

HOW LOCAL ORGANIC FARMS ARE FEEDING SCHOOLCHILDREN AND JOBS

Key information

- Location: **Pays des Condruses (Belgium)**
- Population: **30 000**
- Involved in URBACT network: **AGRI-URBAN**
- More information: <http://urbact.eu/agri-urban>



Pays des Condruses already had a local development strategy — with plans including locally-sourced school food, and a farmers’ ‘Food Hub’. Joining URBACT AGRI-URBAN Network strengthened such actions for local, sustainable agri-business and healthy eating, while connecting local actors across the territory like never before.



Learning from Mouans-Sartoux's BioCanteens Good Practice

In the east Belgian countryside, seven municipalities got together in 2009 to form the LEADER-funded Local Action Group Pays des Condruses, an area that thrives on the milk and meat produced by its thousands of cattle. The Local Action Group promoted short supply chains, local products, and innovation in sustainable agriculture — in line with its territorial development plans. “This economic development strategy simply aims to create jobs in a sector that is losing workers every year, and create productivity on our territory,” says Local Action Group President Eric Lomba.

Meanwhile, a regional drive for a ‘Wallon food system’ was encouraging more integrated, sustainable food production and consumption.

It was against this backdrop that Pays des Condruses joined ten other urban-rural municipalities in AGRI-URBAN to rethink agri-food. Jean-François Pecheur, Local Action Group Pays des Condruses Director recalls, “The themes we already covered seemed to fit just right with this European project.”

“Food connects us all to our cities, our land and our future”

In 2016 the partners of the network signed a ‘local food policy and employment in small and medium sized European cities’ manifesto. And, over the next two years, Pays des Condruses built a holistic, locally-driven Integrated Action Plan to create jobs, preserve the land and improve health.



AGRI-URBAN team in Pays des Condruses



Land and support for budding farmers

“The main challenge for Pays des Condruses was to make its many initiatives, and the actors who pilot them, collaborate and amplify their existing ecosystem, through new markets, new services, etc, stimulating innovation,” says AGRI-URBAN Expert Miguel Sousa. The results went far beyond what was expected (see box).

Voyages of discovery

An URBACT Local Group met every two months, pooling ideas from 56 citizens, farmers, craftspeople, training and cultural associations, politicians, and development specialists. They discussed events and visibility; community cooking; local currency; agro-ecology; and coordination. Some met their European counterparts, including one cook who visited kitchens in Sweden and France.

In fact, transnational learning was an AGRI-URBAN highlight. Södertälje (SE) showed how it was developing new local products with businesses, such as chickpea falafels, and a certain barley to replace rice. Cherry-exporting Fundão (PT) shared marketing tips, encouraging the Local Action Group to promote their own territory better.

Healthy, local school food

One partner, Mouans-Sartoux (FR), had 20 years of experience with public canteens and organic food. The

Local Action Group sent a delegation over, inspiring better recipes, food preparation and waste management in their own new bio-canteens. “Thanks to AGRI-URBAN we used our partners’ experience to improve our work and gain time in implementation,” says Mr Pecheur.

An association ‘Devenirs’ now supplies locally-sourced, mostly organic, meals in nine Pays des Condruses schools. ‘Devenirs’ educates children, weighs leftovers, adjusts menus, and is reducing foodwaste from 30% to 10%. Five more schools are set to benefit by 2021, with the long-term goal of supplying 1000 meals per day — depending on funding.

Pays de Condruses’ Integrated Action Plan includes professionalisation schemes to meet growing demands for organic food. One is the region’s first market gardening ‘incubator’ providing crops, land, technical support, and training, to prepare future independent growers.

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Jean-François Pecheur

Travel for extra ideas

“We visited Mouans-Sartoux (FR) with an elected representative and the following idea was born: to test giving schoolchildren soup during the morning break and fruit in the afternoon, in addition to the usual hot meal at midday. This meant healthy, local food all day!” says Mr Pecheur. After a trial period in May-June 2018, the idea was kept.

“URBACT enabled us to ask ourselves questions locally, improve our strategy, tackle new challenges,” adds Mr Pecheur. “At European level it helped us open our minds, discover innovative practices - and opportunities like Erasmus+. It made us look at ourselves and say ‘we do that already, but we could do it better’.”



Jean-Francois Pecheur highlights five URBACT-driven changes:

- 1 URBACT helped put bio-canteens on the political agenda, from close to nothing. It will become a real question of governance for years to come. We’ll present the Integrated Action Plan to municipal councils in 2018. Next, we’ll propose a policy for adjusting school lunch tariffs with parents’ incomes.
- 2 The URBACT Local Group brought us closer to project leaders and entrepreneurs. For example, we met ice-cream makers and decided to develop a territorial brand for their products. We agreed on a charter, working with raw milk from farms on our territory. Five local icecream makers now use the label, gaining recognition for their fresh, local products.
- 3 Market gardeners and cheese sellers who met in the URBACT group now sell their products together at town markets.
- 4 We already wanted to develop an agricultural FabLab, but Fundão showed how it could be part of a broader, economic approach. The FabLab will offer digital tools to create and repair agro-equipment and package products, as well as professional training and other services.
- 5 The idea of agro-ecology and a ‘holistic’ approach to development at territorial level, working according to cycles, respecting nature, came from our URBACT Local Group. It’s a large-scale project we hope to start in 2022 with LEADER funding.