



A Flamenco Approach to Rural Resilience

Letter from Cortijo El Manzano, Spain

by Matteo Metta



Murciano-Granadina goats and goatherd in a rare cloudy, rainy period. Cortijo El Manzano

In times of tractors taking European streets, not all farmers wanted or could afford to protest. One example is Cortijo El Manzano in Campotéjar, rural Andalusia. For more than 40 years, this mixed and diversified farm has championed peasant agroecology and provided organic, local food outside mainstream agri-food systems. A tractor to protest, El Manzano does not have. But a long history of rural resilience in action. Instead of waiting for better policies, El Manzano and other allied farmers, restaurants, consumers have been working since 1986 to change the way society relates to food and organises itself via [cooperatives for food autonomy](#) within planetary boundaries.

Today, El Manzano is under increasing pressures from all sides: climate change, unfair markets, decaying rural housing, scarce rural labour, and more. When it comes to taking strong and immediate policy decisions for changing the course of things, the essential living and working conditions of farmers and rural areas are eclipsed by false solutions and neoliberal, ecomodernist visions of EU agri-food systems. Will El Manzano and many other agroecological farmers survive the current dramatic state of European rural areas?

In February, ARC2020's Matteo Metta visited and worked on El Manzano, a farm deeply rooted in the living history of rural Andalusia, so rich in nuances, contrasts, and emotions, as expressed in the notes of flamenco and words of poets like Federico García Lorca. Farms like El Manzano are yet another concrete example of a [rural bridge between sustainable agri and food systems](#), as outlined in the Marburg Action Plan. Unfortunately, the EU has failed to provide the promised framework for supporting this.

In this new Letter from the Farm, after a previous [letter from Cuba](#), Matteo reflects on European agri-food-rural policies and trends. He sheds light on the nuances and multiple ingredients of rural resilience in the European Union, with a particular focus on rural housing, labour, energy and digitalisation as tangible impressions emerging from his short volunteering work experience in Spain.



El Manzano's goats freely grazing in a 'dehesa', a multifunctional woodland for agrosilvopastoral system

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From Brussels to El Manzano: the forgotten protests

When I arrived in Campotéjar, on February 10th, Spanish highways and media were starting to be busy with tractors and images of angry farmers. Spanish protests followed the wave of protests that occurred in Belgium, Italy, Germany, France and more. For me, big tractors and predominantly male farmers in the streets, demanding a system change without the larger mobilisation of society, was a symbolic illustration of the structure of European agriculture, so misrepresented, specialised, vulnerable, disconnected, and dependent on external capital resources: financial, private advisory services, chemicals, machinery and new technologies in the hands of corporations.

The amalgamation of protesters under the name of “European farmers” is being used to legitimise, or even reinforce the same corporatist establishment that brought us to this point, with little accountability for farmers’ organisations and more worryingly, little response to address root causes of systemic problems.

Farmers cannot be lumped together in one bloc, especially because of the diversity of the European farming community. There is little recognition to farmers who refused to be complicit in the current system and strived for a different one. There is little accountability for the few who actually benefit from this system. In any case, the current protests signal that for all farmers – big or small, organic or conventional – we need a change of direction: we are all part of a broken system with deep divides and unsustainable patterns.



Almond trees blossom, and ruins decay in rural Spain

I set foot in 'el campo' on an exceptionally cloudy and rainy weekend for rural Andalusia, accompanied on my journey to El Manzano by extensive fields of olive groves, blossoming almond trees, nostalgic rural ruins, and clean air. All this and some bumpy roads made me realise that I was no longer under the same grey sky in Brussels.



Grazing goats on permanent grassland at El Manzano

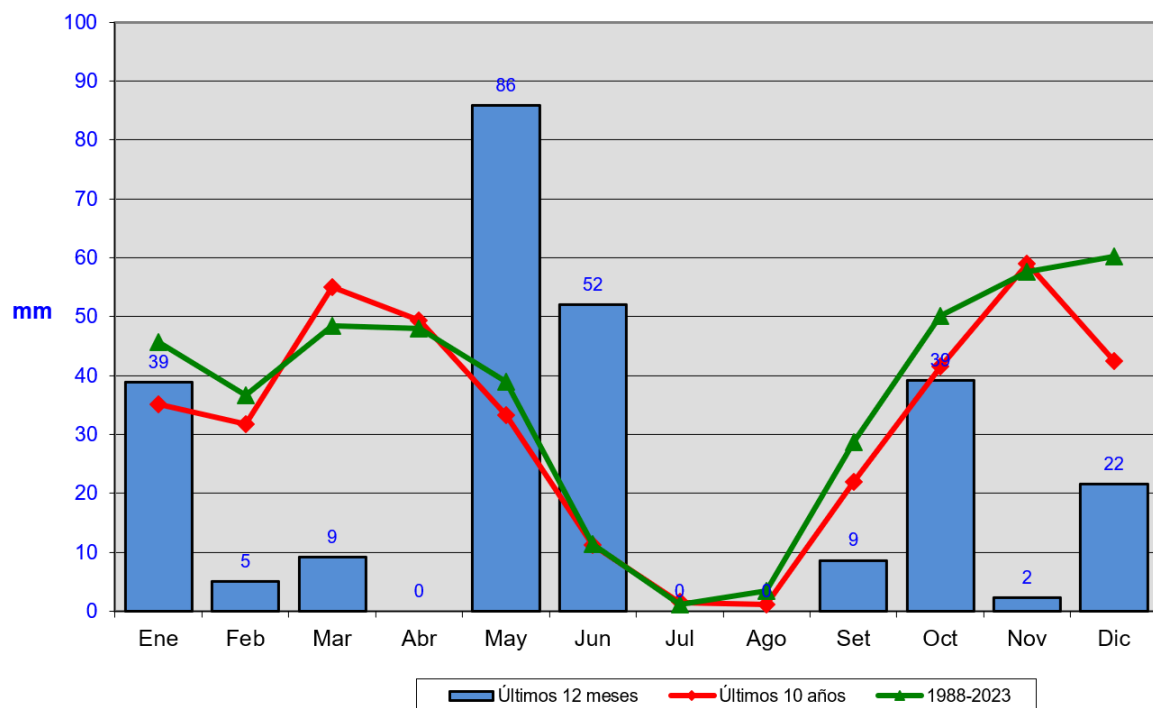
El Manzano is a two-hour walk from Campotéjar Empalme bus stop, which is next to a petrol station just outside the *pueblo* (village). On the long way to the farm, I was chatting and sharing pictures of the Spanish countryside with my dad and mom, who live in the South of Italy. They could not believe the pictures of blossoming almond trees, so well ahead compared to Puglia and the winter season.



El Manzano ruins after a fire outbreak

Before the arrival, I was aware that inconsistent rainfall and raising temperatures were a tough reality for El Manzano, as has systematically been the case for many years in Southern Europe, with only the difference that Central and North European countries are just starting to experience droughts and other dramatic effects of climate change more than before.

The blue bars in the figure below show that 2023 was an anomalous year for Granada province in terms of rainfall compared to the averages in the last ten years (red line) and since 1988 (green line). Except for May and June, 2023 was a traumatic year for many farmers in Granada province and Spain in general, especially olive farmers who experienced drought and high heat during the flowering phases. And 'las sequías' (droughts) in Spain are extending into 2024.



Total rainfall in 2023, Granada province. Source: [Estación meteorológica Granada-Albayzín \(España\)](#)

The agroecology journey of El Manzano (“the apple tree”) began when there were no agroecological schools, universities, and consultants. Around 50 people lived mostly in self-sufficiency around the ‘*Cortijo*’ (traditional rural dwelling), feeding themselves thanks to mixed farming, clean water pumped from the ground, and abundant skilled labour. The countryside was working and alive on a daily basis. On-farm events to bring new people to the countryside were not needed to break the feeling of ‘*clausura*’ and desolate life you can breathe today, here and in many other European rural areas.



Cortijo El Manzano and its goats. In the background, La Sierra Nevada

Today, due to persistent droughts, decaying rural infrastructure, and cemented food habits and inequalities across agri-food systems, the future of this farm faces an abyss and could follow the path of many other farms that gave up a long time ago. Unless the course of things changes quickly and systematically.



El Manzano from one of the neighbouring rural ruins

Today, this large, roughly 20 hectare farm, mixing multiple crops and animal production, located at 1200m, finds itself surrounded predominantly by olive groves and a depopulated rural landscape. The story of El Manzano can evoke a ‘flamenco’ approach to rural resilience, which is rooted in the living reality of peoples’ stories, and not in empty political frameworks and academic predictions. Today, El Manzano is not the perfect model, but at least it is concrete and delivers at many levels: organic food, sustainable farming, rural revitalisation, sovereignty.



Shepherds bringing olive prunings from nearby farms to feed the baby goats up in the mountains

El Manzano’s long history and concrete actions to global challenges can inspire European policies and places to revisit abstract, corporate-led, neoliberal frameworks. It breaks through the siloed approach used by European rural initiatives to date, when dealing with the transversality of rural matters, still too timid in relation to the latest EU efforts to deregulate GMOs, or the failures to provide a legal framework for the sustainable use of pesticides, food systems, land access, and groundwater use. The gap between *el campo* and *el pacto* – be it the European Farmers Deal, Green Deal, or Rural Pact – remains huge.

El Manzano finds its peers in those who have genuinely gone against the mainstream of many agri-food systems in the Mediterranean area. Similar to other corners of rural Europe, the dominant model built so far has pushed many Southern family farms to adopt unsustainable practices. Even today, the solutions being offered by corporations are walking the same industrialisation path that brought us to this dysfunctional system.

A clear example here in Campotéjar is visible in the contrasting quality between healthy and poisoned soils of olive groves with chemical herbicides. All this and more agri-food industrial changes pushed in the name of “feeding the world” have led to the marginalisation of many Southern rural areas at all levels: cultural, social, political, and so forth.



Olive groves surrounding El Manzano and expanding over woodlands, La Dehesa Boyal

The story of El Manzano is one of a collective of workers and consumers walking together towards a different world. Rafa is the heart and soul behind El Manzano and the innovative project of a consumer-producer cooperative for own consumption ([Cooperativa Integral Granaína](#)). Meeting Rafa is a must for peasant agroecology. If you are not lucky like me, some videos about him can be found on YouTube, like here talking about [goat farming](#) or here talking about [goat cheese making](#) in a pub. Along the ride, the people working and connected to El Manzano are aware of their own vulnerabilities and depend heavily on each other in terms of livelihood, nutrition, fair access to healthy food, learning rural competences, housing, ecology.



Closing of the weekly direct food sales by farmers in Granada. Market space is provided courtesy of Jardines de Zoraya restaurant

When talking about the recent farmers protests, Rafa told me: *“Many peasant farmers realised long ago that this system does not care about their fruits, their labour, their ecosystem. It is a system that operates first and foremost for profits. Many farmers were striving for a different model, but they were ignored. Today, many of the tractors and protesters in the streets of Madrid are there because they are being strangled: they followed the subsidies, the banks, the cheap fossil fuel, and the cash, no matter what. What you see unfolding is politicians and the rest of society expressing compassion in words or doing more of the same, but little is moving for a real transformation. Our freedom now must be to imagine something new with the rest of the society and get rid of dependencies that go beyond ourselves”*. Overall, droughts and lower levels of water in general are the number one and biggest concern for Rafa.



Goat yoghurt and cheese, just some of the products made by El Manzano

Cooking with the lights off - ingredients of rural resilience

Rural housing

Fixed or mobile, rural houses tell so much about our human civilisation and history. The many rural ruins around Campotéjar, but also the vulnerable housing conditions I experienced at El Manzano have sparked so many questions in my mind about urban privileges, but also about the vacuum left by policies at all levels, from Brussels to regions like Andalusia. Of course, I came across stunning traditional houses and well-kept *viviendas rurales*, but overall, I recognised that many problems of today's rural areas in Spain and elsewhere are related to poor housing.



Sunset in the countryside around Granada

In El Manzano, but also elsewhere in my previous research, I noticed how infrastructure such as housing and roads is such a significant factor in farmers' livelihoods, yet it receives a paltry budget line in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), or none at all. With good rural dwellings, farmers and agricultural workers can save money on fuel by living on the farm. They can provide accommodation for workers and volunteers in exchange for labour. They can install solar panels for the energy they need in order to process food. They can enjoy quality of life and have long-term prospects for their families and *compañeros*.

So, in the ongoing debate about the future of CAP and other European policies, where is the space to talk about the massive support needed to restore small and medium-sized dwellings on farms? Should farmers' housing continue to be largely excluded from public rural support simply because it is seen as 'non-productive assets' within this rural modernisation paradigm? How is the EU coordinating the regional and local efforts to adapt

the urbanistic law for small and medium-sized dwellings on farms, be they fixed or mobile? If the EU cares about revitalising rural areas, shouldn't we start by supporting the basics: our rural homes?

At El Manzano, I learned that precarious farmers, especially but not only young farmers, and families, with little or no liquidity at all, can never afford to co-finance public investments from EU or regional funds. **At the same time, investments in agritourism and other business diversification projects have become the ultimate gateway to access public funding. This is because, in the current framework, rural houses are seen as economic assets to serve the 'clients', rather than essential infrastructure for farmers to be able to live, work, and prosper in rural areas.** There must be a different package of actions, from regulations to engineering innovations and fair funding models. An example could be a better managed and more targeted 'super bonus scheme', like the one adopted in Italy to modernise the structure and energy use of many houses.



Ruins at Cortijo after a fire outbreak

Rural labour

Directly connected to the issue of housing, at El Manzano, I experienced some of the rural challenges and solutions around labour. Cheesemaking, herding, milking, carpentry, growing fruits and vegetables, animal husbandry, cooking, and many other artisanal competences are needed in rural areas, yet these demands are unmatched. Compounding the lack of qualified workers, many farmers cannot afford to offer attractive earnings for workers. Rafa, like many farmers, works non-stop, even during the weekends, and he is deprived of wages, training, or paid holidays for himself.

Over 40 years, many workers and volunteers have come and gone at El Manzano, which is normal for many businesses. However many workers and volunteers impressed me by their solidarity with Rafa, who could be referred to as the ‘farm manager’. I learned that boundaries between farm manager and workers (and the administrative burden that is today created to ensure fairness in this regard) can be reduced when the farmer is able to offer an inspiring and fulfilling life to agricultural workers, beyond the pay packet. Such arrangements can succeed when conditions allow workers to live from their earnings, and when they have common cause with the farm manager, as well as sharing meals, accommodation, and values.



Sunset over Andalusian olive groves

In this case, the distance between employee and employer becomes a symbolic one, and goes beyond monetary argumentations. The workers I met at El Manzano were not watching the clock to claim overtime. They knew that other jobs could offer more money for less effort, but they felt no oppression about what they were doing. Most of the pressure they suffer stems from two sources: dominant agri-food actors that place all of the human labour burden on farmers and workers, while removing the means for them to have better prospects; and a lack of institutional arrangements that allow these same farmers and workers to better regularise and distribute agricultural labour. Many French farmers, for instance, make up for this institutional shortcoming by paying themselves a wage through labour cooperatives called [GAECs](#) (*Groupement Agricole d'Exploitation en Commun*).

The topic of rural labour is delicate and can contain many bright and dark aspects (slavery, mafia infiltration, human trafficking, abuses, etc.). One farm does not represent all farms: many large, medium or small-scale farmers are very far away from the precarious yet convivial working situation at El Manzano. And yet, realities like this, from the ground at El Manzano, can inform policy makers around CAP social conditionality. Real-life reports can help sensibly steer effective targeting, without compromising the genuine solidarity and complex relationship between workers and farmers (housing, values, daily life) as a key ingredient of agroecological and rural resilience.



Workers and volunteers eating together at Sunday lunch, El Manzano

Rural energy

When I arrived at El Manzano, the cloudy sky over us told me we'd be cooking with the lights off. 100% of electricity at El Manzano is sourced from solar panels. Gas is used for cooking and local firewood for heating the house. Some solar energy is stocked in batteries for the cheese storage facilities. But for the rest, having no sun meant no energy for pumping our water, charging electronic devices, powering light bulbs, and so forth. The same situation occurs every night at El Manzano and here I learned how lower quality olive oil can be used as a source for renewable, locally sourced candlelight.

Coming from Italy, a country that is praising food sovereignty in words, but recently subsidising large-scale hydrogen and solar panel projects over fertile rural grounds in action, my attention was caught many times by the installation of small-scale solar panels scattered among the olive groves, sometimes almost hidden, and usually placed either over or right next to small rural dwellings in Andalusia.



Small-scale solar panel installations among olive trees in rural Andalusia, Campotéjar

It is often true that the environmental footprint of producing, shipping and installing solar panels can go beyond their actual savings. It's also true that many factors linked to sustainable energy depend not so much on the technology or energy source *per se*, but on how we use the energy, who needs it and for what, who controls and owns the infrastructure.

However, if these examples of small-scale installations were to become more widespread for European rural housing and energy self-autonomy, I think this experience from Andalusia is a good practice to invest in our common future, especially in the South of Europe where sun is abundant and solar energy can offer a great contribution to reduce fossil fuels. There needs to be an extra-mile effort to transform the current system with many good practices that exist in the field, but are unfortunately only deposited in EU archives, catalogues, databases, or one-off awards.



Sunny and shady February afternoon at El Manzano

It goes without saying that farmers and rural dwellers should not be pushed into debt to buy solar panels or, worse, made to sell or rent their valuable soil for large-scale installations. Is renting out for large agri-solar projects the best agricultural investment for their land at the moment? These situations are unfortunately happening. To prevent the negative effects of pushing renewable energy at any cost – even compromising food sovereignty, access to land, and energy decentralisation – the EU can and should do much more. The empty ‘do no significant harm’ principle that is embedded in much “sustainable finance” legislation is not sufficiently filtering sustainable investments. In fact, it is providing a legal pathway to many unsustainable investments funded by state-aid support or NextGenerationEU.

Rural digitalisation remains a hard sell

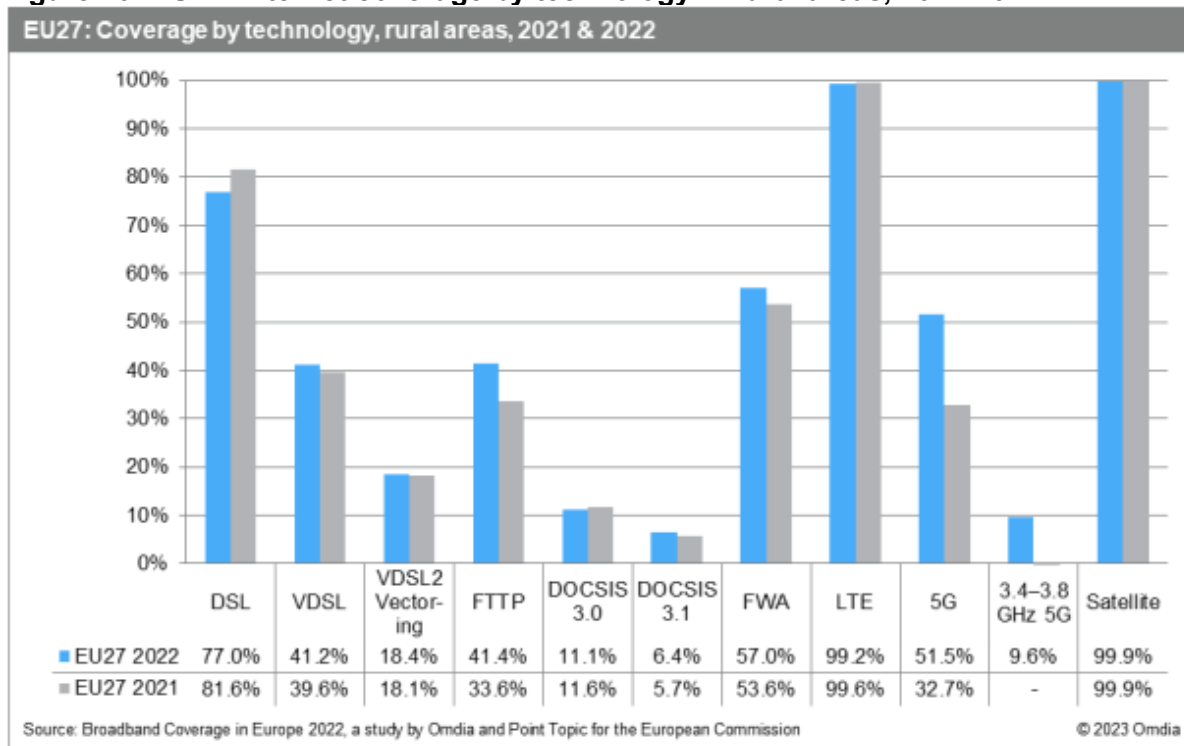
In terms of connectivity, European rural areas – despite all their differences – are reaching a point where basic internet coverage is accessible in one way or another: DSL, satellite, fibre optic, wireless, etc. Of course the public ownership, sovereignty, quality (speed, latency), the costs, and the full coverage remain questionable aspects of European Union telecommunications infrastructure. The discrepancies with urban areas, especially as regards 5G technologies, are well known.



Agri-solar panel in Andalusia

The figure below shows the latest data on broadband coverage in EU rural areas. Except for DSL, all other technologies for internet connectivity have made some progress between 2021 and 2022. In some cases, these technologies are reaching almost universal coverage in rural areas: LTE or 4G wireless networks and satellite coverage is close to 100%.

Figure 20: EU 27 internet coverage by technology in rural areas, 2021-2022



Source: European Commission (2023) [Broadband Coverage in Europe 2022](#). Final Report.

At El Manzano, internet is accessible only via mobile broadband (4G), and only in certain points of the house and field, namely those better exposed to the antennas. A week on this farm brought up many critical aspects of digitalisation that we can learn from rural areas, from demography to dependencies. However, here I'd like to share some observations that were so tangible in El Manzano and can inspire just digital agriculture programmes with a rural and peasant agroecological perspective.

This farm is overwhelmed with the everyday work and the diversity of living relationships to care for: animals, plants, cheesemaking, sales, etc. Doing all this under steady and increasing pressure from all sides takes digital conversion off the high-priority list. It is as if the prospects for introducing something new or beyond the farm's capacity are too distant from the everyday, precarious reality of El Manzano. In some cases, digitalisation clashes with the physical and social equilibrium on the farm, such as operating with low energy consumption, running an agroecological business with little fossil fuel use, nurturing in-person relationships, and so forth.

When I asked Rafa about his views on digital technologies after a long day in the field, he did not oppose the idea of someone on the farm communicating online about the farm activities, or using software to manage direct selling and farm stays. Actually, these innovations would be very welcome at El Manzano as long as they are balanced with the rest.

However, in the current state, Rafa simply feels that he cannot commit to more. Without someone from within the farm stepping up, he cannot lead on this, nor can he externalise these innovations to a delegated actor because he will have no capacity to follow up and actually benefit from it. As a result, the transformative power advocated by many digitalisation proponents remains a hard sell to these long-established and still active rural actors. Here I try to summarise two of the many reasons.



Goats returning back to the stable for the night

A first tangible issue with rural digitalisation at El Manzano, but most probably on many other farms, is connected with the physical world: hardware, infrastructure, and energy. Many believe that effective rural digitalisation needs just a smart phone and internet connection, and I am sure that many rural dwellers want even less than that. However, farms like El Manzano cannot afford a stable energy connection, a PC, a mouse, a keyboard, a desk, a chair, and a room oriented towards antennas in order to effectively respond to the demands and opportunities of digitalisation. And therefore, farms like El Manzano remain totally cut out of the rural digitalisation discussion.



Goats unexpectedly entering the horticultural field

A second issue is related to labour, skills, and scale of work. The advantages of digitalisation in mixed farming can be grasped when the positive returns overcome the opportunity costs involved in setting up, maintaining, and improving a digital system. Especially in the context of agroecology, whereby farmers maximise their own capacity, labour, and resources to minimise external dependencies, unless digital labour and skills are insourced or provided in cooperation with trustful and stable outsiders, the farmers will refrain from moving into areas where they can become vulnerable or exposed to dependencies such as consultants, temporary volunteers, and so forth. Furthermore, time and knowledge investments into the digital domain are weighed by the farmer in relation to the investments required in the physical and social sphere (people, food processing equipment, etc.). Finally, farmers also consider the scale of their work, in terms of number of clients, transactions, frequency, monetary value, time saved. The variables in the digital equation are many.

All in all, I learned that any public efforts to digitalise rural areas cannot draw straight boundaries with other structural and social policies, nor can they rely on decontextualised, top-down plans. As for cases similar to El Manzano, European programmes mainstreaming digital skills, technologies, or telecommunication infrastructures in rural areas may miss their key target groups and fail to stop agricultural and rural decline if they do not work hand-in-hand with broader agri-food-rural policies. Factors that go beyond the pure digital realm cannot be put aside, especially the (often precarious) physical and social conditions of farmers.

Actions beyond tractors

In these letters from Cortijo El Manzano, I have tried to tease out some of the many stories of progressive agroecological actors and alliances that embrace rural development with nature and people in rural Spain. Some ingredients of rural resilience from Andalusia have been unpacked, but many more deserve special attention.

A tractor, El Manzano does not have. Time to beg for better policies, neither. But probably many concrete actions and inspirations to deal with existential rural problems. The housing conditions, but also market, labour, and climate are not giving good, long-term prospects for generational renewal. This is clearly visible by walking around El Manzano. What El Manzano needs to avoid the same path is a system change and collective support – at all levels. Forty years of agroecological work cannot be completely lost. It will be a loss for Andalusia, but also for the food, rural, and agricultural heritage of the entire world.

Agroecology is often criticised for not being a scalable model as it would actually require more land to 'feed the world'. Well, El Manzano reminds us that, without chemicals and with a minimal or zero consumption of fossil fuel, agroecology feeds people and takes care of the environment without putting pressure on it. At the same time, we need to start realising that continuing with business-as-usual models may require more planets than our beloved Earth. Farms so rooted in *el campo*, like the passionate music and dance of flamenco, can move European agriculture forward and free rural areas from today's subordinating schemes.

The solutions are there, in *el campo*. Mixed farming like the agropastoral systems of El Manzano, combined with on-farm food processing, territorially-integrated food systems, renewable energy, fair working arrangements, better rural housing and infrastructure, cooperation, and adapted digital transformations can, all together, make rural areas alive again. There is not a silver bullet solution. And many farmers and consumers in Granada are aware of this and acting in this progressive socio-ecological direction, be it in the form of agroecological cooperatives like [Valle & Vega](#), informal consumer-producers groups, or individual agroecological farmers' initiatives.



La cabra galga: A Murciano-Granadina goat seeking better grazing, a little away from its herd.

I truly hope to return again to this wonderful corner of rural Europe. Until then, without a system change, I ask myself: will Cortijo El Manzano continue its long history in the Andalusian countryside, or become another rural memory, a '*reliquia rurale*'? Or will it be transformed into something new: a goat, an apple tree, a drone? Who knows. Probably, the answer is not "blowin' in the wind", but in the power and motion of flamenco and Andalusian history, still to be written.

Recommended literature: 1) Trilogia Rural; 2) Poemas de la Vega; 3) Impresiones Y Paisajes. Federico Garcia Lorca.

Photo credits: Matteo Metta

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