

Terre de Liens. More than a Land Trust: a social movement

Land acquisition and management are often the most visible and acclaimed dimensions of *Terre de Liens*. The organisation has enabled us to secure access to farmland and its ecological use on a number of farms and hectares. It also gives us space to experiment with new ways of experiencing and managing farmland as part of the Commons. From the start, the political project was a transformational one, aimed at developing new practices and reforming the political framework.

Informing and mobilizing citizens

The cornerstone of *Terre de Liens* is to inform citizens and consumers through a series of educational and local mobilization activities (fairs, farm open days, film-debates, etc.). *Terre de Liens (TDL)* encourages people to take action by sharing information, making ethical investments in farmland, or volunteering in a local group. TDL thus lifts civic awareness, creates support networks for organic farmers, raises funds, and broadens public debate on territorial planning and the orientation of agricultural models.

Local mobilization is also key to helping farmers identify adequate land, obtain the agreement of the transferor, obtain the priority to buy the land, and create an inner circle of shareholders and future consumers. Thanks to its members and partners, TDL also has the expertise to advise the farmer on the adequacy of the land for its intended purpose, on its economic viability or on its agronomic coherence and sustainability. Local supporters may also lend a hand to clear abandoned plots, restore buildings and undertake other tasks in the start-up phase. By bringing capital from beyond personal and local supporters, TDL also creates broader solidarity: between organic consumers and producers, urban and rural, old and young.

Ensuring environmental protection

Directly owning and managing organic and biodynamic farmland allows *Terre de Liens* to fulfil its goal of keeping land in sustainable agricultural use and protecting the environment. Furthermore, TDL and farmers agree on agricultural leases, which include legally binding environmental clauses¹. This is a key dimension to assure shareholders and donors that their contributions are indeed used to protect the environment and that TDL can enforce this protection. In establishing and implementing these leases, TDL is however cautious not to impose excessive or inadequate constraints on farmers. Today, most leases include the requirement to undertake certified organic (or biodynamic) farming. They also include other aspects, as 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 and 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. TDL 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.

Promoting community-based agriculture and vibrant rural areas

¹ In 2010, Thanks to effective lobbying TDL, together with several associations and Foundations, obtained an amendment to the law, extending the list of eligible lessors to foundations and investment companies registered as 'solidarity companies'. Both the Foncière and Foundation are therefore now in a position to impose legally binding environmental clauses in their agricultural leases.

The farms of the *Terre de Liens* network contribute, in different ways, to supplying local consumers, or providing social services. Almost all farms market their products locally through farm outlets, local markets, shops, or caterers, or as part of a community-supported agriculture scheme (CSA). They thereby contribute to short supply chains and direct relations between consumers and producers. Many farms are also engaged in processing activities, such as producing bread, cheese, preserves and meat on the farm, so creating added value and jobs, and enhancing the local economy. Many farms also undertake activities that benefit local communities or are in the public interest. These include training for organic/ biodynamic apprentices, conservation of rare or traditional breeds and species, agro-tourism, open days and cultural events, school premises or educational activities. Farms in the TDL network contribute to job creation, diversification of the rural economy, and local development.

Developing partnerships with local authorities

The rapid expansion of TDL and the strong public support it enjoys have also drawn attention from public bodies and local authorities. TDL has now been approached by municipalities wishing to support existing farmers and help set up new farmers. In response to the municipality's request TDL purchased a 120-hectare farm in Barjac, in Southern France. It is now supporting conversion of the farm to organic production, as well as a bottom-up project of local sustainable development involving the establishment of several farmers and their families and the development of short supply chains to supply municipal catering services, local markets and organic shops. Sometimes, TDL acquires the farm thanks to a donation from the local authority, or through the establishment of a public-citizen partnership (e.g. TDL acquires the land, the municipality the farm buildings). Some municipalities prefer contributing to TDL rather than owning the land themselves, as they thereby ensure the long-term agricultural use and stewardship of the land (despite electoral changes), while avoiding the tasks and responsibilities of property managers. In some cases, TDL does not directly acquire the land, but advises the municipality about the creation of a green belt, the facilitation of a farm transfer, the development of a locally relevant agricultural project, etc.

Reforming rural land management

In the longer term, TDL seeks to make an impact on rural land management policies and institutions. It is already opening up space for debate through leading by example, building strong partnerships with local authorities and engaging with various local and national bodies (SAFER, Water Agencies, Town Planning Federation, etc.). For the first time, it is receiving support from the Ministry of Agriculture, and is more often consulted by the government on issues relating to farmland and agriculture (e.g. support to young farmers and newcomers; introduction of environmental easements, etc.). TDL is also active on a European level, together with partner access-to-land initiatives and farmers' organisations, to call attention to the importance of access to land for a new generation of agro-ecological farmers. TDL advocates for in-depth reform of land management including: defining objectives and tools (regulatory measures, tax and financial incentives, etc.) to preserve agricultural land throughout the country; improving the balance between the respective rights and duties of land owners and users; better articulating land planning at local, regional and national levels; supporting the transmission of farms and the establishment of community-based sustainable farmers; reforming urban planning to include agricultural land and developing land stewardship and environmental protection of the land.

A still recent movement in need of consolidation

TDL has developed very quickly over the past 8 years, since the start up of the *Foncière*. It now needs to consolidate its operations and funding. So far, local branches have benefited from strong support from public funds (up to 60% of their budget comes from Regional Authorities). TDL is now seeking to consolidate and diversify its resources - the core of all activities- to assist existing and advise future farmers, engage with citizens, build relationships with civil society organisations, meet local authorities and stakeholders, etc. We need to find new ways of raising funds. Such setbacks as the economic crisis and the reduction of the tax rebate on donations have impacted investment. Ways ahead include raising the tax rebate, broadening the circle of investors, developing donations and patronage, and progressively converting investment into donations.

TDL is also seeking ways to support farmers and manage farms beyond the initial phase. A first challenge is to nurture a relationship between TDL and the farmers which goes beyond owner/tenant relations, while respecting farmers' autonomy regarding their activities. 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 mobilized in support of the farm. On a more practical level, TDL 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 TDL for the administration of its properties. It needs to upscale the skills, resources and management processes to fund necessary maintenance and improvement works.

Taking a longer-term perspective, TDL 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. Training in business models rarely includes on-farm processing activities or pluri-active farming, 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. TDL is thus supporting several farms which act as incubators for farmers wishing to become organic farmers. Le Gerموir, in Northern France, is one of them. Here 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.

Conclusions

Although TDL's 130 farms and 13,000 supporters are marginal when compared with the overall agricultural area and population in France, they are a strong sign that, if given a chance, large numbers of citizens support the development of local organic agriculture and are happy to get involved in supporting ecological, local food production and the preservation of vibrant rural areas. This has enabled TDL 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. With the current pressures on farmland it is essential to come back to basics: agricultural land is, before anything else, the basis for food production and the reproduction of lasting ecosystems –

hence, life itself. 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.

This is all the more crucial as France has entered a time when aging farmers will retire in great numbers and will need to find new farmers willing and able to take over their farms. It is thus a critical time to valorise existing know-how in land stewardship and sustainable farming, to maintain lively rural areas and to reorient production towards organic farming and environmental protection. The experience of TDL also (re)places farmers as links in a long chain of good land stewards, who develop a long-term perspective on land use and environment protection. It shows that agro-ecological farming generates many social and environmental common goods including job creation, diversified economic and social activities, healthy food, protection of natural resources, preservation of biodiversity, conservation of natural and cultural heritage and lively rural areas.

In the long run, one key challenge will be to reform policies and social representations so that youth are once again interested in agricultural work and rural life, agriculture and rural areas are recognised as a source of employment, and the education system provides adequate training in sustainable agriculture and co-operative business skills. Another challenge will be to promote a change in attitudes and representations about land ownership and stewardship so that land is regarded as a common good, entrusted to long-term users on the basis that they keep it in good heart and fulfil social needs and priorities.

Further references:

- For further information, see: www.terredeliens.org
- Video interview of Sjoerd Wartena (English subtitles): <http://future-farmers.net/from-the-field/specia/sjoerd-wartena/>