area, i.e. 15% of its area of 1960. Source: Pointereau and Coulon, *Abandon et artificialisation des terres agricoles*, Courrier de l’environnement de l’INRA n°57, 2009

⁵ From 2000 to 2007, the number of farms decreased by 24% (from 695 000 to 528 000 farms) and the agricultural workforce by 18%. Source: Agreste Statistics, French Ministry of Agriculture

⁶ In 2010, a hectare of arable land cost, on average, €5100, up from €3330 in 1990, i.e. a 55% increase in 20 years. Source: Agreste Statistics, French Ministry of Agriculture.

- *La Foncière* is an ethical investment company which collects savings from the public (share = €100). 25% of the money collected is put in reserve to allow for the turnover of shareholders. The rest is invested in land and buildings. Created in 2007 with an initial capital of €57,200, the Foncière had, in December 2012, a capital of €29.5 million, owned by about 7600 shareholders.
- *La Fondation* is a foundation which gained in 2013 the status of being recognised by the State as being in the public interest. It collects donations and legacies in cash and kind. As of December 2012, it had an endowment of over €1 million, brought by about 2200 donors, owns 5 farms and has several other farm donations under way.

Through the Foncière and the Fund, Terre de liens currently owns, or is in the process of acquiring, about 130 farms, amounting to 2500 hectares, where 180 farmers are working.

Besides, Terre de liens is engaged in educational and local development activities. It organises public events and community activities to inform people about land issues and raise awareness about the interactions between the existence and types of agriculture, food availability and quality, environment and landscape preservation, rural economic and social fabric, and town planning. TDL also informs and trains agents and elected representatives of local authorities, to encourage them to mobilise existing communal land, support future farmers, or monitor local farmland trends and farm transfers. It also facilitates multi-stakeholders dynamics aimed at creating green belts, maintaining an existing farm or developing local food chains. TDL has now become a large civic movement, counting with over 12,000 members, donors, shareholders and volunteers and engaging with numerous groups of inhabitants and consumers, civil society organisations and local authorities.



Board Meeting of Terre de liens Nord Pas de Calais. Photo Credit: Cécile Dubart, Terre de liens

2- What do we mean by “land as a commons”?

We define “commons”⁷ as a system whereby a community manages a resource in a way wherein:

- No-one is excluded from having access to the resource and/ or its “by-products”;
- The resource (and its intangible by-products) are preserved in the long run;
- The resource is managed for the benefit of all;
- The resource is managed through community engagement and co-operation.

In talks about the commons, it is classic to mention pastures and collective urban gardens as examples of land commons. But how can farmland be anything else than a rival and excludable resource? True, we have examples from foreign countries and remnants from the past, which show us that farmland can be made accessible to all community members instead of (or beyond) its main user (farmer)⁸. In France, these have almost disappeared and are today usually limited to additional area (e.g. pasture commons), specific rights of use (“sectionnaux”⁹) or a given period of time (gleaning). But how can the long-term investment, labour-intensiveness and income-generation needed by commercial agriculture be made compatible with a “commons” approach to farmland?

We can learn from analysing its extreme opposite: land grabbing. We understand land grabbing as a combination of two phenomena: intense land concentration and the short-term and exclusive capture of all the value contained in the land (and eventually its exhaustion). In reverse, what we mean by managing farmland as a commons is reclaiming the multiple values (and by-products) which the land has to different users, and re-asserting the rights of these multiple users (see graph 1). Our action is therefore geared at i) expanding access to a larger and more diverse number of primary users –farmers – and ii) reasserting the rights and involvement of a wide range of secondary users: consumers, residents, tourists, public authorities, future generations, etc.

So, instead of focusing on only few by-products (agricultural products, money), we emphasise the multiple products stemming from agricultural activities: environment preservation, job creation and local economic activities, contribution to one’s identity, etc. We also re-introduce the diverse and multi-layered categories of users. Thus, foodstuffs are a product for the producers and of the consumers, but also for carers of consumers: parents of schoolchildren eating at the school canteen, the mayor through procurement policies, the State through public health regulations.

As a result, we reclaim the multiple uses attached to farmland, and assert the responsibilities of farmers and other co-users (of different levels) to ensure that these benefits are realised and accessible to a wide range of people and groups. We also invite the various co-users to assert their rights and participate, more or less directly, in the management of farmland and the diverse products attached to it. We therefore re-position every plot of land as part of the whole of Land, and re-place the rights of landowners and tenant farmers within a broader ensemble of multiple users’ rights¹⁰.

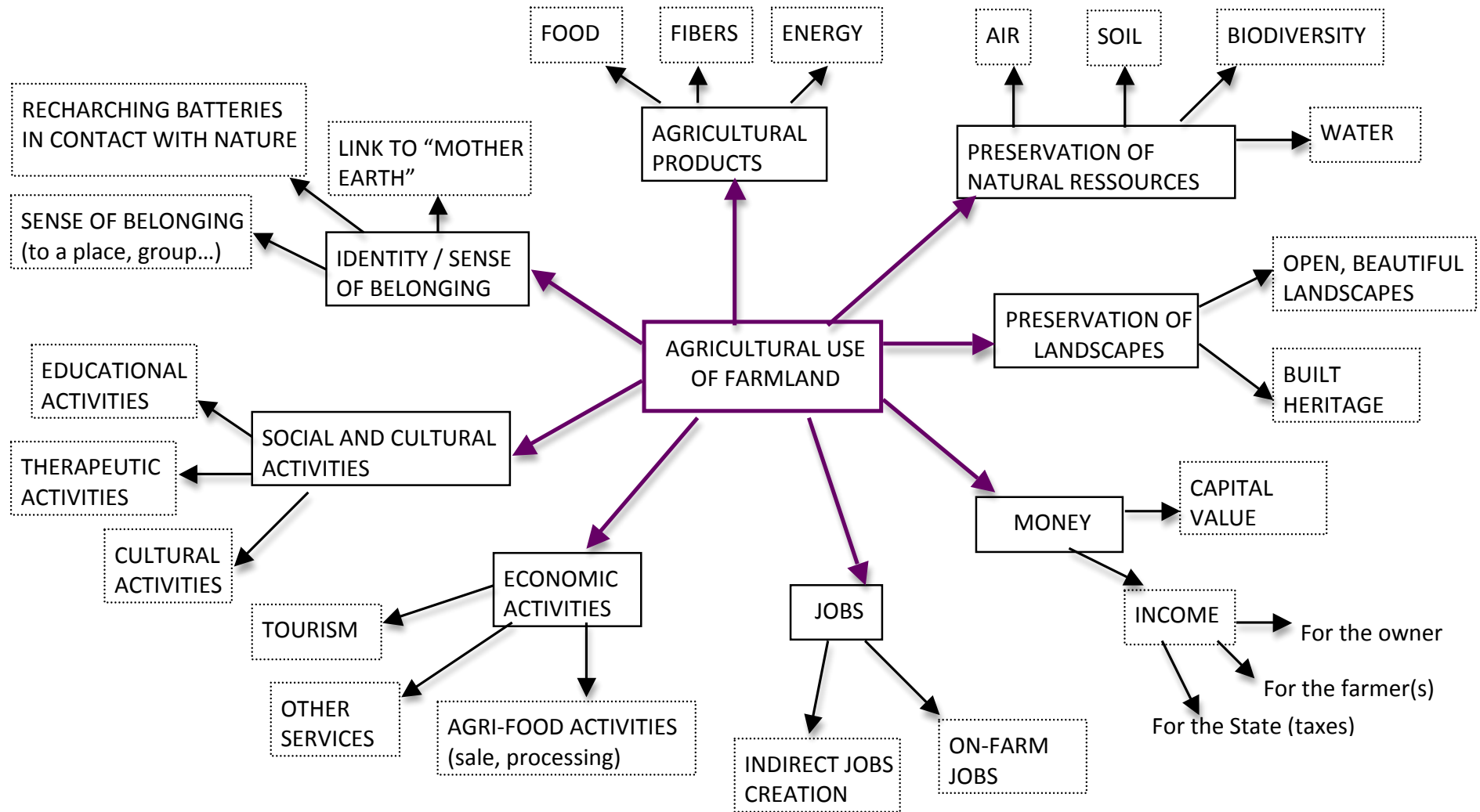
⁷ This analysis draws from Silke Helfrich et al, *The Commons – Prosperity by sharing*, Heinrich Böll Foundation; Jean-Marie Harribey, “Le bien commun est une construction sociale: Apports et limites d’Elinor Ostrom”, in *L’Economie politique*, n°49, janvier 2011, pp98-112; Olivier Petitjean et al., *Les biens communs, modèle de gestion des ressources naturelles*, Ritimo, 2010; Michel Merlet, “Les droits sur la terre et les ressources naturelles”, Fiches pédagogiques aGter, December 2010.

⁸ Joseph Comby, “Superposition de droits sur le sol en Europe”, Fiches pédagogiques aGter.

⁹ *Sectionnaux* are an ancient French system: they are common land belonging to “sections” (parts) of villages and providing *usus* and *fructus* rights to residents of this specific part of the village. Rights using include cutting and gathering wood, picking fruits, accessing water, etc. *Sectionnaux* have largely fallen into disuse, although they are sometimes still used and valorised. See, *Terre de liens, L’accès collectif et solidaire au foncier et au bâti*, Guide méthodologique, juridique et financier, 2007.

¹⁰ In France, the cultural and legal context has favourable features. Thus, the public law regulating land planning indicates that “*le territoire est le patrimoine commun de la nation*” (the territory is the common asset of the nation) (article L110, Code de l’urbanisme). As for the civil and rural codes, they refer to the obligations of managing farmland as a “good family man” (*en bon père de famille*) (article 1728 and 1766, Code civil; article L411-27 Code rural).

Multiple “by-products” of farmland to different users



3- What does Terre de liens do which contributes towards managing land as a commons?

3.1 Broadening access to land to a wider group

Farmers¹¹

Given the current functioning of the labour market, the orientations of EU and national agricultural policies, and the organisation of the agricultural sector (dominated by conventional farmers), locally oriented, small-scale, organic and peasants farmers are less likely to be the beneficiaries of land sales and rents on the land market, than conventional farmers. They indeed often have less personal assets and they tend to be more multi-functional, to work on smaller farms/ projects and to do on-farm processing, or a range of social and other activities. Many of these features are generally deemed to be less viable than industrial farming by banks and public institutions. As a result, these farmers find it harder to get access to credit as well as to subsidies and other support mechanisms. This is particularly true for future farmers coming from a non-agricultural family background. Besides, because they are a minority, they tend to be excluded by other land owners/ farmers who prefer to sale/ rent their land to a “normal” (conventional, already established) farmer. And because, on the land market, a lot is based on interpersonal relation and trust (starting with access to information), this has a huge impact.

Terre de liens therefore intervenes to create positive market distortions in favour of peasant and organic farmers. It does so by:

- Supporting future farmers by telling them of land available for sale or rent in their region, informing them about land institutions and procedures, helping them in their negotiations with landowners, or advising them on various legal status of land ownership and tenancy. TDL plays this role in close connection with a dense network of organisations supporting ‘alternative’ farmers (Confédération paysanne, CIVAM, ADEAR, GAB...)
- Acquiring farmland and renting it to farmers. The current price of farmland indeed reflects the value of land as an asset, rather than its agricultural use value, and cannot be amortised, based on the mere agricultural activity. Buying land for farmers makes it easier (or even possible) for them to get started. It also shares the costs of having farmers with those – individual and institutional shareholders, local authorities¹² – who have an interest in preserving a farm, accessing local quality food, or developing local activities. Freed from the financial burden of acquiring land, farmers can dedicate their available capital to developing their activity and are better positioned to negotiate loans with banks (which are less able to influence their projects towards more conventional forms of farming).

Other users

At the same time, Terre de liens contributes to giving access to farms and farmland to a larger number of people. The most involved people of TDL (staff, board members, local groups..) regularly go to farms to meet with farmers and visit the farms, which may be a new experience for some of them¹³. More broadly, TDL and farmers co-organise open days and various activities (e.g. participatory workshops), which can be an occasion for shareholders, donors, supporters to come and visit the farm. By virtue of its overall mission, it enables all of its members to create a direct (physical or virtual) connection with farms and farmland.

¹¹ This section owes a lot to the insights of Tanguy Martin, Terre de liens, September 2013.

¹² TDL develops financial partnerships with local authorities to jointly acquire land and buildings for a local, ecological farmers. We refer to these partnerships as “public-citizen partnerships” (PCP).

¹³ Terre de liens Massif central, booklet on “Quand les citoyens s’intéressent à la terre” (When citizens show an interest in land), to be published 2014.

3.2 Preserving the resource in the long run

One of the aims of Terre de liens is to preserve farmland, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, by giving primacy to the long term. Both financial structures created by Terre de liens aim at acquiring farmland, holding it in perpetuity and managing it sustainably. Land is never to be sold again. This is, statutorily, a founding feature of the Foundation. It is also inscribed in the founding mission of the *Foncière*. Respect of this founding principle is guaranteed by the legal status of the *Foncière*. As a *société en commandite par action*¹⁴, it separates those who own the capital from those who decide on how to invest it and run the company. In the case of TDL, the first group is composed of individual and institutional shareholders, while the second group is composed of the association TDL and the ethical bank La NEF. This separation ensures that the land bought by La Foncière is forever owned and managed to serve the long-term goal of the association: preserving agricultural land in good heart and sustainable production for the sake of present and future generations.

The procedures in place to decide on projects supported by Terre de liens also ensure that they are sustainable, and preserve land, and other natural resources, in the long run. The projects thus have to match the principles and goals set out in TDL's Charter. All also have to be sustainable, make agronomic sense and respect the environment. TDL thus only supports organic, biodynamic and ecological peasant farmers. It goes further by incorporating protection of the environment in all its agricultural leases. The environmental agricultural lease¹⁵ was created by law in 2007 so as to enable certain categories of landowners to enforce environmental-friendly production practices on land that they lease. Today, almost all leases signed by TDL include the requirement to undertake certified organic (or biodynamic) farming. They also include other aspects, as appropriate to each farm, such as soil preservation; diversification of crop rotation; specific harvesting techniques; and the creation, preservation and management of particular landscape components such as hedges, slopes, ponds and groves.



Ancient varieties of cereals, Upie Farm. Photo Credit: Cécile Dubart, Terre de liens

¹⁴ It is a specific form of company limited by shares, which creates two categories of participants: the shareholders, who provide capital and are liable only to the extent of the capital provided; and the managing partners who run the company and are jointly and severally liable for the debt.

¹⁵ Le "*bail rural environmental*" is a specific type of lease, which includes binding environmental clauses, drawn from a legally established list of agricultural practices (Decree n°2007-326 , Ministry of Agriculture).

3.3 Managing the resource for the benefit of all (or a maximum number)

On land owned by Terre de liens, the balance between farmers and owners differs from more classic tenant-farmed situations. Tenants have to match specific criteria for their projects to be selected, and to thereafter run their projects sustainably. They also have to engage in mobilising funds and support for their project, which may be time consuming, and a source of pressure when taking place at the same time as their establishment. But these requirements normally match their own orientations, as they are there to ensure that the broader “by-products” of farmland use are fully realised and that the interests of the community at large are being considered. Besides, additional requirements are negotiated between the farmers and TDL. In writing and implementing rural environmental leases, TDL is thus cautious not to impose excessive or inadequate constraints to farmers. The leases are carefully discussed between TDL and the farmers to assess what are relevant and reasonable clauses. They are normally reviewed every 3 years (which TDL fails to systematically do), and failure to respect the clauses gives way to discussion and adjustment, rather than sanction.

In exchange for these additional constraints, tenant farmers do not bear the financial cost of the land¹⁶ and gain access to land, which, in many instances, they would not have been able to do. They also benefit from very long-term leases (usually career-long, when the standard lease in France is 9 years). Finally, they receive support from the local TDL branch and local groups: support in developing their local marketing channels, agronomic or other advice, participatory workshops, mediation with local authorities, etc.

Terre de liens tends towards managing land for the benefit of “all” through the types of farming and rural activities that it supports. Besides environmental protection, the farms of the TDL network contribute, in different ways, to supplying local consumers or providing social services. Almost all farms produce foodstuffs and market their products locally, through farm shops, local markets and shops, or as part of a community-supported agriculture scheme (AMAP). They thereby contribute to local food sovereignty, short supply chains and direct relations between consumers and producers. Many farms are also engaged in processing activities (bread, cheese, preserves, etc.), thereby creating higher added value, local economic activities and jobs. Besides, many farms undertake activities that benefit local communities or are in the public interest. These include training for organic apprentices, conservation of traditional breeds and species, agro-tourism, cultural events, educational activities, or vocational training for vulnerable youth or unemployed adults.

3.4 Managing the resource in a participatory and cooperative manner

At the root of Terre de liens is the claim that “agriculture is everybody’s business”. This is a major break away from five decades of co-management of the agricultural sector by state institutions and farmers’ unions, dominated by majority farmers’ unions’ views and interests¹⁷. To make it happen, Terre de liens strongly engages in people’s education: TDL staff and volunteers organise regular activities to meet and exchange with their members as well as consumers, local residents, potential shareholders, or the public. They organise farm walks, open days, public screening, etc.; hold stalls on farmers’ markets, fairs and in organic shops; do media interviews and articles; participate in public conferences; make public campaigns against soil sealing and the decline of peasant agriculture. Volunteers, shareholders and donors are encouraged to get further involved, debate and deepen their understanding of land issues. They, in turn, further disseminate the analyses and solutions promoted by Terre de liens¹⁸.

¹⁶ It is important to note that the costs of maintaining the building (both houses and farm buildings) is currently a major financial burden and challenge for TDL, and is an area where discussion is taking place that could lead to partially redefining the respective roles and responsibilities of landowners and tenant farmers.

¹⁷ aGter, “La politique Foncière rurale en France après la seconde guerre mondiale”, available at: <http://www.agter.asso.fr>

¹⁸ Terre de liens Massif central, supra; a similar study is also taking place within Terre de liens Nord Pas de Calais.

These activities create a sense of ownership and responsibility for land as a common resource. They give way to new solidarities, in particular between shareholders/ donors/ local groups and farmers. Sometimes, it is direct, interpersonal solidarity. For instance, in Val de Roure, in Southern France, 160 families from AMAPs (CSAs) receiving eggs and meat from a couple of local breeders took shares in the Foncière to help maintain them on their land. Local groups may also get involved through participatory workshops on the farm, or by supporting the farmers (with advice, skills, personal support, etc.) during their start-up phase. In many cases, Terre de liens also creates extended solidarity. This is particularly true in the case of shareholders investing in the Foncière, which entails solidarities between organic consumers and producers, urban and rural, old and young¹⁹. Solidarity is particularly strong as, when investing in the Foncière, shareholders do not perceive dividends. Terre de liens indeed decided not to offer financial retribution for shareholders, based on the conviction that ground rent should not pay owners of the capital (land), but rather should remunerate farmers and be re-invested in sustainable management of the resource. Shareholders are offered broader entitlements than financial ones: environment protection, good local food, promotion of organic agriculture, preservation of a local farm, connection with farmland, etc.²⁰.

Participatory farm tours – or *tours de plaine* – are maybe the most achieved practice of commoning within Terre de liens. *Tours de plaine* are organised on TDL farms to visit a farm and make a state of the art of the farm and its environment. They usually gather a group of 10 to 25 people – volunteers, staff, shareholders, others – led by an agricultural expert, and often accompanied by the farmer. They aim at presenting the specific economic, agronomic, environmental and human system constituted by the farm, and at fostering better understanding of the farm as a complex and fragile environment. They often focus on the environmental aspects of the farm – rare and traditional varieties, plants as bioindicators, soil quality, valuable trees, etc. They are sometimes used to conduct an initial diagnosis of the farm, soon after acquisition, and to list key elements that should be indicated in the rural environmental lease. All participants are invited to share their analysis of the situation and to build a common understanding of the specific constraints and potential of the farm.



Tour de Plaine at the Prépetit Farm, Normandy. Photo Credit: Sylvain Cosson, Terre de liens

¹⁹ Shareholders may decide to dedicate their savings to a specific project or region, or leave it open. Until a recent change in the Foncière fundraising rules, which now requires raising at least 75% of the amount needed for a specific project in dedicated funds, 60% of savings were non-dedicated. This testifies to the adhesion of a large number of shareholders to the overall goals of TDL, and to their sense of symbolic, rather than specific, solidarity.

²⁰ There are signs that some shareholders consider their investment as a gift, which will be encouraged by calling upon shareholders to transfer their shares as gifts to the TDL Foundation. The same applies to Regionalwert AG, where non-financial entitlements are particularly monitored and valorised (see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11hmqZmwHg>).

Terre de liens also engages people beyond its direct members and supporters. It induces or participates in local multi-stakeholders dynamics aiming at developing local food chains, maintaining a local farm or establishing an organic farmer. Often, TDL is initially invited for its expertise and financial solutions. Experiences show that its particular added value also often lies in its capacity to mobilise citizens as well as other organisations (companies, environmental groups, etc.) beyond the agricultural sector, thereby creating a stronger basis and legitimacy for the project.

Importantly, Terre de liens does not merely act besides or against State policies and regulations. While partly born out of the belief that both market and state are failing to adequately secure access to land for sustainable farmers, TDL has from the start chosen to engage with public authorities. Initially, TDL focused mostly on expanding its own means of action. In 2010, it thus lobbied, together with several associations and Foundations, to obtain an amendment to the law on rural environmental leases, which extended the list of eligible lessors to foundations, as well as investment companies registered as ‘solidarity companies’, hence both the *Foncière* and the *Fondation*. Terre de liens has also been engaged in obtaining and preserving tax rebates for shareholders investing in the *Foncière*, based on the principle that these are investments in a solidarity company serving the “general interest”. These tax rebates have played an essential part in TDL’s capacity to raise large sums of money²¹. More recently, Terre de liens has also sought to engage with the state so as to reform overall land and agricultural policies in France, in favour of young farmers, alternative agricultures, and organic production. Beyond citizen-based mobilisation and cooperation, State intervention is indeed needed to ensure that a number of by-products of agricultural land – preservation of water and biodiversity, access to land for a new generation of farmers, etc. – are better realised or realised on a larger scale.

Conclusion

With 130 farms amounting to about 2500 hectares of land, Terre de liens is already fulfilling its goal of keeping land in sustainable agricultural use and supporting local, organic farmers in their access to land. Although these numbers are marginal when compared with the French overall figures, TDL’s 12,000 members and supporters are a strong sign that, if given a chance, large numbers of citizens are happy to get involved in land planning and management and to support the development of local sustainable agriculture.

Agricultural land is, before anything else, the basis for food production and the reproduction of lasting ecosystems – hence, life – in the long run. Its use –as well as its availability, quality and price – must reflect these primary objectives. Although exceptional in terms of size and rapid development, the example of Terre de liens is not unique in Western Europe. In several countries, civic initiatives have developed to provide easier land access to local, ecological farmers, connected to their community. 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 and food providers, 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. Often initiated by citizens, they foster the participation of multiple stakeholders and a collective reflection about land use. They have many challenges ahead, but also experiences and reflections to share with all those concerned in the future of agriculture, food and countryside, or interested in new ways of managing commons.

²¹ While in 2009 and 2010, the *Foncière* collected about 7 and about 9 millions Euros respectively in just one year, since the modifications of tax rebates at the end of 2010, it has raised only about 5 to 6 million Euros per year on average.