



# Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms

East Sussex, UK

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Case Study from a Series on Access to  
Land for Community Connected Farming

## Case Study Series on Access to Land for Community Connected Farming

In 2010-11, an informal group of civic organisations from across Europe conducted a project on Access to Land for Community Connected Agriculture. A key part of the project lies in a series of seven case studies, documenting experiences from various European countries and different levels of activity (local, regional, national). These case studies seek to explore both the functioning and the benefits of community

connected farming. From this they seek to identify the constraints that limit access to land of sufficient quality and size, and the potential solutions that have been found to reduce the impacts of these constraints. The case studies are illustrative of a variety of issues and situations and, taken together, present some interesting and innovative approaches to the development of local, civic agriculture.

### • Viva sol, Lithuania:

A National Association of cheese eaters and producers established to support the development of solidarity between urban and rural people, and to encourage the settlement of small farmers and artisans in rural Lithuania. Viva sol has started a farmers' market in Vilnius, a box scheme, environmental training and activities to support small-scale breeders. Faced with the issue of several farmers being unable to find affordable land, it is currently envisaging creating a Land Fund to raise investments or donations in order to buy agricultural land.

### • Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms, UK:

Two Biodynamic Community Farms located in East Sussex, UK, wholly owned by a cooperative (an Industrial and Provident Society) with approximately 600 shareholders, most of them local to the farms. The farms occupy approximately 300 hectares of land, the majority of which is owned by St Anthony's Trust, a local land trust. The farmers employ about 20 staff, process and sell their products directly and have established strong community connections.

### • Hamburg City Estates, Germany:

For decades, Hamburg municipality has purchased agricultural land to be able to influence city development. In 1989/1994, the city opted for the conversion of three large estates in its ownership to organic farming. These farms all play a major role in providing local organic food, and two of them have developed direct marketing and a large array of social and cultural activities involving the community.

### • Terre de liens, France:

A civic organisation established to assist organic and peasant farmers in gaining access to land. The organisation also promotes new ways to own and manage land as a common good. Terre de liens has created financial tools (a solidarity investment company and an endowment trust) to collect investment funds and donations, and educational tools to inform the public and raise awareness about land access and agriculture. It now has a network of 2000 members and 8000 shareholders, and owns 2400 hectares of farmland, supporting about 200 farmers.

### • Jaglea Farm, Romania:

An organic farm located near Sibiu, in the Carpatians, which illustrates a new kind of farm in Romania, where tradition and innovation meet to form an emerging "new peasantry". The Jaglea family practice a low-input, largely manual agriculture, which is certified organic and which seeks new ways to be economically, socially and environmentally sustainable. They process and market all their products directly, and took part in the creation of the first organic producers' cooperative shop in Romania. One obstacle that they face in seeking to expand their activity is gaining access to more land in the vicinity of the farm.

### • Cooperativa Agricoltura nuova, Italy:

A cooperative farm on the periphery of Rome, formed in 1977 following occupation of the land by a group of young people opposing urban development. It is now a 250 ha mixed organic farm, geared towards on-farm processing and direct marketing and hosting a range of environmental and social activities (an information centre on renewable energies, community gardens, social integration of vulnerable adults, etc.). In 1996 it obtained a tenancy contract from the municipality of Rome, which has established a regional park in the area surrounding the farm.

### • Regionalwert AG, Germany (RWAG):

A citizen shareholder corporation, located in the area of Freiburg em Brisgau, that supports the development of organic agriculture and local food production, marketing and distribution. It has collected €1.7 million from about 500 mostly local shareholders. The capital is invested in 6 farms and associated land, processing businesses (caterer, processor), and marketing businesses (retail and wholesale shops, box delivery). As part of its operation, RWAG has developed a detailed methodology to report on the social, economic and environmental impact of its investments in the region.

*These case studies have been brought together and edited by Véronique Rioufol (Terre de liens) and Neil Ravenscroft (University of Brighton and Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms).*

## Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms, East Sussex, UK<sup>1</sup>

Dr Neil Ravenscroft, Professor of Land Economy,  
University of Brighton, and Chair of the  
Tablehurst Community Farm Management Group<sup>2</sup>  
and

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### Overview

Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms (TPH) are two farm businesses owned by an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) with approximately 600 local shareholders. The IPS is a form of cooperative society in which each member (shareholder) has one vote, regardless of the number of shares that they own. The IPS, which was established in 1995, is administered by an elected committee which sets out the strategic priorities for, and appoints the Directors of, the two farming companies. The key strategic priority is that the businesses must farm biodynamically. The businesses farm approximately 300 hectares of land, the majority of which is owned by St Anthony's Trust, a local land trust whose charitable aims include the training of biodynamic farmers. The businesses employ approximately 20 staff, including farmers, growers, food processors and shop staff, and have a joint annual turnover of more than £1.5m. Each business is run by a separate management group comprising a mix of farmers and IPS shareholders. Apart from the initial share capital contributed by the IPS, there is no community financial contribution to working capital or annual running costs, and shareholders (known locally as farm partners) receive no direct benefits (such as dividends or price reductions) for the value of their shares. Rather, they view their share purchases as a 'virtual gift' to the farms, with no shareholders having ever sought to sell or redeem their shares.

<sup>1</sup> - <http://www.tablehurstandplawhatch.co.uk/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> - Contact [N.Ravenscroft@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:N.Ravenscroft@brighton.ac.uk)



### Tablehurst Farm

Tablehurst Farm is a two-hundred hectare arable and stock farm comprising three main blocks of land to the north and west of Forest Row, East Sussex. Tablehurst was, for many years, the training farm for the biodynamic agriculture course offered by Emerson College, and was situated on land owned by the college. This land was eventually transferred to St. Anthony's Trust, to ensure that it would remain in biodynamic farming. The other two blocks of privately-owned land that now comprise the farm are to the west of Forest Row, at Kidbrooke Farm and Springhill Farm. Both of these blocks of land are held on Farm Business Tenancies, which offer security of tenure, but for a limited number of years. The farm produces meat (beef, pork, lamb and poultry), vegetables and cereals, all of which are processed on the farm and most of which are sold through the farm shop, or through Plaw Hatch farm shop. In addition, the farm runs a small residential care home for three adults with

disabilities who live and work on the farm, and it also offers training for apprentices and for students studying biodynamic agriculture at the Biodynamic Agricultural College (BDAC), which is located adjacent to the farm. The farm is also home to Tablehurst Orchard, a recent business start-up that has been helped by Tablehurst Farm, in terms of expertise, machinery and business management training (Tablehurst Orchard is now well established and has acquired additional land close to the farm in order to expand its business).

Tablehurst Farm employs approximately 14 full time equivalent staff, including farmers, growers, butchers, shop staff, care workers and apprentices. Some of the farmers run the care home in addition to farming, although all are equally responsible for supervising the residents during the working day. Some of the farmers and growers are involved in training the BDAC students when they are on the farm. In addition to the employees, 6 IPS shareholders are part of the farm management group, and include the Chair of Directors, the Company Secretary and two non-executive Directors. These volunteers meet regularly with the farmers to plan and manage the business, including taking responsibility for the strategic plan, the budget, health and safety and liaison with the IPS.



## Plaw Hatch Farm

Plaw Hatch Farm is a 100 hectare dairy farm and market garden situated south west of Forest Row, East Sussex. The land is largely owned by St Anthony's Trust, with some additional land rented from private landowners. The farm has a herd of 50 MRI milking cows, with all milk being either bottled for direct sale or processed on farm into products such as cream, yogurt and cheese. The 10 hectare market garden includes a large number of polytunnels that allow year-round cultivation of a range of vegetables. Produce is sold mainly through the farm shop or through a market stall in Brighton, some 30km to the south. Plaw Hatch Farm employs 8 full time equivalent workers, including farmers, gardeners, a cheese and yogurt maker, a shop manager and shop staff. There are also apprentices and work experience students from BDAC. In common with Tablehurst Farm, there is a management group comprising farmers and co-op members.

## History

There are two strands to the development of connections between the community and the farms: St Anthony's Trust's purchase of the Plaw Hatch land and farming business; and the establishment of the Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch IPS.

### St Anthony's Trust and Plaw Hatch Farm

St Anthony's Trust was established in 1972 in order to provide for the retirement of teachers at Michael Hall Steiner Waldorf School in Forest Row and to support the training of biodynamic farmers. In 1979 St Anthony's Trust launched a public appeal for funds to buy Plaw Hatch Farm. This appeal was successful, and Plaw Hatch became an embryonic biodynamic agricultural community farm with 93 local community members. Informed by the teachings of Dr Manfred Klett, then the director of the

Department of Agriculture at the Goetheanum in Switzerland<sup>3</sup> and formerly one of the farmers at Dottenfelderhof in Germany<sup>4</sup>, the new farmer, Andrew Carnegie, set about developing the 'agricultural community' around the farm. He envisaged this community as a support group addressing:

- The whole farm organism (he wanted to create a biodynamic farm that could function as a strong, self-sustaining and vibrant single organism that recognized and respected the basic principles at work in nature)<sup>5</sup>.
- The economic realm, including determining the prices to be charged for the farm's produce; and
- The infrastructure of the farm (a group that would care for the buildings, public spaces and other physical aspects of the farm).

Although it was never formalised, Carnegie did create such a community, comprising farm staff and community members,



3 - The Goetheanum, located in Dornach, Switzerland, is the global centre of the anthroposophical movement (dedicated to the teachings of Rudolf Steiner). Named after Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the Goetheanum includes administrative space for the Anthroposophical Society and a number of exhibition and performance spaces. The building hosts various conferences and events, including an annual agriculture conference (see <http://www.goetheanum.org>).

4 - One of the first community farms in Europe (<http://www.dottenfelderhof.de/>)

5 - See <http://www.biodynamic.org.uk/>

which supported him until he left the farm to concentrate on advising other farmers. The following farmer was unable to maintain Carnegie's success and by 2000 the farm was in financial difficulty. The business then came into community management and was transferred to the recently created Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch IPS in 2001.

### **Tablehurst Farm and the establishment of the IPS**

The Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farm IPS initiative was born in 1994 when it appeared that Tablehurst Farm might be lost to biodynamic agriculture after more than 25 years of careful husbandry by Emerson College. The college could no longer support the farm and was considering selling it. A group of local people formed a community group around farmers Peter and Brigitte Brown, who had previous been at Dottenfelderhof

in Germany, and, following a major community fund-raising drive, managed to buy the farm assets and acquire a tenancy of the land. The 100 hectares of land was at this time still in college ownership. The Browns, together with farmers Alan and Bernie Jamieson and a management group of local people, built up the farm in the following years, including extending

and converting the farm house to a residential care home, to provide a meaningful life experience for young people with disabilities while also securing a revenue stream from the local care service to underpin the development of the farm business. During this period the farm also expanded in size by renting, from a number of private landowners, a further 100 hectares of land nearby (formerly part of Spring Hill Farm).

The IPS (known locally from the start as the Co-op) was founded in June 1996. At this stage, there was a clearly expressed intention that the original ideas for the agricultural community for Plaw Hatch Farm should be realised, and that it should be brought into the Co-op in due course. The transfer of the Plaw Hatch farm business took place in 2001, again following major community fundraising, meaning that St Anthony's Trust was no longer involved in the farming, although it retained ownership of the Plaw Hatch land.

### **St Anthony's Trust and the acquisition of the Tablehurst land**

Following a period of stability for both farms, it became clear that Emerson College could no longer serve the best interests of Tablehurst Farm, particularly in terms of releasing funds for improvements to the buildings and farm infrastructure. Following prolonged negotiations, the trustees of Emerson College donated a significant part of the Tablehurst estate to St Anthony's Trust in 2005, so that the Trust could ensure that the land was retained for biodynamic agriculture and the training of biodynamic farmers. Since that time the Trust has funded the construction of a new barn and, with a partial Government grant, the development of an enlarged shop, abattoir and butchery facility. It has also worked with the Tablehurst farmers to fund raise for the conversion of an old vegetable store to a new farm house and apprentice accommodation.

### **St Anthony's Trust and the Biodynamic Agricultural College**

By 2010 it was clear that Emerson College was in financial difficulties, which threatened the future of the biodynamic agriculture training and Tablehurst Farm's occupation of the remaining Emerson land. Following a community fund raising initiative, St Anthony's Trust has recently (2011) taken possession of a further 5 hectares of the Tablehurst estate, as well as the teaching building used for the biodynamic training (the Rachel Carson Centre), while the Biodynamic Association has relaunched the biodynamic training with a stronger input from Tablehurst Farm, which now provides practical training in a range of subjects.<sup>6</sup>

*6 - The training is run by the Biodynamic Agricultural College (<http://www.bdacollege.org.uk/>)*



### The Biodynamic Land Trust and the Brambletye Fields

While the land at Tablehurst Farm has been secured by St Anthony's Trust, the Spring Hill Land remains subject to short term tenancies arranged with private landowners. These owners are all sympathetic to Tablehurst's approach to farming, but they cannot guarantee security to Tablehurst. Indeed, the owners of 15 hectares of the Spring Hill land (known as the Brambletye Fields) have recently (2011) had to put their land up for sale, with the prospect that it could be sold to someone who no longer wished to rent to Tablehurst. This has resulted in an appeal being launched by the Biodynamic Land Trust<sup>7</sup>, on behalf of Tablehurst Farm, to secure the land in perpetuity for biodynamic farming. The indications are that the appeal will be successful and that the land will be bought by the Biodynamic Land Trust at some time in 2012.

### Land management

Both farms are run biodynamically, embracing the idea that the whole earth is a living organism and that each farm is an individual organism within it. In common with most biodynamic farms, both farms are mixed, with a balance of animals and crops, a system of recycling and benign methods of pest and disease control. Both farms use specific biodynamic preparations added in minute quantities to soil, compost and growing plants. There is no use of chemicals or artificial fertilizers. The farms strive to be self-sustaining, depending largely for their manures and feedstuffs on their own resources. They therefore embody a deeply sustainable approach to farming and land management that is in harmony with nature and fosters an environment that supports wildlife and creates an harmonious landscape. The farming takes into account the whole environment, including the underlying rock

<sup>7</sup> - <http://www.biodynamiclandtrust.org.uk/>

strata, the soil, the atmosphere, the local flora and fauna and above all, the cosmic forces acting upon them. In recognition of this approach, both farms enjoy modest grant aid through the Environmental Stewardship scheme, which is financed through Tier 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy.



## Financial performance

On a year-to-year basis, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch farms have to be financially self-sustaining, including making provision to replace machinery and maintain their land, yards and buildings. Any capital investment by St Anthony's Trust, such as a new building, can only be financed out of the rents that the trust receives from the farms, or through legacies from community members. This presents a considerable challenge for the farmers and their management groups, because the yields per hectare are lower than conventional agriculture, particularly in terms of cereal crops, while the labour required is greater. This is off-set to some extent by the price premium that biodynamic food commands, although both farms seek to keep their prices to a minimum viable level, in recognition of their community ownership. The data set out below are typical of the Tablehurst Farm budget in the period 2008-2010:



### Income (£)

Shop and farm sales	550,000
Residential home	100,000
Subsidy (CAP tiers 1 and 2)	35,000
Community events	15,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>700,000</b>

### Costs

Labour (all farm, shop and home staff)	130,000
Shop costs (inc abattoir, processing, sales)	150,000
Livestock, seeds and bought in forage	80,000
Services (water, electric, gas)	50,000
Rent	25,000
Machinery and buildings repairs, insurance, etc	100,000
Office (computing, telephone, etc)	20,000
Accounting and auditing	12,000
Staff support (food, training, equipment)	50,000
Machinery depreciation	30,000
Fuel	30,000
Certification and compliance measures	15,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>692,000</b>

<u>Surplus</u>	<u>8,000</u>
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## Community connections

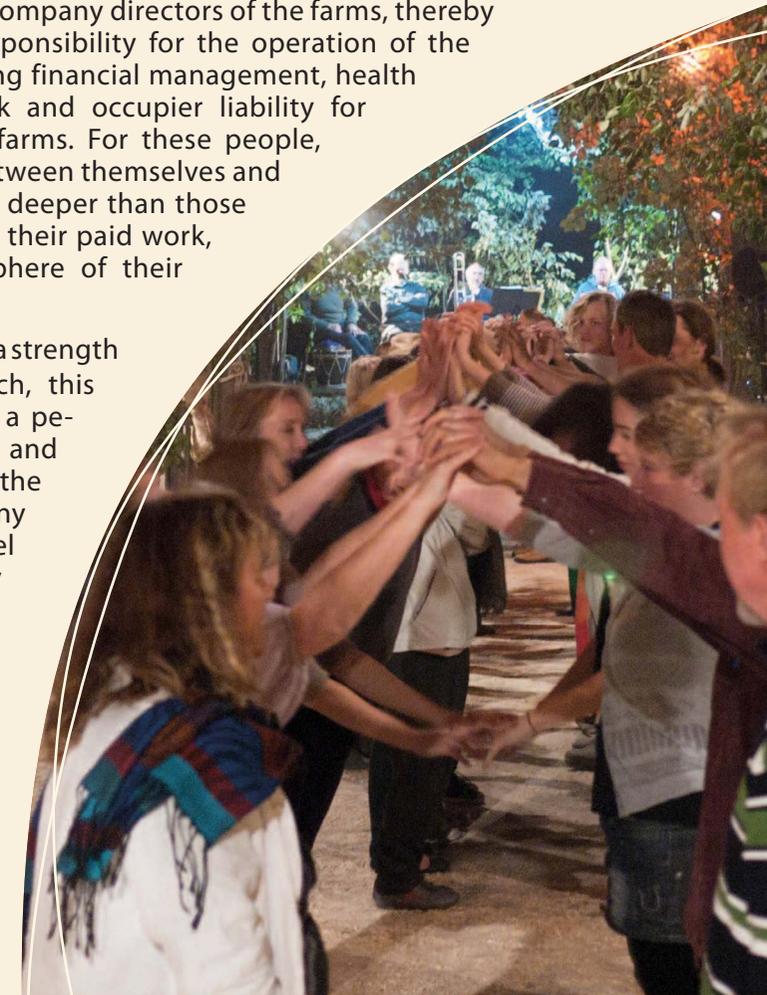
The principal community connection at TPH is the provision of working capital to the farms by 600 members of the local community, in the form of £100 shares purchased in the IPS. Although there is no public record of share ownership, it is understood that most people own more than one share and a few own as many as 20. Most of the shares were purchased during the major fund-raising campaigns to buy the Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch farm businesses. Although the shares can be sold, either to the IPS or to an individual (whether he or she is already a shareholder), there is no record of anyone seeking to sell shares, with most people treating them effectively as a gift to the businesses. This relationship is enhanced by the fact that no dividends are paid and no financial incentives or advantages are offered to farm partners (shareholders). This has led some members to claim that their share represents the best £100 that they have ever spent, since it represents a pure act of giving in order to secure the availability of biodynamic produce for all community members to buy.

The openness engendered by this financial relationship means that community connections extend well beyond those who own shares: many non-members visit the farms and purchase food; many people walk on the farms, especially Tablehurst which is close to the village of Forest Row; many people attend farm walks, open days and barn dances; and many people visit the farms to see how they have achieved and operated their form of community support. Both farms also have important educational connections with the community, through the BDAC and through local schools which visit regularly. There are also a number of economic connections, with a range of businesses either based at the farms, or trading extensively with them. Chief among these is Tablehurst Orchard. However, there are also a number of other businesses operating wholly or partially from the farms, while both farms supply a small

number of local organic shops and cafes.

In addition to being farm partners, a small number of community members (currently around 20) volunteer to join the farm management groups and the IPS committee. These people, especially those joining the management groups, make very deep and strong connections to the farms and farmers, often combining their voluntary work with specific skills such as book keeping, law, event organising and marketing. Many of them also develop new skills (often with training and certification), such as food processing, serving in the shops and running barbeques and other events. Within this group, several community members become company directors of the farms, thereby taking on legal responsibility for the operation of the businesses, including financial management, health and safety at work and occupier liability for those visiting the farms. For these people, the connections between themselves and the farms are often deeper than those they enjoy through their paid work, or in any other sphere of their social lives.

While being seen as a strength of the IPS approach, this openness, allied to a period of financial and social stability on the farms, has led many members to feel that the community connections are not as strong as they were 'in the early days'. Less people attend



the annual general meeting of the IPS, less people join farm walks and fewer people come forward to help at events. While perhaps inevitable, as the lives and priorities of many of the pioneer members have changed (as their children have left home, or through retirement from work), this situation has led some members to suggest that the IPS is in crisis. However, there are others who feel that the changing nature of the connections is a sign that the farms have been successful (there is now a secure supply of biodynamic food available to all and the farms can now afford to pay staff for work that was once done voluntarily) and that they can turn their attention to new issues, such as the Transition Village movement and green politics. These changes have presented a challenge to the farms, for they continue to see a need to 'serve' their community in the ways that they have done since the IPS started, which can be frustrating when fewer people come to events or otherwise engage with the farm. As a result, the community is currently at a turning point in its relationship with the farms, where it has negotiated its way past the early pioneer stage of development and is seeking a new set of connections to two increasingly mature and sophisticated businesses.

## Conclusions

Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms are examples of what might be termed community connected social enterprise. They owe their existence to the working capital raised by a substantial group of local people, and they continue to benefit from access to land and buildings via St Anthony's Trust. However, there are no annual subsidies or other financial arrangements with the IPS members, with all operational risks taken by the farmers and their management groups. This has the advantage of giving the farmers considerably more operational freedom than is found in many conventional CSAs, although it does

mean that they shoulder more responsibility than most CSA farmers and cannot rely on sharing risks when times are hard. It also means that they have to market their produce in the way that conventional farmers do, while simultaneously trying to keep prices low so that community members feel that they are getting value for their initial investment. This is a price that the farmers are prepared to pay, because it gives them access to a farm without the need for personal wealth, while also allowing them a large degree of freedom to develop the farms as they see fit, within the overall objectives of the IPS.

Questions have been posed, particularly in the USA, about how far any approach to CSA is a sustainable form of business operation rather than a transitional process. This is usually applied to farms (and farmers) requiring an injection of fixed or working capital to get through a structural problem in their business, or needing to find new retail markets for their produce. It has also been applied to the problem of members/customers losing interest or finding new sources of food. Most of these situations apply to Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms. The community did rally round when they thought that the farms might close, leaving them without locally produced biodynamic food. And some of the original members have drifted away, to seek other interests and, undoubtedly in some cases, to find other sources of food. However, in many respects this is less a problem for TPH than for conventional CSAs, because none of the parties are in a position (even if they wanted to) to acquire the IPS capital or otherwise bring the financial and ownership relationship to an end. Neither can they buy out the land trust. And, since the farmers never relied wholly on sales to IPS members, they are not now struggling (any more than usual) to find markets for their products. Rather, what it does mean is that the farmers and IPS committee have decisions to make about how far they wish to re-engage with local people, and in what forms.

# Access to land for Community Connected Agriculture in Europe Project 2010-1

This case study is part of a broader project on Access to land for Community Connected Agriculture in Europe run by a group of European civil society organisations.

## Project Presentation

Our European project on Access to Land for Community Connected Agriculture focused on experiences of Community Connected Farming where there have been particular issues related to gaining and maintaining access to land.

We define Community Connected Agriculture as:

- sustainable, i.e. with no chemical inputs and minimal use of external and non-renewable resources, such as organic farming or extensive grazing;
- civic, i.e. concerned with the broader social, economic, environmental and cultural implications of caring for the land and producing food and/or engaging directly with their community;
- local, i.e. open onto their local environment and nurturing the local social and economic fabric through direct marketing, on-farm transformation, job creation, social activities, consumers' participation, etc.

## The objectives of the project were:

- To document such experiences, through seven case studies and a mapping exercise of about 100 community-connected farms and related projects throughout northern, southern and central Europe;
- To disseminate information about and analyses of these experiences and the difficulties that they have faced, to feed into the broader public debate about the future of European agriculture and rural areas.

Local, civic agriculture is developing in Europe, and is gaining broader support from consumers, citizens, civic organisations and local authorities. Such farms often have many benefits: they provide local and quality food to consumers; they contribute to the protection of the environment and the reduction of farming's carbon footprint; they often create more jobs, per hectare, than more conventional farms; they contribute to the maintenance of green belts

around cities; and they are often multifunctional and pluriactive farms, which reinforces their economic sustainability and the vitality and viability of rural areas.

At the same time, one key obstacle to the preservation and development of local, civic agriculture is that many such farms are unable to compete successfully for access to sufficient land that is in good condition. Such civic farmers often struggle to find agricultural land that is available to them at affordable price and on secure terms. A question at the core of our project therefore was to explore these difficulties and, where possible, to identify innovative solutions.

## Project Partners

The project was coordinated by Sjoerd Wartena and Véronique Rioufol - Terre de liens (France) and Titus Bahner - Forum Synergies (Europe). Neil Ravenscroft - University of Brighton and Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms (UK), Jan Douwe van der Ploeg - Wageningen University (Netherlands), Audrius Jokubauskas - Viva sol (Lithuania), Peter Volz - Regionalwert AG/ Die Agronauten (Germany), and Marta Fraticelli - aGter (France/ international) were all active partners of the project.

## Funders

This project benefited from the financial support and fruitful involvement of the Fondation de France and the Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer (FPH), as well as from that of European ethical banks: La Nef association and La Nef bank, Triodos bank, GLS bank and Merkur bank.

## Contact:

We welcome information and contact regarding similar European initiatives and studies. The results of our work, and on-going activities, are available (from March 2012) on the website of:

### Terre de liens:

<http://www.terredeliens.org>

### Forum Synergies:

<http://www.forum-synergies.eu>

### For further information:

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