



Rural Resilience Project Journey 2024

From Protests & Polarisation
to Weaving Common Ground



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Cover photo: The Niwiński's Band plays the traditional music of central and south-eastern Poland, especially from the Masovia region, learning from masters and searching for archival recordings and sheet music. They provided the music for a night of dancing at the Weaving Common Ground gathering in Grzybów, Poland, November 2024. Photo: Adèle Violette

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From Protests & Polarisation to Weaving Common Ground



Almond trees blossom, and ruins decay in rural Spain. Photo: Matteo Metta

This time last year the streets of European cities were on fire. Sometimes literally, as desperate farmers fought to make their voices heard.

The voices of farmers and other rural actors are at the heart of the Rural Resilience project. It is only by listening to voices from the ground that we can hope to inspire and sustain a living countryside. This has been a principle of this project since its inception in late 2020. After an initial period of action-research on the ground in **France**, and subsequently zooming out to look at **multi-tiered rural policies**, the caravan has travelled to **Germany** and this past year

Poland, with stops in Ireland, Spain, Czech Republic and other European countries along the way.

In this second phase of the project (2023-2024), we collaborated with actors in more of Europe's territories, with a view to empowering these actors to grasp the major reforms of EU rural development policy. **Together, we worked to bring forward reality-based proposals, rooted in actions that are already underway on the ground.** The project remains a collective adventure in learning from, sharing and nurturing creative responses to the social, ecological and economic crises we face in our rural areas.

Blame the System, Not the Farmers



Farmers protests in Brussels, 1 February 2024. Photo: Adèle Violette

Farmers took to the streets in early 2024 with legitimate, long-standing grievances. They speak to a [systemic crisis](#) that has been brewing for decades.

Whatever their political stripes, ultimately these farmers [call for dignity](#) in their work. “All the farmers are together here for fair incomes and because our life is becoming impossible,” commented Morgan Ody, small farmer and representative of small farmers associations European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC), at a protest on 1 February 2024.

Yet the language of division and hate, amped up by far-right actors, spoke to many in Europe’s rural areas: as ARC2020 president Hannes Lorenzen warned in *Le Monde*, easy answers are tempting when the established democratic parties have been [ignoring the problems of farmers for far too long](#).

Hannes Lorenzen Les partis démocratiques ont trop longtemps ignoré les problèmes des agriculteurs

L'expert agricole observe le rôle des formations politiques conservatrices, hostiles à la transition écologique de l'agriculture, dans l'exploitation de la colère des campagnes

De nombreux agriculteurs européens sont furieux. La colère n'est pas nouvelle, mais le tonneau a débordé. La frustration s'exprime dans les villes et sur les réseaux sociaux. La colère monte depuis longtemps dans les fermes et les villages contre « ceux d'en haut », contre la « politique », contre le gouvernement, contre l'Union européenne (UE). Le désespoir règne chez de nombreux agriculteurs qui ne peuvent plus faire face à la surcharge de travail, à l'augmentation des coûts, à la précarité des revenus, à la dépendance à l'égard des subventions et des entreprises agricoles, à l'absence de perspective de succession pour leurs exploitations et aux nouvelles réglementations émanant des capitales et de Bruxelles.

L'exaspération est en grande partie justifiée, mais elle se dirige vers un territoire dangereux, vers l'abîme des sauveurs antidémocratiques, anti-européens, racistes – dans certains cas fascistes. Ces cau-

dant des semaines. Malgré la prise de distance officielle avec le parti AfD, les signes d'infiltration de l'extrême droite dans les manifestations et sur les réseaux sociaux ne peuvent être ignorés.

Comme en France, des partis extrémistes se développent aux Pays-Bas, en Lituanie et en Belgique, en utilisant le malaise de la population rurale pour glaner des voix. On l'a vu, le 24 janvier, avec la participation de Marion Maréchal aux côtés de la Coordination rurale, de l'Irish Farmers Alliance, de la Farmers Defence Force Belgium, à la manifestation intitulée « Lutter contre la guerre de l'Union européenne (UE) contre l'agriculture », à l'appel du Mathias Corvinus Collegium, un institut financé par le gouvernement hongrois de Viktor Orban.

Faire face au chaos

Oui, la colère doit s'exprimer, mais il faut surtout qu'un débat politique sérieux s'engage enfin. Pour eux les agriculteurs n'ont



EN ALLEMAGNE, LES SIGNES D'INFILTRATION DE L'EXTRÊME DROITE DANS LES MANIFESTATIONS ET SUR LES RÉSEAUX SOCIAUX NE PEUVENT ÊTRE IGNORÉS

les agriculteurs comme faisant partie de leurs meubles, les socialistes, comme éléments de leur idéologie. Les libéraux

plus tard. Les subventions doivent exclusivement promouvoir le passage à des systèmes agroécologiques, et à une agriculture diversifiée et à taille humaine. La politique de développement rural doit mettre en place les infrastructures économiques et sociales essentielles et décentralisées nécessaires pour créer des systèmes alimentaires locaux à l'abri des crises.

Les financements devraient être distribués en fonction non pas des hectares, mais des progrès réalisés dans la transition écologique et la création d'emplois ruraux. Les agriculteurs doivent pouvoir tirer leurs revenus d'une concurrence loyale sur le marché, et d'une coopération entre eux et les entreprises alimentaires locales. La protection extérieure contre les importations faisant du dumping socio-écologique et le lien avec une politique de santé publique doivent compléter ce nouveau départ.

Telles sont les demandes d'une large coalition en Allemagne d'une alliance sociale



Visit to Ewa and Peter Stratenwerth's organic farm in Grzybów, Poland, November 2024. Photo: Kinga Treder

Solidarity, Cooperation and Continuing to Show Up

Solidarity shows another way. In a [joint statement](#), issued in response to the farmers' protests, the EU Food Policy Coalition, Agroecology Europe and 18 other European NGOs committed to “sharing the responsibility for a consensus-based agroecological transition” and to improving the dignity and livelihoods of farmers and farm workers. The transition to agroecological, local food systems is good for all of us, but “the burden of the transition must not lie solely on them”.

In that spirit, our [Marburg Action Plan for Future-Proof Food Systems in Europe](#) (see below and see the chapter “Democratising Food Policy”), co-created with the participants of the 2023 Rural Resilience gathering in Marburg, showed that farmers, municipalities, public authorities, territorially embedded businesses, food processors, citizens and civil society organisations are working together in diverse ways to create regional, holistic and sustainable approaches that focus on the health and well-being of the planet and people.



The proposals of the Marburg Action Plan emerged from exchanges at the European Action Gathering for Sustainable Food Systems in Marburg, November 2023. Photo: Adèle Violette

With the European Parliamentary elections on the horizon, the Marburg Action Plan (MAP) was our call to action for EU policymakers.

For voters, we proposed a briefing to help cut through the spin: [The Civil Society Guide to Avoiding Electile Disfunction](#).

From Protests & Polarisation to Weaving Common Ground

In a tense political climate, the farmer protests provided [leverage to right-wing parties](#) at national and EU levels. Nonetheless, [civil society continued to rally](#)

for a vote for the future – and farmers continued to feed us.



Demands from different countries sewn together in a huge banner at the Vote Future demonstration organised by Good Food Good Farming (GFGF) and Climate Action Network Europe in Brussels, 1 June 2024. Photo: Kristof Vadino

From Protests & Polarisation to Weaving Common Ground

In this spirit we were proud to participate in Good Food Good Farming's annual network meeting. Held in Brussels on 31 May, it was an opportunity for thought-provoking reflections on recent farmer protests, a lively panel discussion aimed at fortifying connections within the agrifood movement, and insightful presentations and workshops on the future of

the CAP post-2027. Good Food Good Farming gave "a special shoutout to Natasha Foote, our exceptional moderator". As well as supporting the animation of the meeting, ARC2020 gave support through board member Andrzej Nowakowski, who answered questions on the current status of the CAP rollback.



Good Food Good Farming's annual network meeting, moderated by ARC2020's Natasha Foote. Photo: Good Food Good Farming

From Protests & Polarisation to Weaving Common Ground

FUTURE-PROOF FOOD SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

A CALL FOR ACTION




Arbeitsgemeinschaft
blauerische Landwirtschaft e.V.

agricultural & rural convention

kollektiv
MORGEN



Photo: Adèle Violette

THE AGRI-FOOD SYSTEM ISN'T WORKING FOR ALL

Farmers across Europe have taken to the streets. They protest volatile incomes, rising costs, unfair pricing and buying practices, unfair competition from imports and free trade agreements, regulatory strangleholds, and bureaucratic burdens. Meanwhile, profits amass in the hands of the few dominant agrifood businesses, and the EU policy framework continues to shape a food system with devastating impacts for people and the planet.

The effects of climate change, biodiversity loss and socio-economic inequalities are dramatic and ongoing, yet the European Union has systematically missed opportunities to create a policy framework that drives and supports system change to ecological and resilient food and farming. Its promised framework for Sustainable Food Systems never materialised. In short, the EU institutions pushed a 'man on the moon' moment, but didn't provide the supporting infrastructure to make this a reality. In parallel, powerful agrifood firms, including machinery and chemical companies, manufacturers and retailers, wield ever growing influence in, and profit from, food supply chains.

Farmers, agricultural and food workers – and all of us who participate in the dominant food markets in order to eat – are locked into business as usual. The last thing society needs to address systemic failures of the food system is **rollback** in commitments to socio-ecological transition, or a turn towards politics built on exclusion and oppression, which seems to be what is offered following farmers' protests.

ALTERNATIVES FROM THE GROUND UP - THE MARBURG ACTION PLAN

Here are alternatives: Action for future-proof food systems is already taking place on the ground. The [Marburg Action Plan for Future-Proof Food Systems in Europe](#) shows that farmers, municipalities, public authorities, territorially embedded businesses, processors, citizens and civil society organisations are working together in a diversity of ways to create regional, holistic and sustainable approaches that focus on the health and well-being of the planet and people. All of these actors can be agents of food system transformation that is rooted in crossboundary solidarity, just transition and a living countryside.

Yet we still urgently need deeper system change: immediate and coherent actions for future-proof food systems across places and policies at all levels. As we wait for, and expect, the EU to create the necessary policy framework, support and incentives to consolidate and scale future-proof food systems, we invite all food actors to refer to or adapt the [Marburg Action Plan](#) in their own contexts. The action plan provides insights into food system transformation already taking place on the ground, and at the same time calls for a coherent political framework and support options from the municipal level to the EU.



Photo: Adèle Violette

CALL FOR ACTION AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

- Stop the Green Deal rollback. Create an integrated EU policy framework that enables socio-ecological transition in food and farming systems and rural areas.
- Direct political commitment and resources toward change-making communities on the ground. Transformative action for the development and preservation of fair and ecological food systems is already happening across Europe, with huge policy potential.
- Enable communities to put in place governance processes and spaces, where the voices, demands and proposals of all relevant people - farmers, residents, civil society and social movements - are heard.
- Use EU funds and frameworks to amplify and network locally-driven actions. CAP market and sectoral interventions are among the resources available, while collaboration and willingness to change comes from the ground.
- Create the conditions for coherence and collaboration with multiple governance levels and disciplines intersecting in food systems, from farming to health, education, trade, infrastructure and quality of life in rural areas. Rural, agri-food, environmental policies like the CAP are not fully equipped with the necessary framework to take joint responsibilities in areas such as rural resilience and wellbeing, healthy diets, access to land and commons, fair food markets.

From Protests & Polarisation to Weaving Common Ground

ACTIONABLE GOALS OF THE MARBURG ACTION PLAN FOR FUTURE-PROOF FOOD SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

GOAL 1	Re-localised, diverse food systems with strong citizen engagement
GOAL 2	Connected and coordinated local and regional food actors, initiatives & tools for regional food systems
GOAL 3	Inclusion and equality for people of all ages, social classes, genders, ethnic and racial groups, and sexual orientations in agri-food governance
GOAL 4	Trust, cooperation and co-creation between value chain actors
GOAL 5	Sustainable food accessible for all, with easier & fairer forms of distribution and sustainable food markets
GOAL 6	Access to land and commons for sustainable food production

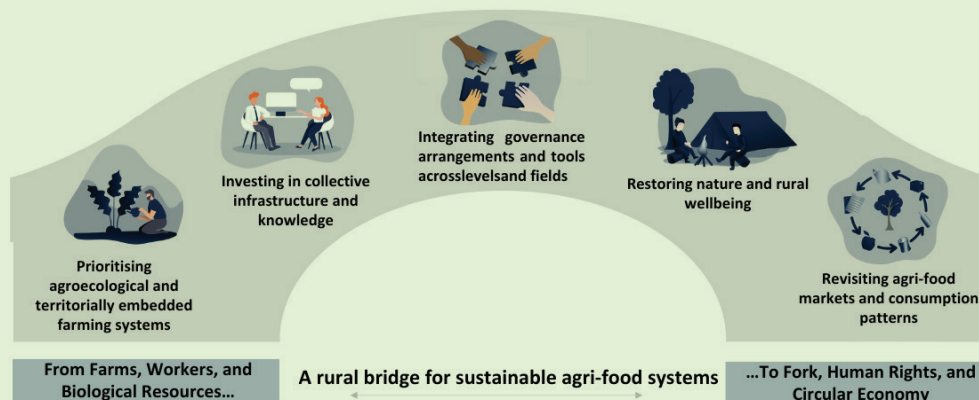


FIG. 1: A BROADER FRAMEWORK BRIDGING RURAL DEVELOPMENT WITH SUSTAINABLE AGRI-FOOD SYSTEMS

WHERE DID THIS ACTION PLAN COME FROM?

In Marburg, November 2023, kollektiv von MORGEN e.V., the Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft (AbL) e.V. and the Agricultural and Rural Convention (ARC2020) hosted a European Action Gathering for Sustainable Food Systems, as part of the project Rural Europe Takes Action - Germany. More than 100 participants from 17 countries and many facets of society came together. Over two days, they shared their expertise and experience, and worked together on future-proof food systems, with an integrated approach and strong rural development component.

The *Marburg Action Plan for Future-Proof Food Systems in Europe* developed from the ideas that participants shared and co-created in these two days. It shows that efforts to achieve coherent changes in agri-food systems are taking place through concrete actions in different contexts across Europe. The Marburg Action Plan is an invitation to align systems and policies. European institutions and other agri-food actors at different levels of governance can use the Marburg Action Plan to change policies where appropriate and find resources to act towards the implementation of future-proof food systems with an integrated approach and strong rural development component.

Why Marburg? An inspiring city, Marburg has committed to achieve climate neutrality by 2030. Surrounded by 40% farmland, some food processing structures still remain. Above all, there is a strong civil society alliance and political momentum on sustainable food systems: Marburg food council, a community health garden, four CSA farms, working groups on sustainable food education, a politically viable resolution on sustainable catering for kindergartens, and a variety of research projects on sustainable food systems.



Photo: Adèle Violette

SCAN FOR THE MARBURG ACTION PLAN IN FULL



With the support of the Robert Bosch Stiftung and Porticus.
The Rural Europe Takes Action - Germany project is supported by the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

Our call for action: [Executive summary of the Marburg Action Plan for Future-Proof Food Systems in Europe](#)

From Protests & Polarisation to Weaving Common Ground

[Cooperation and social alliances](#) offer pathways to the urgent changes that are needed. Many farmers did not take to the streets in their tractors:



Murciano-Granadina goats and goatherd in a rare cloudy, rainy period. El Manzano farm, Spain. Photo: Matteo Metta

[El Manzano farm](#) in remote Andalusia, Spain, did not join the farmer protests. It has no tractor. What it does have is a long history of rural resilience in action. Instead of waiting for better policies, El Manzano and other allied farmers, restaurants and consumers have been working since 1986 to change the way society relates to food and organises itself.

Meanwhile in North Friesland, Germany, young farmer [Jan Gonne Thams](#) is experimenting with different approaches to diversification and cooperation - taming his farming in response to climate change and an overpopulation of wild geese. Is

farming for the birds? Perhaps in that madness lies momentum for change.

Speaking “from farmers for farmers”, the [European Alliance for Regenerative Agriculture](#) (EARA) is attempting to course-correct “a system misguided by wrong paradigms”.

So many voices for agroecological transition. Yet even before the European elections, the direction of travel in Brussels was [leaving behind ecological considerations](#), as demonstrated by the leaked draft Strategic Agenda of the European Council. It was a harbinger of more missed opportunities to come.

The EU's New Power Structure

As anticipated, the May 2024 elections brought significant wins for far-right parties in the European Parliament. “Instead of the emerging Fortress Europe,

anti-science regression and rising ethno-nationalism we need a Europe of solidarity and compassion. Despite the difficulties, this is not only possible, it's necessary,” we argued in an [election post-mortem](#).



Jan Gonne Thams with the Free Bakers checking the wheat population. Pellworm island, Germany. Photo: Hannes Lorenzen

Autumn was ripe for rural policy developments. Once the dust had settled after the summer, we provided another briefing for engaged citizens: [An Agrifood Stakeholder's Guide to the EU's New Power Structure](#).

September concluded a bridge-building exercise initiated by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in the wake of the farmers' protests. Bringing together 29 very different stakeholders (farmers' groups, civil society and the agri-food industry), the [EU strategic dialogue on agriculture](#) announced its recommendations after seven months of talks.

As we reported in some [key takeaways](#), the group called for a European rural contract, and a so-called ‘rural test’ ahead of decisions on the Multiannual Financial Framework. In the interests of contributing to the “dense rural fabric”, the strategic dialogue recommended “the promotion of locally adapted and peasant farms, and similar structures for sustainable forms of agricultural production,” for example by establishing new and strengthening short supply chains. Although the Commission is not obliged to act on these suggestions, it is likely that they will help to shape policies over the course of the next 5-year political cycle.

From Protests & Polarisation to Weaving Common Ground

The recommendations of the strategic dialogue were lauded by a number of civil society stakeholders. Among them Greenpeace, whose report [Go Big or Go Bust](#) warned that small farms are a dying breed, and advocated for solutions to support a transition towards a truly sustainable farming system, such as those outlined on the strategic dialogue recommendations.

For the [European Alliance for Regenerative Agriculture](#) (EARA), however, the findings of the strategic dialogue were lacking. Nothing less than a paradigm shift is needed if farmers are to rescue farming from the throes of crisis: “Europe’s farmer protests are an expression of the frontline experience of climate change in the midst of bureaucracy’s life-sucking ‘paper wars’ on trust, diversity, context-specificity, planning security, adaptation and capacities.”

Post-2024 elections there is much to play for. ARC2020 president Hannes Lorenzen warns: “[Plans to dissolve specific programme based budgets for agriculture, rural and cohesion policies](#) to create a centralised fund for EU competitiveness could prove disastrous for rural and agricultural communities.” But there is still time for European decision makers to transition “[from competition to cooperation](#).”

For future rural development policy, there is [no excuse for business as usual](#): untapped funding sources offer considerable potential, as Edina Ocsko lays out in her op-ed for ARC2020.

Meanwhile, we take comfort in beacons of hope for rural resilience, such as the passing of the [Nature Restoration Law](#) – a huge win in 2024.

Sowing the Seeds of a Rural Triangle



From Plessé to Marburg: (l-r) Merle Drusenbaum of Kollektiv von Morgen, Marburg, exchanges with Vincent Gaudin and Thierry Lohr, local councillors from Plessé, France, at the European Action Gathering for Sustainable Food Systems, November 2023. Photo: Adèle Violette

From west to east, the Rural Resilience project winds its way across Europe. After finding our [roots on the ground](#) in pandemic-stricken France, in autumn 2022 an inaugural European gathering celebrated rural resilience with local partners in the French municipality of [Plessé](#). The following year we took root in Germany, growing partnerships especially in the region of Hessen, which bore fruit in a second European gathering in the university city of [Marburg](#).

This year in particular, alienation between rural and urban Europe and frustrations about politics have massively contributed to a radical shift to the right in EU member states that has bubbled up into the European Parliament. In response to a growing polarisation of society, in particular the farmer protests earlier this year sowing seeds of division, we aspire to create a **European triangle of rural action**. A point

of reference is the [Weimar triangle](#) which stands for cooperation at state level between three large Member States: France, Germany and Poland. In times of populism and nationalism we want to focus on what we can do together in our villages and in Europe to overcome the multiple ecological and social crises we face.

And so we ended 2024 by [weaving common ground](#) with a European rural gathering in the Polish village of Grzybów. But first, let's look at how the various themes of the project were developed in 2024.

Themes of Rural Resilience

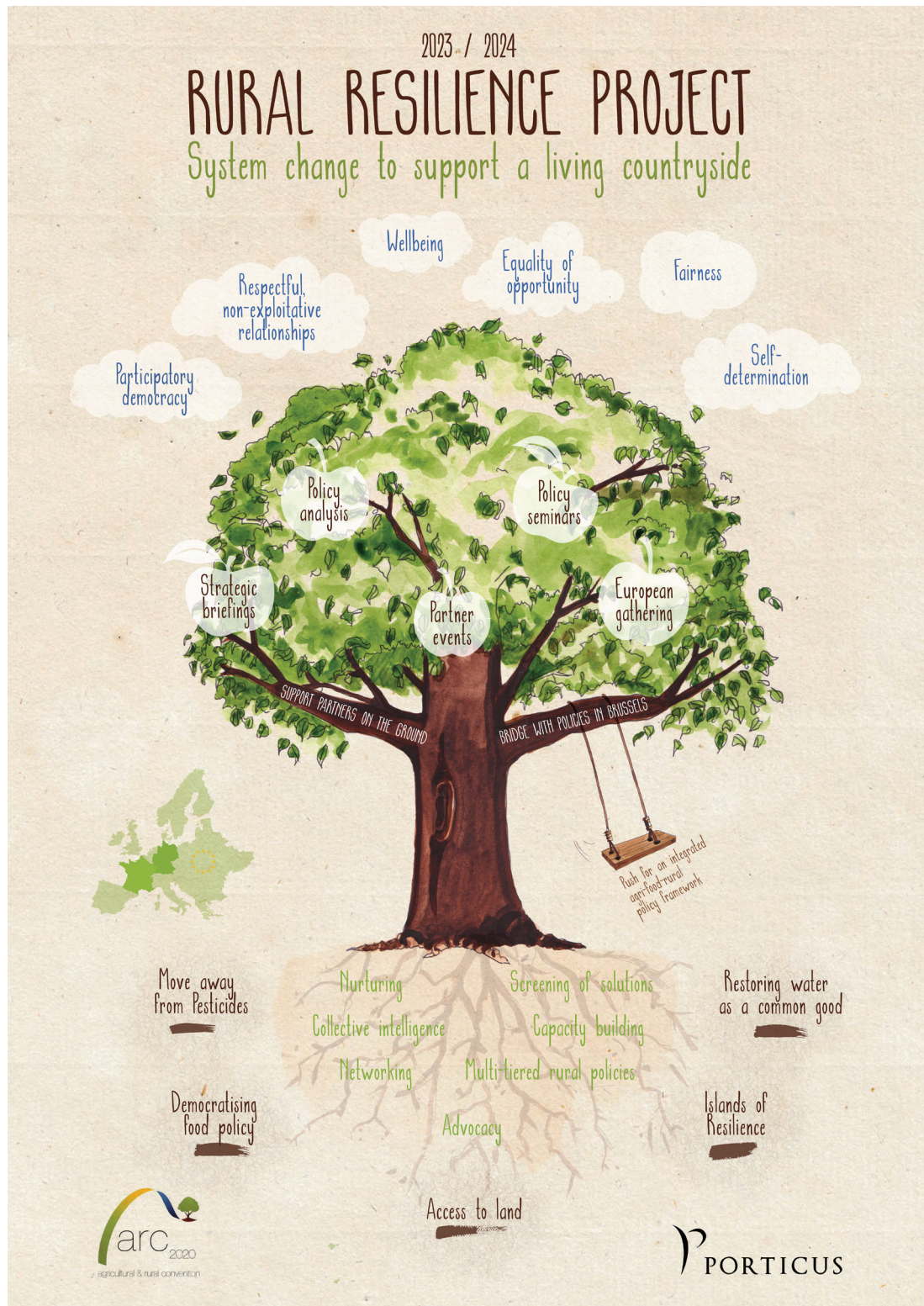


Illustration by Stephen Rater

Themes of Rural Resilience

In its second phase the Rural Resilience project zoomed out from France to take in wider Europe. We collaborated with actors in more of Europe's territories, especially **Germany, Poland and Ireland**. In terms of **multi-tiered rural policies**, we hope to empower these actors to grasp the major reforms of EU rural development policy, whose outcomes and details at regional level are still uncertain and need critical scrutiny. **Together, we work to bring forward reality-based proposals, rooted in actions that are already underway on the ground.**

For the second phase of the Rural Resilience project, we identified a number of themes to develop, based on analysis of our exchanges on the ground in phase one:

- Democratising local food policies
- Access to land
- Rural well-being and the move away from pesticides
- Water as a common good – assessing an agroecological response to drought



Farm walk on Cloughjordan Community Farm during Feeding Ourselves 2024. Photo: Oliver Moore

Democratising Food Policy



Diversity of bread from the on-farm bakery in Grzybów. Photo: Adèle Violette

Paths to democratising food policy were traced in the **Marburg Action Plan for Future-Proof Food Systems (MAP)**, which we disseminated this year in four languages: German, French, Polish and English. The MAP, which was an output of the 2023 rural re-

silience gathering in **Marburg**, Germany, demanded action from European policymakers, in view of the action for future-proof food systems that is already taking place on the ground.

Diary from the ground: Feeding Ourselves 2024

We brought the proposals of the MAP to Feeding Ourselves 2024, the annual gathering in Cloughjordan Ecovillage, Ireland. In March 2024, it was a moment to unpack protest, agroecology and local food economies that concluded with a deep listening session with farmers and environmentalists that offered an antidote to anger on the streets.

The MAP offered European perspectives, rooted in action on the ground, to the Local Food Policy Framework, presented by Irish small farmers' association Talamh Beo. Indeed, if you want to stress test a local food policy framework, no better place than Feeding Ourselves. It was a little like playing Talamh Beo bingo: in a room full of local food policy actors, almost every point raised is covered by their proposals. A land access strategy for aspiring farmers? That's in the document. Infrastructure to develop local supply chains? Yes, it's in there. An integrated approach to reviving rural communities? Yes, that too.

Both the Marburg Action Plan and Talamh Beo's Local Food Policy Framework in turn fed into a roundtable on bottom-up approaches to sustainable food systems. Farmers and project partners from Germany, France and Ireland exchanged with participants on the different but complementary approaches they are using to transform food and farming at the local level.

Ann-Marie Weber represented kollektiv von MORGEN in Marburg. Thierry Lohr participated as local councillor for the French municipality of Plessé. They were joined by representatives of German and Irish small farmers' organisations (which are national chapters of European Coordination Via Campesina): respectively Henrik Maas of AbL, and Fergal Anderson of Talamh Beo.

European perspectives proved insightful also during the closing plenary, with a contribution from Simone Matouch (Forum Synergies) on generational renewal for sustainable food systems. The handover to younger generations will encounter challenges, noted Simone, but these challenges can make space for innovation and fresh thinking to flourish. Intergenerational cooperation is crucial: the older generation has the experience, and the youth have the energy.

Feeding Ourselves (FO) started as an event, but is now a community of practice. Initially in 2011 FO was about developing community supported agriculture as an idea in Ireland, now, delegates from over 20 organisations and movements come together for 4 days to further advance local agroecological food economies, people-focused and inclusive distribution, and better policy proposals at the national and EU levels. There is always a strong International dimension, with participants coming in from Marburg and Plessé, and from organisations like Forum Synergies and ECVC. Now, webinars and newsletters appear ongoing throughout the year, focusing on different aspects of fairer and more ecologically sound agri-food systems. Dozens attend each one, while hundreds have signed up to the newsletters. Of the 18 organisations centrally involved, most relevant include the Environmental Pillar and its 33 member organisations; Talamh Beo (the Irish Branch of ECVC), think tanks (e.g. FEASTA), EU Projects (e.g. CODECS, EU4Advice) and ARC2020's Seeds4All project.



Themes of Rural Resilience



Louise Kelleher moderates the roundtable on bottom-up approaches to sustainable food systems at Feeding Ourselves 2024, with Alison Brogan (ARC2020), Ann-Marie Weber (kollektiv von MORGEN), Thierry Lohr (municipality of Plessé), Henrik Maas (AbL), and Fergal Anderson (Talamh Beo). Photo: Adèle Violette



Deep listening session with farmers and environmentalists at Feeding Ourselves 2024. Photo: Oliver Moore

Themes of Rural Resilience

A living tool for future-proof food systems, rooted in action on the ground

The Marburg Action Plan, rather than a static document, is a living tool rooted in action on the ground. We spotlighted some particularly inspiring components of the MAP, such as the work of Belgian organisation Manger Demain ('Eating Tomorrow') to harness [public canteens as a tool for regional resilience](#). In early 2024, Manger Demain joined with the municipality of Mouans-Sartoux (one of whose councillors also helped to co-create the MAP), the city of Brussels and a grouping of over 100 French municipalities to issue a call to [free up public procurement for food](#). The Rural Resilience project supported the

[English language version](#) of the text, which developed into a declaration in partnership with the Buy Better Food coalition. More updates are to come in early 2025 on this continuing work on the potential of public procurement at EU level.

Another co-creator of the MAP was PETR Ariège - see the box below for their local food policy council's experiment on a social security scheme for food.

Following their exchanges and field visits in Marburg in November 2023, two representatives of PETR Ariège returned home with the confidence to move ahead with plans to start a municipal farm in their locality.



Workshop on communications for Sustainable Food Systems by Kollektiv von Morgen in Ockershausen, Germany, June 2024. Photo: Ann-Marie Weber

Themes of Rural Resilience

The 2023 Rural Resilience gathering in Marburg added momentum and new energy to the efforts of Kollektiv von Morgen and AbL Hessen to progress sustainable food systems in Marburg and the surrounding region. In follow-up activities, Kollektiv von Morgen strategically honed in on two main topics, based on buy-in from relevant stakeholders through connections formed at the gathering and actions conceived of in the MAP. These main areas of action are: Putting More Regional Food on the Menu and Communications for Sustainable Food Systems. Through ongoing networking and strategy meetings on regional food hosted by Kollektiv von Morgen and the Creativity and Social Innovation Hub Marburg (CIM) for local restaurant operators, suppliers, civil society actors and employees of the city and district, a win came in the conceptualisation and prototyping of regional dish initiative for Marburg Biedenkopf, which is now on the menu of four restaurants and counting.

Core to the networking activities of Kollektiv von Morgen, linking food system stakeholders with politicians and the administration in pursuit of local food system transformation, is the facilitation of trust-filled and safe spaces, in which actors feel free to express their views even in dialogue with those who may have a different perspective. This was one of the key messages that KoMo brought to Grzybów, where they connected with old and new European partners.



Pierogi served at the Weaving Common Ground gathering.
Photo: Alison Brogan



Local women's cooperative Cor et Manus prepare pierogi during the Weaving Common Ground gathering. Photo: Kinga Tredner

Themes of Rural Resilience

Diary from the ground: Ariège Local Food Council



Meeting of the Local Food Council in Ariège, France, July 2024. Photo: Natasha Foote

In July 2024, we attended a meeting of the Local Food Council (CLA) of Ariège in the south of France, where the 'Pôle d'équilibre territorial et rural' (PETR) project is working to set up a [social security for food](#).

The Local Food Council (CLA) is a participatory body bringing together local players with an interest in food (from producers to consumers) with wider themes of regional food projects (environment, food heritage, health, social justice, energy, etc.).

The idea is that each participant contributes to a common pot according to their financial means, and receives credit for food according to their needs. This can be cashed in with local agrifood businesses who meet a set of predefined sustainable requirements. The money is therefore pumped back into the local economy, encouraging short supply chains and the network of local businesses.

In this way, the scheme works as a 'win-win' - on the one hand, working in solidarity to ensure access to nutritious food for all, regardless of income, while also working to strengthen the local agrifood sector, promoting food sovereignty and local democracy.

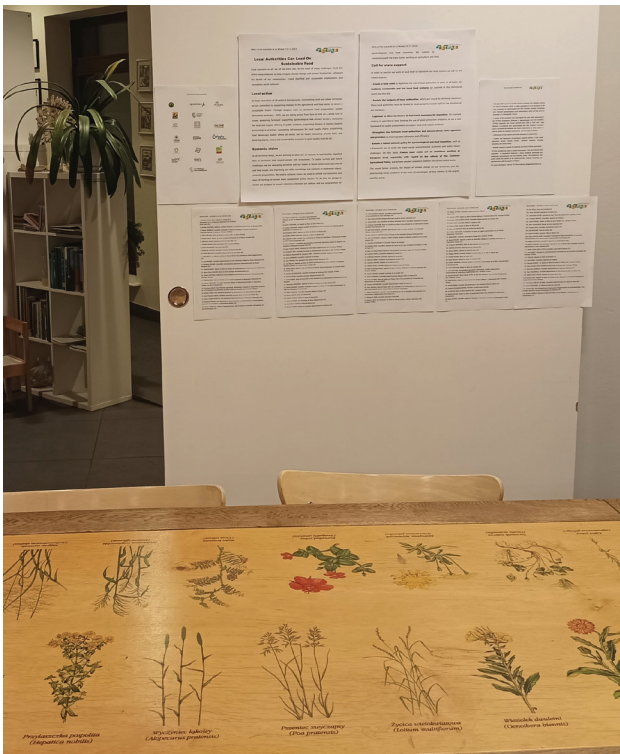
The pilot scheme is already being tested in the Couserans PETR, and well underway in Montpellier and Gironde, with over 400 participants in each area – but the ultimate goal is to roll this out on a wider scale, building on the lessons learned from these pioneer projects.

After months of consultations, the scheme officially launched on 18 January 2025. We intend to follow up on this experiment, amplifying the ideas and lessons learned from their experience with the view to inspiring other regions, both in France and further afield.



Seed exchange proposed by the Ariège Local Food Council. Photo: Natasha Foote

Themes of Rural Resilience



Local authorities can lead on sustainable food: the joint letter displayed at Weaving Common Ground gathering. Photo: Louise Kelleher

As the year came to a close, the Rural Resilience project was proud to cooperate with the TETRAA project, which from 2020 to 2024 supported 9 territories in France in accelerating their transition towards agroecology and sustainable food. One outcome was a joint letter [Local Authorities Can Lead on Sustainable Food](#) signed by over 120 mayors and local councillors and published in Le Monde, which we translated and simultaneously published in English in November. We also spotlighted this initiative at our European rural gathering in Poland.

It is at the municipal level that much work is being done to democratise food policy. Cities are the [missing link in Europe's sustainable food future](#), argued the Vice Mayors of Milan and Leuven, in an op-ed for ARC2020 published the same week.



Louise Kelleher presents the activities of the Rural Resilience project at the launch of the participatory policy positioning process led by Ecolise on just and sustainable food systems

Grassroots perspectives are of course essential in shaping fair food policies. In December, Ecolise launched a [participatory process](#) that is intended to culminate in a policy positioning paper on just and sustainable food systems. At the launch event, we presented European and grassroots perspectives based on the initiatives of our partners in France, Germany and Poland. We will follow up this process as it progresses in this year.



Themes of Rural Resilience



Farmhouse cheeses in Grzybów. Photo: Alison Brogan

Access to Land

In 2024, issues around access to land continued to provide a common denominator in our discussions of rural resilience. Access to land is increasingly a barrier for aspiring farmers across Europe, even as an ageing generation of farmers often fails to find a successor.

Czech farmer Terezie Daňková sounds the alarm: it takes [50 years to pay for a farm](#), no matter the size, and no matter the country! As global capital snaps up farmland, the crippling investments required from young farmers are a barrier that cuts across borders. This was her takeaway from the rural resilience gathering in which she participated in Plessé in 2022.



“Land, if treated well, doesn’t lose its value,” says Czech farmer Terezie Daňková. “So you don’t mind how long it takes to pay it off. The crucial thing is that the payoff of the investment is enough to live on.” Photo: Courtesy of Terezie Daňková

Themes of Rural Resilience



The next generation is preparing to take over the farm. On the question of succession, Terezie is keen to give her daughter Barbora Vondroušová freedom of choice. She remarks: “A farm is a paradise, but it is also a prison.” Photo: Courtesy of Terezie Daňková

One tool to ensure that land is used for the common good rather than private gain is the common good leasing initiative put forward by AbL Mitteldeutschland, a regional branch of the German small farmers’ organisation, and available in [German](#) and [French](#). A decision-making guide for municipalities and private landowners on who should get to lease the land, it broadens the lens beyond market considerations: criteria include climate protection, nature conservation, labour rights, maintenance and development of peasant farms.

Henrik Maas of AbL highlighted this tool for action at local level in his contribution at Feeding Ourselves 2024. It chimed with points raised by Thierry Lohr, local councillor for Plessé, who referred to the work of the SAFER authority which oversees land purchases in France. An outcome of these exchanges on the tools available to safeguard the public interest was a proposal by Irish young farmer Daniel Long who made [the case for a Land Observatory in Ireland](#). Daniel has since met with Irish MEP Cynthia Ní Mhurchú to discuss his proposal.

Move away from Pesticides

If there is one EU file that illustrates the sad story of rollback, industry lobbying and politicking in 2024, it is the story of the [Sustainable Use of Pesticides regulation \(SUR\)](#), which in February was an early casualty of attempts to tamp down the farmers' protests. This despite a call from 125 organisations for the EU to “accelerate the transition towards resilient food systems and [make pesticide reduction a reality](#)”.



Call from 125 organisations for the EU to accelerate the transition towards resilient food systems and make pesticide reduction a reality

In the face of this rollback, we continued to spotlight the solutions available. In May, FoodWatch released its Pesticide Free Europe report outlining five steps to [free half of European arable land from pesticides](#). In September, we shared research by German scientist Andrea Beste on [nutrient management as a tool to move away from pesticides](#).



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen pushed for a withdrawal of the proposed EU regulation on Sustainable Use of Pesticides. Photo: © European Union 2024 – Source : EP

Meanwhile pesticide reduction had become a political football in the debate around new genomic techniques (NGTs, also known as gene editing or [new GMOs](#)). “Belgium aimed to finish off its time at the helm of the EU rotating presidency with a greenlight on the NGTs file,” we reported in June, noting that earlier work on the NGT file had been “[turbocharged](#) as part of a sweetener deal to help garner support for the EU’s plans to slash the use and risk of pesticides.”

The full extent of the pesticide industry’s powerful lobby was exposed with the “[Poison PR](#)” investigation published by Lighthouse Reports in October.

Restoring Water as a Common Good

New genomic techniques (NGTs) have something in common with mega-basins and “insurance by irrigation”: both are tools to maintain business as usual, and to prioritise corporate interests over the common good.

In France, farmers took to the streets in 2023 to protest a new crop of mega-basins that threatened to effectively privatise groundwater in the west of France. Popular discontent culminated in the [water convoy](#), a week-long festival-like mobilisation of farmers, activists and other citizens, who marched from Poitiers to Paris.

The water convoy’s demand was simple: a moratorium on public funding for mega-basins. To turn off the tap of easy money that was draining public funds into false solutions to drought. In Poitiers at least, the common good triumphed with a court ruling in October 2023 against the construction of 15 new reservoirs for agricultural irrigation.

While the battle was won in Poitiers, the [systemic crisis of neoliberal agriculture](#) continues, and politicians offer tweaks and techno-solutionism that fail to address the underlying structural issues.



Before the farmers’ protests of early 2024 came the water convoy in France, a week-long festival-like mobilisation of farmers, activists and other citizens, who marched from Poitiers to Paris in August 2023. Photo: Marie-Lise Breure-Montagne

Themes of Rural Resilience

Genetic techniques, however ‘new’, are no match for climate change, as we explained in a three-part policy analysis on water, diversification and agroecology.

[NGTs don’t hold water](#). Meanwhile, there is a growing body of research that points to the benefits of agroecological solutions to protect crops against extreme weather events. [Sustainable water management at territorial level](#) is key, as we saw in our comparison of approaches in France and Germany.

Ultimately, though, the question of water shortages underscores the urgent need to make a success of agroecological transition. It is the dominant agricultural model that must change. As a set of practices

centred on efficient use of water and other natural resources, [agroecology favours the resilience of agricultural systems](#). Yet it is being embraced to varying extents by France, Germany and other Member States.

We examined measures to support agroecology in the context of the re-nationalisation of the CAP, concluding that, with much decision-making power in the hands of the Member States, each country’s auditors’ office may be the best placed instrument to make the case for agroecology – and to be listened to.



Low level of the River Loire at Orléans, France, at the time of the water convoy protests in summer 2023. Photo: Marie-Lise Breure-Montagne

Themes of Rural Resilience



Kerry cattle on marshy terrain. Irish farmer Martino Newcombe notes: “Keeping small dispersed herds of native cattle around the country is not only a way to safeguard these old breeds but also manage land in a more biodiverse manner because of their grazing patterns and behaviour in what is called ‘conservation grazing’. The native breeds thrive on less fertile ground outdoors, year-round, in all weathers.”
Photo: Martino Newcombe

Irish farmer Martino Newcombe is literally taking inspiration from the ground. Martino manages his mixed smallholding in the west of Ireland as a wetland nature reserve. His practices are informed by traditional land use: “Heeding the older generations’ inherent understanding of deep ecology is in my experience overlooked and undervalued, as oral cultures generally tend to be, along with [the resilience that mixed smallholdings have](#) in withstanding economic and climatic threats to food, fuel and biodiversity.”

Water and wetlands inspired some of the visual art on display at the Weaving Common Ground gathering. ‘What Even is a Peatland, Anyway?’ is a comic zine that is part of youth collective RE-PEAT’s new Peatland Justice campaign, which highlights the many diverse ways in which peatlands are viewed and valued as an ecosystem. The comic follows a character named Gob, who is on a journey to find their own definition of a peatland.

Themes of Rural Resilience



'What Even is a Peatland, Anyway?' Artwork by youth collective RE-PEAT exhibited at the Weaving Common Ground gathering. 16 pages, A5 size, four-colour risograph printed on recycled paper. Photo: RE-PEAT

Weaving Common Ground - A European Gathering of Sustainable Rural Initiatives



Weaving Common Ground - a European gathering of sustainable rural initiatives. Graphic design: Anka Wikińska. Watercolour: Antje Schiffers

The Power of Three – A Weimar Triangle for Rural Europe

Geopolitics, geography and geometry can sometimes come together as a force for good. A gathering of people from European rural and urban civil society in the Polish village of Grzybów was one such moment. The event, which was spearheaded by ARC2020 and took place at the end of November, weaved together rural, urban, farming and EU perspectives to find a common thread towards a fairer, more sustainable farming and food system.

And that is how, on a crisp late autumn day, seventy people from 12 countries across Europe found themselves at the **Ecological Folk High School** of that small village, a training centre for agro-ecological transition. From farmers to researchers and journalists, policymakers to teachers, philanthropy foundations, seed savers and environmental activists, the gathering brought together an eclectic mix of perspectives in search of the right recipe of good farming practices, sustainable rural development and closer communication.

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You know what they say – all good things come in threes, and this curious caravan of people searching for places where rural communities thrive is no exception. Starting in France in [2022 in the municipality of Plessé](#), the gathering moved across Europe through the German town of [Marburg in 2023](#), before finally landing in Grzybów, Poland, in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship in 2024.

Each stop on the three-pronged tour brought a different flavour. The municipality of Plessé shared encouraging experiences in revitalising local democracy; Marburg offered insights into an inclusive rural-urban food system; and the community of Grzybów hosted its guests to learn about inspiring educational methods for agro-ecological and community development.

In times of geopolitical, environmental and democratic challenges which Europe faces these days, this unique triangle of countries and people has, inadvertently, mirrored the diplomatic geopolitical agreement of the governments of France, Germany and Poland, the so-called [Weimar triangle](#).

The third point of the *rural triangle* in Grzybów placed communication at its core, holding space for farmers, rural communities and urban citizens to listen, talk and take action for good.

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Local hosts Ewa and Peter Stratenwerth welcome participants to the Weaving Common Ground gathering at the Ecological Folk High School in Grzybów, Poland, November 2024. Photo: Adèle Violette

Frustrations and fragmentation

The gathering comes at a time when Europe finds itself grappling with new political realities amid a growing tension between urban and rural communities, where many feel disregarded, excluded from urban, global and virtual modernity. This alienation of urban and rural Europe, along with deep-seated political frustrations, has played a key part in the shift to the extreme right in EU member states and recently in the European Parliament.

Meanwhile, farmers often feel at odds with animal welfare and nature conservation movements which are often seen as out of touch with the realities and challenges of farming and food production.

On this backdrop, the gathering had a clear aim – to **build a bridge** across these lines of confrontation and polarisation between farmers, rural people and ‘the rest of society’ on the **foundational stepping stones of respect, trust and empathy**.

Weaving a yarn – in more than one way

Weaving common ground at Grzybów was the motto of the gathering, and this was seen and felt in more ways than one, with reflective, physical and artistic threads intertwined throughout the days.

In Grzybów, yarns were woven both literally and metaphorically. The transformative power of art, creativity and culture emerged through a hands-on exercise with a loom weaving a “carpet for common ground”; at a seed swap where gardeners, farmers, and seed savers exchanged seeds and knowledge; and at an exhibition revealing the importance of conserving peatlands and biodiversity.

Taking a deep breath for singing in French, German and Polish provided oxygen for creativity at thematic workshops. Meanwhile, the conference room quickly transformed into a dance floor, where participants could grasp each other’s hands in traditional dances to the tunes of central and south-eastern Poland, played by the Niwinski’s Band.

For the guests, a special sense of place was found through excursions to neighbour farms and rural start-up projects; during chats at Grzybów’s farm, [bakery](#) and shop, and during six thematic workshops, reflecting on common ground and action for improving life in rural Europe.

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Agnieszka Niwińska teaches the ancient craft of weaving to participants at Weaving Common Ground. Photo: Adèle Violette

Learning, doing, sharing

Another rule of three can be seen and felt in the local community of Grzybów, which, as **Ewa Smuk-Stratenwerth** explained, is built on “three pillars: learning – doing – and sharing”. Together with her husband Peter, Ewa is co-founder of the Grzybów Ecological Folk High School, founded on the principles of the Danish pastor, politician and philosopher, Nikolaj Grundtvig. A forerunner of pedagogy, Grundtvig’s overarching goal was to enable rural people to “live a life in self determination”.

The Ecological and Cultural Association ZIARNO is another key organisation in the Grzybów network. Closely connected to the Ecological Folk High School, ZIARNO empowers local communities through education and active participation in ecological practices, and plays a vital role in fostering agro-

ecology by organising workshops, training sessions and cultural events.

Ewa’s is a driving force behind the many sprouts of local enterprises which form this hub of agro-ecological transformation in Grzybów. The 20 ha organic farm has become a beehive of inspired activists and organisations, which hums with energy but moves at a human pace.

Around thirty people currently call this place home, employed between these various organisations including the local shop, food processing, educational and cultural activities, and cheese making.

But the community’s reach extends far beyond this. Almost three thousand school children visit during the summer season. With the ‘head, heart, hands’ approach, children learn about animals, nature, bio-

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diversity and bees through exploring the farm and eating farm fresh food, prepared by the women's food cooperative [Cor et Manus](#).

From dialogue to deeds

From all three of the rural gatherings, one thing is clear: complaining about problems and demanding politicians to find solutions is not enough. So the question is – how do we take matters into our own hands?

Here, we gathered a handful of the commitments, which emerged from the six workrooms:

Claudia Schievelbein, farmer and journalist at the independent German small farmers monthly journal '*Bauernstimme*', invited all to join the Wir Haben Es

Satt! demonstration for better food and farming in Berlin on 18 January in which her organisation participates. "It is a broad alliance of farmers and civil society. We can raise our voices and become one," she suggests.

Thierry Lohr, elected representative of the municipality of Plessé in Loire Atlantique, challenges the negative image of "politicians", encouraging everyone to make policy work by running for office on local and municipal level. "We made our visions, plans and decisions with everyone and that was the remedy against mistrust," he explained, adding that democracy must be "nurtured like plants and animals". He offered to share his knowledge of Plessé with potential political candidates elsewhere.



Claudia Schievelbein (AbL and the Bauernstimme) shares rural perspectives on a Weimar triangle with deputy Thierry Lohr (left) and professor Zbigniew Karaczun (centre). Photo: Adèle Violette

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Noa Lodeizen, social entrepreneur and founder of Bioregional Weaving Labs, supporting the Grzybów community as an Ashoka fellow, is enthusiastic about Thierry's invitation to visit Plessé. Noa also plans to establish a community of practice that connects farmers and consumers through direct selling, with a focus on ensuring access for low-income individuals.

Staszek Fiszer, a young farmer, feels encouraged to continue organic farming with his parents. He has just passed the agroecological training course at the Folk High School and has committed to "take over the farm from my parents and I will practice what I learnt here," including investing in direct selling between his farm and his consumers.

Besides personal commitments, the gathering also explored concrete **policy proposals** to bring forward in ongoing political debates.

This included a proposal for an **EU-wide 'FARMER-ASMUS' programme**, modelled on the current Erasmus project, which could help farmers to exchange their knowledge and work together on EU level, or the need for a **European Land Observatory**, which could make increasing land ownership concentration in Europe more transparent.

Concluding the caravan

On the last evening, the village was already shrouded with darkness when **Adam Struzik**, Marshal of Mazowieckie Voivodeship and member of the EU committee of the regions, joined the final part of the 3-day rural extravaganza.



From left: Radosław Rybicki, Director of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the Marshal's office of Mazowieckie Voivodeship; Adam Struzik, Marshal of Masovian Voivodeship; and Ewa Smuk-Stratenwerth, co-founder of the Ecological Folk High School and ZIARNO association in Grzybów. Photo: Adèle Violette

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Addressing the curious caravan, the local politician kicked off with a reminder of the struggle Poland went through for freedom and democracy, stressing the impact that EU-membership has had in terms of reaching the current high level of socioeconomic stability in Poland. He also emphasised the key role that sustainable rural development and farming plays in preserving the stability and wellbeing of rural people.

The politician also agreed to take the dedicated proposals woven throughout the assembly forward from Grzybów to Brussels in his role in the EU's Committee of the Regions.

The third and final stop of the rural Weimar gathering ends with a 'Long night of farmers' films' from **Antje Schiffrers**, painter and performance artist who has spent the past 25 years putting together a docuseries of farming perspectives across Europe by offering farm paintings in exchange for a short documentary, shot from the farmers' point of view.

The night involves a democratic choice of these films, which capture scenes from the farmers' day to day lives intertwined with shots of herself painting their farm on the spot. For Antje, it is an invitation to people in the cities to "watch and listen and better understand how challenging but also how beautiful life as a farmer can be".

No doubt the power of good comes in three: from heads, hearts, and the weaving of common ground.

It needs fiery spirits to resist all odds. It needs open hearts to listen to each other. And it needs common action to make change happen in villages, in cities and in Europe. May the caravan continue.



What if you sowed life? Seeded postcard offered to participants at the Weaving Common Ground gathering. Artwork by Agathe Payen. Photo: Louise Kelleher

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Sharing a cup of hot tea at Weaving Common Ground. Photo: Ashley Parsons

From Common Ground to Common Action



The circle of commitments at the closing session of Weaving Common Ground in Grzybów, Poland. Left to right: Andrzej Grupa, Marcus Nürnberger, Bernadeta Golbiewska, Noa Lodeizen, Bethany Copsey. Photo: Adèle Violette

During the short end of November days, the annual European Rural Gathering in Grzybów, Poland, co-organised by ARC2020 and a rich ecosystem of partners, marked another stop of our rural caravan from France to Germany to Poland. It was a meeting of heads, hearts and hands that opened doors of connection and possibility for future collaboration on rural resilience.

A moment at an Ecological Folk High School

The participants stand close in a circle on the final afternoon of the gathering. As we pledge our next steps for future action, it is clear that this is not so much an end as a beginning. One voice joins another in a rousing chorus of personal commitments, rising

in a powerful crescendo that continues to ring in our ears long after we have parted ways.

While critique is essential for driving social change, merely complaining about problems or demanding solutions from politicians is not enough. With a shared determination to act, at this gathering we asked ourselves – **What can we do now, from where we stand? What alliances must we build and sustain?**

All those in the room are already engaged in action for socio-ecological transition. Yet problems continue, morph and accumulate, and communities must be resilient in adapting to the unpredictable. Many things which seemed to stand fast yesterday may change tomorrow. Being ready to move seems to be the core of the lessons we learnt.

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The six thematic workrooms of the gathering addressed these tangled problems and possible solutions. Graphic: ARC2020, based on a design by Anka Wikińska. Watercolour: Antje Schiffers

Why host this gathering in this place? The Ecological Folk High School ([EUL](#)) in Grzybów, founded by Ewa and Peter Stratenwerth in 2015 is steered by the teachings of N.F.S. Grundtvig. Grundtvig birthed the folk high school movement in Denmark, believing that empowering individuals through education could lead to societal transformation. Or, otherwise stated: by fulfilling their inner potential, individuals could become active participants in shaping a better society.

For the three days in Grzybów, we experienced a taste of this folk high school way of life and learning. Steeped in the nature-inspired beauty of the setting, exchanges blossomed between hearts and hands as well as minds. With a mix of participants from 12 European countries and beyond, with a variety of backgrounds, rich new ties were woven as

we experimented with different ways of connecting through song, dance, sharing food, seeds, art and weaving: using all of our senses in sharing what we can do to cultivate what we have in common.

We celebrated the vital practices that sustain rural communities. An Agrobiodiversity Fair organised by [Seeds4All](#) invited participants to explore the fascinating world of free seeds. This included a seed swap where seeds from Poland, Ireland, Greece, Belgium, Palestine, and other countries changed hands.

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At the heart of the gathering was a desire **to sit down at the table with opponents and allies, to find out what we have in common and what not, and even to consider whether we can take action together to improve life in our villages and farms.** Here we looked to previous lessons from the caravan of rural resilience. A delegation from Plessé brought to the table its work to create significant space for partici-

patory democracy to put citizens at the heart of public policies, and to enhance representative democracy to distribute power more fairly and transparently. Spaces where everyone is safe to speak their truth are crucial to the work of actors such as kollektiv von MORGEN from Marburg, who, by creating opportunities to be in dialogue with decision makers and other stakeholders, can help enhance democratic skills.



Constructive communication starts with listening; learning how to speak each other's language – a proposed solution from the workrooms, seen here in action. Staszek Fiszer, Anna Gurdak, Agnieszka Makowska and Simone Matouch. Photo: Adèle Violette

Commitments to take action together

Each workroom was a play in three acts: from challenges to solutions to actions – with a final coda of commitments. Common themes emerged from all six workrooms: Trust, education and communication, collaboration, empowerment, generational renewal. Within a few hours, these threads had crystallised into commitments to take action together.

To **build trust, community and collaboration**, we heard commitments to collaborate with migrant farm workers, and to develop a community of practice connecting farmers with people from low-income

backgrounds. Another collaborative effort pledges to work on 'FarmErasmus' exchanges between farmers across Europe, allowing for shared learning and intercultural dialogue. One group suggested new models of neighbourhood cooperation so that young farming families can go on holiday.

To nurture **education, communication and dialogue**, we witnessed commitments to develop on-farm education concepts, but also to make Brussels politics more accessible to practitioners on the ground through policy explainers and workshops. Thursday dinners will inspire hearts and minds through sharing delicious local food.

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Tasting local apple varieties at the agrobiodiversity fair. Anastasia Vasileiadou and Mateusz Ciasnocha. Photo: Adèle Violette

To **empower communities to make change at the local level**, we heard of a project to support groups running for office in France to champion **participatory democracy**. To **support farmers as changemakers** and promote a **more positive narrative around farming**, the [Letters from the Farm](#) series will continue to spotlight stories of effecting change, and a new collaborative series will celebrate Women Heroes.

We agreed on the urgent need to change the “farming is hard” narrative which many farmers pass on to their children. Currently in Poland, 9 out of 10 farmers can’t find a wife – which reflects another stale narrative that only the son should inherit the farm. To **foster generational renewal** on our farms and in our rural areas, commitments ranged from individual (continuing intergenerational cooperation in organic farming on a family farm), to technical (plans to exchange on the topic of land observatories at national and EU level).

There was a pledge to host an information meeting on a non-family-based approach to farm transition, the so-called ‘Tinder’ service by [Perspektive Landwirtschaft](#) in Austria, where those handing over their farms to new entrants can meet and explore various arrangements, including, for example, accommodating a grandma who wishes to stay on the holding, as the pension is often an issue which hinders transition.

While the challenges facing Europe’s food and farming are deep and complex, these difficulties are not insurmountable. In crisis lies opportunity. Across the workrooms, solutions highlighted ways in which trust can be rebuilt, relationships between stakeholders can be forged and strengthened and systemic barriers can be overcome. By leveraging holistic education, fostering cooperation and nurturing democracy, communities can transform the ways food is grown, shared and valued.

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Morning songs in Polish, English, French and German set the tone each day of the gathering. Natasha Foote, Paweł Kulpa, Anka Wikińska, Ewa Smuk Stratenwerth. Photo: Adèle Violette

The power to act

Manifold challenges stand in the way of fair and ecological farming and food systems. At *Weaving Common Ground*, together we pinpointed issues of trust, disconnection and inequality. Many are concerned by the rise of the far-right, and how that is unfolding in rural areas across Europe. Farmers often face isolation, struggling with a lack of understanding from policymakers and “the rest of society”, while grappling with dependence on industrial agriculture and financial constraints that limit sustainable transitions. Local communities experience fragmentation, with

traumas, media narratives and cultural divides eroding the bonds between people and place. Systemic issues – such as lack of access to land, exploitation of migrants, and dominance of industrial over agro-ecological farming – compound these difficulties. Broader societal and ecological crises, from climate change to social inequities, challenge the very fabric of how food is produced and consumed, not to mention human existence.

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Yet in the face of all this, we still hold the power to act – at European level but even more so at local level, and in the tiniest of actions in our daily lives. *What if you sowed life?*, asked the seed cards distributed at the Agrobiodiversity Fair. What if you ran for office in your municipality? What if all of us ran for office? What if we chose care over productivity? One workroom decided not to work through the coffee break. It was a political choice, they quipped. Seemingly insignificant, such choices can add up to the agro-

ecological approaches that have the power to drive food system change. The group may have come to plenary with a slightly less detailed flipchart, but they honoured their human needs, their bellies and souls. It's a flipping of the script that also played out in the workroom on generational renewal, which faced up to a stark reality: taking over the family farm often means caring for ageing relatives, yet there is little recognition of this invisible labour in the productivist paradigm.



Taking hands and taking risks in dance. Photo: Adèle Violette

But how does one get to this place, to this chorus of commitments that concludes the gathering? We sit down at the table. We break bread together. Bread produced right there on Ewa and Peter's farm, and other good local organic food – simple dishes lovingly prepared. We look one another in the eye. We study each other's names. We synchronise our breath, attune our voices in song, and learn a Christmas carol in a language we don't understand, in a gesture of solidarity and peace for war-ravaged communities. We take each other's hands in dance, and trust our fellow dancers not to cause us injury in a crowded room. We try our hands at weaving to discover what we might co-create. As we take risks together, we are rewarded in good time with growing mutual trust,

and deeper connections. As we look to forge new alliances for system change, the ecological folk high school offers many lessons.

Winter is knocking on the door as we part ways after these days together. A chill wind blows through Grzybów, and frost dusts the fields. Having taken the time to understand one another, this throng of now-not strangers basks in the warmth of new partnerships and commitments. In cooperation and solidarity, listening and learning, lies the power to build a more just and resilient future for food, farming and our rural communities. We have learned by doing and sharing, and the lessons continue to sing in our ears.

Weaving Common Commitments

Commitments made at Weaving Common Ground, Grzybów, Poland. November 2024	
Solutions	Commitments to Action
Nurturing democracy Empowering communities to make change at the local level	
Making space for participatory democracy in local government Enhancing representative democracy	Municipality of Plessé is supporting groups to run for office in French elections 2026
More inclusion of inhabitants can be a turning point, making people feel that they belong	Municipality of Plessé will work on cooperation with an association for migrant farm workers
Building Trust, Community and Collaboration between stakeholders	
Farm Erasmus could facilitate exchanges between farmers across Europe, allowing for shared learning and intercultural dialogue	Ziarno, EUL, ARC2020, InterAFOCG will investigate the possibilities of a FarmErasmus Program
Cooperation and dialogue between stakeholders	Municipality of Plessé will work with Bioregional Weaving Labs to implement a bioregion in the territory
Connecting existing networks	Ashoka Poland will continue to connect eco-systems of rural organizations with urban consumers to help raise awareness of situation in rural areas to better support farmers
Weaving community: Map and engage key stakeholders in the bioregion	Ziarno and EUL will continue the work of cooperating in weaving bioregions in Poland
Provide a trusted source of information; inform on policy; if you cannot understand, you cannot advocate.	ARC2020 will continue to translate policy developments in Brussels into accessible language
Farm visits	European Carbon Farmers will keep encouraging farm visits and supporting small farmers and organic farms
A European Land Observatory could help regulate land prices across Europe and support fair value chains.	ARC2020 will link interested people with an initiative for Land Observatory in Ireland

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Education, Communication & Dialogue

Bridge between practice and policy

ARC2020 will work with Bioregional weaving labs and other partners to see how policy analysis can be more useful for practitioners on the ground

Expanding educational efforts for children and adults about the importance of ecological agriculture

Kollektiv von MORGEN will develop more concepts of how to work with adults on farms

Constructive communication: Starts with listening; Learning how to speak each other's language

ARC2020 will facilitate workshops for journalists / with journalists / for students

Make agricultural policy a societal discussion

ARC2020 platform to disseminate the outcomes of this gathering to the public.
RE-PEAT with ARC2020 will raise awareness about where food comes from to transform how peat is used in vegetable farming

Supporting farmers as changemakers

Find farmers who are ready to get involved in advocacy & support them
Media training (for farmers to talk to media, and journalists to talk to farmers)

Ziarno and EUL will inform as many organic farmers as possible about these outcomes and that international farming is important
ARC2020 will do trainings on advocacy for creating fair communication to politicians

Encourage individuals to share their commitment and success stories in agroecology

ARC2020 will continue to valorise the work of agroecological farmers in the "Letters from the Farm" series

"Promoting a more positive narrative around farming."

Ziarno, Our Common Ground, ARC2020 will celebrate Women Heroes in a new collaborative article series

Agroecology as a holistic solution for sustainable farming, justice, resilience, and collaboration

Agroecological food system transformation

Polish farmer Agnieszka Makowska will continue to increase biodiversity on her farm and will introduce geese, chickens and ducks

Communities that connect farmers and consumers

Bioregional Weaving Labs will set up a community of practice of direct farming with consumers that gives access to low-income people.
Polish farmer Wioletta Olejarczyk will relaunch Thursday dinners where local food is tasted and use these meetings to inspire people to reach their hearts and minds through their stomach

Generational renewal

Rebuild trust around farm handover

Young Polish farmer Staszek Fiszer will continue organic farming with his parents.
Forum Synergies will organize a meeting on how farm transmission processes can be reported
ARC2020 will showcase stories of generational renewal in the "Letters from a Future Farmer" article series

Conclusion

Conclusion

Art, education and learning were the cross-cutting threads that allowed us to weave common ground at this gathering. A watercolour by artist Antje Schiffrers offered the graphic grounding for the gathering, while her Long Night of Farmer Films concluded the last

night of the event. We trust that all of this groundedness will allow the participants to stay firm in their commitments, which provide a very concrete jumping off point for 2025.



Rémi Beslé, local councillor for the municipality of Plessé, contributes to the collective weaving project during the gathering. Photo: Ashley Parsons

Conclusion



Result of the collective weaving project at Weaving Common Ground. Photo: Adèle Violette

Conclusion

As we heard from farmers throughout the year, at Weaving Common Ground, at Feeding Ourselves, in [letters from the farm](#): these days you'd have to be mad to go into farming.

It was “a shitty year” for new farmer Marie Halicki. She began 2024 [struggling to gain a foothold in farming](#) in the foothills of the French Alps: “If I only had one wish, it would be to spend more time with my sheep and less with my computer.” [Her first year in farming](#) was heartbreaking, with bluetongue virus wiping out 20% of her beloved flock. Despite the difficulties, despite the red tape, Marie remains determined to hold on. She wants to play her part in promoting sustainable farming and changing rural traditions.



Kristof Hayes, rather than follow his father into farming, is forging his own path in the regen ag space with an ag tech startup. Pictured here with the listt.io farm-ng robot. Photo: Courtesy of Kristof Hayes



New farmer Marie Halicki: “Being a livestock farmer sometimes borders on madness.” Photo: Michel Halicki

Conclusion

Young farmers like Marie play a crucial role in helping to build rural resilience in their communities. In the coming period we will tease out the question of **generational renewal** in a new series called Letters From a Future Farmer, which began with a story of father and son [rethinking the farm from the ground up](#). Another father and son continue the farming tradition to [keep the village together](#).

Handover to the younger generation is equally important at policy level, as a changing of the guard within the [LEADER](#) programme points to new opportunities for rural territories. The European Rural Parliament in Scotland in October 2025 may be a chance to pass the baton to the younger generation.



Father and son Vasilis and Lukas Mylonas are two generations of Greek olive farmers who are honouring their roots while looking to the future for their community. Photo: Hannes Lorenzen

For all the disappointments of 2024, let's focus on what can and is being done on the ground. Giving voice to farmers and rural actors, and sharing lived experiences. Good Food Good Farming now offer training to NGOs in how to make farmers' voices heard. Participating in their webinar in November, we were reassured that the Rural Resilience project is following best practice in this regard, and also reminded that those who live on and work the land

must be at the centre of conversations about the future of our rural areas.

Conclusion



No stranger to hard work, Marie Halicki worked as an equine podiatrist before taking over her husband's family farm in 2024. In her first year as a farmer, she lost 12 ewes and lambs to bluetongue virus. "But I saved 48," says Marie. "And for them, I'll keep getting up." Photo: Courtesy of Marie Halicki

Building on the commitments made at Weaving Common Ground, we will continue to listen deeply, to find new expressions of that which unites us, to strengthen partnerships and form new alliances at different levels, to build together a living countryside.

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