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The European commons: The “great absent” in the EU agri-food and agri-environmental policy making

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Abstract

According to EUROSTAT (2013), approximately 9 million hectares of EU land is constituted by customary common lands (pastures, grazing lands, forests). This means about 7% of the total Utilized Agricultural Area (UAA). This percentage rises to even 9-10% of the EU territory, if we account also coasts and forests. An example of extent and forms of collective management of forests is given in the latest global report on forest ownership (FAO UNECE 2020). Besides, in the last decades several examples of more contemporary commons have been flourishing all over Europe (CSAs, urban gardens, and closely related initiatives, mostly embracing agroecology). Common land governance offers a greener, more sustainable, and resilient alternative to intensive agricultural land tenure systems, which is why most collective lands across Europe are considered officially protected (e.g., under the Natura 2000 Framework). However, there is not even a single mention of the commons neither in the incoming CAP (2023-2027) nor in the EU Green Deal with its associated strategies (Biodiversity & Farm to Fork Strategies, Climate Law, etc.). We claim that this “invisible reality” of the commons cannot be ignored, especially in light of its new environmental ambitious targets. Both contemporary and customary commons can constitute a point of departure for the EU to develop socially inclusive instruments that are sensitive to ecology. We illustrate sustainable and resilient rural development on this basis by two case studies from Slovenia and Spain.

Slovenian example of commons refers to collective management of pastures and forests on less productive sites. Voluntary, self-organized and peer-mediated local production bases on both, productive and non-productive values and has specific form of democratic organization that characterizes rural tradition. However, their national jurisdiction framed into agricultural sector poorly recognizes local collective rules and there is no statistics for this type of management. Commoners are under-represented in decision-making which is not a surprise in any post-socialist country after decades of abolition. Common lands are characterized with general reluctance of landowners to enter organizations and slow revival of their type of governance. Roles of old and new commons for rural resilience are not acknowledged as potentials. Natura 2000 protects 37% of the Slovenian territory- while commons are absent in public discourse and a subject of tensions between rural income potentials from agriculture, tourism, and nature protection.

The communal lands of northwest Iberian Peninsula – “baldios” in Portugal and “Montes Veciñais en Man Común” (MVMC) in Galicia – play a vital role in the economy of the communities. This function was lost during the twentieth century because the forestation of them and the decline of agriculture. The restoration of democratic regimes returned them to their original owner communities, now in decline, aged and disorganized. Communal lands occupy near 1 million ha, 400,000 in north Portugal and 600,000 in Galicia with high average areas (500 ha in Portugal and 200 ha in Galicia). They are owned by around 2900 communities in Galicia and 1000 in north Portugal. The use is mainly forestry, but numerous reasons caused in a sub-utilization of their potential. Both Galician and Portuguese case show similarities and complementary benefits needing socioeconomic innovation to make better use of rural resilience. The commons and small-scale business initiatives could support the network of the local produce markets with attractive values, as well as contribute to the conservation of the biodiversity.

Reading material

Bogataj, N., Krč, J. (2014). A forest commons revival in Slovenia. *Society & Natural Resources* 27: 867-881. [DOI](#)

Marey-Pérez, M. F., Diaz-Varela, E., & Calvo-González, A. (2014). Does higher owner participation increase conflicts over common land? An analysis of communal forests in Galicia (Spain). *iForest-Biogeosciences and Forestry*, 8(4), 533. [DOI](#)

Lawrence, A., Gatto, P., Bogataj, N., Lidestav, G. (2020). Forests in common: learning from diversity of community forest arrangements in Europe. *Ambio* 50: 448-464. [DOI](#)

Vivero, J.L. (2017). The Food Commons in Europe: relevance, challenges, and ideas to feed them. P2P Foundation Ed. [URL](#)



Nevenka Bogataj, PhD, is a Senior Researcher at the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, Ljubljana, Slovenia. She is interested in collective models of (forest) management and governance of common pool resources. Currently she focuses to response of forest commons to climate change and to implementation of climate change goals into educational policy.



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Antonio Manzoni, currently concluding a PhD in agri-food and agri-environmental law at Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa, Italy. His research is focused on the recently-in-the-spotlight "food-as-a-commons" discourse, the EU Common Agricultural Policy, the EU Green Deal, and sustainable food systems. Notably, in his dissertation is investigating the validity of the food commons discourse - and approach - for a paradigmatic shift in the EU agri-food and agri-environmental policymaking, in light of the new CAP 2023-2027 and the Farm to Fork Strategy.

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