# 5. Territories of Commons in Europe: Niches of a Much Needed Transition

by Jose Luis Vivero Pol

We have to move to a Common Food Policy instead of a Common Agricultural Policy (CAP, the European policy framework that exists today). That idea is gaining traction in more and more circles, from the [proposal](http://www.ipes-food.org/pages/CommonFoodPolicy) by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems – IPES Food1 to the European Economic and Social Committee. Hundreds of alternative food movements are already supporting the idea. A shift like this would solve the current policy incoherence between the different EU policies, such as trade, food, agriculture, environment, climate, health and social issues. Right now, these policies do not row in the same direction.

Another good reason for leaving the CAP behind and moving towards a Common Food Policy, would be the disproportionate power of big agriculture and transnational food corporations in the European policy arena. They exert their influence through revolving doors and lobbyists that literally draft and amend EU guidelines. This corporate policy capture purely aims to maximise stakeholder profits instead of public health, environmental protection or food security. It leads to huge monopolies in food retailing and agro-chemicals, patented seed research and supply, land grabbing in many parts of Eastern Europe and food safety circumventions (for example, glyophosate or neocotinoids). It is already common place in scientific circles to call the current way of producing and consuming food, the industrial food system, neither fair nor sustainable. Our industrialised food system is one of the main drivers of planetary destruction.

As global warming already poses a threat to human lives and agricultural production, what is needed for the sustainability transition is indeed more democracy, more rational and forward-looking management of food-producing resources and a different moral economy for the entire food system. Based on my international expertise as a food security specialist and my scholarship on food systems in transition, I believe that we need to value food differently. We need to re-conceptualise the entire food system so that it bolsters human health, nature stewardship, farmers’ livelihood and landscape protection. We need a food system that works for the common good, not just for profit maximisation. To get there, it helps to look at the food system through the lens of the commons. This has the potential to cure the myopia that makes food and food-related elements (like seeds, water, land, knowlegde) exclusively a matter of market transaction. The industrial food system values and governs food as a mere commodity and that is wrong. The meanings of food are more diverse than that, as I have proposed recently. In the multi-dimensional [framework](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/9/3/442)2 to understand the value of food to humans, there are economic and non-economic dimensions. Some can be valued in monetary terms, others cannot. What is the price of a human right to be traded in the market? As food is essential to everyone’s survival, its market price could be priceless when someone is in desperate need. How can the cultural importance of any given food be priced when that valuation is rather personal and subjective?

We need to re-conceptualise the entire food system so that it bolsters human health, nature stewardship, farmers’ livelihood and landscape protection.

These critical reflections imply that not all food values can be reduced to supply and demand market rules, in which food prices do not properly represent the multiple meanings food has for different people. These meanings and social constructs simply cannot be reduced to food prices. Commodified food is the most reductionist approach to food, where those non-economic dimensions are superseded and obscured by the tradeable dimension (represented by quantity, quality, size, place of origin, homogeneity, durability and other features appreciated by the industrial food system).

Within this current framing, food cannot be enforced as a mandatory human right and traded as a commodity at the same time. As long as we see it as a commodity, it cannot be governed as a public good by a nation-state or as a commons by a community. Market rules prevail over other allocation mechanisms. However, if we consider food as a human right (which is currently [not the case in any EU member state](https://gh.bmj.com/content/1/1/e000040))3, a public good or a commons, then we should broaden the debate and look at grassroots movements in Europe for inspiration. The rejection of the narrative of food-as-commodity and the adoption of [food-as-commons](https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Handbook-of-Food-as-a-Commons/Vivero-Pol-Ferrando-Schutter-Mattei/p/book/9781138062627)4 or food-as-human-right can be found in many new initiatives that are popping up in cities as well as in a myriad of customary practices that have successfully resisted the commoditization wave. Did you know for instance that [12 million hectares of land in Europe](https://blog.p2pfoundation.net/food-commons-europe/2017/02/01)5 are still managed collectively as a commons? They include croplands, pasturelands, estuaries, coastlines, forests, mountains and rural roads in all EU countries. Common lands have nearly all vanished in European countries that actively encourage private or state appropriation of communal lands, such as Belgium and Germany. Some of these countries do not even have a legal status for common land. In France, Spain, Italy or Sweden however, there are still millions of hectares of [“territories of commons”](http://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Territories_of_Commons_in_Europe)6 that enable people to survive. Well-known examples are the oyster beds in Arcachon Bay, to the Water Jury in Valencia, long-term rental contracts of agricultural lands owned by communities in Nonantola or the Everyman’s Rights that enable any Swede to collect berries, fish or camp in anybody’s landplot. Another example is from Galicia, my home region in Spain: the proportion of commonland is one fifth of the total area, legally owned and managed by those who actually inhabit in parishes.

The “territories of commons” are reservoirs of:

* climate-adapted practices based on agro-ecology
* biodiversity and fundamental ecosystems services
* governance systems, based on centuries of experience, with their own institutions and regulations
* cultural heritage and collective knowledge, accumulated for centuries and adapted to local conditions
* participatory and de-centralized democratic mechanisms.

The commons require a collective search for new shared governance systems that work in different contexts. They represent political alternatives to the representative democratic systems that we now have in Europe: systems that are detached from citizens, [co-opted by corporations](https://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/captured-states-exec-summary-fr.pdf)7, focused on economic growth and the exploitation of common resources. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is not a single mention of the commons, commons-based food systems or collective governance in the current CAP documents.

And yet, as a word of caution: the territorial commons and the food-producing commons are not governing arrangements that are devoid of inequality, exclusion or discrimination of certain community members8. The commons, understood as governing mechanisms crafted by human collectivities, are embedded in the communities that have instituted them and in the formal states where those communities live. Therefore, the commons mirror the inequalities and hierarchies already found in those groups and countries. As human institutions, the collective mechanisms devised to govern the commons are far from perfectly fair and flawless, although they are useful and resilient. Those mechanisms are complex combinations of formal and informal rules, customary norms and modern laws, being in many cases legally protected or at least tolerated by the state mechanisms where those commons are embedded9.

New initiatives like Community Supported Agriculture farms (CSA) or Food Buying Groups are popping up everywhere, adopting a logic that goes beyond the price tag of a strawberry. These initiatives enable organic farming to be a coproduction of eaters and farmers, sharing risks, restoring common sense in the food system. Eat what is in season, do not use agro-chemicals that kill pollinators. These initiatives, however diverse the motivations of their members may be, share a rejection of the absolute commodification of food. They seek to re-create the lost bonds between producers and eaters, to re-embed food into the moral economy and local environment, and to make non-economic food dimensions more salient and relevant.

A commons approach to food systems recognizes the multiple values of food that cannot be reduced to its economic transactions. Food is not only essential for everybody’s survival, it is also a human right and a cultural determinant. It has been a public good throughout history, from the Roman Empire to the CAP subsidies today. To reduce it to just something with a price tag, like a car, feels absurd and awkward. Purchasing power cannot exclusively determine your access to such an essential resource.

They share a rejection of the absolute commodification of food. They seek to re-create the lost bonds between producers and eaters, to re-embed food into the moral economy and local environment.

If policy makers are ready to shift from an agricultural policy focus to a food-related policy focus, they should take into account [new and old food-producing commons](https://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/commons-and-commoning-new-old-narrative-enrich-food-sovereignty-and-right-food-claims)10 and partner with them. The “territories of commons”, rural and urban, customary and contemporary, are innovative niches of transition full of tasty and healthy organic food, institutional novelties, digital technologies, participatory democracies and enviromental caring practices. Local solutions to the challenges affecting the industrial food system already exist. They are a complex set of self-regulated actions and state-imposed laws that succeed relatively well to satisfy community needs to govern common resources. Enabling food democracy, in which food citizens can re-gain control of their food systems, would indeed bring us closer to the values and the benefits of a regime based on the food commons. The aim would be sustainable agro-ecological production using open-source knowledge, seeds, fish stocks, land, forests and water as commons to reach food and nutrition security for all Europeans, as a commonwealth.

The change I propose is as much about technologies, subsidies, legal frameworks or specific policies as it is about moral shifts and narrative changes. This change implies devolving power to local communities to command their own transition pathways to reach fairer and more sustainable food systems. In walking that path, communities may fail or succeed, and other stakeholders such as the state and the market may or may not find a constructive role in that transition. But all of them shall value food and the food-producing resources differently than before. Considering food as a commons, a public good and a human right is an aspirational and inspirational narrative that may substantiate the proposed Common Food Policy, by unlocking political innovations that have not been explored so far. Let’s dare to do it.