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entitled

The role of the State in food commoning: The interactions between the City of Leuven and local Alternative Food Practices.

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The role of the State in food commoning

The interactions between the city of Leuven and local Alternative Food Practices.

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"The world is not populated by singular, autonomous, sovereign beings. It is comprised of a constantly oscillating network of dynamic interactions in which one thing changes through the change of another. The relationship counts, not the substance. [...] Life on Earth is about 'reciprocal specification' - an act of mutual engendering. Only through a moment of encounter does one's own character come fully to fruition. The world is not an aggregation of things, but rather a symphony of relationships…"

Andreas Weber (2017, cited in Bollier & Helfrich 2019, p. 49)

Preface: why the commons?

My personal interest in commoning practices stems from my childhood experience as well as my academic background. In fact, I grew up in a geographical context where commoning practices were embedded in daily life activities and in popular tradition for centuries. Being the village located in a rural area, people's livelihood was mainly provided through agricultural activities. Among other things, they shared skills by helping to work on each other's agricultural fields, the tools needed to work the land, and precious knowledge of agricultural practices. Those techniques, which I had never thought would attract academic interest, were implemented as a strategy to cope with the lack of capital to pay for someone's labour or to buy essential agricultural instruments; in a way, it boosted people's resilience in the face of scarcity and poverty. Those practices provided for generations an alternative to the State's inability to create sufficient social and economic conditions for a dignified life. But, most of all, it motivated people to develop community dynamics and social relations through which they could secure their livelihood in the absence of appropriate state facilities and instruments. Although so rooted in daily life, I have never reflected on the potential of such practices for the sustainable development and growth of a place and the community.

It was only during my studies that I got familiar with the academic interest in commons and commoning practices. First during my undergraduate, where the commons received somewhat academic attention within the political and economic debates about shared resources. At the time, however, my understanding of commons was corrupted by the economic discourses of shared resources. However, I had the chance to come across a different vision of commons during my reading of the book "The Value of Nothing" by Raj Patel. Such reading provided me with a perspective of commoning that goes beyond shared and collective resources and that actually shows its potential as an alternative to the current growth paradigm.

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During the writing process of this thesis, I came to the realisation that I have experienced commoning practices throughout my whole life. Writing this thesis alone can be viewed as a commoning process since it mobilised multiple efforts and people who under different forms contributed to making this Master experience warmer and more colorful.

First, a special thanks to my supervisor, Pieter Van Den Broeck, for giving me the opportunity to actively participate in the organisation of Action research activities, to explore and learn about the commoning landscape in Leuven, and for the precious guidelines provided to write this thesis. I am very grateful to my co-supervisor Xenia Katsigianni, who assisted me from the beginning until the very last moments of the thesis submission with inestimable support that included thesis and life advices; I truly appreciated the time, energy, dedication, and the mediterranean warmth you have put into making this process easier and more gratifying. I would like to thank the entire IMSDP group of young researchers and beautiful people and the PhD student Clara Garcia Medina who contributed with ideas, shared knowledge, and a lot of inspiration.

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Abstract

In light of the ever-increasing social, economic and environmental problems experienced in today's society, many academics call for a paradigm shift to redefine the human-nature relationship and hence the management of natural resources. In this framework, commons have been praised as a revolutionary alternative to the current Market – State deficiencies and the social and environmental problems it causes. In particular, they are praised for their ability to satisfy social and economic needs through regenerative practices of resource management and community development. However, these spaces of cooperation are confronted with a major issue: the difficulty of materialising on their own, suggesting their need to interact and collaborate with public/state institutions in order to proliferate and contribute to a wider change. Therefore, this thesis aims to analyse the extent to which the state facilitates or hinders the access of commoning initiatives to agricultural land as well as their endeavours to contribute to a more sustainable food production and distribution system.

To reveal these interactions, the focus will be set on the role of the municipality of Leuven in enabling the proliferation of Alternative Food Practices, which fall under the category of food commons. In fact, during the previous years, Leuven developed a local food strategy aiming at transforming the city's food system. In order to implement this strategy, among other actions, the city launched a Call for sustainable and innovative agricultural projects to be developed on land owned by the municipality. In the context of this thesis, action research was conducted to analyse the Call as a tool with the potential to support food-commoning activities. The investigation of the Call unravelled a series of multi-level interactions between public institutions and AFPs allowing for the identification of the conditions under which the state can support the commons.

Résumé

En raison de l'augmentation constante des problèmes sociaux, économiques et environnementaux rencontrés dans la société actuelle, de nombreux chercheurs appellent à un changement de paradigme pour redéfinir la relation entre l'homme et la nature et donc la gestion des ressources naturelles. Dans ce cadre, les biens communs ont été salués comme une alternative révolutionnaire aux déficiences actuelles du système Marché-État et aux problèmes sociaux et environnementaux qu'il engendre. Ils sont notamment loués pour leur capacité à satisfaire les besoins sociaux et économiques par des pratiques régénératrices de gestion des ressources et de développement communautaire. Cependant, ces espaces de coopération sont confrontés à un enjeu majeur : la difficulté à se matérialiser de manière autonome, suggérant leur besoin d'interagir et de collaborer avec les institutions publiques afin de proliférer et de contribuer à un changement plus large. Par conséquent, cette thèse de master vise à analyser dans quelle mesure l'État facilite ou freine la concrétisation d'initiatives de communs sur des terres agricoles, ainsi que leurs efforts pour contribuer à un système de production et de distribution alimentaire plus durable.

Pour révéler ces interactions, cette étude se concentrera sur le rôle de la municipalité de Louvain dans la prolifération des pratiques alimentaires alternatives, appartenant à la catégorie des communs alimentaires. Au cours des années précédentes, Louvain a développé une stratégie alimentaire locale visant à transformer le système alimentaire de la ville. Afin de mettre en œuvre cette stratégie, la ville a entre autre, lancé un appel à projets agricoles durables et innovants à développer sur des terrains appartenant à la ville. Dans le cadre de cette thèse, une recherche-action a été menée pour analyser l'appel en tant qu'outil pour soutenir la création de communs alimentaires? Son analyse a révélé une série d'interactions à plusieurs niveaux entre les instance publiques et les pratiques alimentaires alternatives, permettant d'identifier les conditions nécessaires dans lesquelles l'État peut soutenir les communs.

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List of acronyms

AR or PAR Action Research or Participatory action research

AFN Alternative food networks

AFP Alternative food practices

AGSL Autonoom Gemeentebedrijf Stadsontwikkeling Leuven / Autonomous Municipal Company for Urban Development Leuven

CAP Common agricultural policies

CSA Community supported agriculture

IMSDP International Module of Spatial Development and Planning

OCMW Openbaar centrum voor maatschappelijk welzijn

PCSW Public Centre for Social Welfare

VLAR Voedsel- en landbouwadviesraad / Food and Agriculture Advisory Council

MUFFP Milan Urban Food Policy Pact

Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem statement and research question

The major events occurring in the last two years, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine, have further emphasised the vulnerability of nation-states to multi-layered crises and their incapacity to cope with social, ecological and economic challenges.To date, the number of problems we face, including food insecurity, environmental catastrophes, and the rising prices of energy and primary goods, are the outcome of long-praised values such as globalization, increasing demand for natural resources and massive concentration of power in the Market and State institutions; thereby exposing the limits and dangers of this dominant system of values and powers. However, the intrinsic rationales of these challenges are to be found in the expansion of capitalism, established on the progressive commodification of natural resources, such as land and food, leading to inequalities, and poverty on the one hand (Vivero Pol et al., 2019; Peet 1975;) and on the disruption of social and ecological relationships on the other (Polanyi, 1957 in Clark et al, 2017; Carson 1962; Biehl & Bookchin, 1953). This also points out that such processes of commodification, perpetuated in the market economy, benefited from the institutional and political legitimization of states, thus suggesting that the market and states cannot be considered two distinct entities, giving birth to the market state system (Chang, 2001, in Reis 2012). For example, one of the most fragile sectors striving within these dynamics is the web of food, due to its interdependence with multiple cross sectors, such as energy and transportation (IPES-FOOD, 2017), thus easily disrupted by shocks in any of those sectors. As a consequence, the need for a radical shift in the current production trajectory is revealed; it calls for a dismantling of the value system we have relied on until nowadays, and a consideration of tangible alternatives to stem the tide of the disastrous path the world is headed towards.

As states and markets institutionalised efforts are lagging in addressing the socioeconomic needs of society while ensuring the planetary boundaries, many local initiatives are taking action by setting in motion a process of radical transformation of the socioeconomic reproduction system. Civic societies around the world gather together to create communal spaces related to food, land, environment, and culture, empowering them both to "break free from isolation and defeat" (Caffentzis et al., 2014, p.96) but also to establish themselves as a concrete alternative to the current political and social voids. These dynamics are often manifested in form of commons, a model defined as " a paradigm that embodies its own logic and patterns of behaviour, functioning as a different kind of operating system for societies" (Bollier & Helfrich, 2012, p.xi). Commons can assume different forms, varying from social commons, knowledge commons, cultural commons, and food commons, and are praised in view of their revolutionary and radical power to transform society toward a more democratic and fair governance arrangement. The growing academic attention they received is motivated by the potential of the commons to meet socioeconomic needs while addressing the increasing discrepancies between economic growth and socio-ecological imperatives (De Angelis, 2017; Weston et al., 2013; Exner et al., 2021; Bollier et al., 2019). Especially in the food sector, commoning paved the way for solidarity networks that materialised through community

gardens, local short-chain food systems like Community supported agriculture (CSAs), and food hubs, as a form of resistance to the limited and highly regulated access to agricultural land, and dysfunctional food production and distribution system (Exner, 2014; De Angelis, 2017, Caffentzis et al., 2014, Vivero Pol and De Schutter, 2019). Yet, these spaces of cooperation face a major issue: the difficulty of materialising on their own, suggesting that their proliferation should be fostered by institutional support (Weston & Bollier., 2013, Bauwens et al., 2017, Vivero Pol et al., 2019). For example, the scaling up of food commons is hindered by the national and international political frameworks establishing severe rules for food production and thus hampering the commons' ability to enter the market or strive within it (Vivero Pol, 2017). In other words, commons struggle to remain resilient and survive within a market/state-imposed system of rigid structures and regulations.

Several scholars have highlighted different factors that affect commons resilience and proliferation (Ostrom, 1990; Delladetsimas, Katsigianni, Van den Broeck, 2021). In the case of food commons, public policies play a crucial role in determining their upscaling (Vivero Pol, 2017). However, policies, frameworks and governance schemes can be framed by different institutional levels thus impacting the proliferation of commons. Local authorities, national policies, and European directives can trigger or hinder the proliferation of common initiatives since they frame the legal institutional system embedding common development (Bloemen & Hammerstein, 2017). However, opposing voices exist, arguing for an autonomous and self-efficient development of commons and communities, where the state can only play a negative role (Bookchin, 1953; Caffentzis, 2014). Legal scholars explain that laws and regulations are predefined and thus provide fixed institutional structures that are incompatible with commons regenerative and dynamic nature (Gutwirth & Stengers, 2016; Micciarelli, 2022). Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to investigate the conditions for the proliferation of commons. More specifically, the thesis focuses on food commons, in order to *analyse the extent to which the state facilitates or hinders the access of commoning initiatives to agricultural land as well as their endeavours to contribute to a more sustainable food production and distribution system*.

Case study: the rising of food commons in Leuven and the role of the city

Located in the Flemish Region of Belgium, and the capital of the Flemish Brabant province, the city of Leuven represents a good example for analysing the role of institutions in supporting the emergence of food commons. First, in the last years, Leuven has witnessed the development of many initiatives oriented toward sustainable food production and food governance, falling under the categorization of Alternative Food Practices (AFPs). The AFPs are local food models belonging to short-supply chains and community-based food systems since they share their values (Manganelli et al., 2019, p.3). They are established by a variety of minded actors eager to provide the communities with local and sustainably produced food as an alternative to the dominant food on the market. Among such initiatives, there are several CSAs, such as the Boerencompagnie, Natuurlijik Fruit, Ramselveld, De Witte Beek, 't Legummenhofke, Wakkere akker, 't Legumenhofke), cooperatives, food-markets (Farm, Content), food hubs, etc. In view of their operational design and shared value, they belong to the larger framework of food commons. Through self-institutionalised and democratic decision-making, they aim at

challenging the conventional agro-industrial food system by making autonomous and sustainable small-scale mixed organic farming a reality in collaboration with the local community. In fact, AFPs contest the conventional food systems and the market's logic regulating them in view of their disembeddedness from social and environmental needs, geared toward economic interests. Contrary to the conventional food industry, food commons including AFPs constitute innovative efforts that support a holistic approach to food systems, that integrates social, environmental, and economic ambitions (Mehmood and Parra, 2013 in Medina-García et al., 2022). The combination of values, operational modalities, and results of these initiatives, pave the way to a revolutionary shift of the existing food paradigm. Thereby their proliferation is deemed essential for the achievement of a wider and structural transformation of the dominant agri-food system.

In reaction to those initiatives, the city of Leuven has developed open platforms of collaboration between citizens, food actors, organizations, and public stakeholders to stimulate discussion on the creation of a food strategy seeking to transform the city's food system toward a sustainable vision (Medina - Garcia, 2022). As a result, in 2016, civil society's interest in collaborating in the complex process of policy development led to the formulation of an ambitious project, known as the "Food connects" strategy. Initially, the food strategy was created through a bottom-up process, under the initiative of three actors, but soon it evolved into a collaboration with other actors such as Leuven 2030, a governmental and non-profit organization whose mission is to endorse climate neutrality in Leuven (Medina-García et al., 2022, Leuven 2030, n.d.). To implement the food strategy, among other actions, the city has launched two Calls for proposals, the first in 2020 and the second in 2022, to provide access to farming land for sustainable agricultural projects. Thus the Calls were functional tools for implementing the food strategy that was collaboratively created by bottom-up initiatives and the city (Medina - Carcia et al., 2022).

However, the contribution of AFPs to the transformation of the food system remains marginal, on a small scale, and perhaps irrelevant for a transformation that could englobe the needs of the entire community of Leuven. The incapacity of these initiatives to proliferate is restricted by struggles in competing with unfair prices established by the mass production of food, difficulties in reaching out to a consistent number of consumers, in addition to a challenging system determining access to land constraints. Next to these struggles, some structural problems in the Belgian, and, on a higher scale, European framework, contribute to the creation of a conflicting context for the small-scale realms to strive in, characterised by unequal competition in access to land and in the market competition.

In the aforementioned context, the thesis focuses on the analysis of Calls for proposals due to the mobilisation it has triggered and the potential effects on the commoning endeavours. In fact, the main goal of the Call is to provide affordable access to public land, in the form of annual rent contracts, for food actors interested in developing sustainable agricultural projects intertwined with socially added values. In view of these promises, the Calls appeared to be the ideal framework for boosting food commoning activities and practices.

Data collection through action research

The thesis analysis is established on an Action research approach carried out in collaboration with KuLeuven students and researchers[1] in the geographical area of Leuven from March 2022 until May. To unfold the role of the municipality in the development of AFPs, the research was carried out through multiple stages each characterised by different methods. The methods mobilised include desk research, group work, collective reflection moments, participant observation and fieldwork. The research concluded with the writing of a critique and proposal to submit to the open call for proposals. For this reason, interviews with food of actors and stakeholders were conducted as well. A more exhaustive list of activities and methods, as well the limitations of the research will be outlined in Chapter 3.

Thesis structure

The thesis is structured in the following order. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework involving literature on commons and commoning and provides conceptual background to understand how they interact with the State. Moreover, it introduces the approach of food as commons, in the context of which AFNs will be defined and analysed as commoning practices. Secondly, theories of state are revised to understand which form of State and structure of governance could support the proliferation of commons. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodological approach mobilised for this research and the methods used, and discusses some limitations encountered during the research. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings of the case study and outlines the first contradictions manifested in the city of Leuven's Call for proposals. Finally, in Chapter 5 critical conclusions are drawn, revealing the role assumed by the municipality in supporting AFNs.

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[1] The group consisted of : 16 students and researchers gathered in the context of the International Spatial Development Planning (IMSDP) course at KuLeuven, prof. Pieter Van den Broeck, Prof. Pieter Van den Broeck head of the Planning and Development research Unit (P&D), the Post-doctoral researcher Xenia Katsigianni, the PhD researcher Clara-Medina-Garcia.

Chapter 2: Conceptual framework and literature review

The theoretical framework brings together various bodies of literature on commons and commoning practices aiming at revealing their revolutionary power to foster a social, ecological and economic shift. First, the chapter starts by introducing some definitions of commons although finding univocal definitions appears to be a complex task. Second, I bring forward some of the reasons behind the resurgence of commoning in the current capitalist society. For this purpose, the concept of food commons will be introduced and discussed in relation to the current agri-food system. This topic will be of primary importance to drawing the analysis of my research case study in light of its capacity to challenge the systemic structural inequalities of the current dominant agri-food system, which threatens the emergence of sustainable and regenerative food and agricultural initiatives. Additionally, to unfold the political and institutional role of the State in providing adequate instruments and tools for the proliferation of commons and food commons, different state approaches will be investigated. In particular, the Market State concept will be discussed and, ultimately the Partner-State model will be introduced as a potential governance model able to foster the urgently needed proliferation of commoning practices.

To summarise, the table below provides an overview of the literature touched upon and the corresponding scholars.

Body of literature	Scholars
Commons and commoning	Bollier et al., 2019; Bollier et Helfrich, 2012; Bauwens and Niaros, 2017; Caffentzis, 2010; Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; De Angelis, 2017 Esteva, 2014; Linebaugh, 2008;
Food commons	Vivero Pol, 2008; 2013; 2019; De Schutter, 2019;
State theories	Mann, 2003; Jessop 2016;

Partner State approach on commons	Bauwens and Niaros, 2017; Carson et al, 2018; Vivero Pol et al., 2019;

Table 1: Conceptual framework overview by bodies of literature and scholars. (Source: Author)

2.1 Commons and commoning in a capitalist world

2.1.1 The evolution and complexity of commons definitions

Over the last year, the commons have received particular academic attention within the field of research concerned with community development practices. In particular, practices based on the use of shared and open resources, and dynamics of mutual support that transcends the State and the traditional Market system, have been at the core of such studies. In this context, this field of study and investigation of commons, covered a variety of practices, spacing from traditional commons, mainly associated with the governance of the natural resources, as the ones portrayed by Ostrom (1990), to the evolution of knowledge commons, which have been developed with the emergence of the digital era (Bauwens, Bollier), cultural commons (Bowers), not to neglect urban commons (Rundgren) and food commons firmly analysed by Vivero Pol and De Schutter.

When addressing commons literature, the main authors that would cross one's mind would be Elinor Ostrom and Garrett Hardin, both important figures in shaping the definition of commons and in bringing back the debate upon the commoning practices in the contemporary political and social context. Their contribution results in the conceptualization of commons constrained by economic rationality on the one side and on an institutionalist approach on the other. To escape such conceptualisations, the thesis will emphasise other commons-related ontologies and narratives, which focus on the social and environmental dimensions of the commons.

Garrett Hardin's seminal article "The tragedy of commons" published in 1968 is widely known as one of the latest publications adding to the debate of commons. The paper emphasizes that shared resources like land, among farmers, are most likely to cause resource depletion (De Angelis, 2017). This article preannounced the emergence of an economic theory, first introduced in 1833 by William Forster Lloyd (Ostrom, 1990), founded on privatization and State governance of shared resources as unique solutions to counter depletion. Privatization was indeed a dogma emerging in the 60s as a sub-discipline of New institutional economics (Lohr, 2013) and it did not take long to spread out as the key solution to every problem. Based on an economic reading of the commons, Hadin's tragedy suggests his failure in comprehending the real ontology behind them, an interpretation adding even more confusion to this debate. Other scholars, however, saw this as an opportunity to provide a new epistemology to explain commons.

The first misunderstanding in Hardin's theory is the conceptualization of commons as a public resource but scholars like Linebaugh (2008), clarify that commons cannot be categorised as public resources since "the public do not manage the land while commons do " (p.145). In fact,

commons which are not defined by ownership, are different from the open-access resources described by Hardin. This assumption makes it evident that the tragedy conceived by Hardin does not refer to commons but it is rather a *tragedy of open access* and *free for all* (Lohr 2013, pp.410-416, in Bollier et al., 2013; Ostrom, 1990), a condition leading to depletion, overuse, and destruction as wisely suggested by Hardin himself. In other words, Hardin's theory falls short in explaining the following elements: the actors engaged, and their collective decision to rule out the common resource, thereby neglecting that the actors are naturally concerned about safeguarding the resource's sustainability. Next to these conceptual deficiencies, a methodological limitation was pointed out by De Angelis (2017, in Kothari et al., 2019, p.125) arising from the economic argument "that different farmers only aim at maximising their individual utility". Hardin's individualist ontology results from his inability to "comprehend commoning or imagine a set of political affordances based on dynamic relationships" (Bollier et al., 2019, p. 49). The interpretation of the commons through economic lenses dismisses its social embeddedness (Bollier et al., 2019, p.93).

To escape Hardin's conceptualisation, Ostrom & Hess (2007) define commons as "a general term that refers to a resource shared by a group of people" (p.5), and whose preservation implies a form of management. In fact, the authors building on Ostrom's institutionalist approach focus their attention on the nature of such resources and their governance (Foster & Iaione, 2018, p.3). Ostrom's contribution to the analysis of commons was important as she designed a framework of regulations to counter the *tragedy* of commons invoked by Hardin. In this academic framework, institutionalisation and community management of shared resources represent the inherent characteristic of the commons, thereby representing the hallmark to distinguish the commons from the non-commons (Madison, Frischmann, and Strandburg 2014, p.2 in Foster & Iaione, 2018., p.3).

Despite her extensive contribution to shaping the literature on commons, Ostrom's approach was not spared from criticism. The main criticism is directed at the limited analysis of the theory, which was conceived from a purely economic standpoint and failed to take a political stance. Ostrom does not question the historical relationship between commons and capital, therefore, envisioning "the cohabitation of these different forms as unproblematic, pace enclosures, exploitation and social injustice" (De Angelis, 2017, p.156). On the contrary, authors assuming a political stance conceive the commons as a greater project for social change, that overcomes the dichotomy Market - State. Bauwens et al. (2017) suggest that " to construct or declare a commons is to make a claim to power, including political power" (p.23). He observes that the decision-making power taken by a group of people aiming to unite in an association whose purpose is to self-manage a resource, according to their own rules and with no interference from the state or the market, has to be considered a claim of political power (ibid.). Additional critiques argue that while the principles she designed represent an important contribution to the "issues of governance", they do not explain "the inner life of commons or the complexities of what it means to common" (Bollier et al.,2019 p.97). For example, according to Ostrom's theory, the poor functioning of commons is determined by the failure of the principles she conceived, thereby indicating that the struggle consists in following such principles. In contrast, more radical schools of thought opt for a different interpretation of the

struggles for the commons. Caffentzis (2004, in De Angelis 2017) remarks that the survival of commons does not only depend on their internal governance but on resisting the "power differentials" existing in the environment surrounding commons such as the "social forces that have differing sensibilities and plans, and that will try to enclose or co-opt this commons power for its own ends" (p.171).

These critiques reveal the complexity and challenge of finding an unambiguous definition for the commons appear somewhat challenging, as they can assume different forms, and each school of thought adheres to different conceptualisations and approaches.

2.1.2 A new ontology: uncovering social and political dimensions of commons

Considering the diversity of practices associated with commons, numerous authors have sought to understand their historical development, with Linebaugh (2014) being perhaps the most emblematic author in this field, as well as their transformative power and potential for a different development paradigm and cultural transformation (Bollier et al., 2019). Historically, the commons indicated the " land that was used by several people or households during a certain period, as opposed to land that was used by only one person or household throughout the whole year"(De Moor 2002 in De Moor, 2011, p. 424).

Only recently, commons started to be investigated from different perspectives and in different fields of study. Bauwens et al. (2017) define commons as " a shared resource, which is co-owned and/or co-governed by its users and/or stakeholder communities, according to its own rules and norms " (p.13). The conditions for its existence require " an *object* of cooperation, or resource, which is shared or pooled; an activity, i.e, commoning as the maintenance and co-production of that resource; a mode of governance, the way decisions are made to protect the resource and allocate usage (and which is related to the modes of property)" (ibid). This definition offers a clear explanation of the difference between the commons' governance of resources and the private sector's and state's management of resources (Bauwens et al., 2017, p.13). The insight offered by Bauwens is not too far from the one elaborated by Massimo De Angelis (2017) who describes commons as "a *social system* comprising three elements: commonwealth, a community of commoners and a praxis of commons, of doing in common, including the act of governing the relationship with the commonwealth and nature and with one another among the commoners themselves" (p.126).

Both authors analyse commons in view of the social dynamics and activities they trigger, also known as commoning, and without whom it would not be possible to speak about commons. Such understanding of commons echoes Linebaugh's *Magna Charta Manifesto* (2018)*,* as well as Harvey's (2012) illustration of commons as " an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood" (p. 73, in Exner et al., 2020, p. 8). Esteva (2014) emphasizes the social side of the commons, noting that these interactions create social norms, reciprocal responsibilities (or rights), and distinctive social organization structures (p.i55). Moreover, commons are characterised by boundaries set by the field in which the relations take place (ibid.). The importance of this new "pattern of

behaviours" created by the commons lies in their ability to provide an alternative system for governing society (Bollier et Helfrich, 2012, p.xi).

In this framework, David Bollier stands out as one leading figure of the common's relational ontology and understanding of commons. Bollier et al. (2019) justify the need of comprehending this relational approach as the sine qua non-condition indicating "new ways of thinking about value" (p.93). Patel's book *The value of Nothing: How to Reshape Market Society and Redefine Democracy*, (2010) similarly emphasised the power behind the "sociology of commons", which can guide us to a new way of experiencing life that surrounds us, in which building democratic interactions through commoning acquire an immeasurable value compared to ownership.

In a nutshell, this latest body of knowledge aims to overcome the economic and interpretation of commos as mere resources. What sets these authors apart from traditional approaches to commons is their way of analysing and conceiving commons as a locus and channel for apolitical struggle, collective action, and social emancipation (de Angelis, 2012; Harvey, 2013 in Moreira et al.2020, p.2, Bollier et al., 2019). These characteristics make the commons a powerful instrument for countering neoliberal systems and capitalist states.

2.1.3 From commons to commoning

Taken together, all those actors mention "commoning" to highlight the relational and social practice as a driving and defining element of commons (Linebaugh, 2008, Bauwens et al., 2017. p14, De Angelis, 2017, Helfrich, 2012). In fact, the reconceptualisation of commons in terms of *commoning* provides a more holistic understanding of its broader dimensions, such as social, environmental and political ones.

Linebaugh (2008) observed that "to speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst; the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, rather than as a noun, a substantive" (p. 279). Through this reflection, the author suggests that using the verb *commoning* is more appropriate to define the meaning of commons since it better conveys the concept as an activity rather than a mere natural resource (ibid.). Additionally, it better denotes the dependency of social relationships on nature. However, its connotation as an activity is not limited to pooling resources but it reveals the motivations prompting the decision of commoning. According to Bollier et al., (2014; 2019) first of all commoning stems from the simple desire of a collective of individuals to connect, build a relationship and engage in the management of a resource for the collective benefit. These relationships are not confined to inter-human but extend to human and nonhuman spheres, indicating the emergent need among humans to reconnect with the natural world (Bollier et al., 2019; Linebaugh, 2008, Esteva, 2014).

Moreover, the human-nature relationship embodies a deep inherent dimension: a relationship between present and future generations, whose relevance is particularly highlighted by Bollier

et al., (2019). There is widespread agreement that the use and appropriation of resources by current generations will determine the quality of life of tomorrow and affect future generations' capacity to benefit from environmental well-being. In this regard, commoning becomes an instrument to take inter-generational responsibilities not only focusing on satisfying present needs but also bearing in mind those of future generations. In other words, commoning practices manifest a willingness to concretely engage in respecting the right of future generations to benefit from a healthy and sustainable environment. While international policy frameworks coin definitions of sustainable development with no concrete examples of how to achieve them and profess intentions that are not pursued, commoning creates tangible examples of environmental equity and justice on the ground. These concepts are the bedrock of sustainable development, as well as the guidelines to be pursued in order to comply with the sustainability criteria (Vibhute, 1997). Therefore, commoning is also considered in light of its sustainability dimensions.

However, by referring to commoning authors insist on the synergies created by the community within this process. Bauwens et al., (2017) underline the leading role of civic society in the commoning practices with each member being a *productive commone*r contributing to the co-creation of " various commons that fit their passions, skillsets and needs" (p.9). Yet, Gibson - Graham et al. (2017, in Amin et al., 2016) evidence that communities are not just part of the process but also the outcome of commoning.

Along these lines, commoning becomes a channel of social emancipation and empowerment where each member of the community can put forward his own skills and values, thereby respecting the particular traits of each individual, but each contributing to create commons "as a whole unit" (De Angelis 2017, pp.230-231). The value stemming from these single units is clearly distinguishable from the *capitalist/state units (*ibid.). In general, de Angelis refers to these processes in terms of organic commoning to underline that its reproduction and development is the result of *power relations* influencing the structure (ibid, p.252). Focusing on these powers relations is crucial because it illustrates that the capacity to build the commons is under the control of the participating actors, and the intensity of the final outcome is determined by these collective efforts. In other words, Bollier et al. (2019, p.101) suggest that "we have the capacity to affect the process - to intensify commoning - at any given moment" (Bollier et al., 2019, p.101).

2.2 The role of the state

This section strives to explore some fundamental debates concerning the power relationships between the State, the market and the commons aiming to discover how these three establishments influence each other. The focus is set on some of the dilemmas pertaining to the relationships between the State and the commons, such as the role of the former in supporting the proliferation of commons.

2.2.1 Different manifestations of the State

Providing a definition of the state is a complex task, as it is with commons. In the literature, there are multiple definitions varying from the conceptualisation of the absolute state, the modern state to the more recent manifestations with no clear boundaries and various *polities*[2], such as the European Union and also civil society organisations.

The conception of the state that is dominant in our time roots back to the Middle Ages. From those historical times until the modern nation-states, the concept of the 'absolute state' is associated with sovereignty, a specific territory that is governed by a politically dominating authority that poses certain hierarchies (Mann, 2003). This is similar to the way Weber defines the modern state as a compulsory political organisation with continuous operations and a monopoly of authoritative rule-making within a bounded territory (Weber 1921/1978:54, in Hay et al., 2022). According to Mann (2008 in Brenner et al., 2008), this form of state embodies 4 elements: 1) diverse institutions; 2) a centrality ruling the political relations; 3) a territorial area defined by boundaries; 4) "a monopoly of authoritative binding rule-making" (p. 53).

More recently, many authors providing definitions and analysing State theories have focused on the evolution of the State after 1900 witnessing the proliferation of financial markets and multinational corporations. This conjuncture combined with globalisation undermined the power of Nation-States that no longer rely on territorial extension and population density but on capital and technological knowledge (Portinaro, 2005). However, it would be misleading to think that some sort of incompatibility exists between these multinational companies and the Nation States: the opposite is true as States themselves take advantage of international organisations. The role of the European Union figures within these dynamics considering its contribution to shaping State's reliance on supranational governance systems. As a result of the integration process between states, which lead to the creation of the European Union, many of the States' responsibilities have been delegated to higher institutions, which in turn are co-opted by lobby groups and multinational companies whose power in the decision-making process exceeds State's power. On the other hand, starting from 1960, countries have witnessed the development of Civil society organizations, which in turn led to the increase in civic and corporate power. Bauwens et al. (2017) refer to such organisations as contributory communities, and their grouping around commons define somehow as a " challenge to the existing system" (p.23).

What is important to grasp from those trends is the difficulty in defining what are the States today and identifying them with one single apparatus. In fact, some academics focus on internal

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[2] a polity can be "a form of government or organization of a state, church, society, etc; constitution; a politically organized society, state, city, etc; the management of public or civil affairs; political organization" (Collin's dictionary, n.d)

governance while others investigate the supranational dimension. What is interesting to notice is the belief that state sovereignty is exposed to challenges in both those dimensions and this is the result of the trends outlined above, which Jessop (2016) refers to as the "recalling of authority" and the "blurring of public-private boundaries" (p.74). They are nothing else than powers traditionally "exercised by national sovereign States are now delegated downwards, moved sideways to cross-border arrangements, pooled or transferred to supranational institutions" (ibid.). In fact, Weston et al., (2013) suggest that while the idea of the "State as a system of power" might be preserved in the future, there might be a change in the "nature of its sovereignty" (p.227). Some trends like distrust in the central government and the political power of the States can lead to contestations and social pressure calling for downsizing of the state's sovereignty in favour of local and regional forms of authority " *and up to the global level to manage global common-pool resources more effectively*" (ibid. p.227). In fact, the rise of the Nation-State has been criticised in light of the process of centralization of power it led to. Their expansion, and transformation to models like welfare states, resulted in a concentration of many social responsibilities previously controlled by communities themselves (Biehl et Bookchin, 2009, p.9).

The constantly changing and dynamic nature of all elements that constitute a State, i.e. power and sovereignty, governance, the impact of intra-national and supra-national organizations and institutions, etc. justifies the complexity of the state's definition. As Jessop puts it, the state is differentiated by time and place but also internally variegated (2016).

2.2.2 The market and the capitalist State

*"Capital and the State have since the start lived in symbiosis, in a process of co-evolution and mutual dependency. While capital depends on the State to accumulate, conversely, the State depends on such accumulation (and on economic growth more generally) to finance the services it provides to the population and thus to maintain its legitimacy (*Moulaert et al. 2022, p. 10). The state's incapacity to address environmental issues or the increase in poverty and inequalities is a consequence of its interdependence with the market (ibid.). In fact, addressing these issues would imply a much more profound restructuring of the market economy *"than what a 'competitive' State could afford"* (Moulaert et al. 2022, p. 10). So how, precisely, is the capitalist state implicated in the expanded reproduction of capital?

Firstly, we might point to the fact that capital is fragmented into a large number of competitive units, yet crucially relies on certain generic conditions being satisfied if the surplus value is to be extracted from labour and profit secured (Altvater, 1973). The state is, in short, a response to capitalism's collective action problem. Since a capitalist economy without rules is very unstable and can fail, rules are provided by states, with the underpinnings of dominant market actors. This process leads to the marketisation of several - if not all - activities of everyday life, such as the privatization of land, services, and resources, etc., thereby determining the emergence of the capitalist state.

The relationship between the Market and the State is thoroughly explored by the institutionalist political economy school of thought that seeks to demonstrate how markets can be considered political outcomes. Specifically, political economists examine which regulations, interventions and tools are adopted by the State, their purpose and finally who benefits from them or in other words, "whose interests are protected as *rights* by the state" (Hodgson 1988; Medema et al. 1999, in Raudla 2014, p.6). Power is considered an intrinsic element in determining these relations, thereby understanding how it is exercised, further allows discerning how rights are allocated, and how in turn these rights determine the distribution of power in society (Acemoglu et al. 2005; Furubotn and Richter 1997; Medema et al. 1999, in Raudla, 2014, pp.4-6). In this context, the state's power is determined by its ability to control actors' incentives and consequently guide individuals' behaviours through the derived cost and benefits of each action (ibid.). An empirical example reported by Chang (2002) is determined for instance by the role of the European r*egulations, safety, and import contents* in impacting the price of products on the Markets (p. 12).

There are several important elements to grasp from this relationship. First, as Ugo Mattei (2011, in Bollier, 2011) argues, the collusion of state and market transformed the state into "a market among many", thereby highlighting the fallacy of believing that the state is effectively democratic and responsive to common interests since is it dominated by corporations "on both sides of the equation". The second implication is provided by Bollier et al. (2019) who underline that the market has produced a diverse set of strategies for countering social movements calling for change (p.4). It partly addresses some social needs, but only by charging additional costs to someone else (ibid.). What does this mean? To put it in Bollier et al.'s (2019) words " *Freedom is played against fairness, or vice-versa, and each in turn is played off against the needs of Mother Earth*" (p.4). In fact, through this relationship the market is often exempted from the internalisation of negative externalities, such ah environmental degradation, CO_2 emission, and the intensive extraction of resources. As a result, capitalism repeatedly hinders calls for systemic change (ibid.).

2.2.3 Commoning: moving beyond the capitalist state

In light of the aforementioned implications, it appears evident that current systems are incapable of addressing humanity's needs, thus calling for transformative changes. However, as argued by Esteva (2014) it is unrealistic to rely on conventional paths for a radical transformation (p.i156) since it is not possible to "separate the means from the ends" (Esteva, 1987, p.148). He suggests that it is not only necessary to bring about transformative changes, but is most of all important to "change the way to change" (ibid.). This social realm bolsters the need for commoning practices in view of their ability to deliver tangible pathways and a paradigm shift in various dimensions of society.

The commons, as illustrated in the previous section, stand up as a *political arena* that strives to provide solutions to people's struggles in a context where Nation-State flanked by the Markets, is lagging in addressing them. Their reproduction in today's societies is being

increasingly invoked precisely in light of their differences with the private-public agencies and with neoliberal policies. In fact, the newly debated commons, aspire to set up an alternative governance model to the one offered by the private-public, based on self - organisation and autonomy oriented towards the pursuit of equity, social justice, mutual solidarity and open participatory systems (Foster & Iaionne, 2018, p.3; Bauwens et al., 2017; Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; De Angelis, 2017). The outcome of this new political force is a generative space that " *continually creates and activates new forms of difference, resulting in a perpetual revolution*" (Hartzog 2020, p.279). This space must be understood as a place "*where we empower, recognize, and celebrate horizontality and diversity, rather than seek to impose conformance to hierarchy and similarity*" (ibid., p.279). The incredible force of commoning lies in its capacity of bringing together a multitude of struggles and showing that commoning provides solutions for all of them. Hartzog (2020) refers to the effect resulting from the synergy created from comms and cooperation as "The Difference Engine" (ibid.)

In practical terms, commoning practices can foster transformative changes in multiple dimensions and sectors of society. First, they can function as tools for the creation of new production systems to oppose the ongoing commodification of common goods, capitalism and authoritarian state systems (De Angelis, 2017; Caffentzis and Federici, 2014). Caffentzis and Federici (2014) argue that commons are "no longer built on a competitive principle, but on the principle of collective solidarity" (p. i100-101). In this way, they pave the way to revolutionary models of participation in the market, different from individualism or corporatism" (Caffentzis, 2010).

The production system envisioned through commons rationales would result in the democratisation of the means of production, based on participatory principles rather than following a hierarchical design. It manages to deliver socioeconomic benefits while simultaneously respecting planetary boundaries (Esteva, 2014). The market fostered by commoning activities would take the form of a *generative economy* geared toward the *"*accumulation of capital; or alternatively, where the accumulation of capital directly serves the accumulation of the commons" (Bauwens et al. 2017, p.51). This, in turn, would lead to the creation of "collective intellectual production" jeopardised by the current system of enclosures driven by capitalism (De Angelis, 2017 pp.168-170). The ambition of a similar economic model is to achieve sustainable livelihoods while respecting the natural environment by increasing non-commodity goods and services, resulting in a challenge to the traditional competitive economy founded on extractive practices of natural resources (Bauwens et al., 2017). Moreover, commoning can stimulate the creation of new rules governing the market, concerned with environmental issues, emphasising the quality of products, and the producers' livelihoods and minimising the transportation distance of goods (De Angelis, 2017). This has become increasingly urgent in the context of the depletion of natural resources leading to significant risks to social and environmental well-being, such as food insecurity, health issues, increasing shocks in temperatures and climate change among others (Vivero Pol et al., 2019).

Next to fulfilling primary and economic needs, commons produce social well-being in terms of "moral legitimacy, social consensus and participation, equity, resilience, social cohesion and social justice" (Bloemen & Hammerstein, 2017, p.6). These criteria are advocated more

than ever to counter the State's and markets' greed for GDP growth and incapacity to get rid of poor economic criteria which do not take into account the real social welfare of citizens. The proliferation of commons would on the contrary provide benefits that go beyond the national economic competitiveness which often struggles to deliver the basic need for the most vulnerable people within the society. To fill this gap, commoning would significantly boost local economies through the production of short and local supply chains and localized projects (De Angelis, 2017). The strength of commoning resides in its ability to mobilise *existing skills* and pool *existing resources* in a specific territorial context creating local synergies beneficial to promote growth in disadvantaged regions (ibid., pp.251-252). Ultimately, other qualitative *rewards* and benefits would result from these activities, such as the pleasure of learning from each other, and the motivation to preserve commoning and being part of the association, all representing valuable leverages against the alienated relationships prevailing today (De Angelis, 2017, p.235). The renewed interest in the social commons is due to the mutual help developed via the communities' dynamics and it depicts a sort of "mutualization of risk" as well as leverage to collectively empower the workers so they can be legally managed by cooperatives (Bauwens 2017, p. 15).

Collectivism is perhaps the most important force to contrast individualism and the alienation of labour existing in the present economic system. As suggested by Baginski (1907, n.d.) "the individual reaches the highest level of his development through cooperation with other individuals", or as expressed by Bollier (2019) the world must be understood as an aggregation of *reciprocal specifications* and where each action is impacted by other actions (p.49). Biehl and Bookchin (1998) argued that economic pressures have robbed people of their leisure time, making them increasingly isolated and alienated from communities. Thus, commons, which are based on communitarian synergies, can provide a real breakthrough in the mass society isolating individuals. To date, Bauwens et al. (2019), sought to analyse how the transition from a market-based society to peer-to-peer social dynamics occurs (p. 50).

Other authors highlight commoning's potential in delivering environmental benefits and contributing to the decrease of the material footprint of society. Bauwens and Niaros (2017) outline some examples functional to this purpose. Among others, mutualization of infrastructure, and relocalization of production, are conceived as potential leverages to decrease society's material footprint. For example, production relocalisation could contribute on one side to increasing the supply of organic-local products while potentially re-industrialising in a sustainable way region that have to undergo delocalization processes (Bauwens and Niaros, 2017, p.22). An example provided by Bauwens and Niaros (2017) is the project "Lunch met LE" adopted in Ghent aiming at supplying public schools meals with local and organic food (p. 22). More in general, commoning activities enable to restore the threatened relationship between humans and nature.

2.3 Re-commoning food: challenging the dominant agro-industry 'within' or 'without' the state?

One of the crucial sectors, where the impact of the capitalist development model is alarming, while commoning initiatives seem a promising alternative towards a more sustainable, nature and human-friendly path, is food production. The main concerns of our days are the increase in ecological breakdown and the increase in food insecurity, which threatens the survival of billions of people. According to FAO et al., (2022) in 2021, 2.3 billion people were estimated to be food insecure, covering 29.3% of the global population. Next to food insecurity, the global population is facing obesity, and diet-related chronic diseases and is exposed to unhealthy diets (GAIN 2013, in Vivero Pol, 2013). To date, the conventional measures adopted by markets and states to cope with these challenges resulted to be inefficient (ibid.). For example, they advocate for an increase in food production, which in turn, depends on technological and external inputs, such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides. As a result, industrial agriculture became the response to food-related concerns, neglecting how it functions and the consequences of its operations, which lead to a new set of problems such as environmental breakdown, disease epidemics, and soil damage, all worsening human life conditions (IPES - FOOD, 2016). Bottom-up initiatives emerge with an increasing frequency calling for collective action and community involvement towards the transformation of the current agri-food system to provide tangible long-term solutions to global crises. Moreover, there is another layer of analysis that must be discerned to understand the complexity of food systems, and it is rooted in the array of components generating it, such as the "land, seeds, gender, energy, labour, landscape, the convivial act of eating, food waste " (Vivero Pol et al., 2019, p. 11). To date, these multiple elements intrinsic to food and the multiple dynamics generating it are ignored due to commodification processes that have ascribed food a pure exchange value. According to Pettenati, Toldo and Ferrando (2019, in Vivero Pol et al., 2019) conceptualizing food as commons consists of rethinking and re-imagining all these elements through the lenses of commoning.

2.3.1 Food as Commons

Vivero Pol et al. (2018) have provided a significant contribution to the debate over food as commons with the publication of the "Handbook of Food as a Commons". Among others, the book explores the multiple facades of food commons and provides empirical examples of food commons worldwide. Although there is no clear definition or conceptualization of this concept, the food reflects forms of commons when " its production and distribution responds to a logic of solidarity and mutual help, rather than to a logic of competition and exclusion, because people recognize mutual neediness and the essentiality of eating" (De Schutter et al., 2018, p.384). On a general note, food commoning consists of a radical shift in the production, processing, distribution and value determination of food (ibid.). For this reason, food commons can be regarded as a conceptual umbrella for all those social innovations identified under the name of alternative food practices, AFPs (Vivero Pol, 2013). For instance, agricultural

practices such as CSAs, food hubs and community gardens, cooperatives, are some examples of food commons (Esteva, 2014, pp.i156-i157; Vivero Pol, 2013; De Schutter et al., 2018). All those social enterprises encompass the vision of food as a commodity, are based on collaborative governance of the production and allocation of food, and are connected by a strong sense of community and civic engagement whose interests are placed at the centre of their activities (ibid.). In this way, food commons embody promising solutions to food insecurity, malnutrition, hunger (Vivero Pol, 2013), unstainable and unfair urban food systems (Morrow, 2019), and unsustainable agricultural practices (Vivero Pol, 2019). Just like any other form of common-based initiatives, food commons rely on "collective governance, rational utilization of natural resources and a fair distribution of revenues and food products " (Alex Pazaitis and Michel Bauwens in Vivero Pol et al., 2019, p.10). There is clearly a self-institutional dimension in the production of food, in contrast with the market rules.

In the literature on AFNs, some scholars further refer to more institutionalised initiatives that resemble more to participatory governance processes and collective efforts to develop food policies, such as bottom-up food strategies and food councils that pave the way for differentiated food systems (Blay-Palmer, 2010; Mansfield & Mendes, 2013; Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015; Morgan, 2013). All types of "AFN agents usually share the collective will to change or build alternatives to the status quo of mainstream food provision systems and their governance" (Manganelli et al., 2020). Two main observations have to be highlighted here. First, food commons lack a specific definition. This is purposely done by most scholars since commons are context-specific and are defined in different ways by different countries, regions, legal frameworks and policies. Second, the degree of institutionalization poses the need to examine to which extent state institutions are involved in food commoning, and what this involvement implies for the commons. Does the state's intervention facilitate food commoning and support the proliferation of such initiatives? Or does the state confine the development of food commons further regulating and predefining their contribution to a wider socio-political and environmental change?

2.3.2 State's reproduction of the dominant agro-industrial food system

The state constitutes the legal-institutional context that embeds commons development. In the case of food production and supply chain, the state is regulating a number of aspects, such as the access to agricultural land, rate of imports and exports, participation of actors in food decision making etc. creating an often-hostile environment for locally grown food commons. This occurs through an array of practices adopted by State institutions which regulate agri-food governance. For example, at the European Union level, the CAP policies greatly influence agri-food governance (La Via Campesina, 2021; Nyéléni, 2020). The CAP is an instrument that organises the distribution of European funds for agriculture and the allocation of subsidies system impacts the agriculture market development (ibid.). The subsidies are distributed in a way that benefits big landowners at the expense of small-scale agriculture (La Via Campesina, 2021). As a result, this contributed to further exacerbating the process of commodification of

land and natural resources, jeopardizing the potential of growth for food commons initiatives. Moreover, the agro-industrial food system is additionally reproduced through states' institutional channels in which big corporations and lobby groups have privileged access and can thereby play a leading role in the policy-making process (Bloemen & Hammerstein, 2017, p.10; Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020). For example, this is what occurred with the most recent attempts to reform the CAP to make it compatible with the Farm2Fork strategy, blocked by lobby groups such as Copa - Cogeca[3] colossus that benefit from the maintenance of the status quo (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020). The problem resulting from this lobbying pressure is the ability of agro-industrial corporations to deliver "convincing narratives which portray them as champions of the 'low-cost' economy", thereby able to feed the world, as long as they are exempted from internalizing negative externalities (De Schutter et al., 2019, p.379). Consequently, these actors overshadow the real problems (therefore the possibility to develop systemic solutions) such as difficult and unequal access to food, and the origin of poor diets etc (IPES- FOOD, 2016, p.8; Vivero Pol, 2013). States more specifically, institutions, settle for the solutions brought to the discussion tables by these actors, thus reproducing the problems the problem caused by intensive agriculture practices.

In other words, the state instruments/policy, according to IPES-FOOD (2016), contribute to the creation of "feedback loops", otherwise referred to as "lock-in" systems that "allow industrial agriculture and agribusiness to stay in place" while further strengthening similar farming models (p.6). In addition to the aforementioned "feed the world narrative", another lock-in is determined by the "expectation of cheap food", an outcome created through the convergence of multiple factors, such as industrial agriculture, and everchanging consumer habits leading to *mass food retailing* (IPES, 2016, pp.6-7). As a consequence, cheap food is demanded by the market, and alternatives that do not meet these standards struggle to enter the food market. Regulations and laws on food contribute to the creation of such standards favouring big actors at the expense of small producers.

The table below summarizes the lock-ins[4] identified by the IPES-FOOD (2016) and offers some solutions and policy recommendations to transform them towards fairer sustainable food systems[5].

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[3] Copa Cogeca is a "hybrid lobbying group consisting of farmers' unions and companies which often sides with pesticide giants like BASF, Bayer-Monsanto and Syngenta, and with food multinationals like Mondelez, Nestlé, and Unilever" (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020).
[4] The factors enabling the current agro-industrial system to remain in place.
[5] Although these factors are not specifically pointing at the creation of food commons, I believe that they can steer the transformation of a fairer food system and thus create the adequate framework for food commons to strive in.

Figure 1: Table summarizing the "lock-ins and their entry points for change". (Source: IPES-FOOD, 2016, p.12)
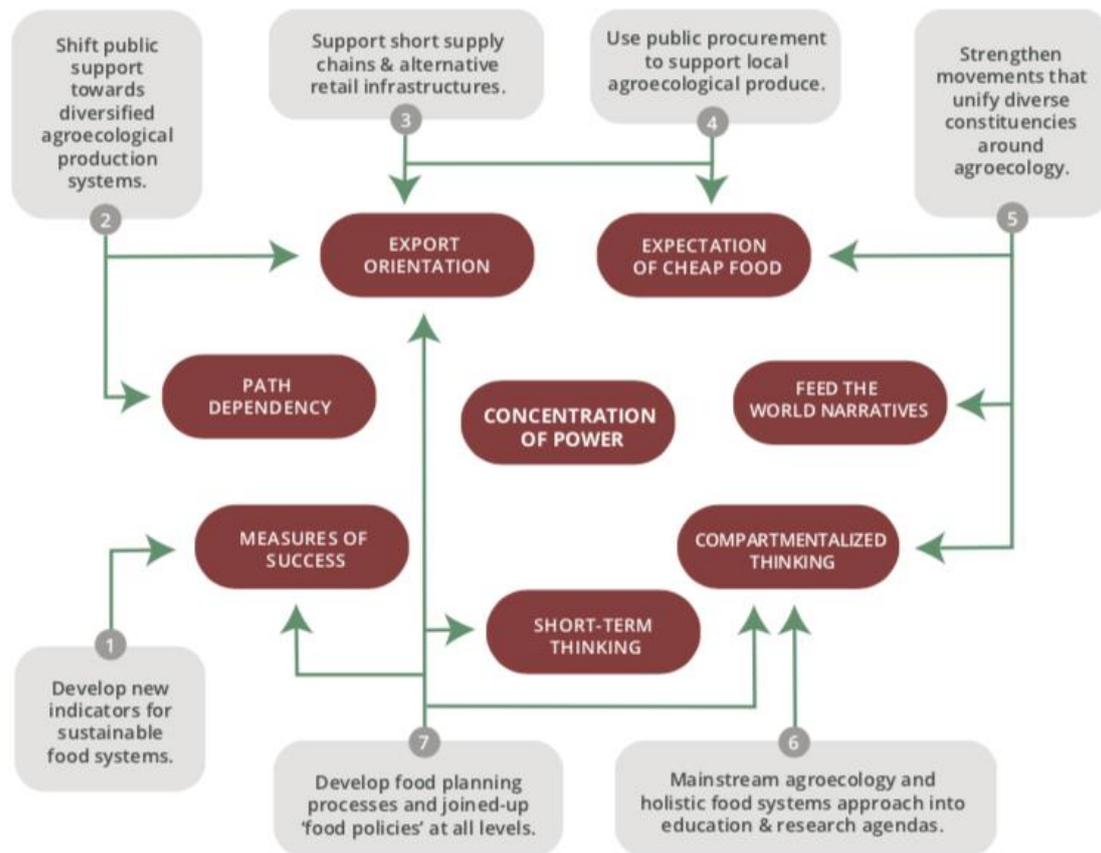
To sum up, the main problems perpetuated by States do not stem purely from State's institutional design but rather from the mechanism, policies and public actions they endorse. It is through such actions that States interact with communitarian and civic projects and they show to what extent they will benefit certain actors rather than others.

2.3.3 State-Commons partnership

Within the debate on what role the state should play in enhancing the reproduction of the commons, numerous positions have been articulated by academics. For some, the materialization of commons can only be ensured through the support of the State apparatus, which must guarantee its reproduction. In this case, the state must allocate its instruments and capacities to fulfil the needs of the commoners. However, this type of relationship is not one-sided but involves reciprocal dynamics since it implies the active collaboration of both the State and the commons to satisfy a larger project, the welfare of individuals. The work of Bauwens,

Carsons and Bollier provides fruitful insights into viable alternatives to the current capitalism paradigm, through the conceptualization of commoning practices at the municipal level. In detail, Bauwen's (2017) 'Partner-State' and Carson's (2018) 'counter-institution' notions referring to the municipality, analyse the role of the former in providing a fertile ground for the proliferation of commoning practices that "enable small group dynamics at higher levels of complexity and enable the reclamation of power" (Carson, 2018, p.25). This argument is supported by De Schutter and Vivero Pol (2019), who consider that the transition to food commons should be enhanced by a partnering state, whose role is to stimulate social innovation aimed at reconceptualising food as "a public good" (p. 386). Authors like Weston and Bollier envision the coexistence of commons in a market-state framework, as a third sector (Weston and Bollier, 2013). However, for the commons to succeed and overcome the hegemonic market power, the State is required to adopt sanctions and any other measures necessary to encourage their establishment. To put it in the authors' words, the state has the role to "sustain, protect and assist the commons" (Weston and Bollier, 2013, p.8).

Many authors sought to understand which institutional design would be more appropriate to support common-based projects. Bollier et al. (2016) indicatively formulate the following questions in this respect: *"How can state power be re-imagined and altered in ways that support commoning? What are the strategies for the "commonification" of the state? How might a commons-based state work?"* (p.30). Bauwens et al. (2019) argue that the transition to a common-based society calls for a reconstruction of the State's institutional framework, which leads to the Partner-State model, or Partner - City if realised on the urban scale. This process of transformation should: 1) set the commons at the core of its interests, rather than the market, with the civic society representing the arena of this newly designed institutions; 2) steer the creation of a generative market no longer geared toward the capital accumulation but to the expansion of commons; 3) lead to the creation of "common good institutions" whose objective is to ensure the preservation of "individual and social autonomy" (Bauwens et al., 2019, p.9). The different stages guiding this shift of paradigm demand active collaboration between the commoners and the common good institutions, (ibid.). This structure should be secured by a contract stipulated between the commons and the state (ibid.).

To make this institutional organisation truly successful, socio-ecological needs should be integrated into its decision-making process (Bauwens et al., 2019, p.11). These dimensions are already incorporated in food commons committed to the regenerative management of resources alongside the fulfilment of social needs. The mechanisms adopted by a partnering- city to enhance the production of food commons, should get rid of "command and control" instruments (Carson, 2018 p.29- 30; Bauwens et al., 2019). Instead, the state /city should empower the citizens "to make decisions, to orientate choices, rules and priorities, reappropriating themselves of the very possibility of governing and managing goods and services in a participatory manner" (Carson, 2018, p.31). For example, the means and resources to self-governing the commons should be provided, such as infrastructure, access to natural resources etc. (Bowens, 2012, p.30 in Carson, 2018; Vivero Pol et al., 2019). The importance of providing the means instead of operating as a paternalist state lies in the commons' need to

preserve their autonomy. In fact, the final goal of the Partner State is to directly "empower and enable civil society to be autonomously productive" (Bauwens, 2009 in Carson, 2018, p.29).

The enabling stated for food commons envisioned by Schutter et al., (2019) combines features from the partner state described by Bauwens and an entrepreneurial state, each fulfilling specific tasks. While the entrepreneurial state should provide funding to foster sustainable consumption, the partner state should steer the creation of new commons, provide incentives, and facilitate legal frameworks for commons management (De Schutter et al. 2019, p.387). There are examples of local authorities supporting the development of local food chains and AFPs. A good example is the urban food policy adopted by the municipality of Ghent, Belgium, in 2013, which promotes and supports small-scale farming (Vandermaelen et al., 2022). Specifically, public lands were made available to urban-focused agricultural initiatives following the municipality's call for proposals in 2017 (ibid, p.4). Public land can be used as a tool to assist the development of innovative food actors (IPES-Food, 2016).

2.3.4 The "no-State" approach

In many circumstances, the State proves to be incapable of providing a friendly legal-institutional context for the commons to arise and evolve. In their form as "free associations of producers," commons rely on self-organization and autonomy for their survival which might be threatened by the state (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014, p. i101). In light of their divergences with the Market state operational functioning and values, institutions might not represent the optimal channel for their upscaling. Caffentzis warns against the state's strategy to co-opt commons and use them as "another pathway for capitalism" or to serve its own interests (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014, p.i100; Caffentzis 2004 in De Angelis 2017 p.170). This is true in light of the fact that state bureaucracies are unprepared and do not have the right tools to manage "an effective coordination of complex systems, such as food systems" (De Schutter et al., 2019, p.379). In other words, while the state might be of help by furnishing infrastructure, their "centralized knowledge" cannot replace the knowledge of local food actors considered as the only knowledge capable of understanding local needs and the ways to adapt to them (ibid.)

More in general, a no state approach is often favoured in the framework of community development systems by anarchist scholars. This has to do with the contrasting values that characterise the centralised power of the state from the needs of communities. If we were to read what could be the role of the state in enabling commons through anarchism lenses, the state apparatus would be incompatible with the need for self-organization, solidarity, trust and freedom professed by commons. The incompatibilities between local communities and states lie in the highly centralized power of the state, hierarchical institutions, and bureaucracies (Bookchin, X). For this reason, anarchist scholars imagine alternative spaces for social development that go beyond the state. For example, they envision a devolution of power toward local communities, an example being Bookchin's libertarian municipalism (Bookchin, x). Pierre-Joseph Proudhon' the federation of communities based on the distribution of powers, is also representative in this sense since the authors declare the need to reserve more rights for the citizen than for the state, and for local and provincial authorities than for the central power

(Proudhon, 1863 in Tarinski, n.d.) Rather than a state approach, they conceptualise different forms of institutional organisation tailored for the community's needs.

The problem with food commons lies in the hazardous environment they have to strive in. Agricultural and food processing industrialization, combined with globalization, have resulted in a significant increase in power concentration in various segments of the food chain (De Schutter et al., 2019). Nowadays, this power is mainly concentrated at the two sides of the chain: one being determined by the input providers and the other by the global retailers (ibid.). Markets' laws that neglect the importance of quality food and equal access to it, not to mention the complete disembeddness from environmental needs, like preservation of natural resources and soil fertility, are incompatible and constrain common's values (De Schutter et al., 2019). By allowing and supporting the functioning of the market and its competition rules, automatically food commons are excluded from such economic realms. Therefore, as Caffentzis argued, it is dangerous to think that the proliferation of commons could occur within institutional frameworks that created a hostile environment for the survival of commons (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014). It is no wonder that so far many fair-food-related initiatives have been denied in view of their incompatibility with the capitalist prevailing narratives (Wright, 2013, in Vivero Pol et al, 2019, p.3). As a matter of fact, the paradigm of food of commons praises different goals such as the democratisation of food, the achievement of food sovereignty and solidarity among producers and consumers (Vivero Pol et al., 2019).

In light of the previous analyses and debates in literature, this thesis will examine the role of the state in the case of Leuven.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The author of this thesis together with a group of 17 Master students and researchers at KU Leuven (Department of Architecture) conducted action research aimed at: (1) critically analysing the calls to further understand to what extent they support the development of AFPs, and (2) reacting to the open call by writing and submitting a collective proposal. The action envisaged mobilizing a plethora of food actors in Leuven interested in collaborating in the development of a collective proposal. The research activities took place from March to May 2022 and included preparatory sessions, fieldwork, group workings, a public debate and the final submission to the Call. The entire action research exercise was named Leuven Gymkhana 4.0[6] and formed part of a series of research activities and episodes with different foci that had been developed by KUL researchers and academics. During the process, the research question evolved significantly through the interactions of the group with local stakeholders.

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[6] Leuven Gymkhana is the outcome of a collective exercise developed by Master and PhD students as part of the IMSDP module (The International Module in Spatial Development Planning). shttps://leuvengymkhana.wordpress.com/leuven-gymkhana-4-0/

3.1 Leuven Gymkhana 4.0 Action research and research methods

To investigate the case study, the research was carried out through various phases each including different methods. The action research methodology is not a linear process since it entails a "spiral of steps", which can be described as "iterative cycles of planning, action, and observation, and critical reflection about the results of the action" with the reflection phase setting the stage for the new spiral adding to the knowledge gained in the previous steps (Robson, 2002 in Moreira et al., 2020, p.5). The Leuven Gymkhana action research was an itineration of all these stages, each mobilizing a plethora of methods. The different steps can be summarised as follows:

1. To familiarise with the topic, the methods included a first-desk research, group work and collective reflection moments.
2. Invitation to stakeholders to collectively develop a proposal to submit and deliver a message/critique of the call to the City.
3. Due to time limitations there was not a lot of reaction. Fieldwork and informal talks with local actors: citizens in neighbourhood with community gardens, CSAs, cooperative food markets, local conventional farmers, etc.
4. Development of the critique to the Call and proposal to submit. Workshop and Working online. A second round of invitations to local food actors to co-write, read and comment on the critique and the proposal. Some of them did provide feedback.
5. Open debate. To present our critique and proposal. Some stakeholders appeared and we had round table discussions in groups.
6. Complete the proposal and submit it.

The first step consisted in familiarising with the topic through desk research analysis on the food actors pertaining to the AFPs in Leuven and the political landscape under which they operate. This stage included both individual and group work. The individual desk research included reviews of documents, papers, newspapers, articles, and policy papers related to land and agricultural policies in the European and Belgian contexts (e.g. EU, FAO, La Via Campesina, Urgenci, Government of Flanders, etc.). Collective research consisted of data collection on the food actors in Leuven, through website consultations (previous Leuven Gymkhana, Kortom Leuven, CSAs platforms, etc.). This information served to design a timeline showing which policies, tools, and instruments adopted at the political level could have explained the appearance of AFPs and what happened on the governance level in parallel with the emergence of such practices. Additionally, it helped to create a list of pertinent stakeholders for the aim of our investigation; the actors were then invited to collaborate with us and were contacted for interviews in the following phases.

Moreover, the desk research I conducted individually represented an important method to frame the first interview questions. In particular, the policy analysis was divided into local, national and supranational layers. To understand the local political dynamics that triggered the creation of the Call, I scrutinized the first Leuven Action plan "BAANBREKEND LEUVEN" which outlines the political ambitions of the current political coalition in Leuven.

Subsequently, the focus was set on the "Impact" law reform which determined the rules of the land lease contract. Furthermore, these territorial dynamics were analysed in the context of the European Common Agricultural Policy, thus an analysis of the functioning of CAP policies was made. On the one hand, land lease contracts in Belgium provided an overview of challenges associated with access to land rooted in the Patch that dates back to 1824. The understanding of this law reveals some of the issues related to land management, which consequently impacts the access to land for new farmers.

The data collection was followed by collective reflection moments, which brought together several insights and ideas, important to deliberate on the next steps of the action. It is important to mention that the actions were not pre-established but collectively decided during the reflection moments, an important characteristic of the action research method (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991, pp.78-83)

Figure 2: Group reflection moments. (Source: Action Research team)

Figure 3: Group reflection moments. (Source: Action Research team)

Figure 4: Group collective moments. (Source: Action Research team)

Figure 5: The creation of the timeline. (Source: Action Research team)

Throughout the collective debates, it was decided to develop a collective proposal to submit and deliver a message to the city by writing a critique of the call. This collective action was intended to be implemented in partnership with food actors in Leuven, who were invited to participate in the reflection and writing process. However, due to time constraints and the invitation did not receive a significant reaction, therefore during collective debates, it was decided to organize a fieldwork trip including informal talks with a plethora of local actors such as citizens in neighborhoods with community gardens, CSAs, cooperative food markets, organic markets and local conventional farmers. The students reiterated the invitation to collaborate on the proposal and interact with the following food actors:

1) group 1: visited the Naturlijik Fruit CSA and interacted with the respective farmers;
2) group 2: visited the short chain shop De Wikke and 2 CSAs (Boerencompagnie and Plukgeluk) and conducted informal interviews with their representatives;
3) group 3: visited several communities garden and interacted with the neighbours working on them, and conducted informal interviews with several food entrepreneurs at Hal 5 (which hosts restaurants and bars);
4) group 4: visited community gardens and some the plots of the first call, where informal talks with traditional farmers were conducted.

This field trip concluded with visits to the plots of the first call which represented an occasion to detect the primary issues related to the plots, such as their location, size, etc., and this information was used to build the critique. Several questions were raised during the interactions with the stakeholders and the students and in the collective reflection moments hold after the

field trips. Among these questions, the Action research focus is set upon the following ones: 1) To what extent is the Call challenging the dominant access to the land system in support of commons? 2) Do food commons initiatives have the capacity to proliferate outside the State?
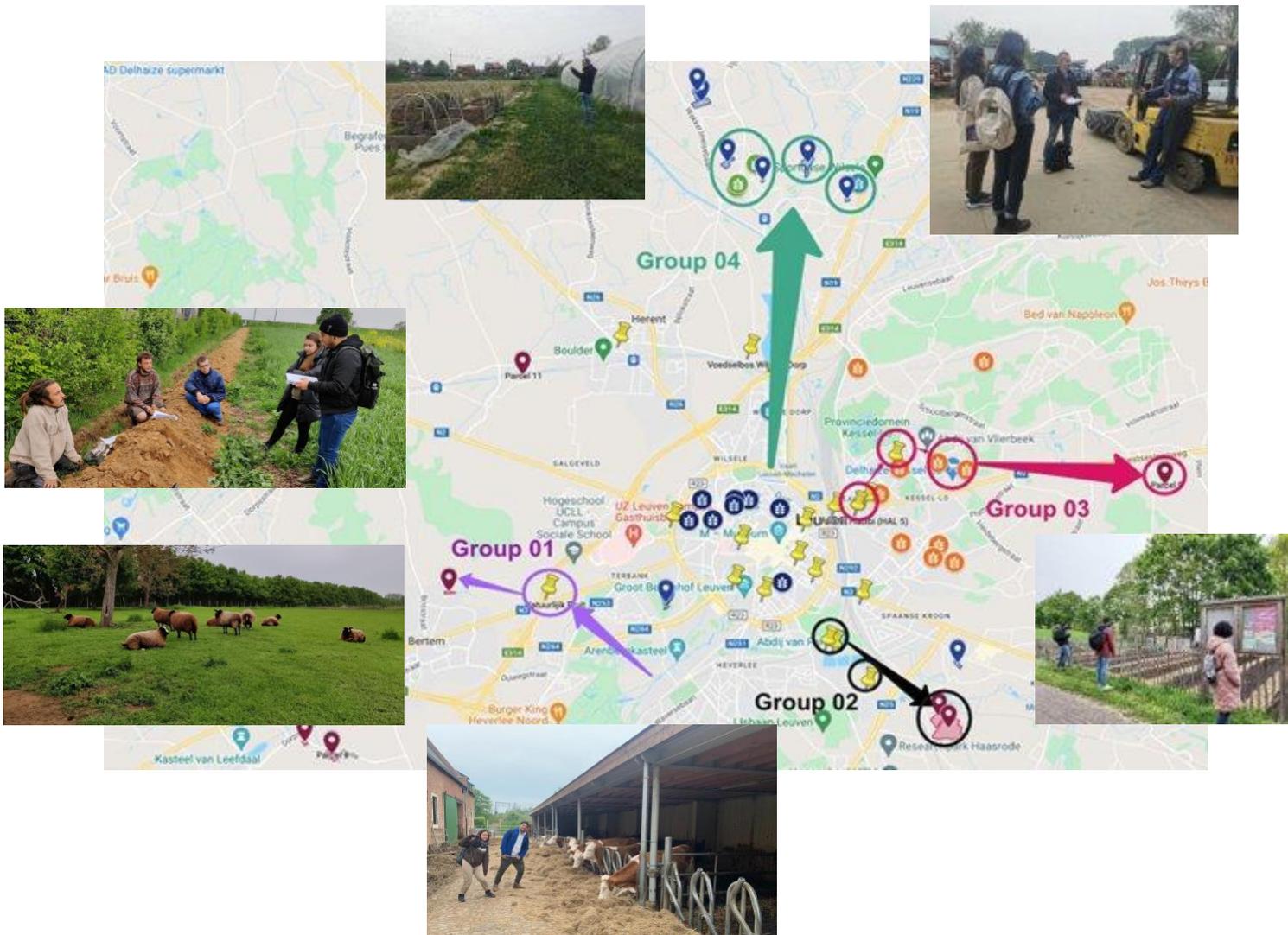
Figure 6: Map indicating the fieldtrip organisation. (Souce: Action research team)

Following the field trip, the team worked on developing a critical analysis of the call for proposal in an online document during a week-long workshop. Therefore, a second round of invitations to collaborate on critique and proposal analysis, through an online document, was sent to the food stakeholders. Feedback was provided by some of them but the participation was very limited. During the workshop, a final public event was also organised which took place in May.

Figure 7: Collective brainstorming after the fieldtrip. (Source: Action Research team)

The public event held in May aimed at gathering local food actors to deepen the reflections on the Call critique and proposal. The starting point of the collective discussion was a presentation showing our Collective proposal draft to the participants. The presentation was followed by table discussions with the participants in which the elements shown in the presentation were discussed and critically reflected upon, eventually leading to the reconsideration of previous ideas. The aim of this part of the research was to test with the invited stakeholders if the insights and ideas we have collected so far resonated with their experiences and needs. Collective reflection moments were organised through round table discussions in which the stakeholders expressed their opinions and provided recommendations for the proposal. In fact, the debate led to multiple changes, corrections, and adjustments to our critique and proposal, as well as to our assumption concerning the stakeholders' needs. The result of such collective dialogues sought to overcome the tension between the subject and object of study, which is a key element in the Action research approach. Fals Borda (1999) suggests that such distinction is dysfunctional for this empirical approach since "the researcher and the researched are not seen as two discrete, discordant, or antagonistic poles but rather, real thinking, feeling persons" (sentipensantes), whose views on the research experience could jointly be taken into account" (p.13). On the contrary, this methodological approach demonstrates that there is reciprocal respect and gratitude between the researchers and the participants that leads to a "subject-subject horizontal relationship" otherwise called "symmetric reciprocity" (Helles 1989, in Fals Borda 1999, p. 13). This collective way of conducting research allows achieving "more interesting, reliable and cross-referenced results" (Fals Borda, 1999, p. 14). However, in order to reach this symmetric relationship, it is necessary to overcome the communication barriers between the researcher and the researched, for this reason, we promoted a transparent and simplified communication tool, by sharing and giving open access to the document we were working on with the participants, all along the research, so that they could follow our work and contribute with their insights.

Figure 8: Leuven Gymkhana public event. (Source: Leuven Gymkhana)

The writing of the critique was completed in July and was sent to the municipality. In this phase, additional important sources contributing to building on the analysis of the Call were given by the archives related to last year's Call for proposals, whose access was provided by the municipality according to the principles of public transparency of Council provided by the Local government act (Art. 57). This enabled us to analyse the first call, examine which were the selection criteria, who were the members of the committee in charge of drafting the call for proposals, and the score obtained by each applicant. Most importantly, through the archives, I could review the projects that have applied the previous year and contact some applicants from the previous Call, and set up interviews with them. The information gathered by reviewing the archives contributed to obtaining further information on the modus operandi of the call (score, jury etc.) and the reasons behind its development, allowing us to search for the strengths and weaknesses which we considered as opportunities or obstacles for the AFPs' proliferation. In particular, we sought to understand which was the evolution from the first to the second call and which factors were improved. Keeping this in mind, our critique was built around those drawbacks. However, shortcomings of the call were further uncovered through the interviews with the applicants of the first call and some jury members.

Furthermore, the key method enriching the research consisted in organising 6 semi-structured interviews with a variety of stakeholders. Among the interviewees, there were 3 AFPs members, one policymaker, one Syndicate member and one member of OCMW. They all contributed to gathering first-hand insights, perceptions and information fundamental to the research outcome, which brought forth a complete analysis of the Call. Three main categories of interviewees were targeted as (1) Local Public Actors (LPA), (2) Private Actor (PA), and (3) Local Food Actors (LFA). In order to preserve anonymity abbreviated codes will be used to refer to all the interviewees. The following table provides an overview of the interviewees.

Name	LPA01	LPA02	PA01	LFA01	LFA02	LFA03
Category	OCMW representative, civil servant	City representative, Cabinet employee	Boerenbond representative	Food actor (Diary products producer)	Food actor (Nursery)	Food actor (CSA)

Table 2: : List of interviewees and role in the City of Leuven. (Source: Author)

The interviews conducted with local public actors intended to investigate the motivations behind their creation of the Call, the technicalities related to it, such as the evaluation criteria, the composition of the jury, and in general what this tool represented for them. The questions addressed to LPA01 were mainly historical, to understand the background of the land owned by OCMW and management practice. In fact, both the insights and the documents the interviewee shared with us after the interview furnished a more complete picture of the practices adopted by the organisation in terms of land management prior to the creation of the Call. Secondly, the information gathered through this interview was valuable to trace the history of the land owned by the OCMW and thereafter to locating this project within the practices developed so far by the OCMW. In other words, to understand whether the creation of such a project is an extraordinary instrument adopted by the organisation for specific purposes or whether it is part of a long-established practice. This, in turn, helped to assess if there is indeed interest from the municipality to invest in the expansion of commoning practices.

Similar questions were addressed to the other actors involved in the creation of the Call. In addition to that, they were asked questions on sustainability and about the targeted group of actors by the Call. Those questions resulted in an advantageous to detect which were the most important elements for the Jury. Beyond that, the interviewee PA01 was asked questions about the organisation of the Farmer syndicate, the trends within the syndicate and which categories of farmers were mostly represented, among others.

In addition to the institutional actors, interviews were set with 3 food producers pertaining to the AFPs classification. 2 of them are currently working on the OCMW plots from the first call, therefore they were asked questions on the potential of the Call to endorse the proliferation of AFPs, the issues and challenges they encountered during the application process and afterwards. The contribution of these actors was crucial to collecting ideas for the development of the Critique, as well as to the writing of our proposal. On the other hand, the interview with the CSA farmer, who was interested in applying to the 2nd call, was focused on analysing the critical issues that affect local producers and limit their ability to grow on the territory or that hinder the emergence of any new similar initiative.

3.2 Action research as a commoning process

The hallmark of this methodological approach is the role played by researchers in the analysis process, which consists of active participation encompassing the mere data collection and analysis usually used by traditional scientific approaches. In contrast to these limitations, the researchers following an action research approach, contribute "to a process of collective reflection, joint problematization, and further multi-actor co-creation that is both valuable for the academic field and the daily practices of the initiatives involved (Fontan et al., 2013 in Medina-Garcia et al., 2022)". The action research analysis is not limited to actor - observation but it demands direct involvement within the field of examination. In this way, researchers are not merely concerned about the final outcomes of the study, given that the process of knowledge gathering is as crucial as the research outcomes. Indeed, on the one hand, the process becomes an instrument to understand the problems in interplay and thus to obtain information, and on the other, it can stimulate "new ideas and practices among those involved in the field" (Konstantatos et al., 2013, in Medina - Garcia et al, 2022). Similarly, the Leuven Gymkhana group not only analysed the object of the research, the Calls for proposals, and the initiatives they triggered, but it contributed directly to influence the object under investigation, through collective mobilisation of food actors in meetings and informal talks, and by writing and submitting a critical analysis and proposing alternative recommendations to the call for proposals.

Collective knowledge building

"Can we be participative students and agents of change and work together to assist in the intellectual and political movement for people's self-reliance and empowerment? Can we join together to defend life and the pursuit of relevant, useful science? Can we commit ourselves as scholars and citizens to this epoch-making task?"

- Orlando Fals Borda, 1999, The Origins and Challenges of Participatory Action Research,

In essence, the collaboration process behind the Action research exercise was a practice of commoning itself that contributed both to gathering information on commoning dynamics in Leuven, while at the same time attempting to convey a political message. The combination of Action research theory and Commoning theory offers a good explanation for this argument. According to Borda's (1999) explanation of the elements entailed in action research and Bauwens et al.,'s (2017) characteristics of commons, it can be claimed that methodologically, both practices follow an approach based on direct intervention and collective contribution to achieving their goals. On the one hand, Borda (1999) observes that the accumulation of knowledge is reached through "direct involvement, intervention, or insertion into processes of social action" (p. 10). On the other hand, Bauwens et al. (2017) suggest that the commoning process entails collective collaboration and everyone can contribute to "co-constructing the various commons that fit their passions, skillsets and needs" (p.9). As a matter of fact, the Leuven Gymkhana group can be considered an empirical example of similar social dynamics, since all the participants were directly engaged in the research process and each participant contributed to enriching the process and the final output of the Action research by putting

forward his own skills and creativity. Secondly, both the origin of the Action research methodological approach and the commoning practices are rooted in bottom-up endeavours concerned with social, economic and environmental challenges. They both fight against hierarchical structures governing knowledge and human activities. Correspondingly, both practices become a tool for social emancipation and political empowerment of under-represented people. Likewise, our goal was to support the bottom-up food initiatives in Leuven and contribute to building up a political message that could support their struggles. Political collaboration is a determinant element characterising this epistemological method because, as argued by Zamosc (1986a, 33, in Robles et al., 2018), the researchers are legitimised to cooperate with the researched agents in view of this agreed "political collaboration" (p.602) Ultimately, participatory action research, just like commoning, can be considered a "philosophy of life", due to its ability to transform "its practitioners into thinking-feeling persons" (Fals Borda, 1999, p.17).

3.3 Scopes and limitations

Some limitations that influenced both the research and the action process should be noted.

The first challenge was determined by the difficulty in reaching out to additional food actors than those interviewed and involving them in the Action research project. In fact, this constraint was often due to farmers' scarcity of time during an extremely busy moment of the farming season, busy schedules and hectic management of the activities they are involved in. In fact, scarcity of time was identified as the main hindrance impeding food producers to participate in political and public meetings. Consequently, the food actors did not participate in the co-writing of the proposal to be delivered to the municipality, which was one of our goals. In addition, the several collective discussions that were meant to mobilise round tables with a plethora of food actors did not reach successful results. In fact, a general feeling of untrust and scepticism resulted from the first informal round of talks with the stakeholders. This might be explained by the fact that some actors, who were planning to react to the call individually, did not understand the reasons behind our interest to develop a collective proposal. As a matter of fact, our direct involvement in writing and submitting an application was considered an "obstacle" since we could have caused more competition to receive the plots and therefore, hindered the stakeholders' opportunity to win the plots. It appeared that the food actors we reached out did not really grasp our intentions. Therefore, to generalize the findings provided in this thesis, more AFPs should be contacted and an evaluation of the call should be made after the participants have settled on the plot and initiated their projects.

Another constraint limiting our intervention, namely the writing of the collective critique and proposal might have been determined by the language barrier. In fact, while it is true that we have tried to overcome the communication obstacle by sharing the online document with the food actors and we provided full access to edit the document, the language barrier remained since our document was drafted in English and the actors might have found it difficult to read or understand, considering that they mother tongue is Dutch.

Moreover, a general scepticism was revealed from the stakeholders' side related to the role of the University and research to take an active part in such projects. We (researchers) were perceived as catalysers of competition and our role was not clear. In fact, during the first informal meeting with the stakeholders, they appeared quite reluctant to speak with us and share their thoughts regarding the Call. This made us reflect on the role that the University should play in those contexts, and how we should get involved in those collective projects without being perceived as academics purely interested in collecting data rather than passionate researchers who strive to translate people's needs into their work. Perhaps, the most difficult part was determined exactly by this barrier which was constantly leading to questioning our positioning the socio-political impact of our research activities. In this regard, one of the interviewee's reflection on action research can be underlined here. The interviewee argued that the challenge in action research is to understand whose actions count; "the researcher's actions or the actions undertaken by the participants? And who decides this? Cause the researcher might also have a kind of drive to change things, Yeah, I guess it's not always easy to see that the things you want to change maybe are not the ones" (LFA01, 2022). These reflections were probably pointing at the fact that sometimes the participants' actions might be eclipsed by researchers' actions and thus affect the desired outcome.

Chapter 4: Case study analysis

In order to explore the role of the state in food commoning initiatives, the thesis examines the case of Leuven, in Flemish Brabant (Belgium). This chapter will seek to offer a broader overview of the political and institutional attempt of the city of Leuven in building a fertile ground for the growth of AFPs. To do so, the particular emphasis will be set on the Call for sustainable agricultural projects to assess to which degree such an instrument can foster sufficient conditions for AFPs' development. Therefore, in this chapter, I will first provide an overview of the AFPs existing in Leuven and explain why, in the context of this thesis, they are considered food commons. Second, I will provide a multi-level analysis of the circumstances and conditions, under which the Call was developed and operated (city, citizens, AFPs). To simplify the reading and understating of the moments that led to the creation of the instrument under investigation, a timeline tracing the evolution and development of AFFs, the broader political context in which they operate and their interactions with the city of Leuven, will be provided.

4.1 Food commoning dynamics in the city of Leuven

In the previous years, Leuven started being a centre of a twofold experimentation: (1) by active citizens, who claim their rights to improve and democratise the local food system, and (2) by the city that collaborates with citizens and organizations to co-designed policies aimed at transforming the local food system within the bigger framework of achieving climate neutrality. Those dynamics sparked the interest of a diversity of local food actors (who I will refer to as AFPs), who looked at these policies as an opportunity for their proliferation, as well as a joint effort to trigger a radical change in land and resources management. As a matter of fact, various actors ranging from City representatives, NGOs, AFPs, and actors involved in the local food production/consumption system joined forces to collectively develop Leuven's food strategy. In turn, the city of Leuven was engaged in the development of tools aiming at implementing the Food Strategy, while facilitating access to land for local food actors. In this context, among the tools mobilised by the city, there figures a Call for sustainable agricultural projects which was launched twice (in 2020 and 2022) with the aim of spurring the creation of sustainable and innovative agricultural projects to be implemented on lands owned by the OCMW. This thesis is drawn upon this specific tool and explores to which extent the Call supported and fostered the already existing food commoning dynamics in Leuven further contributing to AFPs proliferation.

The initiatives triggered by Leuven's Food strategy are oriented toward sustainable food production and food governance falling under the categorization of Alternative food practices. AFPs embody an umbrella of food actors, such as CSAs (Boerencompagnie, Natuurlijik Fruit, Ramselveld, De Witte Beek, 't Legummenhofke, Wakkere akker, 't Legumenhofke), cooperative food-markets (Farm, Content), food hubs, short-chain restaurants and shops (Barstan, Hal5, Weigewijs) and community gardens, operating and contributing to various

levels of the local food system. More specifically, the food actors that were analysed in the context of this thesis were:

1. *De Landgenoten*: "land comrades", a Flemish cooperative that attempts to secure access to land for organic farmers by purchasing land with resources from shareholders and donors and selling or leasing it to farmers for an affordable price. The Landgenoten can itself be considered a commoning initiative since the land is purchased by pooling savings from citizens, while shareholders and/or leaseholders are often members of CSAs.

2. CSA network in and around Leuven: a number of CSAs -some of which are even cooperating among them- that challenge the conventional agroindustrial food system by making autonomous and sustainable small-scale mixed organic farming a reality in collaboration with the local community. The CSAs that were examined are *Boerencompagnie* and *Natuurlijik Fruit* in Leuven, *Ramselveld* in Holsbeek, *De Witte Beek* in Bierbeek, 't Legummenhofke and Wakkere akker.

3. Cooperative food markets: *Content*, a cooperative that was involved in the development of the food strategy and works with local food producers and CSAs, and *Färm*, an organic grocery shop part of an international organic market chain.

4. *Food Hub*, a cooperative organic groceries store working with small and medium-sized producers to help improve biodiversity and support the local economy. The Food Hub closed in 2022. In the past, they run a kitchen providing a daily menu to nearby offices and eating-in options made with their own products near expiration date to reduce food waste (Leuven Gymkhana, n.d.).

5. Short-chain restaurants and shops: *Hal5*, a self-sustaining HUB co-created by 15 partners and financed by diverse investors and the neighbourhood; *Barstan*, restaurant working with local farmers and CSAs; Weigewijs.

6. Neighbours involved in *Community Gardens*, a project coordinated by the City of Leuven to support community development and gardening.

7. Food-related NGOs and collaborative platforms: *Rikolto*, an NGO working with farmers, companies, scientists and governments towards a more sustainable food system, and *Kortom* Leuven, a platform and a webshop for short-chain food supply bringing together food producers and consumers who want to purchase local food products.

What differentiates these practices apart from the industrial food systems is the direct relationship between the producer and consumer, resulting in the elimination of intermediaries and thus overcoming the issue of concentration of power in other parts of the food chain (Vivero Pol, 2017). An example of a production scheme falling under this category of food network is the CSA farm, which, among other things, creates a direct relationship between producers and consumers, by allowing the consumers to self-harvest the food at the farms. In this way, land overcomes its mere food production function, in favour of a broader set of purposes, such as recreational space where it is possible to relax and play at the same time as using it to produce food. It is worth nothing to emphasize that the production model of those

farming schemes is virtuously committed to complying with environmental needs and ensuring ecosystem services.

Despite the benefits provided by these alternative food systems, they are confronted with many challenges, such as difficult access to natural resources fundamental to their survival. Next to the difficult access to resources, AFPs' production model is also threatened by strict regulations and food standardisation mechanisms, imposing labels of food, certain safety rules and among others, defining certain production requirements to be able to access the food market. This is the case, for example, of agricultural schemes like CSAs, which, in case of overproduction exceeding the needs of their members, they can only sell to third parties if they reach a certain percentage of the total harvest (informal meeting). This, however, turns out to be a constraint for farmers, who cannot guarantee how much food will be produced each year and whether there will be enough to sell on the market in addition to satisfying their members' shares (LP03; informal meeting with a CSA farmer). These alternative food schemes struggle to access other market strategies in addition to direct sales. Their struggles are not limited to being included in the market, but fighting against the progressive commodification of land and food, which contributes to deteriorating their ability to survive. Commodification transformed the land into a disputed territory between multiple actors, among which AFPSs, and this is reflected in the high prices of land, ranging from €50,000 to €80,000 per hectare, and reaching up to €100,000 (Segers 2017 in Urgenci 2017, p.16). For this reason, it is challenging for AFPs farmers to find affordable agricultural land and to start or expand their agricultural production. To overcome this issue, organisations and cooperatives, like 'De Landgenoten' highly facilitate the access of AFPs to land further contributing to the wider food commoning landscape.

In addition to these dynamics, AFPs' support is often hindered by the lack of institutional support which fails to materialize due to various opposing forces (Manganelli et al., 2019). One of the interviewed food actors remarked that even the notification of projects or meetings that might be of interest to them is poorly communicated by the municipality. He argued that " [they] have to put in a lot of work to discover if there's a meeting, where it is going to be, who's interested? (...) It would be nice if we, all the small farmers around Leuven would receive an official mail from Leuven" (LP03). In fact, farmers who are not members of farmers' associations or syndicates face difficult access to information, resulting in their exclusion from many projects, initiatives, or institutional meetings that could be of interest to them.

4.2 Policy context: regulating the access to land and the food system

<u>European level</u>

As evidenced by the Leuven example, land has emerged as one of the most critical issues to be addressed within the debate on the prospects of AFPs proliferation in Leuven. Therefore, it is important to offer an overview of the political framework influencing the struggles and current dynamics of the development of AFPs. Although the case study is context-based in Leuven, a broader policy analysis must be undertaken as well. Especially in view of the fact that small-scale and organic farmers in the EU are highly affected by European agricultural policies as they receive few subsidies compared to large-scale farms, and are therefore the losers of these

policies (La Via Campesina, 2021; Fritz, 2011). Moreover, these dynamics are intertwined with already unfavourable local dynamics such as very high land prices (Segers 2017 in Urgenci 2017,).

The EU is deemed one of the responsible stakeholders in shaping the concentration of land trends across Europe. The need to mention those higher dynamics of power, which are enforced by laws and directives binding on the Member States, lies on their power to hold back agricultural schemes that do not comply with these laws. For example, the Common Agricultural Policy shapes and regulates substantially European agricultural politics, thus it plays an important role in the agricultural dynamics within European countries. First, its policies stimulate a great dependence of European farmers on subsidies (Fritz 2021). In fact, 80 % of the CAP budget it's allocated through direct payments to the farmers (European Union, n.d). Direct payments, in turn, are allocated according to the hectare per land criteria, meaning that the largest farms, in terms of owned hectares, are entitled to receive more subsidies (La Via Campesina, 2021; Nyéléni, 2021; Corporate Europea Observator, 2020). This system has, on the one hand, stimulated the concentration of land in the hands of a few people, and on the other hand, further exacerbated the commodification of land (La Via Campesina, 2021).

In fact, the CAP funds are unequally distributed. As reported by Fritz (2011), OECD revealed that in 2007, 75% of CAP funds went to 25% of the biggest European farms, while only 3% went to the smallest 25% (p.26). Direct payments show an even greater disparity; in fact, 85% of direct payments are allocated to 18% of the largest farms (ibid.) As a result of the CAP allocation system, large-scale "input-intensive and export-oriented" farms are favoured over small-scale farms that supply local markets (ibid.). More recent figures illustrate that in 2019, "74.9% of CAP beneficiaries in the EU-28 received less than EUR 5 000 in annual payments" while "a very small number of farms (121 844 out of a total of 6.3 million, i.e. 1.93%) received more than EUR 50 000 each," resulting in 12.67 billion € that correspond to 30.6% of the total direct aid paid out in 2019 (European Union, n.d).

The uneven distributions result in the loss of one quarter or 4.2 million farms of European farms that were recorded between 2005 and 2016; 85% of which were small farms with less than 5 ha (La Via Campesina, 2021). However, this data demonstrates that the Eu is responsible for the reproduction of an unfair agricultural system, in which only big and input-intensive farmers can strive. The same trend reflects the Flemish landscape with national statistics declaring that "compared to 2007, the number of agricultural holdings has decreased by slightly more than a quarter, a decrease of 3% per year on average" (Plateau et al., 2019, p.1). The most impacted category is small-scale farming whose activity interruption "leads to a constant increase in scale" (ibid.).

Moreover, the Farm2Fork strategy has more rigorous criteria for food production, but they struggle to become binding due to the strategy's incompatibility with the CAP policies (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020). The many attempts to reform the CAP were often blocked by the persistent pressure from lobbying organizations and corporate actors who exercise a dominant power in the European policy-making process and benefit from the maintenance of the status quo (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020; Bloemen &

Hammerstein, 2017; Nyéléni, 2021, p.35; La Via Campesina, 2021). To sum up, the European Union has its responsibility in reinforcing a certain mode of farming and promote farmers' dependence on subsidies. This, in turn, creates a hostile environment for the expansion of AFPs which struggle to tackle these dynamics of powers.

Another relevant institutional framework that should be underlined here is the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. The MUFPP is an international agreement signed by over 200 cities pursuing a transformative paradigm shift of their food systems (MUFPP, n.d.). Under the agreement, cities receive recommendations for actions, and among others, they are encouraged to "enhance the stakeholder participation" by expanding the political dialogue to multiple urban actors and to "provide access to municipal land for local agricultural production" (MUFPP, n.d). For a long time, the deployment of public land for urban food production has been invoked by international food actors as leverage for the transformation of food systems (IPES, 2017). Leuven is one of the cities that has pursued this action plan with the two calls for proposals providing public-owned land for agricultural projects. In fact, in October 2020, the city of Leuven signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and in the last years, the city is attempting to adopt strategies and projects, such as community lands trusts, that could to some extent provide institutional support for the proliferation of AFPs.

National level

The complexity of the Belgian political landscape adds to the difficult policy dynamics challenging the proliferation of AFPs. In fact, Belgium is a federal country, and policies are implemented at different levels of government, such as national, regional and local. The land use policies as well as the agricultural policies are under the jurisdiction of the regional levels (OECD, 2017; De Jong and Raus, 2020). In Flanders, the land dynamics are regulated by the Flemish land agency (VLM) which is also responsible for the allocation of subsidies for agricultural projects. Moreover, regions are responsible for liaising with the European union programs and therefore allocating subsidies. For example, one of the plans through which farmers can be granted subsidies is the Regional program for rural development "farmers can receive subsidies for implementing agri-environment-climate commitments" (De Jong and Raus, 2020). However, these subsidies are tied to a minimum of a 5-year commitment (ibid.) therefore binding farmers to a long-term commitment. Moreover, in Flanders, such "agri-environment-climate commitments" are controlled by two distinct departments, the Department of Agriculture (Departement Landbouw en Visserij) and by the Flemish Land Agency (Vlaamse Landmaatschappij) (ibid.)

The Land Law in Belgium is an important framework to take into consideration when addressing agricultural land dynamics. Due to the high prices of agricultural land in Belgium, access to farmland is a major bottleneck therefore often farmers who want to start an agricultural business opt for leasehold land (Vilt, 2021). However, the Lease Law dates to 1969 thereby presenting many limitations for farmers' needs. For example, oral contracts are allowed by the lease law thus failing to protect the tenants' legal certainty (Vilt, 2021). Therefore many have called for a reform of this law which among others should make it mandatory to stipulate written agreements to ensure maximum legal protection for farmers (Vilt, 2021). In fact, a

reform of the lease law was enacted in 2021 and among others, the minimum duration of the long leasing contract (erfpacht) has decreased to 15 years instead of 27, something that operates in favour of landowners (Vilt, 2022). Moreover, while usually the long lease law is given from 15 years to a maximum of 99 years these terms can be changed for public uses (DLA Piper, 2022). An additional change that occurred within the reform and benefited the landowners is the possibility to cease the leasing contract if the pensioner is unable to designate a successor (Vilt, 2022).

At the local level, the municipality of Leuven has launched the Plan [7]"PIONEERING LEUVEN: Ten ambitions for a caring, green and prosperous city" which defines 10 strategic ambitions pursued by the city during the timeframe 2019 - 2025. Each of the 10 programs envisions a list of action plans which should guide the city's commitments. Among these ambitions, programme 6 depicts the city's engagement towards the achievement of a Sustainable, climate-resilient and circular city. In particular, Action 6.4 displays the commitments related to sustainable consumption and the development of a strategy for a circular economy (Stad Leuven, n.d., pp. 94-98). The list indicates a set of tools, actions and commitments related to sustainable consumption and production, and extensive attention is provided to the role of agricultural production in fostering sustainable consumption. The plans indicate the city's engagement in the implementation of a local and regional Food strategy, the creation of the VLAR, and the commitment towards the creation of short chains initiatives (ibid.). In particular, Article 58 indicates the city's support for projects regarding sustainable and innovative agriculture and Article 59 mentions the city's " effort into maintaining an agricultural area for local sales and expanding it where possible" (Stad Leuven, n.d. p. 96). It is specifically indicated that "the city/OCMW's 'rent-free land' can be used as testing grounds for innovative agricultural business models as part of the food strategy" (ibid.). In addition to that, the plan mentions the intention to foster educational activities on topics concerning sustainable food. All these ambitions are intended to promote participatory food production.

4.3 OCMW land as historical forms of commons

To understand the governance system of public land in Belgium and its historical evolution, it is important to introduce the organisation that is responsible for its management, the OCMW or in English Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs). OCMW is a historical institution in Belgium in charge of delivering social services to people in need (LPA01). Although historically independent from the Flemish institutions, such independence was abolished in 2019 incorporating the OCMW into their respective municipalities (LPA01). This organization provides a number of services, including social housing, as well as maintaining public land that once belonged to the Church (LPA01). In Leuven, the agricultural land was managed through a variety of practices such as selling and leasing it to privates and farmers, (LPA01, 2022). As explained by one of the interviewees, the land owned by the OCMW was mainly leased according to the Land Law, leading to a number of issues. For instance, when a local authority

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[7] in Dutch: *Baanbrekend Leuven, Tien ambities voor een zorgzame, groene en welvarende stad*

leases land through the land law, it loses its permanent ownership because if the lessee has a successor on his business or farm, the land will automatically pass to the successor. In this way, while the OCMW could secure a monthly rent, it could not secure anymore the ownership of the land. The land sale was used as a financing instrument and in turn, the money earned from sales was reinvested, among others, in social projects such as the creation of social buildings. The LPA01 explained that in the years around the 1 World War, the OCMW possessed about 16 000 hectares of land, which turned to 1100 hectares in 2004, determining a structural change in the OCMW's historical agricultural patrimony. This is an outcome of the institutionalization of selling land as a financing instrument which on the one hand contributed to the progressive commodification of land while on the other limiting the use of public land for other purposes and projects.

To halt this trend, in 2003 the OCMW decided to stop adopting this system based on granting land according to the Land Law and regulate it in a different way by prescribing to farmers who had no successor within the family to return the land to the municipality. Following this new regulation, some of the land owned by the organization is under the status "free of use" (LPA01). Currently, 105 farmers work on OCMW according to the land law regulations (LPA01).

The evolution of OCMW land management, the interactions between the city and AFPs that led to the development of the call, and the broader European policy frameworks, were summarised in the following timeline created by the Action research team. The timeline was developed in three axes, each illustrated with a different colour and showing a distinct level of dynamics. For instance, the blue axis represents the European policy framework focusing on agricultural and land policies that to our reading led to the creation of the so-called dominant agricultural system. The green axis illustrates the development of the Alternative food network in Leuven and the arrows show their interactions with the city. The orange axis displays the food governance framework in Leuven and the shift in the land management system by the OCMW. For a more detailed visualisation of the different layers of analysis, the timeline can be found in the annex.
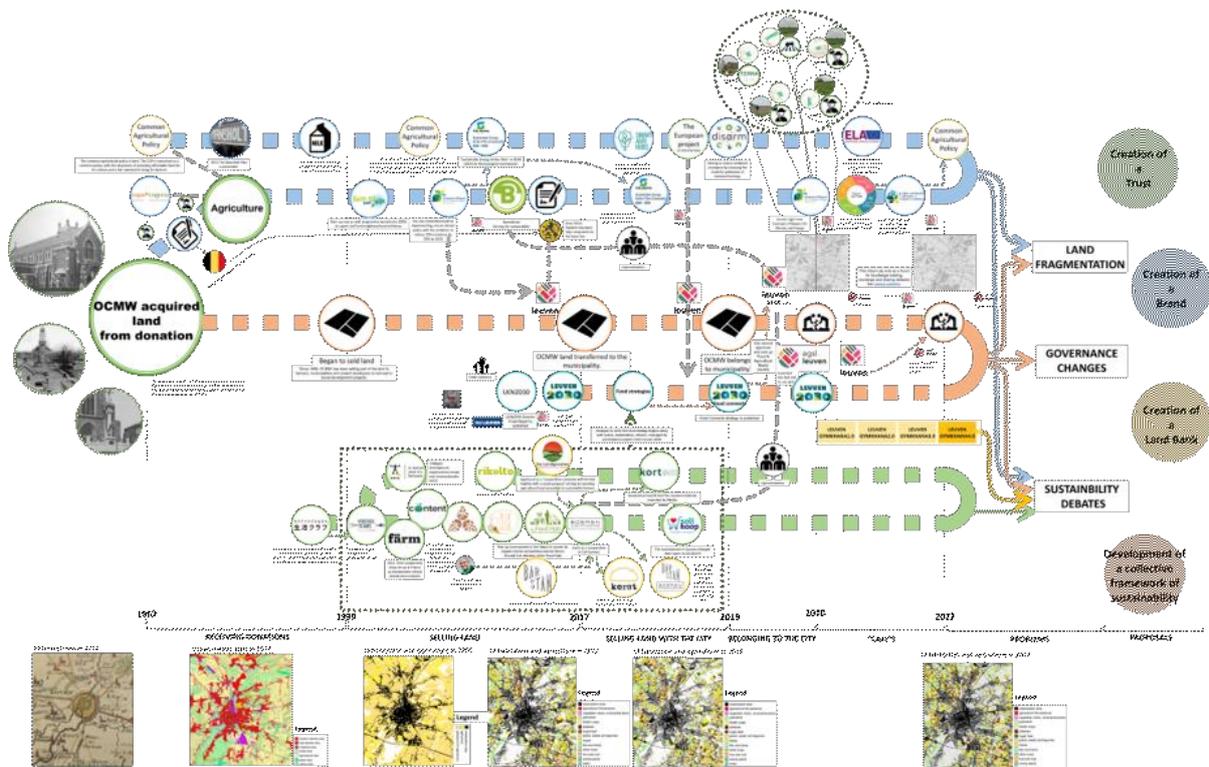
Figure 9: Chronicle displaying the interactions and interrelations between the dominant agricultural system, the City of Leuven's land and food governance, and the Alternative Food Practices in Leuven. (Source: Ying Li, created in the context of Leuven Gymkhana)

4.4 Uncovering the potential of the Call to support the development of new forms of commons on OCMW lands

4.4.1 The landscape of the Call creation

The Call was launched twice, the first being in July 2020, under the name of " Oproep Projecten Lokale Voedselstrategie Leuven" or "Call for Projects Local Food Strategy Leuven", followed by the second round in 2022. As it might appear evident, the first Call was clearly conceived as a tool to endorse the Food Strategy. In fact, AGSL, the promoter organization of the vision, considered that the enforcement of the Food strategy needed to initiate from the potential of immovable goods and continue with a political design that identifies how to use them. Those intentions were already declared in the Pioneering Leuven Plan[8], the document illustrating the political visions of the new governmental coalitions. However, the project was developed by OCMW in collaboration with the VLAR and AGSL. The VLAR is the forum of discussion on food issues reuniting food actors and stakeholders from various sectors and "de facto taking the role of the "guardian" of the strategy from the perspective of the Municipality" (Medina-

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[8] It refers to the aforementioned "Baanbrekend Leuven, Tien ambities voor een zorgzame, groene en welvarende stad"

Garcia, 2022, p.16). AGSL in turn is an autonomous company of the city development Leuven responsible for the development and implementation of urban development and urban policies objectives on behalf of the city (AGSL, n.d.).

In practical terms, one of the long-standing members of the OCMW identified and selected several plots of land that could be used for the creation of the Call. Additionally, a Council was set to take charge of the decisions regarding the plot allocation, evaluation criteria, lease contracts, and the evaluation process. The structure of this Council is the following: one member from the OCMW, one member from the municipality, one member from the University, one member representing the Borenbond (a farmer Union), and a representative of an organic farmer and a lawyer. The condition set by the Jury was to comply with the 5 criteria which account for 20% each of the final project: feasibility plan, economic plan, social added value, sustainability and ecology, innovation value, and an example function.

The creation of the 2 calls for proposal has to be framed into a broader political-institutional context. The political coalition taking office in 2019 established both the VLAR and endorsed the Climate action plan 2020-2025 therefore the call was a decision prompted by the new political framework. In fact, an agreement document that declares the goals of the government mandate of the new political coalition suggested, among others, alternative objectives for the use of the vacant land around Leuven (Stad Leuven, n.d. p. 96, art.59). Among other recommendations, the instalment document indicates the use of public land for innovative purposes, such as sustainable agricultural projects (ibid.) This was evoked during the interview with the interviewee LPA01 while he was explaining the factors determining the current use of the OCMW land. According to his explanation, first, the endorsement of the Calls was embedded in a broader strategic and political framework – that of "giving the land a purpose" according to the newly developing ideas on sustainable agriculture, and within the political framework and objectives of the new local government. Indeed, the interviewee argued that it is part of a political project "we have also politics in this" which started with the establishment of the new government. Secondly, it steamed from a broader process of acknowledgement of the fact that the OCMW has progressively lost its land throughout the years as a consequence of the selling system adopted previously. Thus, to address this problem, an alternative was found in the reorientation of land management, geared no longer towards selling but towards renting land according to the new land law reform. In the beginning, tenderers stipulate a temporary agreement with the City (*precair gebruik*). Although it is a temporal contract and the lessees/tenderers feel rather insecure because " it is a piece of paper" and the agreement can be ended at any time (LFA01; LFA02), the public actors argued that it was a legal tool to speed up the process so that the tenderers can use the plot as quickly as possible. Then, the tenderer will receive an *erfpacht contract,* with which he/she can continue using the land for up to 27 years.

Through the lease agreement, the municipality could ensure that it preserves long-term ownership of the land while enabling its potential to be exploited, in light of the reforms of the land law which benefits the landowners (e.g. the reduction of the duration contract for the long-term lease). Ultimately, the call appears as a double effort to change the traditional system to

land and create opportunities for innovative and sustainable agriculture. Therefore, above all, the Call symbolizes a political decision resulting from a multitude of efforts, needs, and new visions. The combination of the aforementioned dynamics established the ideal conditions for the creation of the call.
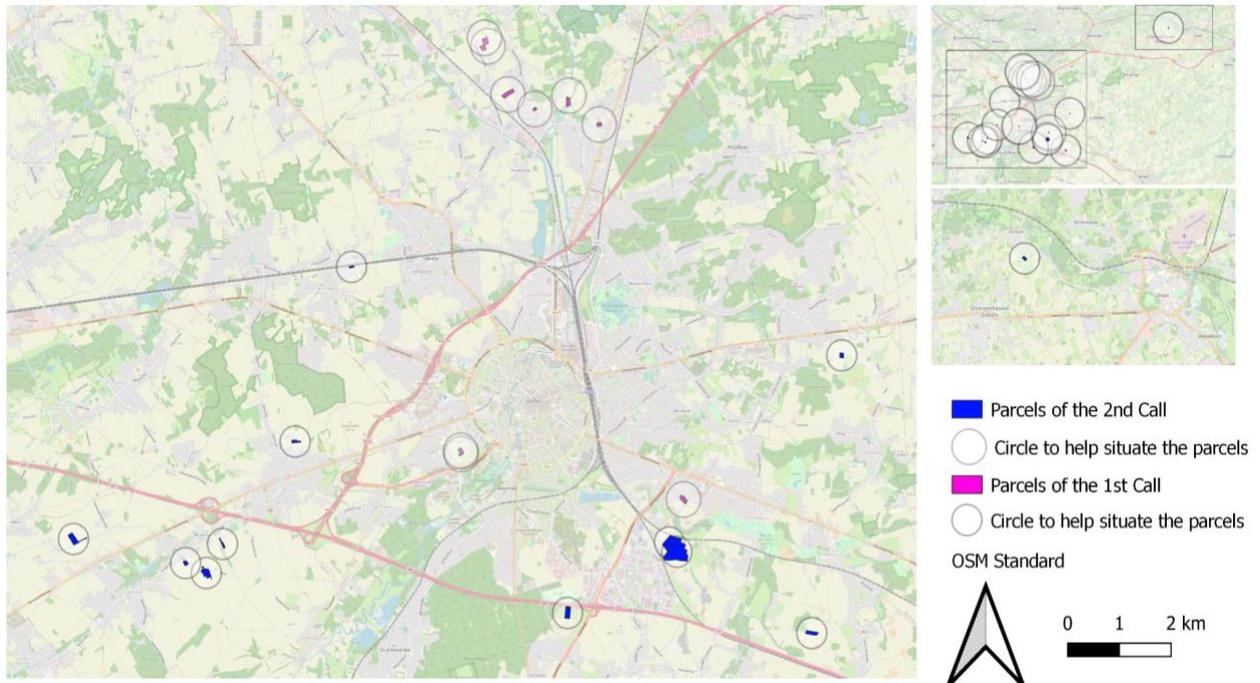
Figure 10: Map displaying the plots of the 1st and the 2nd Call. (Source: Author)

4.4.2 The call as an endeavour of the city to change the access to the land system

The history of OCMW land management is an important element to explore since it is the first constituent that generated a process of acknowledging the value of OCMW's patrimony. However, it was not the OCMW alone to change its mindset regarding land management, but it rather converged with another statal agency's decision, AGSL, to set in motion a different approach towards land governance. The latest had been referred to as the "pivotal point" in impacting the whole landscape on how both AGSL and OCMW conceive their property (LPA02). One interviewee emphasized two interesting insights on this point, first that AGSL started to rethink their use of land because they did not need to "valorize it anymore" by selling it but that it could be used for different purposes, and second that "they wanted to maintain their position, sort of giving balance to the market [AMB1] ". The Call appears somewhat to be the result of this reorientating process, and it materializes the necessity of transforming the traditional system of land management while combining it with the achievement of other transversal goals, such as the implementation of the Food Strategy and the city's commitment to embracing innovative sustainable agriculture. As a piece of evidence, one of the actors involved in the creation of this initiative refers to the Call as a "game changer in land use"

which among other things sparked the interest of other Belgian municipalities who are looking at this project as a prototype to be adopted in their cities as well (LPA02). This appears to be particularly ground-breaking in a context such as the Belgian one, where the high prices of land jeopardize the possibility to start agricultural businesses.

The shift in the land management paradigm, orientated to keeping the ownership and leasing the land instead of selling it, might result in less concentration of land in private hands and easier access to land for the local community. Specifically, since the Call has been developed in the context of the Food Strategy's implementation, it could be viewed as an attempt of local authorities to facilitate access to OCMW land for local food actors. This could indirectly support the proliferation of local AFPs. As a matter of fact, the interviewees engaged in the creation of the Call emphasized this point. Particular attention was given by the LPA02 to the two-sided intention the Call seeks to achieve regarding the Food Strategy. On the one hand, it aims to encourage local food actors to design innovative agricultural projects, while on the other hand, it strives to spread the values embedded in the strategy, namely "create bridges between the new ways of farming and the more traditional ways of farming" (LPA02). Indeed, LPA02 observed that the very same name of the strategy is "Food connects" and this was a demonstration of the fact that food wants to connect people around it. How does this bridge concretely materialize? By putting the plots at the disposal of everyone and enabling participation. It was more of a "social project" according to the observations of LPA01 since "the purpose was not to focus on specific groups", for instance, like CSA "since this would not allow reaching a broader view". The interviewee LPA01 explained that "we - (the actors involved in the creation of the Call) - from the beginning, made our statements and put it in a way that everyone -particularly single persons, organizations, traditional farmers-organizations, traditional farmers were able to candidate for the grounds". According to LPA02, the success achieved with the 2 Calls could be attributed to this flexible and integrated approach. The interviewee expressed admiration to the fact that some farmers "were happy to make adjustments as long as they can continue farming" since one of the goals was to "have them actively thinking". For PA03 instead, as a member of the farmer syndicate, it was about giving an opportunity to traditional farmers to change their way of working. The Call could have shown them that "the way they work it's not ok" and perhaps it stimulates them to think out of the box. As a result of the first Call, some farmers made a few steps toward a more sustainable way of farming. However, the major shortcoming of this objective is the fact that no measurable criteria are adopted to assess the affinity of the projects with the Food Strategy's goals.

4.4.3 The Call as a means for facilitating AFPs' access to land and enabling commoning initiatives.

Projects promoting agricultural initiatives are important in view of their potential to overcome social narratives ascribing negative connotations to farmers. For centuries, farming has been associated with negative connotations and farmers have been stigmatized as mere peasants, a trend marginalizing farmers as a working class. Historically farmers belonged to less wealthy

social classes which has contributed to consolidating a view of farmers as less intelligent, less thoughtful, and less worthy people. As emphasised by one of the interviewees "the way farmers are placed in society, (...) in the marginal side, in many ways, they're regarded sometimes like less intelligent" (LFA01). It was through these assumptions that farming was further consolidated as the least ambitious career to pursue, and LFA01 highlighted that it was even repeated in her school experience where "children were told that that was the least ambitious thing to do, that they were lazy and stupid" (LFAO1). This in turn alienated many people from farming and today most of those still involved in agriculture are probably following their family business. However, to reverse the industrial agriculture model of production more small-scale and alternative farming practices need to be set up and this should be encouraged by institutional help. Interviewee LFA01 has expressed "I'm not saying everybody should be a farmer. But I think that there should be a larger diversity of people who take up farming. Because I know so many stories, there are some very interesting documentaries about that, too, about people who are interested in farming or continuing the farm or going back to the farm of their grandparents". Therefore, projects prompting the mobilization of citizens around farming ambitions can help reconnect citizens with farming practices, and determine a shift in the mindset and vision about what it means to be a farmer. The achievement of this relational aspect is particularly relevant for the development of food commons since their essence is determined by the engagement of commoners which enables commoning (Caffentzis, 2004 in De Angelis, 2017; Bollier et al., 2019). But, as claimed by Caffentzis (2004, in De Angelis, 2017), reuniting commoners might result difficult due to their belonging "to a working class that has been fragmented and individualized through decades and centuries of capital inscribing itself into social loops" (p. 170). Fostering the creation of agricultural projects on public land could contribute to rethinking the role of farmers in our society and overcoming structural marginalization of the working class, by showing that everyone can get engaged in agricultural practices and that it is not restrained to a particular social category. In turn, bringing to light the role of the farmers in our society becomes functional in restoring a spirit of responsibility between the producer and the consumer, which got progressively lost within the logistics of the dominant agricultural system.

Additionally, the fragmentation and individualisation of peasants' working class, allowed many organizations over the years to manipulate this condition by imposing certain rules on farming methods and creating a subordination system at the expense of traditional agricultural knowledge, which has been progressively marginalized. As argued by LFA01 "for some organisations it was interesting to have the farmers those children in a family who are less educated. And that's the most stupid thing you can know. But if you are not so highly educated, it's easier to tell you what you have to do. And for some organizations, that's interesting, because you can tell someone who is not highly educated and maybe has less self-esteem that, yeah, the way you are producing your food now that's not in a good way. I mean, you're too small, you're not efficient, you should have to ask for it, you shouldn't become bigger, you should use these products etc." In this way, organisations managed to create dependence of farmers on input products, and fertilisers and this perpetuated the concentration of power among the actors defining the rules governing food production.

The call has therefore opened its doors to AFPs farmers who do not have the financial means to buy land. Both interviewees who obtained a plot from the first call, have expressed gratitude with regard to the project set in motion by the municipality. One of the farmers stated, "it has given me the chance to start my business, to start farming, which, probably, if that hadn't happened, I might have not been farming right now" (LFA01). The same opportunity was given to the actor LFA01 who prior to the publication of the call, leased land from another farmer but it was too expensive so she could not afford it.

The calls, therefore, triggered participation and this is deemed one of the main ingredients for the proliferation of commons (De Angelis, 2017). Among the various individual projects it stimulated during the 2nd call, several collective proposals must be noted. One of them was set up by a group of 4 farmers envisioning a project of collective management of one parcel of land. Their decision stems from several factors: first, the already existing cooperation between the farmers, in which there are involved some CSAs (2 vegetable farms and a fruit farm) and the interviewees. In fact, LFA01 stated that she/he does not want the land just for herself/himself but rather to work on it in a collaboration with other farmers, as she was already used to doing. Thus, they aspire to demonstrate through this common application farmers' ability to work together and pool the same resource. These statements were strengthened by a strong enthusiasm and trust in cooperative efforts and labour – deemed to be the most appropriate pathway to pursue sustainability. In fact, according to the words of the interviewee, this cooperation has far more benefits than working on the land individually: "I value the cooperation (…) think this is potential, and this should be the way to work in the future (…) If you really wanted to have a future in Flanders, we have to work together. It's not easy, because it's an issue of trust."

The potential of this system for the future lies in the multiple functions that the land can assume. For example, the interviewee states that she/he would use the land as a space for animals, while other farmers are interested in harvesting and growing fruit and vegetables. In this way, an optimal circularity is created to meet everyone's needs, including the ecological needs of the land. Furthermore, the interviewee stated that land in itself is not enough to facilitate their work as the lack of infrastructure on-site makes their work much more difficult, expensive, and environmentally harmful. In fact, to date LFA01 is not able to exploit all the potential of the plot received from the first call since a warehouse is not allowed to be constructed on-site, thereby forcing the interviewee to move the tractor every day from her/his house to the plot, which implies higher costs as well as greater environmental damage. Alternatively, the collective project strives to address these issues in such a way that farmers' work is on the one hand facilitated, and on the other hand, it also entails less environmental impact. For example, as an alternative to building infrastructures on the land, in the absence of approval from the municipality, the interviewee mentioned the idea of exploiting abandoned buildings in proximity to the plot in order to give them a new life and utilise their capacity.

Therefore, the call triggered new approaches to innovation and sustainability, both in terms of resource management and the delivered benefits. In relation to resource governance, the projects valorise mutualisation and social cooperation while in relation to the social benefits they challenge individual utility and competition in the pursuit of communitarian wellbeing.

The most remarkable aspect is perhaps the focus on collective problem-solving and collective efforts, which are integrated with passion for their jobs, and aim at delivering benefits for the entire community. Finally, farmers want to show that they can become autonomous and will not have to depend on external forces to perform their work and thus deliver products for the community. This aspiration was voiced by one of the interviewees who revealed "I hope this is a chance to prove that we can be independent here in Flanders if they allow us" (LFA01). Actually, such examples already exist around Leuven, and commoning is an active practice but they receive little attention as LFA01 suggested that "it's all our own effort. And I think there is also still a huge difference between what is known and publicly promoted by the city".

The collective projects set in motion by the call are an example of productive articulation of efforts which according to Caffentzis (2004, in De Angelis 2017) is essential for the "survival and expansion of commons in larger and larger spheres of lives" (p.170). What does this exactly mean? The proliferation of commons, like food commons represented by AFPs, "necessitates the participation of commoners" and demonstrates "the possibility that commons are and will be viable and desirable" (ibid.). The efforts articulated in the joint proposals reflect the viability of food commons and demonstrate the strength of the internal power of commoners. While it is true that their internal power is already exercised and reproduced by those practices through their daily activities, their political power is often hindered by dominant forces countering them. Thus, for AFPs the calls represent a way to prove their credibility, strength and political claims, in addition to bringing to light their endeavours.

4.5 Conflictual understandings within the Call

Defining Sustainability
It must be observed that besides the successful results achieved after the publication of the Call, they did not come without setbacks. As underlined in the previous section, the value of land for AFPs overcomes the use of land as a commodified resource. For this reason, they strive to practice sustainability in all its dimensions: ecological, social and economic. In the proposals submitted by these actors, there is a clear reference to the need to re-thinking and re-storing agricultural practices under these lenses. In this sense, the call provided a unique opportunity for them to counter the dominant agricultural system that has been progressively disembedded from the ecological and social relations that had historically controlled its way of operating. Their project proposals, in fact, do not stem from individual economic or financial interests related to land, but rather from long-lasting aspirations to positively shift unsustainable farming practices and demonstrate the benefits of sustainable farming for social needs. LFA01's dedication is indicative in this respect, as he attentively examined all the plots available in the first Call to understand which was the most suitable for his project. The goal behind his project was to bring about a greater transformation in the field of growing sustainable trees while filling a gap in the market. He noticed in fact that even the most sustainable farms do not start their production from 100% ecologically grown trees, since they are bought from the traditional agricultural market. Unlike the traditional growing methods, his business does not entail the use of technological tools and is attentive to the well-being of the soil. In fact, the interviewee

emphasised that his initial aim was to implement a rotation system that could allow the regeneration of the land while guaranteeing vigorous and healthy production. However, this did not materialise because the plot he received was not the one he was initially promised, thereby creating several problems in the implementation of the farmer's project. The smaller size of the plot blocked him from adopting the rotation system because he could not have grown sufficient trees.

The gap in comprehending sustainability needs between the city and the farmers was confirmed by other structural problems concerning the land, faced by the LFA02. The interviewee LFA02 argued that the characteristics of the land he was allocated do not allow for the development of an irrigation system on the plot. The interviewee claimed that "they could have checked before giving [him/her] the plot", but no study of the land has been conducted. In this case, the municipality did not do a prior investigation or evaluation of the terrain nor considered the structural needs of this project, such as the adequate size of the plot and land with a proper irrigation system. The negligence of the plots' embeddedness in wider socio-ecological systems reveals that the call embodies an anthropocentric view of sustainability (LFA01, LFA02). As a matter of fact, in the Call there is a vague conceptual definition of sustainability, which leaves space for the reproduction of the predominant position of the economic value of the proposals, becoming profit-driven rather than innovative and sustainable. There is only a broad requirement that 'the tenderer pays attention to sustainable (ecological, economic and social) agricultural production methods and also has sufficient knowledge to work in an ecologically responsible manner. However, the Call does not contain detailed information about sustainable agricultural production practices, nor about the necessary knowledge on ecological responsibility, and how these requirements will be measured. The lack of a thorough definition of sustainability embodies the risk of the concept being emptied of meaning. On the contrary, the management of land and resources by AFPs is very concrete, generative and not (only) economically oriented. AFPs are pursuing and building their own definition of sustainability on the ground based on constant observation and examination of the wider socio-ecological system that surrounds their plot. They share a natural and social generative idea of sustainability, which in practical terms means avoiding the use of chemical substances in farming or overexploiting farming soil, but also creating the conditions for regenerative socio-economic practices. Therefore, the production of food is geared toward social needs and environmental respect.

Moreover, there are competing temporalities in the conception of sustainability between the City and the farmers. On the one side, sustainable and restorative farming can only be implemented under certain conditions and a long-time framework. For example, to yield the benefits of crop rotation farmers need land for a long period of time, and the short-period leasing contracts of 5 years, do not take into account these temporalities[9]. As emphasised by LFA01 " if you want to do sustainable farming or restorative farming, you need to be sure to have land for years and years to come. Because you first invest, you don't really get much out

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[9] The leasing period for the plots are established for a longer perios but in the first call, some plots were only available for 5 years because they are reserved for some long term planning projects.

of this land. It's not your idea to produce money from this land. First, you have to take care of its soil". In fact, LFA01 has revealed that initially was hesitating to apply for a parcel of land because there was a reference for a 5-years use of the land in the Call. LFA01 claims that this would hinder the realisation of the project because "*restorative farming, you can't do that in five years. I mean, that's a long process and farming should always be considered something that goes beyond one generation*" considering that a healthy and *living soil* needs perpetual care.

Food Governance and AFPs' weakened representation
A lack of representativeness was identified within the Board in charge of developing the Call. When questions on the representativeness of the farmers in the creation of the Call were raised, one of the interviewees argued that the representation of farmers is guaranteed by the presence of the Borenbond among the jury, a farmer Union whose birth dates to 1890, "farmers are free to join the union for farmers, but I'm sure not every farmer is doing this". The same interviewee has suggested that very often representativity is determined by political parties " I don't make secret, I think when we have some issues there where we can see these alliances is visible (...) I think this representation exists by politics." For instance, the Christian and democratic parties have a very strong alliance with Farmer unions. These claims confirm that farmers who do not hold membership in Farmer unions are automatically excluded from institutional representation since such unions are the main bodies reporting farmers' needs. It is not a coincidence that smaller farmers and those adoptive alternative farming schemes are not members of these organizations. This means that the syndicates address the needs and interests of their members which often do not reflect the needs of farmers pertaining to the AFPs. In fact, the involvement of Borenbond in the project has been criticised by a local food actor who pointed out the unsustainability of Borenbond's practices "Borenbond and sustainability don't go together. So it's very weird. I still haven't figured out why like two people from the ecological party from Belgium work with them. I find this very strange" (LFA02). Moreover, the members of the farmer syndicate can benefit from the assistance provided by its consultants, therefore, having more advantages and chances to win the projects, compared to the AFPs who operate on their own.

Although the call claimed to create broader partnerships in Leuven, it has actually produced and reproduced conflicts and further competition between the new tenderers and the current users of those plots. Both interviewed tenderers reported having encountered tensions with the previous farmers working on their plots. This lies in the Belgian law that allows working on the "free of use land", but the moment the use of this land is changed, the farmers cannot claim any right on the land. For example, the parcel granted to the actor LFA02 was part of a larger plot already managed by another farmer and its land use was reserved for sowing plants and flowers to attract pollinators. The current user had ongoing investments, loans, and contracts with the Vlaamse Landmaatschappij, the Flemish land agency and this meant that LFA02 couldn't use part of his plot for other purposes. LFA01 reported that in general, the way the distribution of the plots was managed added to the already existing conflicts between traditional farmers and new farmers. However, according to her a good relationship should be perceived between old and new farmers "because these old farmers are not necessarily bad people. I

mean, they also have a lot of knowledge that new farmers don't have. And if we really want to have a good food system, the best thing is to have new and old schools (...) to be able to communicate and exchange knowledge and ideas. So what happens now is that you have two groups that are set against or are in competition?" (LFA01). It could be thus argued that a constant representation of both conventional farmers and AFPs in the decision-making regarding agricultural land use and food production would have limited the competition among those actors and fostered fruitful interactions and collaborations.

In fact, LFA01 stressed that those practices remain marginalised and often eclipsed because cooperation has to face many challenges and it is not always the easiest solution. Among these challenges, regulations perhaps are the main hindrance to the association since they are not "favourable to cooperation" (LFA01). But, as suggested by the interviewee, such regulations often go beyond the municipality's decision, and she keeps wondering "Why is it so difficult for local farmers to work together? If they're organic and non-organic, in some ways, they should be able to work together more". These propositions show commons as social systems (De Angelis, 2017) and they entail a paradigm shift in the production models, empirically seeking to convert the hierarchy in the institutional structure of the dominant food system, through the decentralization of the mechanisms regulating it.

Conditions for facilitating access to land
In order to be granted a plot of land, applicants must fulfil the sustainability and feasibility criteria. Feasibility, in particular, does not exempt AFPs from complying with rigid market regulations controlling the agro-industrial food system. Interviewees reported that there are still many contradictions in the production model envisioned by this call, geared towards efficiency and high production goals (LFA01, LFA02, LFA03), while at the same time expecting sustainable outcomes. What is an efficient and sustainable agricultural project? What is a sustainable food system and how is feasibility measured? Both are defined by the EU, public institutions, the market and large-scale food companies. Perhaps, one of the biggest drawbacks of this project is that the City is not questioning those top-down imposed rules, regulations and food standardisation, but is reproducing them to provide land to local food actors. For AFP's prospects of proliferation, this is a particularly concerning issue because the market regulations and standards are created by the Market for the market, therefore they automatically exclude all alternatives that do not comply with them. While for large-scale farmers operating under the market rules is easier, it is way more difficult for AFPs to conform to these regulations, such as producing a specific quantity. As argued by De Schutter et al., (2019) when small-scale farmers want to access the food market, the competition is not limited to the land assets but is generated from the "non-land farm assets" as well, which can range from irrigation to storage systems (pp.376). In practical terms, for small-scale farmers, this translates into a certain "entry fee" (ibid.). And the municipality does not provide additional instruments, other than the land asset, to lower such entry costs and the entrance obstacles that those farmers have to face. According to the food actor (LFA01), if there is a real intention at the municipal level to implement the Food strategy, farmers and food producers should be protected from these regulations, but this does not appear to be the case. While reflecting on these considerations, the interviewee has claimed that "the problem is that maybe they're not fully free themselves

(referring to the municipality)" indicating that higher dynamics of power might interfere with the government's possibilities to adopt certain decisions and political tools. To this regard, LFA01 has explained that:

"There is a whole paradigm shift towards a new mode of production, in which words like sustainability, efficiency and high productivity are exactly what is being promoted. The main idea is that everything must be efficient (produce as much as possible, in the shortest time, with the smallest effort). In that context, animals are treated like machines, farmers have become managers without having a relationship with their animals anymore, and they are completely dependent on many other actors -one being the landowners-. There is a huge difference between farming industries and engineers that produce food safety standards and regulations, and farmers who work with a limited number of animals, taking care of them, knowing what they eat, and where they live. There are so many regulations on food safety that derive from industrial food practices. It is just absurd that I have to be assessed with these same criteria."

The table below provides a summary of the several elements of the call analysed in the context of this thesis.

	City (State)	AFPs (commons)	Conflicts (Call)
Access to land	the call represents a shift in the dominant management of land paradigm	the call seeks to facilitate access to land	facilitation of access to land under the criteria set in a top-down manner
Commoning	not directly supporting commons but indirectly (through community building, short chains etc.)	developing commons on the ground (e.g. Food strategy, collective applications to the call, networks between short chains etc.)	food regulations hindering commoning (e.g. food safety standards, top-down definition of sustainability etc.)
Sustainability	not clear definition of sustainability and vague policies on how to work on sustainability	generative management of resources; building socio-ecological on the ground; context-based sustainability & collectively defined	conflictual understanding of sustainability but the city is open to AFPs' approaches

Participative governance	innovative food governance in Leuven[10]	weakened or/and lost representation	restore representation in food governance could solve problems and better support AFPs

Table 3: Table summarising the findings. (Source: Author)

4.6 The contribution of the Leuven Gymkhana 4.0 Action Research

The call unblocks one of the challenges faced by food actors aiming at developing an agricultural project. The call sparked our interest in view of its potential to favour and enforce existing food initiatives that are facing difficulty in accessing land and the food market. However, during our investigation, we decided to take it a step further and grasp the opportunity we had to first understand the dynamics, issues, and benefits related to the Call. Then, considering the action research characteristics, we sought to shed light on the limitations arising from the Call and to take a political stance in favour of small-scale farmers and AFPs, which we found that are losing their representation in the implementation of the Food Strategy (Garcia - Medina et al., 2022). To do so, we collectively agreed to write a critique of the Call integrating local stakeholders' feedback and deliver it to the municipality. We, as students and researchers collaborating with active citizens, share the same values about food and land management as AFPs members. As Raj Patel (2010) states, reclaiming the right food systems is not just about supporting our farmers, and the local community, but it should be upscaled to the political field, mainly by getting engaged in politics. This means that "we are not consumers of democracy; we are its proprietors" (Patel, 2010, min.23).

Our final goal as researchers was to gather feedback throughout the observation on the field and interviews with stakeholders and stimulate new reflections on the limitations of the call and similar future projects. For this reason, we submitted an integrated document[11] to the municipality of Leuven, which included both a critique and a proposal outlining the importance to restore participation and collective governance in the policy-making decisions (bottom right cell in Table 2). In this sense, we suggested:

> 1) the creation of a trust which should set up a cooperative system including a variety of food actors, thereby restoring the representation of AFPs while contributing to food democracy;

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[10] For more information see : Medina-García C, Nagarajan S, Castillo-Vysokolan L, Béatse E and Van den Broeck P. (2022). Innovative Multi-Actor Collaborations as Collective Actors and Institutionalized Spaces. The Case of Food Governance Transformation in Leuven (Belgium). Front. Sustain. Food Syst. 5:788934. doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2021.788934

[11] To have a more detailed view of the Critique and proposal, it will be added to the annex.

2) the creation of a brand to increase the visibility of local food products.

3) the creation of a land bank to secure the access to land;

4) development of a collective framework of sustainability.

In particular, the creation of a Trust would enable a higher level of cooperation among various food stakeholders and public actors engaged in food-related issues. In this framework, the definitions of principles and values governing food production and consumption are collectively made, securing everyone's right to have a say. By operating as an integrated body, the trust will increase representativeness and facilitate knowledge exchange between different ideas and practices produced on the field. Additionally, the trust will function as a brand to promote local and regional products (under the name Grown in Leuven) which can be supplied in local restaurants, supermarkets and university canteens.

To develop land consolidation projects and enhance the potential of local agricultural production, we proposed the creation of a land bank. A wider agricultural ecosystem should be secured around and within the City of Leuven by extending participation in land initiatives beyond local institutions, such as the Flemish Land agency. An integrated strategy would reduce pressures on agricultural land, confine acute rises in land prices and create opportunities for young farmers. Ultimately, the collective definition of sustainability is needed to set a fair framework for food and agricultural production, encompassing the efficiency and high productivity narratives framed by the dominant food system.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This thesis explored the role of the state in the development of commons aiming to reveal *the extent to which the state facilitates (or hinders) the access of commoning initiatives to agricultural land as well as their endeavours to contribute to a more sustainable food production and distribution system*. Since the thesis forms part of an action research process, more context-specific questions arose and were collectively shaped through the interactions between the researchers and the stakeholders. More specifically, we aimed to explore what extent the city of Leuven is facilitating the proliferation of food commoning initiatives. Therefore, we analysed the call for sustainable agricultural projects to further provide answers to the questions: (1) To what extent is the call challenging the dominant access to land system in support of commons? (2) Do food commons initiatives have the capacity to proliferate 'outside' the State? This chapter will reflect on the key research findings and re-analysis them through the integration of concepts outlined in the theoretical part such as 1) food commons, 2) the state's reproduction of the agri-industrial food system, 2) partner-state, and 3) the no-state approach for commons.

5.1 Food commoning dynamics in Leuven

The existing Alternative food practices in Leuven are the empirical evidence of what De Schutter et al. (2019) refer to as food commons, both in view of their operational functioning and in their sphere of shared values. As emphasised in the literature, the AFPs in Leuven can be regarded as an "association of food actors", not necessarily under formal institutionalisation, trying to provide alternative food production and a short supply chain, which are regulated by integral control of all the stages of the food chain (Manganelli et al., 2019; Vivero Pol et al., 2019; Caffentzis et Federici, 2014). All those practices reveal a very dynamic system of bottom-up initiatives, whose motivations are not merely lucrative since their economic activity seeks to fulfil the needs of the community while taking care of the environment. In fact, food production is considered a system, rather than a mere industry, that combines economic, social, and environmental needs (De Schutter et al., 2019). Although AFPs operate locally and pursue local-based approaches they reflect global movements seeking to radically transform the food systems rather than just attenuating the vulnerabilities of the prevailing dominant system. This is manifested in the way they operate and function showing a structural shift in the methods of food provisioning, compared to the dominant supply system. First, the supply directly to the consumer, reducing both the geographical distance and the social one. Second, AFPs' mode of working seeks to overcome the inequalities inherent to the dominant food systems in which the monetary value is concentrated on the edges of the production and supply chain, while farmers receive little remunerations. Moreover, the value of food is fairly determined and does not deceive the consumer about the true price of goods, guaranteeing fair production and contrasting the deceitful prices established by the dominant food market. In fact, by collectively defining the rules regulating food production, the actors engaged in food production not only democratise food systems but society as a whole (De Schutter et al., 2019). The value they generate cannot be monetised but manifests in the shared social-wellbeing it promotes (Bloemen & Hammerstein, 2017, pp.6-7).

In addition to already existing food commons initiatives delineated in the previous chapter, it is worth mentioning that further dynamics of food commoning have emerged in reaction to the call. Therefore, throughout the research, empirical commoning practices have been investigated as well. One of the examples previously mentioned is the collective proposal submitted by the group of 4 food stakeholders. The constituency of this project exhibits the characteristics illustrated in the process of commoning food described by Bollier, Bauwens, de Angelis etc, such as cooperation. As revealed by the LFA01, the writing of the project, for example, was accomplished by the division of tasks according to the skills of each of the members, a factor that is emphasised in the commoning process because it is fundamental to aggregating the contribution of each member to the creation of commons (De Angelis, 2017). Moreover, the collective project itself is designed on the principle of food commons, according to the LFA01, it aspires to share a plot of land and implement multiple types of activities on it, from vegetables and fruit growing, to the production of dairy products, not to mention the intention the mutualise nearby infrastructure to the plot. As argued by Bauwens and Niaros (2017) mutualisation is an important component of the commoning process, since it also

contributes to limiting the environmental effects of food production. However, most significantly, this project is clear evidence of the fight against land commodification which led to unaffordable prices of agricultural land. In fact, as remarked by Vivero Pol (2019), "the fight for food as commons cannot be detached from a struggle for a de-commodification of all the elements that compose food systems" (p.17). In general, the synergies and networking dynamics created, strongly driven by communitarian needs, demand a change in the status quo in the food production systems.

5.2 State's reproduction of the dominant agro-industrial food system?

In the case of Leuven, it appeared that there are continuous discrepancies between the factors that are required for an alternative paradigm shift in the agricultural production model and the factors that are actually promoted by higher-level institutions. As argued by LFA01 efficiency and high productivity are the keywords promoting agricultural production, but this does not correspond to the operational schemes followed by AFPs. In fact, the regulations, and certifications constraining the entire food production paradigm, are developed by the state's institutions in collaboration with and for big farming industries and industrial food practices that operate on a different scale and rationale than local, small-scale, and organic food businesses. This often occurs at higher institutional levels, like the European Union, where big corporations exercise lobbyist pressures on the policy-making process and push for the preservation of the status quo which benefits their interests (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020). Often, these dynamics are also reproduced at the domestic level. For example, as revealed by the interviewees, the political representativeness of farmers in the call is determined by the farmers' syndicate (Boerenbond), omitting that this syndicate might not necessarily represent all the categories of farmers and therefore neglecting the interests of certain actors. Moreover, there is an asymmetry of information between the AFPs and farmers being part of these associations, since syndicates advertise these kinds of initiatives among their members, while often AFPs lack information.

Another element contributing to the maintenance of the dominant agricultural systems is the belief in the food narrative of "feeding the world" which agro-industrial corporations manage to impose as the only solution to food issues (IPES-FOOD, 2016, pp. 7-8). This prevailing narrative is reproduced by the demands of the markets/states to increase food production neglecting its consequences (e.g. chemicals and pesticides destroying the fertility and quality of the soil, worsening the quality of food etc.) and it occurs mainly in the supranational policy-making frameworks, where lobby groups have facilitated access. The main problem with this idea is that it is difficult to escape it, because it governs the production system prevailing today, geared toward intensive production that is controlled by few international firms aggravating inequalities in the food production sector and the market. AFPs in Leuven are challenging this system since they support and build a local and short food supply chain while investing in organic agriculture that is environment-friendly, sustainable, and provides good quality food products.

Because of this multilayered policy system, it might appear difficult for local municipalities to mediate certain top-down regulations that jeopardise the spaces of action of AFPs. However, they can avoid reproducing the same power imbalances created in the top-down policies, by adopting certain initiatives and tools which deviate from higher-level political dynamics. For example, as emerged in the previous chapter, one of the challenges faced by AFPs aiming at re-commoning food, is defined by the restricted access to land, which in turn is the result of a convergence of policies, and normative regulations adopted at different levels of the state (EU, federal level, regional level). Supranational dynamics like the ones framed by the CAP policies indisputably have a considerable impact on regional development trends, such as increasing prices of land and the progressive commodification of land, at the expense of AFPs. These supranational policies and incentives reproduce some structural inequalities that allow the current agro-industrial food system to *remain in place* through the feedback loops it creates (Vivero Pol, 2019; IPES-Food 2016). This is caused by the iteration of industrial agricultural and production practices that have been progressively institutionalised and regularised by the state, in view of its alliance with the market. Thus, initiatives like land leasing schemes, which remove some entry barriers for AFPs in the agricultural system, can contrast, even if not entirely, some supranational policies. However, for the state's assistance to be fully successful, many scholars have called for the creation of partnering institutions.

5.3 State-Commons Partnership

It has been contented that states can act as partners and play a major role in supporting commons by providing fertile institutional grounds, infrastructure, and financial means to support their proliferation. Members of the AFPs in Leuven revealed that without facilitated access to the land their projects could not materialise, thus suggesting that their development depends on the availability and access to resources, such as land in this case. Through the Call for proposals, the municipality of Leuven is attempting to address this issue and mediate higher-level dynamics at the local level. Certainly, the convergence of favourable dynamics in the local institutional framework contributed to the creation of the call and thus to steer a shift in the access to the land system. On the one hand, multiple initiatives promoting the transformation of the food systems were launched by the city and the recognition of the important role played by agriculture in fostering local food production and short supply chains. This is thoroughly underlined in the 10 ambitions plan for example. On the other hand, the OCMW progressively lost its agricultural patrimony, historically considered common land, due to the allocation of public land through financial practices, like selling or long-term leasing land. This contributed to raising awareness about the value of OCMW's land and the need to maintain its ownership in the long run together with the role it could play in enhancing the agricultural and food projects. The call, an outcome of these events, became an enabling factor for the creation of new AFPs and commoning synergies in the city. In fact, as argued by IPES-Food (2016), instruments providing facilitated access to land are more efficient in stimulating the transition to certain agricultural practices than the mere allocation of subsidies since the public stakeholders can decide which agricultural practices to prioritise (p.13). In fact, as portrayed by authors conceptualising the partnering institutions, a partner state does not operate under the command and control rules, through the allocation of subsidies for example, but

rather by empowering the autonomous production of citizens (Bauwens 2009 in Carson 2016). Bollier et al., (2019) look critically at subsidising instruments due to their risk of motivating people and directing "their actions in the desired way" at the expense of autonomous decisions (p. 62). On the contrary, commons initiatives need to create and follow their own path, and providing access to resources leaves room for commoners' ambitions and autonomy to organise their work. Such claims are part of a broader discussion on the conditions guaranteeing the long-term survival of commons. Vivero Pol et al. (2019) argue food commoning dynamics can only be considered successful in the long term if the intention behind this transition is not merely stimulated by external forces and factors, such as the promise of more subsidies for a greener farming model, but also by genuine motivations towards change. In fact, Vivero Pol et al. (2019) he argues that the initiatives stimulated by intrinsic forces to move towards a fairer, greener, etc. production are more likely to succeed in the long run. Conversely, initiatives motivated only by exogenous factors are unlikely to take root in the long run.

Depending on the instruments and incentives furnished by local authorities, the state can support or hinder commons. For sure, political and technical support, and allocation of resources, such as land, are needed to allow the commons' viability. In contrast, the provided support must leave room for common's self-organisation and not exercise normative pressure which might thwart their long-term viability. In the case of the commons, in fact, it is precisely this strength, desire, and ambition for transformation to keep them alive and prosperous. Through these elements they can exercise their resilience and autonomy and express their political power, thus only these examples can bring authentic transformation and avoid being co-opted by the State (Caffentzis and Federici, p.i97).

Next to these arguments, it has to be mentioned that positive conditions for commons' proliferation cannot depend on similar isolated initiatives. For instance, the degree of support depends on a broader political and institutional commitment of cities to set in motion this transformation and overturn the tools that reinforce the dominant agricultural system. In other words, the state must assist the commons concretely, even through sanctions of the market if this might be needed to protect the commons from a hazardous environment (Weston and Bollier, 2013, p.8). This translates into changes in the power forces competing in the policy-making process with imposed limits on groups favoured hitherto at the expense of smaller actors but also on the redirection of local government institutional ambitions towards new practices. For example, long-term declared political commitment appears to be important in light of its potential to direct certain customary practices towards new pathways benefiting the creation of additional commons. For instance, the 10 ambitions plan its promising instruments in this regard. Moreover, the plan declares the commitment of the city to foster educational activities and projects aiming at raising awareness of the importance of food sustainability and sustainable initiatives on a larger scale. Reading this through IPES-FOOD's table (see chapter 2.3.2) it might appear that the inclusion of education in a well-defined political agenda might represent an "entry point" to escape the compartmentalised knowledge on such issues and thus the dominant food narratives.

To conclude, the call for proposal appears to have played a significant role in facilitating access to the land system in Leuven. In view of the instruments adopted by the municipality, with the leasing of public land, as well as its declared political commitments, it could be considered a prototype of a partnering state. However, there is no complete realignment of the city's support towards the AFPs, which is deemed necessary in the partner state model. Although some AFPs managed to emerge, their "empowerment" has not occurred through an intentional decision of the State but rather in an indirect way.

5.4 Is a no-state approach possible for commons development?

This section aims to provide an answer to the question: Do food commons initiatives have the capacity to proliferate 'outside' the State?

A no-state approach to commons implies that the development of commons must occur outside the State and market dichotomy, to ensure the maintenance of the true specification of commoning, which is autonomy. Such claims are based on the considerations asserting that when helped by the State, commons lose their intrinsic values (autonomy, self-governance, solidarity etc.) and might be co-opted by the state to achieve its own interests (Caffentzis 2004, in De Angelis 2017). The assessment criteria enlisted in the call illustrate that AFPs are not extended from complying with some rules, whether these rules are imposed by the state or by a wider policy framework. In fact, many of these rules, like for example food safety normatives or other organic label requirements, constrain AFPs' operations and impose limits to the generative activities that highly contribute to sustainable development. Additionally, unlike traditional agricultural methods, AFPs practices are examples of social commons therefore the core of their activities and operations lies in communitarian synergies. Among others, such dynamics are based on the mutualization of infrastructure, resources and knowledge (Bauwens et al., 2017). Often, however, these praxis and costumes are not allowed by strict regulation on food standards, therefore the whole essence of commons is hindered and limited by these frameworks. As revealed by LFA01, the mutualization of resources is highly halted by regulations and this restricts their way of operating and all those practices that define the fulcrum of commoning.

Yet, the AFPs seem to need the state to achieve access to land and resources. However, the state's support can be provided under restricted conditions that are often imposed in a top-down rationale, thus not compatible with local realities. Food commoning in Leuven seems rather powerful to cover needs at several stages of the food systems (e.g. De Landgenoten facilitates access to land, collaborations between different food actors, the collective use of land, etc.). That suggests there is a potential for these initiatives to achieve autonomy. But, when the state provides its support, through tools like the Call, the AFPs can grasp the opportunity and proliferate in achieving their goals in collaboration with state institutions.

Conclusions

This thesis aimed at uncovering the extent to which, through the call for proposals, the municipality of Leuven is supporting (or hindering) the proliferation of AFPs in Leuven, which operate as food commons. Action research was conducted to analyse the Call as a tool with the potential to support food-commoning activities. The analysis of the Call unravelled a series of multi-level interactions between the public institutions and AFPs allowing for the identification of the conditions under which the state can support the commons.

The case of Leuven demonstrated that the state cannot be viewed as a monolith but rather as a convergence of various layers of institutions, each adopting different policies, initiatives and regulations. Food commons, which operate at the local level, are affected by policies like the CAP and legislative frameworks (land laws, property rights regulations etc.) that are prompted at a supranational or regional level and overstep local authority's jurisdiction. More specifically, the thesis unravelled different manifestations of the state (EU, Belgian State, Flemish Region, City of Leuven) shaping the access to land system and directly or indirectly affecting in different ways (positive and negative) commons development and proliferation. At the same time, the case study revealed that the state (the city of Leuven) acts as a mediator between active citizens/communities of practice and wider socio-economic dynamics framed by multi-level public and supra-national organisations. The local authorities in Leuven and related public institutions (OCMW, AGSL etc.) appeared to be open to the agency of communities of practice and local food actors inviting them to co-develop food strategies as well as to implement their projects on land owned by the city. This constitutes an empirical demonstration that at the local level, municipalities can follow and even support social dynamics (commoning) and trigger political and institutional changes associated with the management of land and resources. However, obstacles are still remaining due to innumerable mechanisms the capitalist system has to reproduce itself at various political tiers and therefore control and channel global development models.

The aforementioned context justifies the complexity of defining a precise set of conditions for the state to enable commons development. Commons are inherently context-based and generate themselves to cover specific needs in a specific socio-spatial territory (Bollier et al., 2019; De Angelis 2017). Therefore, it is difficult for commons to fit in and be developed within predefined structures imposed by wider policies and legal frameworks (Gutwirth and Stengers, 2016). Food commons, like the AFPs in Leuven, seem to have the capacity and potential to keep exercising and reproducing their power through daily activities, but often need the support of the state to proliferate and prove that commoning is a "viable and desirable" solution to cover the needs of society as a whole. As explained in the proposal submitted by the action research team (Leuven Gymkana) to the city of Leuven in the context of the open call, there is a need to adopt a collaborative governance model to collectively define the needs of the food system in Leuven, as well as the ways to cover them through democratised and participatory decision-making processes. In other words, all actors that operate at different levels of the food

production and supply chain ranging from conventional farmers, AFPs, NGOs, city representatives etc. should co-shape the rules and conventions that guide local development. For the case of Leuven, the collaboration can be set through the creation of a Union building on existing partnerships and cooperation to ensure the constant representation of multiple actors who can co-shape sustainability definitions and land governance and co-produce context-specific knowledge for Leuven's sustainable future. Following these principles and goals, the future scenario for the proliferation of commons will have to address conflicts and create the conditions for fruitful collaboration between local public institutions and commoning initiatives. This pathway should be guided by sincere willingness to create regenerative processes in all the dimensions of life and to re-build human-nature/land relationships, to be able challenge the unsustainable and harmful social and environmental reality reproduced by capitalist system.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Leuven Gymkhana picture

Annex 2: List of interviews

Annex 2: Map displaying the interactions and interrelations between the dominant agricultural system, the City of Leuven directing land and food governance, and the Alternative Food Practices in Leuven. (Source: Ying Li, created in the context of Leuven Gymkhana action research)

Annex 3: Critique and proposal written by Action research team.

Figure 11/12/13: Leuven gymkhana collective moments

Figure 12: Leuven Gymkhana's final event
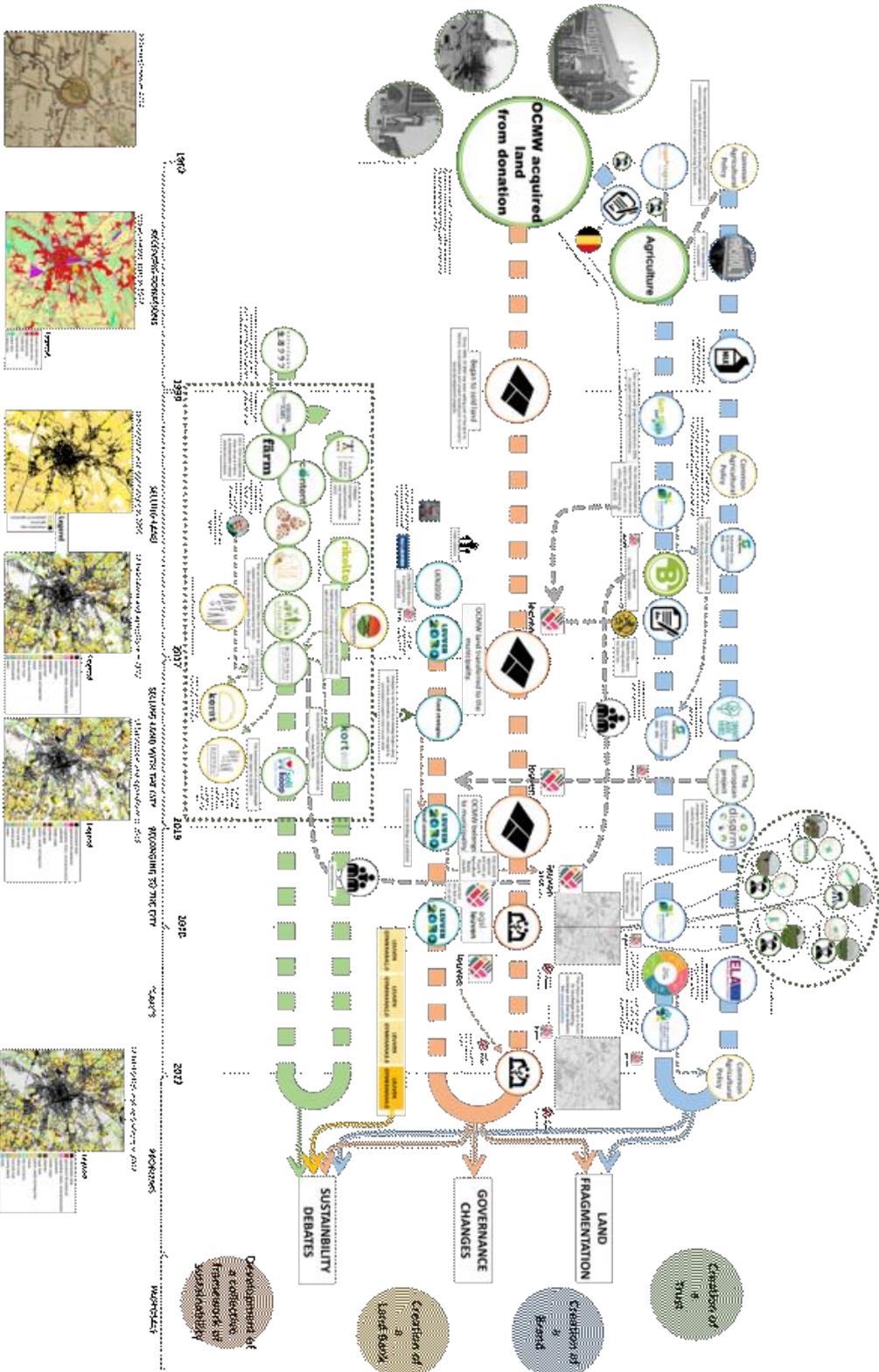
Figure 1: List of interviews (the list of questions is not always exhaustive, additional questions emerged during the interviews) .

Interviewee	Theme	Questions
LPA01	General information	1. Could you introduce yourself and tell us something about you?
	History of OCMW land	1. What was the use and ownership of the OCMW lands before they passed to the municipalities? 2. How much land is owned in total by OCMW in Leuven urban and peri-urban zone? 3. Registered in the cadastre as public, private or other? Can we find OCMW lands aggregated data in the cadastre? 4. Does the city has rights to sell the land? Under which conditions?
	Land governance OCMW	1. Which are the principles of the land distribution / rental out by the OCMW? 2. Which are the principles of the land distribution / rental out by the OCMW? 3. How is the land owned by the OCMW managed ? Who keeps track of the management of the land ? 4. Who are the main targets of access to such land? 5. Apart from the Call, what other tools/contracts exist for the use of OCMW land?
	First Call	1. Who developed and organized the call? Was it VLAR or another board? 2. Who participated in the development of the Call? Was there any discussion with citizens and stakeholders before? Boerenbond or any other organization representing farmers? 3. Do local farmers have access to participation tools to express needs and visions? 4. What about the plots that are part of a wider cultivated area? Under which conditions can there be an exchange of land? 5. Is there a mid-term evaluation? (criteria 'defined by the jury members of the Call'? so legal specialists? Can we have access to these criteria? 6. Do you know if the projects are operating effectively? Have the tenderers ultieshared any problems and diffics? 7. When do leasing agreements end? Can tenderers extend their contracts under certain conditions?
	Second Call	1. What was improved? 2. Which was the role of VLAR? 3. Who is represented in the development of the second Call? Do you think that there are food actors that are left out from the representation and the whole process?

Interviewee	Theme	Questions
LFA01 & LFA01	Personal information	1. Could you introduce yourself and let us know something about your life?
	Personal history of the project (struggles)	1. Since when have you started this project? Was it planned even before the call or you elaborated it in view of the call? 2. Why did you start? Why are you still doing it (i.e. what is your aim/goal)? 3. Is this your full-time job? How much commitment does it require? ecc. 4. How did you learn farming? Are you still learning and if so how? 5. What are the main challenges that you are facing?
	Information about the plot	1. Was it clear where the plot was? 2. Is there any control- evaluation by the local authority on the land ? 3. What are your intentions with the land? 4. How would you evaluate the call as a tool supporting your projects? • what do you think about the call as as tool to provide land to local food actors (from the municipality) • as a tool to engage sustainable projects • Governance - what about the development of the call? participated? Where you invited to take part there ? How did you hear about it ? Why did you apply? 5. Leasing agreement: when does it end ? Can you extend the leasing period?
	AFPs and the State /policy	1. Is the municipality collaborating with you to make your projects easier? • Is the municipality a good channel to get started with this kind of projects? 2. Which are the spaces of dialogue between citizens and the municipality? 3. Do you feel supported by the local authorities? Regional authorities? What do you appreciate? What kind of support are you missing now but would you like to have? • Do you know of places where it is better? Worse?
	Subsidies and fundings	1. How much does it cost to get started with the project? 2. Do you receive any aid/fundings from the State or are you aware of any financial tools? Are you aware of the subsidies from the European Union?

Interviewee	Theme	Questions
	Personal	1. Could you introduce yourself and let me know something about your life?

LFA03	History of the CSA	1. Since when do you have your CSAs? Was it easy starting? 2. Why did you start? Why are you still doing it (i.e. what is your aim/goal)? 3. Is this your full time job? • how much commitment does it require? ecc. 4. How did you learn farming? Are you still learning and if so how? 5. What are the main challenges that your CSAs has faced?
	Policy framework for CSA	1. Do you receive any aid from the State or are you aware of tools 2. Is the municipality collaborating with you to make your projects easier? antagonism? 3. To what extent is the level of municipalities better to implement sustainable initiatives than the national level? 4. Which are the spaces of dialogue between citizens and the municipality? 5. Are there some commons in the territory or are there plans of the Municipality to extend commons? 5. Do you feel supported by the local authorities? Regional authorities? What do you appreciate? What kind of support are you missing now but would you like to have?

	Csa and networks	1.Are you part of any association/group of CSAs?
		    • Do you know other CSAs initiative in the municipality?
		        1. 2. What can you tell us about the CSAs you know (in Leuven)?
		3. How do you relate to other CSAs ?
		do you have any collaboration platform?

	Subsidies & fundings	1. How much does it cost to get started with the project? 2. Do you receive any aid/fundings from the State or are you aware of any financial tools? Are you aware of the subsidies from the European Union?

Interviewee	Theme	Questions
	General information	1. Could you introduce yourself and tell us something about you?
	History of the organisation	1. How do farmers become members of BB ? 2. How are farmers represented in BB? (Through the elections of the administrative council? Through regular open-to-public meetings/discussions?) 3. Do you have Csa as part of your oganisation ? • how do you categorize farmers within your organisation ?

	Role of the food policy	1. Which role does Boerenbond play in the VLAR?
		2. How do you participate in the VLAR at the personal level?
		3. Which is the role of BB in the development and implementation of Leuven's food programme?
		    • Was BB also involved in the making of the food strategy?
		    • Is BB/you also related to the food program in Leuven 2030?

LPA		4. Does BB have a say/can influence decisions about the management of agricultural land at Regional or Provincial level? (
	Role in the creation of the Call	1. What is your opinion about the Call? Who can it support? and how it works for farmers in Leuven from your perspective? • Role of BB in the Call's development? • How do you communicate the Call to the farmers? • Do you provide guidance and/or technical support to farmers to apply? How does it work? • Do farmers rely on your help in a second momentum for the plots management? o e.g. help with infrastructure, irrigation system ecc. 2. Which is the aim of the Call? 3. Which is your role in agriculture policy making?
	Sustainability	1. Who participates in the evaluation of the call? Which is your role in the evaluation of Call? How is the criteria measured among members in the jury? 2. One of the 2 criteria defined by the call are sustainability and innovation, how do you evaluate them? 3. How would you define sustainability?
	Support for farmers	1. Do you provide any help to the farmers who want to apply? If yes, how does it translate in practical terms? 2. Do farmers rely on your help in a second momentum for the plots management?
	Representation	1. Which is the percentage of small farmers members part of your organization? 2. How about AFPs? (You have to bring a definition prepared to explain what you mean) 3. Representativeness of AFNs /CSAs in the Boerenbond • How is the communication between farmers and BB managed? • Is there also communication among farmers facilitated by BB? how? 4. Is there any existing platform of collaboration or space of dialogue btw the Boerenbond and the farmers in the context of such projects?

| Interviewee	Theme	Questions
LPA02	Personal information	1.Could you Introduce yourself and give us an idea of what you're doing ?
	Call related questions	1. Do you negotiate with local communtiies for the use of this land? How is the OCMW land managed? 2. Do you have to be based in Leuven to apply for the call? 3. Did you have any meeting with the farmer before the creation of the Call? 4. Could you tell us about the composition of the jury? How are they elected? 5. Which is the role of Leuven2030? 6. Which are the criteria to apply? Where does this policy steam from? Local ideas or also national and suprnaation e.g. EU? 7. Is it a local or regional project?
	Policy framework	1. Are you exchaning experiences and learning from other cities in Flanders on these topics? 2. Are there similar projects, like the call ? • Where do community gardens stem from? 3. Is someone monitoring the implementation of the Food Programme 4. How is the food strategy itself embedded in the work of the city (funding and budget)? 5. Is food a transveral topic in different policy framewokrs? 6. Is there any specific policy to attract bottom up initiatives
	Representativeness	1. Are citizens involved in the policy making process? 2. Are small farmers included in the call creation?

C0. Introduction: The Call

This Call for sustainable agricultural projects -in the context of which we submit our proposal- aims to identify and support innovative projects of sustainable agriculture and food production, and to increase community participation in all stages of Leuven's food system. It builds on more than 20 years of experimentation by the City and different food actors in Leuven to transform the local food system and relations between citizens and policy makers. In 2016, conversations and workshops gathering different stakeholders from the food system in Leuven led to the development of the "Food Connects" strategy. This actors to guide their efforts to achieve healthy and sustainable food for all in Leuven document was then taken up by different. First, Leuven2030, a multi-actor organization aiming to coordinate efforts to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, incorporated the principles of the strategy into its new Roadmap, published in 2019, and established a "Food Programme" to guide and track its implementation. In the same year, the City transformed the Agriculture Advisory Board into the Food and Agriculture Advisory Board (VLAR) and translated the Roadmap into the "Climate Action Plan 2020-25", including specific actions related to food. One of the actions taken by the city to implement the objectives in the Food Programme, and the Climate Policy was a first Call (launched in 2020) for projects to be developed on OCMW lands to implement the local Food Programme. Both the first and the second -currently open- Call are designed in collaboration with the VLAR, and the Autonomous Municipal Company for Urban Development Leuven (AGSL).

The Call appears as a dual endeavour of the City to change a long-standing system of access to land, as well as to support an increasing number of local actors involved in Leuven's food system. Among those actors, Alternative Food Practices that 'claim their rights' in the transformation of the dominant agro-industrial food system, can be significantly benefited. As opposed to mainstream food businesses, Alternative Food Practices '*think of food as a system, not just an industry taking into account economic, environmental and social issues related to food*'[1]. All these initiatives can also be framed within the social and solidarity-based economy, since their motivations are "not simply profit-based and the final aim of the economic activity is often to serve the community"[2]. In and around Leuven, there is a growing interest and potential in this respect, since active citizenship has resulted in the development of several Alternative Food Practices. To our reading, those include: a wide network of Community Supported Agriculture initiatives (BoerEnCompagnie, Natuurlijk Fruit, Ramselveld, De Witte Beek, 't Legummenhofke, Wakkere akker, 't Legumenhofke) , cooperatives that deal with access to land issues (De Landgenoten) and others that operate towards an improved -more equal- food system and local supply chain (eg. Food Hub, Content, Barstan, Hal5, Weigewijs). They all belong to what we call 'Food Commons' they can contribute to food democracy and generative land and resources management, and attempt to secure that all members of the food system have a saying in how the food resources are managed and are guaranteed a fair and sufficient access to those resources, regardless of their purchasing power.
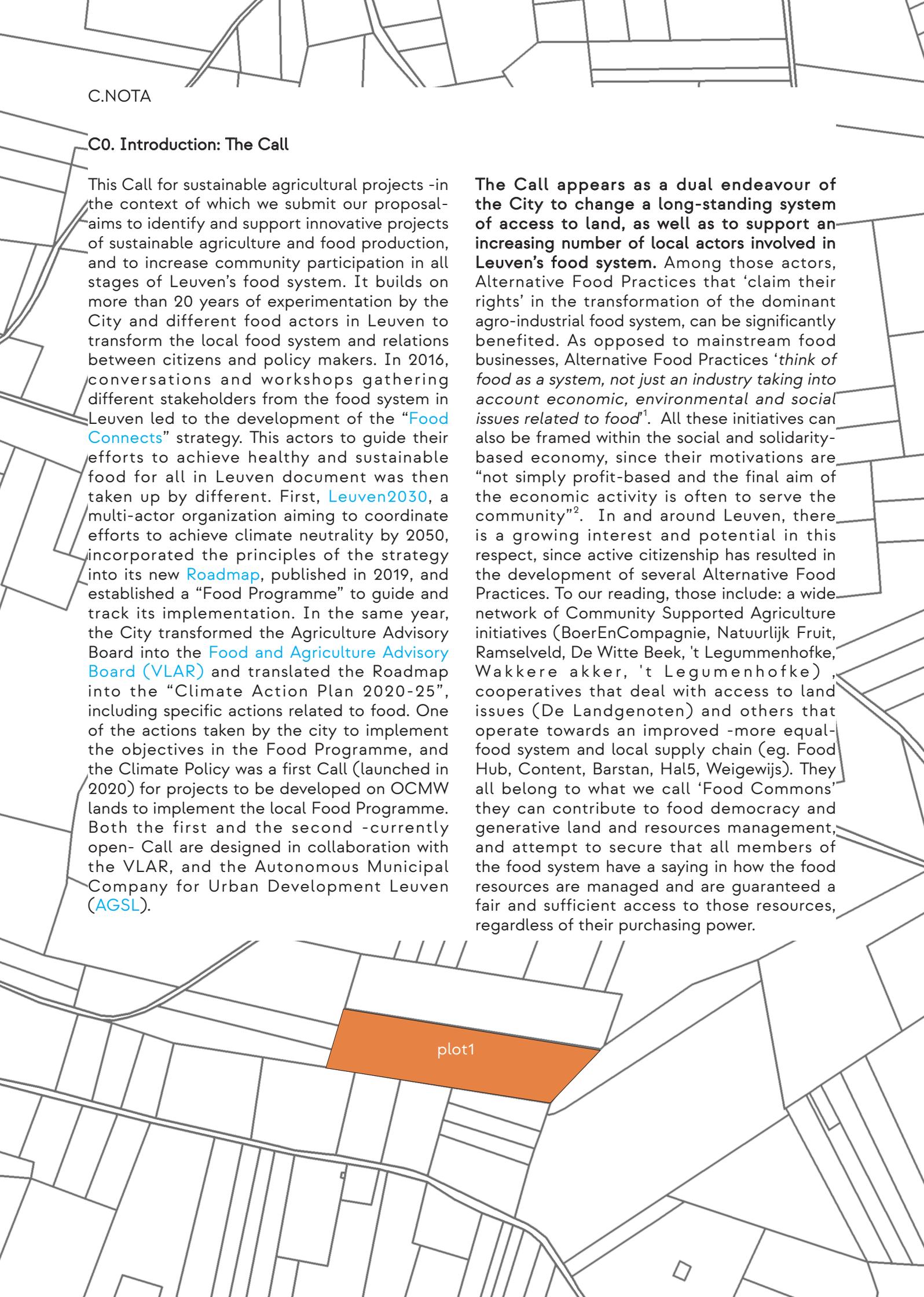
plot1
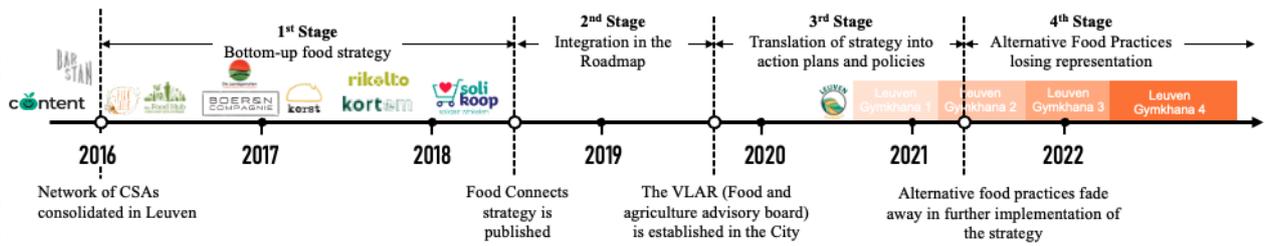
Using literature on governance, state theory, commons and commoning, social innovation and spatial development planning, a group of KU Leuven students, and researchers started analysing the Call for Sustainable Agricultural Projects in March 2022. By putting the Call in the field of interactions between agro-industrial farming, the city and alternative food practices (see Figure 1) , the team tried to understand the broader implications of the Call. What does the Call actually do? Who benefits from it? To what extent and how does it affect this field?

To organize this analysis, three themes are discussed: access to land, sustainability, and governance. The main statements that are stressed are the following:

• There is a positive shift by the City of Leuven, which is now keeping the ownership of the OCMW lands -instead of selling them- and opens their use for the Alternative Food Practices.

• The City is interfering in land access dynamics without fundamentally changing them.

• There are competing understandings of sustainability: a generic one framed by the City and a context-specific one developed in practice by Alternative Local Food Actors.

• The representation of the Alternative Food Actors in the implementation of the Food Strategy has weakened.
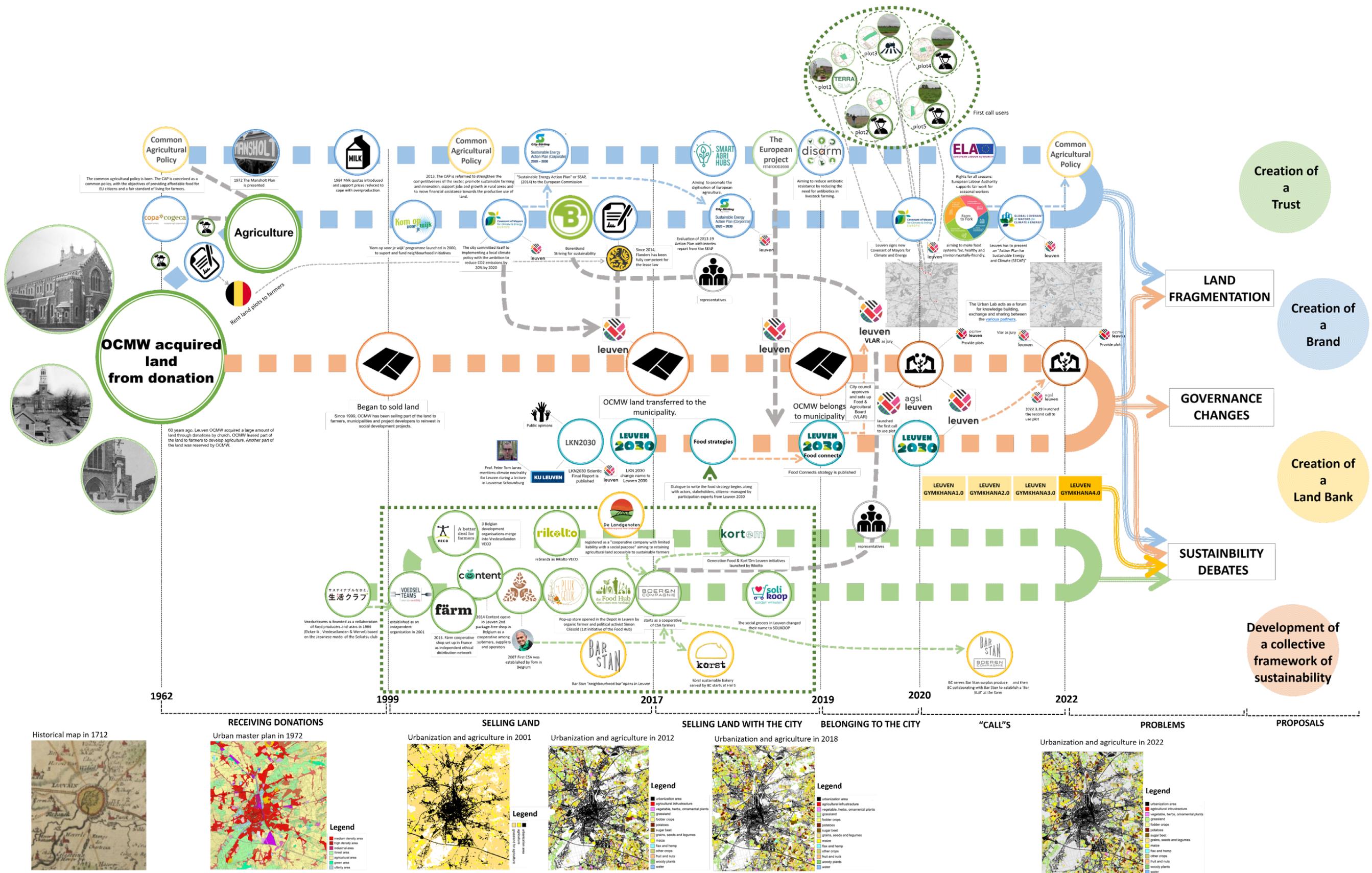
Figure 1: Chronicle of the interactions and interrelations between the dominant agricultural system, the City of Leuven channeling land and food governance, and the Alternative Food Practices in

The City -through the Call- is making an attempt to change the access to land system favouring local and 'small' sustainable food actors. As a matter of fact, the land that is made available through the Calls belonged to OCMW, a historical Organization for Social Welfare, the assets of which were for long used to cover the needs of local communities. Since the 1990s, the OCMW has been selling part of the land to farmers, municipalities and project developers to reinvest in social development projects[3]. In 2017, OCMW lands were transferred to the municipalities, and as part of the public estates, can be sold, leased, and become available for development purposes. In Leuven, over the last 30 years, valuable agricultural land was sold for the benefit of project developers at the expense of local farmers[4]. However, we are witnessing a political shift in the management of OCMW lands. The new local government (since 2019) decided to keep the ownership of the land, while 'offering' the management of several plots, which are currently free of rent[5], to actors who can prove that they can develop sustainable agricultural projects[6] (art.59 Meerjarenprogramma, 6-year political programme). **This is a positive change,** since the big actors involved in the dominant agro-industry own and/or have uninterrupted access to large areas of land, while looking for additional hectares to increase productivity and profit. Moreover, big corporations are dominating more and more sectors related to nature, land and resources monopolising the seeds market, agrochemicals, biotechnology, fertilisers etc[7].
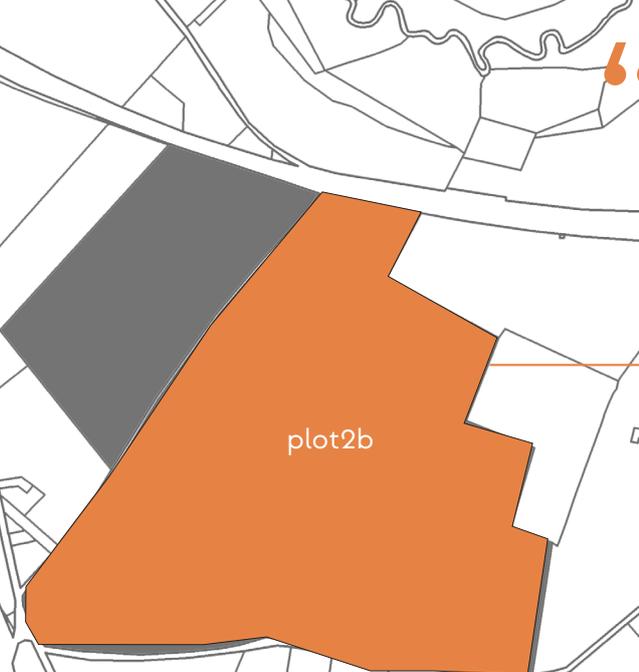
plot2b

"*A few firms and their allies, nowadays, have the power to affect and shape land policies (agricultural/ environmental) and the market. They decide and -in some cases- impose to the states how many animals each farmer can breed and sell, what kind of crops can be cultivated in each territory and to what extent, how animals should be fed and raised to comply with food safety criteria. What is more, the same allies define the prices of the products and the percentage that goes to the producers, while expanding their interests on oil and energy investments to further consolidate their multifarious speculative operation.*" Local Food Actor 01 (LFA01)

Opposing the dominant system, small-scale practices and initiatives 'advocate for more ecologically sound and socially just food systems'[8]. They normally work on fragmented pieces of land, which struggle to be kept out of globalised land grabbing trends. European statistics confirm the continuous decrease of the number of small-scale farmers: 'The EU lost 4.2 million farms (one quarter) across the Member States between 2005 and 2016, about 85% of which were farms under 5 ha' (Eurostat, 2018)[9]. The same trend is mirrowed in Flanders (Figure 2). According to national statistics[10]:

(Figure 2). According to national statistics : "compared to 2007, the number of agricultural holdings has decreased by slightly more than a quarter, a decrease of 3% per year on average. In particular smaller farms stop their activities, which leads to a constant increase in scale" (p.1). Moreover, "due to the small number of new, starting farmers and the stable number of farmers stopping their farm business, Flanders is facing an increasing ageing and shrinking farmer population. Old farmers often retire without someone taking over the farm business" (p.5).

Nombre d'exploitations, superficie et main-d'œuvre							
Belgique	1980	1990	2000	2010	2013	2016	2019
Nombre d'exploitations *	113.883	87.180	61.926	42.854	37.761	36.888	36.111
Superficie agricole utilisée (en ha)	1.418.121	1.357.366	1.394.083	1.358.019	1.338.566	1.352.953	1.358.705
Main-d'œuvre	185.134	142.272	107.399	80.944	74.510	70.993	-
dont main-d'œuvre non familiale occupée régulièrement	7.139	7.791	9.962	14.437	15.443	19.802	
Main-d'œuvre/exploitation	1,63	1,63	1,73	1,89	1,97	1,92	-
Flandre**	1980	1990	2000	2010	2013	2016	2019
Nombre d'exploitations *	75.898	57.934	41.047	28.331	24.929	24.034	23.378
Superficie agricole utilisée (en ha)	634.397	603.896	636.876	616.866	624.960	622.860	624.990
Main-d'œuvre	124.658	96.015	74.695	56.575	51.661	48.569	-
dont main-d'œuvre non familiale occupée régulièrement	5.140	6.223	8.121	11.296	12.376	15.545	-
Main-d'œuvre/exploitation	1,64	1,66	1,82	2,00	2,07	2,02	-

Figure 2: Evolution of the number of agriculture exploitations in Belgium and Flanders (source: Statbel, 2020)[11].

Local food actors further underline that "because of the capitalist society, people who are not farmers, but own land, do not want to rent it for long periods, which is -on the other hand- a sine qua non condition for food producers to invest in an agricultural project" (LFA01). Therefore, small actors try to join wider networks of similar interests and visions (like Community Supported Agriculture networks -see CSA Netwerk VZW-, and collaborative products distribution platforms -see Kort'om Leuven-) in order to proliferate, remain resilient and challenge the dominant

remain resilient and challenge the dominant agro-industrial food system. However, "joining collaborative distribution platforms sometimes entails unequal competition especially between organic and non-organic producers" (LFA02). What is more, Alternative Food Practices are challenging *land commodification*[12] processes that serve efficiency purposes, and advocate for generative ecological principles, which could provide a fertile ground for the development of democratized food governance and holistic responses to land and resources scarcity.

plot3

"Generativity defines in a transversal way a capacity to give birth to, to make something emerge, to engender, to distinguish from a reproduction of the same by the same, or from a fabrication for which an intentional agent would be responsible. The term ties in with the older meaning of physis – nature as having the power to grow and flourish." (Gutwirth & Stengers, 2016: 336, citing Capra and Mattei in the Ecology of Law, 2015)

But does the Call overcome issues of land commodification by providing plots in this way? Instead of selling the OCMW land that is free-of-rent, the City keeps the ownership of the lands and sets up leasing contracts with the users and appropriators of the plots. This intention restrains concentration of land and promotes a more fairly distributed and equal access to land. Moreover, it leaves space for the development of diversified projects and the development of diversified projects and land uses, which could be translated as an attempt of the local authorities to stimulate Alternative Food Practices in Leuven's peri-urban zones. While the surface available in the first Call (2020) was very small (3,3 ha), the second Call (2022) offered more land both in terms of the quantity and size of the plots (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Eight (8) plots -marked in red colour- with a total amount of 3.3 ha were made available in the 1st Call (left); six out of the eight plots were in Wijgmaal (north Leuven). Twelve (12) plots -marked in blue colour-, 12.44 ha in total, were made available in the 2nd Call (right) located in the southwest and southeast zones of Leuven.

However, the plots remain very isolated and the Call seems to ignore the fact that they are part of specific local land dynamics, , as well as a set of place-specific features:
• social (family relations, decade old community tensions, generations of landed property and/or lease),
• economic (the logics of market-embedded agro-industrial farming versus those of market challenging alternative farming, huge differences in conceptions of labour, land price dynamics),
• legal (complexities of agricultural lease legislation, property and rent relations, cadastre, taxation),
• cultural (clashing peri-urban and farming cultures), and
• ecological (land quality, nature-agriculture tensions, hydrology).

What's more, the city seems to exacerbate conflicts or even trigger conflicts that were not there before (LFA01, LFA03, BB interviewee).

There is also no mention of any intention of the City to more fundamentally intervene in these land dynamics, e.g. through land consolidation projects (competence of the Flemish Land Agency VLM).

Important for assessing the call, are the evaluation criteria and the assessment of the selected projects to be developed on those plots. Farmers should commit themselves to use the land for the implementation of sustainable agriculture (see section 2.2. for definitions of sustainability by the City and the local food actors). However, one of the local food actors explained that when he was interviewed by the juries of the City and the VLAR, he was asked to explain his economic plan and elaborate on the economic added value that the use of the plot would provide. No questions were raised about the sustainability of the project in terms of natural resources management, environmental, ecological and social impact, since the interview focused only on the financial aspects.

plot4

> *"I noticed nobody asked me anything about sustainability during a 30-minute or 45-minute interview. They only focused on how I am going to make money from that. Which is important; I also appreciate that. And the Call gave me the chance to start my business, which probably I might have not otherwise. But it was strange to me. The Call was for sustainable projects. So, I spent time and studied the gap in the sustainable system. But there were no questions about the fertilizers, soil quality, water use etc. during the interview. Only same questions on whether I could make a profitable business from something that small."*
> (LFA03)

So does the City equate sustainability to efficient agro-industries and carbon-neutral activities? If it does, the Call does not actually overcome the issue of land commodification, considering that land is allocated for mere agricultural purposes that should conform to efficiency principles. But this is not how Leuven2030 explicates sustainability principles in the Roadmap guidelines to implement Leuven's Food Programme and Strategy (Figure 4). For Leuven 2030, *"when it comes to food, there is a strong overlap between sustainability and health"*[14].

[PROGRAM 8] SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY EATING	
Site 48	Promoting sustainable and healthy food
Site 49	Decreasing food waste and food packaging
Site 50	Expanding participatory and sustainable food production in the Leuven region
Site 51	Increasing the eco-efficiency of food production
Site 52	Fostering innovation in sustainable agriculture and nutrition

Figure 4: Dimensions (Sites) of sustainable food production and consumption defined in the Leuven2030

C0.2. Competing understandings of Sustainability

Sustainability has become a major trend for many cities that label their local development policies as 'green', 'equitable', 'innovative', 'ethical', 'resilient' etc. Such policies are often used by private and state-owned companies to comply with supranational agendas that are not always compatible with local and context-specific sustainability needs as shaped by the distinct socio-cultural, environmental, ecological, and spatial features of each territory. As a result, cities end up using the 'sustainability trend' to decorate (i.e., urban gardening) more than creating everlasting impacts on the unsustainable structures of capitalist nature exploitation and nature commodification[13]. Moreover, local authorities invest on fragmented projects to satisfy different interests, needs, EU or national multi-year strategic goals, while sustainability requires a radical, systemic, continuous, and long-term change.

For the case of Leuven, the following critiques are drawn:

Different actors in the food system have competing understandings of sustainability. The city presumes and builds on EU-imposed definitions of sustainability based on a profit-oriented and market-based perspective that are also vaguely described and measured. While 20% of the award criteria is related to 'sustainability and ecology' requirements, there is only a broad requirement that 'the tenderer pays attention to sustainable (ecological, economic and social) agricultural production methods and also has sufficient knowledge to work in an ecologically responsible manner'. However, the Call does not contain detailed information about sustainable agricultural production practices, nor about the necessary knowledge on ecological responsibility, and how these requirements will be measured and awarded within the 20%. Representative from the City mentioned that the lack of sustainability definition implies that nobody is excluded. "A food business does not necessarily have to be organic to apply, for example. *We wanted to show that food really connects. And it worked.*"[15]   Flexibility can indeed provide a fertile ground for the applicants to develop creative projects. But it can also result in an unfair competition between small-scale organic farmers, who can be really sustainable although not competitive efficiency-wise, and large-scale food businesses that can have consultants/experts developing proposals

for profitable projects labeling them 'green', 'sustainable', etc. **The lack of a thorough definition of sustainability, therefore, entails a risk for the concept to be emptied of meaning.**

On top of that, **the City did not conduct, in advance, a thorough study to analyze the distinct environmental, socio-ecological and spatial features of each plot.** Such an analysis could provide a context-specific understanding of what sustainability means as a basis for the assessment of the project's added value. A site survey took place during the formulation of the second Call being one of the improvements compared to the first Call (City Representative 01 – CR01). However, no data were published to help potential tenderers adjust their projects to the special needs and potentials of the available lands. Even basic information on infrastructure and water resources are missing. This makes potential applicants skeptical and hesitant, especially if they are small-scale businesses (LFA02, LFA03). This relates to another detail that was made clear by the City in the second Call: the fact that the tenderers have to invest and develop themselves the necessary infrastructural works (CR01). As a matter of fact, a tenderer mentioned that water is a serious problem for farmers and there was no water on the plot that he was offered. He, then, looked for a company and the budget to drill and create a well on the plot, which proved impossible due to the composition of the soil.

Understandings of Sustainability

DOMINANT AGRO-INDUSTRIES — Efficiency

CITY OF LEUVEN — Carbon neutrality

ALTERNATIVE FOOD PRACTICES — Generativity
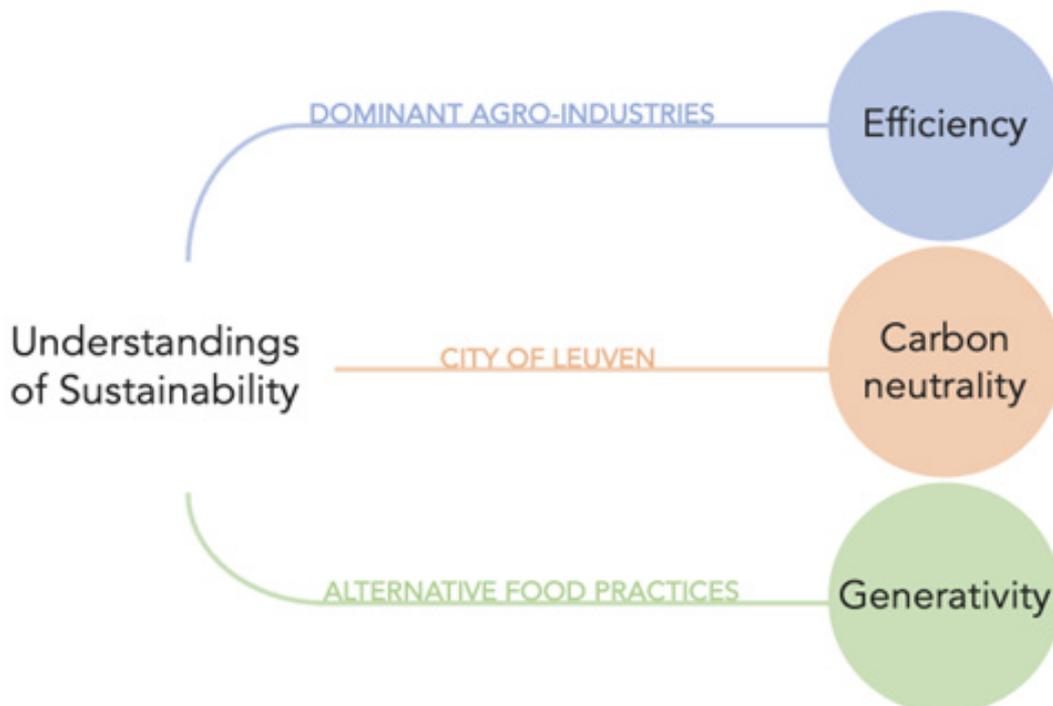
What is more, **there are competing temporalities in the conception of sustainability between the City and the farmers.** On the one hand, sustainable farming requires time and long, uninterrupted access to land. Local stakeholders, who work with -or plan to invest in- sustainable and organic farming, are reluctant to apply for a plot, since there is a reference period of a 5-year land use. This period is very short because, first, the soil requires time and preparation to become fertile and 'healthy', especially if a conventional type of farming was formerly developed on the same plot. Furthermore, since chemical 'accelerators' (hormones, pesticides) are not used, the crop requires time to naturally reach a fruitful and efficient level of production. On the other hand, local administration has a 6-year power and limited budget, which allows the implementation of specific and limited projects related to the food strategy. Representatives from the City explained that tenderers can have a long leasing agreement (Erfpacht contract) which prolongs significantly (up to 30 years) the use of the plot. They added that the 5 years is a reference period aiming to speed up the initiation of the projects. However, tenderers waiting for their erfpacht contract even for more than a year -since the legal process takes time- hesitate to invest in the plot, and fear that their contract can be cancelled any time (LFA03). A number of bureaucratic burdens make the City act as a real-estate agent operating in a project-oriented rationale that proves to be incompatible with the essence of sustainability.

plot5

" *"The type of farming I want to do is sustainable farming, restorative farming; you can't do that in five years. That's a long process and farming should always be considered as something that goes beyond one generation. [...] I didn't look at the short term because I was not going to plant eg. vegetables and have them produced immediately. No. I was going to have some crops that are good for the soil. And then I found out that those plots will probably not remain farmlands."* (LFA01)

" How did we think that food should be fast, cheap and easy? It's never been since the beginning of civilisation

—
Alice Waters
On "The Economist Asks"

The individualistic approach to the use of the plots and the negligence of the plots embeddedness in a wider socio-ecological system reveal that the Call embodies an anthropocentric view of sustainability, which adds to local competition   creating tensions and conflictual attitudes (LFA01, LFA03). In several cases in the first Call, conventional farming and crops already existed on specific plots. So, what happened is that the new tenderers came into conflict with the current users, since the latter had ongoing investments, loans, contracts and one of them even had to pay a fine because of the abrupt land use and occupation change (LFA03). Although the Call claims to create a broad partnership in Leuven for the implementation of the food strategy, what is happening in the field is sometimes rather different from collaborations and coalitions at the policy-making level. And it is precisely in the arena of policy-making, the development operational directives, certifications/standardizations, and the evaluation of food agribusinesses, that competing understandings of sustainability become very critical. The vast majority -if not all- of the regulations, as well as criteria to assess food safety, production-consumption chains, and sustainable projects in general are developed by and for farming industries and industrial food practices that operate in a totally different scale and rationale than local, small-scale, and organic food businesses. In a similar context, the Call is meant to support projects that can prevent food losses, the reuse of surpluses and food residue streams. But stakeholders state that what used to be a natural cycle of using, exchanging, reusing,

and consuming food products, now falls under certain bureaucratic procedures and food safety standards that hamper in situ cooperation and exchange of raw materials (LFA01). In other words, in an attempt to formalize and institutionalize sustainability, the

core essence of the concept is lost. The Call seems to reproduce this institutionalized view of sustainability embedded in the prevalent pro-growth and market-led development model.

plot6

"There is a whole paradigm shift towards a new mode of production, in which words like sustainability, efficiency and high productivity are exactly what is being promoted. The main idea is that everything must be efficient (produce as much as possible, in the shortest time, with the smallest effort). In that context, animals are treated like machines, farmers have become managers without having a relationship with their animals anymore, and they are completely dependent on many other actors -one being the landowners-. There is a huge difference between farming industries and engineers that produce food safety standards and regulations, and farmers who work with a limited number of animals, taking care of them, knowing what they eat, where they live. There are so many regulations on food safety that derive from industrial food practices. It is just absurd that I have to be assessed with these same criteria." (LFA01)

Contrary to the normative dimension, **local communities are building their own definition of sustainability on the ground,** which is disregarded by the City. Alternative Food Practices make sense and interact with the local ecosystems, while having an intrinsic need to maintain sustainable nuclei in terms of businesses, farms, resources and social relations in a globalized economy. In practical terms, this means avoiding the use of chemical substances in farming and replicating natural ecosystemic cycles instead, work on a healthy and fertile soils, pasture animals freely on meadows, cultivate local/seasonal products and choose local animal breeds, incentivize individuals to be in close relationship with the place where food is produced -eg. by joining a CSA network-, set up agricultural schools and educational activities to raise awareness. But their approach and understanding of sustainability failed to be integrated in the

principles and assessment criteria of the Call. On the contrary, it is often restrained by legal frameworks and local development policies. This contradicts with the fact that the Food Strategy (collectively developed with the AFPs) was used as a basis to formulate the Leuven 2030 Roadmap, from which the Call to define sustainable projects stems. Was there a moment when collaborative governance was overturned?

What happened with the representation of local food actors in the implementation of the food strategy? Why was their view of sustainability neglected? Could the City of Leuven -instead of creating conflictual environments- focus on knowledge and expertise exchange between different food actors as well as old and new farmers? Can all actors work on a collective characterization of sustainability that will evolve into an improved land and food governance model?

C0.3. Governance

Governance can be defined as a way of organising social relations, including the management and political administration of resources and actors linked to farming land. It is "a constant process of negotiation, restructuring and readjustment, among a plurality of actors and institutions operating at various spatial scales." [16] Governance is context-dependent. Therefore, its analysis requires

a deep understanding of the socio-cultural, institutional and spatial particularities of the locality in reference, which is the urban and peri-urban territories of Leuven in our case. Moreover, governance comprises changing power and scalar dynamics that are connected from the local to the global [17]. This is particularly relevant, for Leuven Food Strategy aligns with Leuven 2030 Plan, which at the same time, is

framed under national and supranational regulations and plans related to food production and sustainability (EU, 2019; 2020)[18]. For governance to be subverted in favour of small actors, institutional arrangements should "enable stakeholders to generate sufficient capacity to act collectively and to perform transformations[19]" in the intersection of land and food politics. In this respect, Leuven2030, born from the interaction between the City and academia (KU Leuven), set the ground for a socially innovative multi-actor collaboration making Leuven an example of innovative food governance structures[20]. A bottom-up initiative for the development of Leuven's food strategy was an additional value, since it involved multiple interactions and meetings between local stakeholders, Leuven2030 and City administrators that resulted in the publication of the 'Food Connects' strategy in 2018, with the input of 120 citizens and about 80 organizations[21]. In 2019, the Food Strategy was consolidated in Leuven's Climate Action Plan 2020-25, while the VLAR was set up to safeguard the implementation of the Food Strategy.

However, **local small-scale farmers explain that their representation has weakened** and in some cases is even lost. One the one hand, City's representatives as well as members of companies and organizations, such as Boerenbond, participate in meetings within Leuven2030 and/or the VLAR as part of their professional duties and obligations and during their working hours. On the other hand, farmers are not paid for participating in the meetings; on the contrary, they have to postpone their work on the field, losing time and money. They, therefore, decide to participate in limited meetings but cannot affirm that their voices will keep being heard once they are absent (LFA02). Alternative food actors constantly try to explain how things operate in practice and ask City administrators to think out of the mainstream legal-administrative 'boxes'; but there is a lot of bureaucracy and do not always have time for that (LFA01). In this context, although the City of Leuven makes an attempt of opening up to bottom-up practices and collaborative food governance, the Call doesn't seem to be the result of an enhanced representation. Although several interviewees indicated that the composition of the VLAR -responsible for the formulation of the Call- assures a high representation of all actors involved in the food system, others expressed

that they do not feel well represented. Indicatively, some interviewees explained that timing issues that hinder the development of a well-prepared application by the interested parties would have been solved if small-scale actors participated or had a voice during the formulation of the Call. They underlined the fact that the Call is launched during the busiest period in agricultural production, which does not allow farmers to study and develop a thorough plan (scrutinize the budget, work on the long-term management of the business and the land, ask for consultancy etc.) to submit to the City. Hence, some questions arise: **Why is Leuven2030, which contributed to the making of the policies in a collaborative and participatory manner, missing from the Call? Who is representing Alternative Food Practices? Can such representation been recovered and improved?**

Current power relations in the local and supra-local authorities promote mainstream farming and reproduce the dominant agro-industrial system of food production and consumption. This Call is a significant attempt to include and incorporate the interests of small-scale and sustainable actors, but collide with the prevalent decision-making hierarchies and processes, as well as to a number of legal-institutional burdens embedded in the administrative system. In order to achieve change and sustainability goals, the dominant profit-driven paradigm has to be overturned. Building on what has been already achieved in Leuven by the multiplicity of actors, collaborative innovation could improve both the public capacities of problem-setting and problem-solving, but also create a new vision of governance itself[22] harnessing new ideas to create a shared identity that would last over time[23].

Based on the analysis of the Call presented above, we have developed the following proposal.

C1. Proposal

Our proposal lies on the creation of a Union/Trust as a basis for an improved governance model operating in line with commoning logics. The Union can collectively develop integrated principles of sustainability to support the collective management of land an resources. We further aim to set up a Brand -under the name of the Union/Trust to support local food actors (not substituting their brand, but add to that making them more visible in the food market), build synergies among the actors and create the ground for a continuous representation of those actors in decision making.

C2. Who are we[24]?

This application has been collectively produced by a group of KU Leuven students, researchers, academics[25]. The group mobilized action research methods (interviews, informal conversations, document research, stakeholders meetings, field visits, online documents for collective feedback and writing, public debates) to identify and integrate the interests and needs of local food actors in this application. We all use this Call as an opportunity to express such interests and needs, reach out to the City seeking for constant representation of alternative food actors in decision making, as well as a democratic and bottom-linked land and food governance system.

C3. Project Summary

The project includes the following main parts:

1. Creation of a Trust to join forces towards an improved bottom-linked governance model and to strengthen the representation of Alternative Food Actors in the implementation of Leuven's Food strategy.

2. Creation of a Brand to increase the visibility of Leuven's products and of Alternative Food Practices in the food market, improve their competitiveness and support their proliferation/scaling up. An additional but crucial goal is to make sustainable healthy food the dominant trend for all, instead of an 'affordable only for a few' choice.

3. Creation of a Land Bank. Secure agricultural land by transferring plots in a land banking system. Further develop land consolidation projects to secure wider agricultural ecosystems in and around the city of Leuven.

4. Development of a collective framework of sustainability (in theory and practice) through commoning processes to support the democratic management of land and resources towards the production of sustainable regional products, on the basis of collectively agreed principles for healthy food and generative agriculture (principles for the operation of the Trust).

We recommend the creation of a Trust with a dual aim: (1) to set up a cooperative system that can contribute to food democracy, as well as to **collective and generative land and resources management**, and (2) to **recover the representation of Alternative Food Actors** in the implementation of Leuven's food strategies and agricultural policies. The Trust should be open to any local food business, food producer, farming cooperative, CSA, fair trade shop, sustainable nursery, food forest community, NGO, restaurant/ shop working with local producers, cooperative food market that deal with 'food as a system -and not just an industry- *taking into account economic, environmental and social issues related to land and resources*'[26]. It should further host any representative from the City with an expertise on issues related to the Food strategy, Agriculture, Land management, Sustainability, Environment, Culture and Education, and from organizations that are already involved in the food strategy in Leuven. The Trust could also be developed on the basis of already existing collaborative organizations and platforms, such as Leuven2030, or Rikolto. All members will contribute to a collective development of shared values and principles to guide the use and the management of land. . Moreover, the Trust will be multi-actor and multi-nucleus cooperative system, in which everyone collaborates according to their capability and capacity, assuring that representation gaps will be minimized. Collaboration will be strengthened among the members of the Trust, to make sure that knowledge, ideas, and opinions produced in the field will be integrated in the Trust's principles, and from there, they can then reach all tiers of decision-making.

plot7
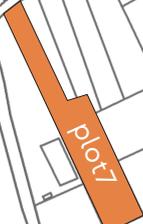
The Trust will further operate as a Brand to promote local/regional products and Leuven's food businesses and make sustainable healthy food the dominant trend for all, instead of an 'affordable only for a few' choice. Every land, every country has several own crops and breeds. Local food actors should support local breeds (eg. West-Vlaamse Rood Ras, *Belgisch Witblauw*) instead of importing foreign ones, to support local economy as well as local ecosystems sustainability. The "*Grown-in-Leuven*" brand is proposed for products developed within the region and the Trust that accomplish requirements of sustainability defined by the producers and the eaters themselves. Research has demonstrated that Belgians have deep "knowledge and a more favourable approach to certification labels"[28]. Instead of bureaucratic and administrative processes, an alternative certification system could be developed within the Trust. '*Trust-in-Food*' implies that trust in food can be recovered through a potential active involvement of all actors directly or indirectly involved in food production and consumption. Then the Trust can -to a certain extent- replace a number of legal frameworks and bureaucratic burdens. Since the brand refers to local products, people (consumers, eaters, buyers) can have access to the land and place where food is produced for them to check the process of production, gain a better understanding and be an active part of the food system. Research institutions can further provide data, analysis and information about the land, the resources, the products, the animals etc. Finally, the Trust can promote the Brand to KU Leuven restaurants, schools, local hotels, offices, supermarkets and establish a stronger local supply chain.

C5. Creation of a Land Bank and land consolidation projects, instead of an economic plan

The City of Leuven is currently making an attempt to provide land and administrative support for several projects that aim to foster community development, socio-economic solidarity, active citizenship, while offering equal opportunities to all. Projects such as community gardening, Community Land Trust, collective housing in Kessel-Lo, and the Hal5 are indicative examples in this respect. When it comes to agricultural lands, however, the pressure is much higher and the need to secure the lands becomes of high priority. Fragmented projects encompass the risk of temporariness revealing the need for a strategic change and radical policy shift. Therefore, we suggest the creation of a Land Bank that can receive plots to be used under long-leasing agreements in line with principles of sustainability defined collectively within the Trust. Moreover, we propose the collaboration between the City of Leuven and the Flemish Land Agency with the aim of developing land consolidation projects to secure wider agricultural ecosystems in and around the City of Leuven. Until today, the Flemish Land Agency has not proceeded to such projects around Leuven, since there were areas of higher priority and high fertility of agricultural lands.

However, a proactive and integrated agricultural strategy could significantly reduce pressures on agricultural land, confine acute rises of land prices and create opportunities for young farmers. Large agricultural areas can then be sustainably cultivated setting the ground for a paradigmatic shift in the dominant agricultural system.

plot8

Create a Brand

GROWN-IN-LEUVEN
TRUST-IN-FOOD

products

knowledge

Set the principles for the use of land

Trust

Vlaams-Brabant
Food-related businesses
Farmers
Alternative Food Practices
Communities of neighbours
Schools
VLAR
Universities
Leuven 2030
nurseries
citizens
City of Leuven representatives
Rikolto/ Kort'om Leuven
CSA network Flanders
De Landgenoten
food markets

Land Bank
OCMW plots
Community gardens
Land consolidation projects

C6. Knowledge co-creation and improved collaboration, instead of a social-added-value plan

The establishment of a strong network within the Trust could create a bridge between mainstream farming practices and Alternative Food Practices, as well as old-school farmers and young farmers, imparting knowledge from all sides to all directions. The Trust can be an interactive platform of knowledge exchange and co-production, in which diverse actors can look for a common ground to understand and practice sustainability. Knowledge exchange would encourage dialogue and debates on different food strategies and production systems and reinvent enhanced roles of the different actors involved focusing on their unique strong points and capabilities. Conventional and long-standing farmers can share their experience and expertise, while young actors could add their ideas about innovative projects and their socio-economic added value. This could, for example, lead to training programmes and educational activities, as well as to better channels of communication and exchange of information regarding new technologies, marketing tips, subsidies and other supporting tools for the development of agricultural projects.

plot9

Going beyond the frame of efficiency or carbon neutrality in defining sustainability, the Trust will work on a comprehensive definition collectively constructed by local authorities' representatives, scholars, and practitioners involved in the local food system. Researchers and students can facilitate the collection of data, as well as the analysis of different approaches, and perspectives to be taken into account. The perspective of sustainability agreed upon the members of the Trust will respond to a broader goal, which allows us to imagine and put into practice a socially innovative and just future. Sustainable practices must foster integrated relationships between economic, ecological and social practices and systems that not only maintain natural resources but rather revitalize them over time, while allowing the satisfaction of humans' material needs[29] based on principles of solidarity, cooperation and reciprocity.

A dynamic definition should integrate all aspects of sustainability (environmental, social, economic). The **environmental** aspect can be achieved by practices, understood as regenerative towards the natural figures including natural resources; soil, water, and fauna and flora, at a pace that allows for them to recover. On the macro level, this implies that land uses are in line with the landscape ecology and follow climatic characteristics. On the micro level it requires ecological farming practices that demonstrate circularity in the use of resources, efficient waste management, avoid toxic fertilizers,use manure to enhance soil quality (once animals are fed in a correct and healthy way) and contribute to biodiversity; all recognised as examples of a sustainability paradigm change. The social aspect of sustainability is, for example, achieved in farming by Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). The main features include a relationship through a "solidarity contract" that establishes a share in the farming risks and direct sales between producer and consumers, skipping the middleman. Commoning practices that create/regenerate social capital (social supermarkets, food banks, farming educational activities, raising awareness about a healthy nutrition and environmental impact) could be an additional inspiration.

Having local solidarity through residents' engagement as an integral element of food and land governance, while further embedding socio-ecological projects at the neighbourhood level, sets a base for an improved social infrastructure that could serve multidimensional purposes. The economic aspect can be developed on the basis of theories of circular economy, peer-to-peer economy, solidarity economy that aim to prioritize social profitability instead of purely financial profits, and focus on co-production of goods and services without intermediary third parties. They further build on principles of shared resources, reuse and recycle and reduced waste. In Leuven, several initiatives have grown in this direction including package-free shops, social food markets, shared infrastructure among the existing CSA network etc. Even the gathering of different farmers to collectively develop an application to submit to this Call (as two interviewees confirmed) is a promising initiative that shows the potential of active citizenship in Leuven integrating all the aforementioned dimensions of sustainable development.

plot10

More specific sustainable practices mentioned by the interviewees include:

• Farmers investing in local seeds and breeds.

• Local seeds and plants to be cultivated also in a sustainable and organic manner since the very beginning (nurseries).

• Local food actors should be able to interchange spare and surplus products, infrastructure, food waste etc.

• Businesses with food surplus should be able to circulate without bureaucratic obstacles (traceability of food and waste) if they agree among them.

• Use of same plots under a time-sharing mode overcoming legal restrictions for use rights.

C8. Understand and build on existing socio-ecological systems, instead of an innovation plan

Each plot that is made available to a user is part of a specific place and ecosystem and an intrinsic part of a neighbourhood. As such, it has a context-defined social and economic value associated with an environmental landscape, a set of formal and informal uses that the plot hosts and has hosted through time, as well as a set of cultural meanings and social imaginaries. The development of a sustainable project calls for the study of, 'respect and admiration for, and patience with the living nature'[30]. The first action -that of studying natural ecosystems- can be facilitated by research institutions, universities, and schools. This encompasses the identification and explanation of multi-layered characteristics of the place ranging from biodiversity particularities, soil composition, fauna and flora to social conflicts over use and access rights, legal restrictions etc. However, the role of research and education can be crucial not only in that first stage of gathering data and analysing the socio-cultural and environmental landscape of a given locality, but also in raising awareness and cultivating respect for the nature at the very early ages of children and adolescents. This is where a culture of sustainability can be grounded and flourish. Only after providing a deep understanding of the distinct characteristics of a place, its carrying capacity, its potentiality and weaknesses, local communities can invent a plan for its sustainable future. A plan that should be based on shared values, knowledge co-production and on what Mendras[31] calls 'art de la localité' that is the context-specific, unique, indigenous knowledge that characterizes one and only place.

plot11

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-        Prof. Pieter Van den Broeck head of the Planning and Development research Unit (P&D) at KU Leuven.
-        Post-doctoral researcher Xenia Katsigianni in a 4-year commitment, in the context of the DOMINIA research project on the role of the state in the governance of the commons.
-        PhD researcher Clara-Medina-Garcia, in a 4-year commitment due to the PhD project titled: SI4SD | The Role of Local Administrations in Social Innovation: a Global Understanding From the Comparative Study of Flanders and Madrid.
-        Master students: Ana Maria Brinzanu (Msc Sustainable Development) and Ying Li (MAHS – MAULP), as part of their master thesis research.
-        Sixteen (16) international post-graduate students and researchers of the International Module in Spatial Development Planning (IMSDP) involved in a 3-month action research project.

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