

Value of public landownership

Hans Vandermaelen

Ghent University

[Online]



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Towards a democratic appropriation of public farmland: emerging debates and policy initiatives in Flanders

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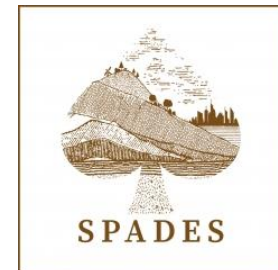
Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium, Aberdeen

Hans Vandermaelen

Flanders Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
Burg. Van Gansberghelaan 115, 9820 Merelbeke-Melle (Belgium)
T 003292722386 M 0032487168915

hans.vandermaelen@ilvo.vlaanderen.be

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/hansvandermaelen>

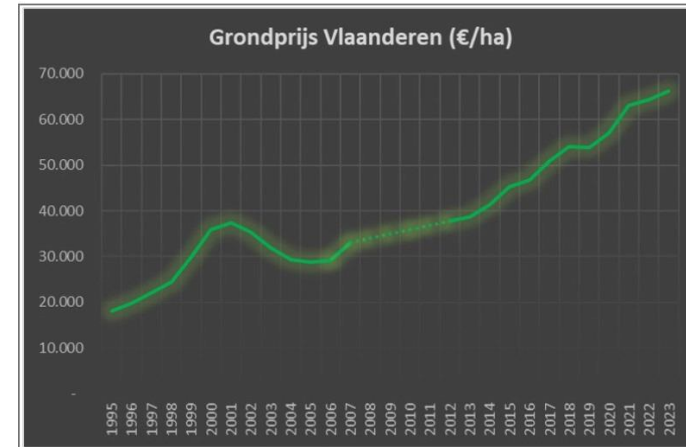


ILVO

Flanders Research Institute for
Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

Farmland market dynamics in Flanders (Belgium)

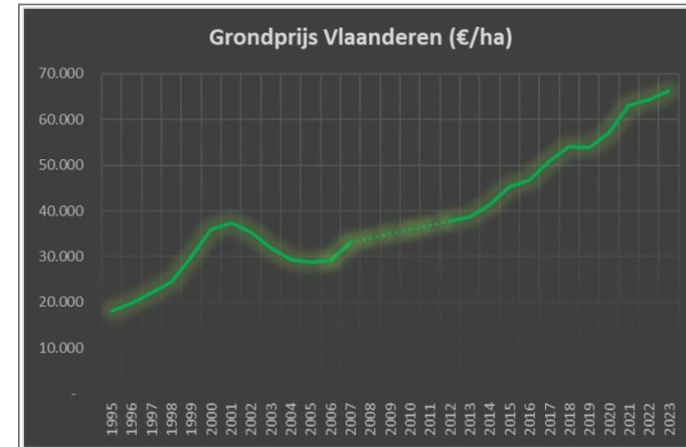
- **Poor research coverage** → Ongoing negotiations ILVO - Belgian Land Registry
- **Strong and structural market value increase** of farmland and farmsteads
 - Far beyond agricultural use value ~ x2 on average, x3 not exceptional, up to x4
- Why?
 - Capital logics
 - Vast non-agricultural (re)use of farmland and farmsteads
 - Build-up of power and influence
 - Intensive nature agricultural system + policy impact
 - ...
- Is that a problem?
 - Impossible to pay off with agricultural income
 - Recent report (KBC Bank, 2024) warns for risk of overfinancing: almost at point where agricultural income no longer suffices to cover *interest* on loans for purchasing farmland (!)
 - Still not necessarily issue if farmers were able to conclude attractive use agreements with private landowners → however **private land market moves towards short-term and expensive contracts** + recent leasehold law reform likely to exacerbate problem



Bronnen: Notarisbarometer, FOD Economie

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➔ **Very difficult to reconcile with increasing sustainability in agricultural sector, generational renewal, alignment with policy and societal objectives (rather the opposite)**

Rich history of public farmland ownership

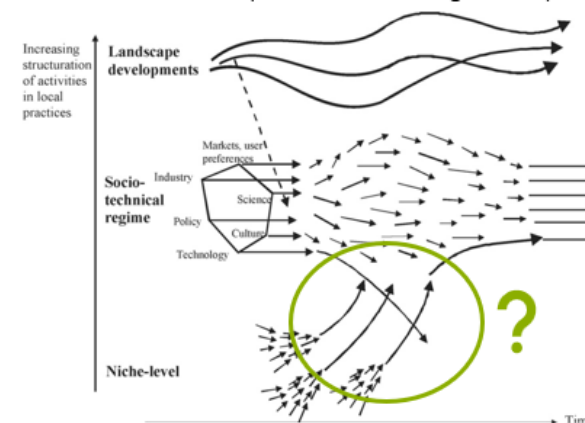
- Origin in the Late Middle Ages
- **Care for poor and sick** provided by dozens of **private** initiatives (hospitals, almshouses...)
- Land served as foundation for their operations: **reliable source of income, food, energy** (especially in times of crisis)
- Land was acquired through donations, but also through land reclamation and purchases
- French Revolution
 - Care for the poor and the sick **became public services** → ... → Public Centers for Social Welfare (PCSWs).
 - Church lands were nationalised and with Concordat of 1801 transferred back to a.o. **parish church councils** = public institutions
- Centuries of continuity, structural loss from 1960s onwards, in the background



Renteboek van de Heilige Geesttafel Sint-Jacobskerk, 1436,
Rijksarchief Gent

From the background to the spotlights

- **High-profile lawsuit** by organic farmer against Ghent's sale of 450 ha public farmland to Belgian billionaire (2017-...) → David vs Goliath struggle catalysed much larger debate on public landownership
- Fierce **criticism of Ghent's award-winning food policy**
 - How to reconcile using public land for pilot projects while structurally selling out at the same time?
 - Moving from focus on pilots to concern over the stalled regime transition



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- **ILVO Research** "Public farmland in Flanders and Brussels: figures, evolution and agricultural potential" (2024) → press attention, seminars, policy briefs, adoption by civil society organisations & policy makers, sparking debate within agricultural communities...
- ...



TENTOONSTELLING GENTSE GRONDEN OVER GRONDBELEID EN -BEZIT

'Voor landbouw ontbreekt een grondbeleid'

Hoe komt het dat het stadsontwikkelingsbedrijf Sogent honderden hectaren landbouwgrond in beheer heeft, waarvan het overgrote deel bovendien buiten de Gentse stadsgrenzen ligt? Het is een van de vragen die aan bod komen in de tentoonstelling *Gentse Gronden* in het stadsmuseum STAM. LAURENZ VERLEGERS

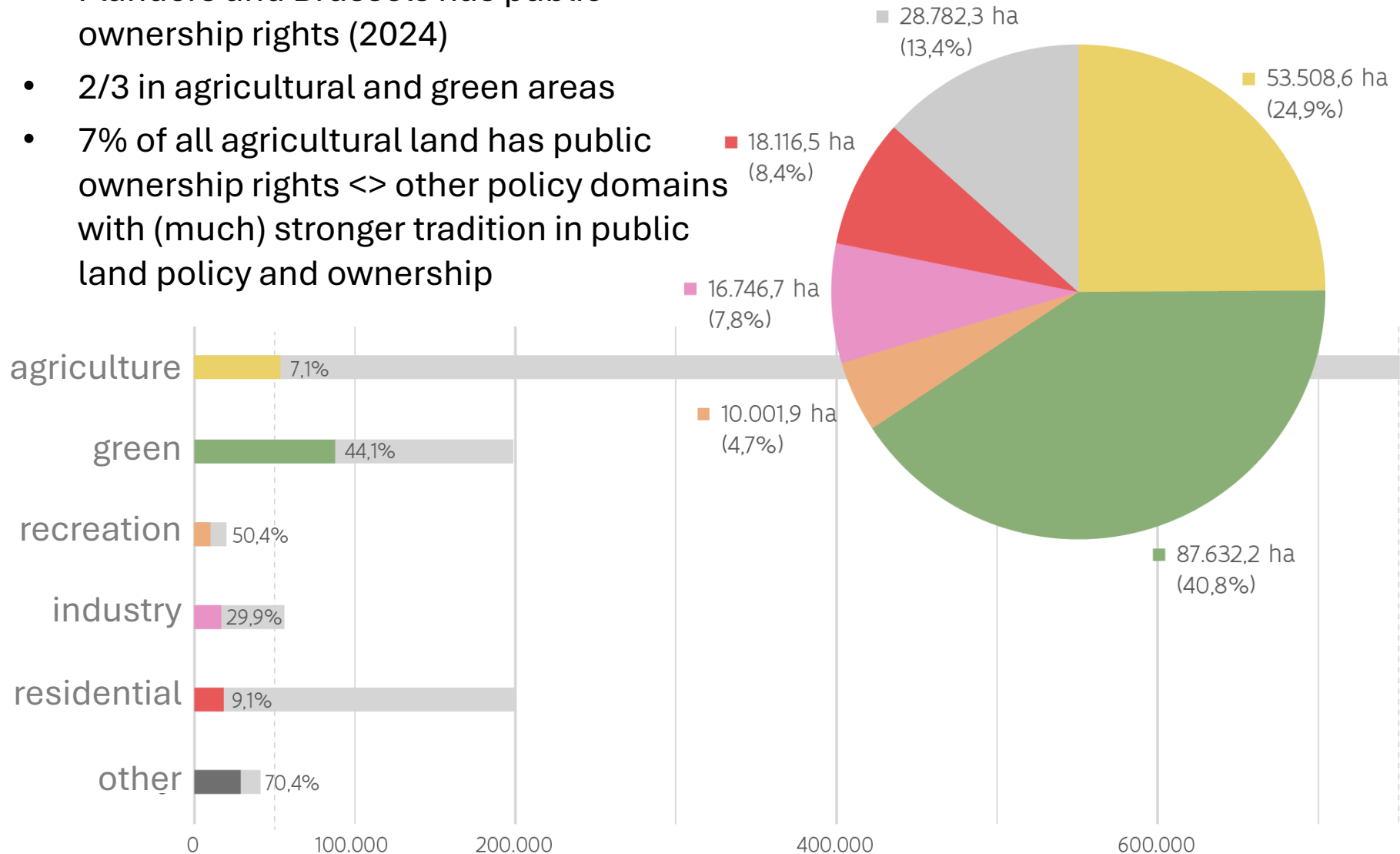


**PUBLIEKE GROND
IN VLAANDEREN
& BRUSSEL**

OVERZICHT
EVOLUTIE
EN LANDBOUWPOTENTIEEL **ILVO**

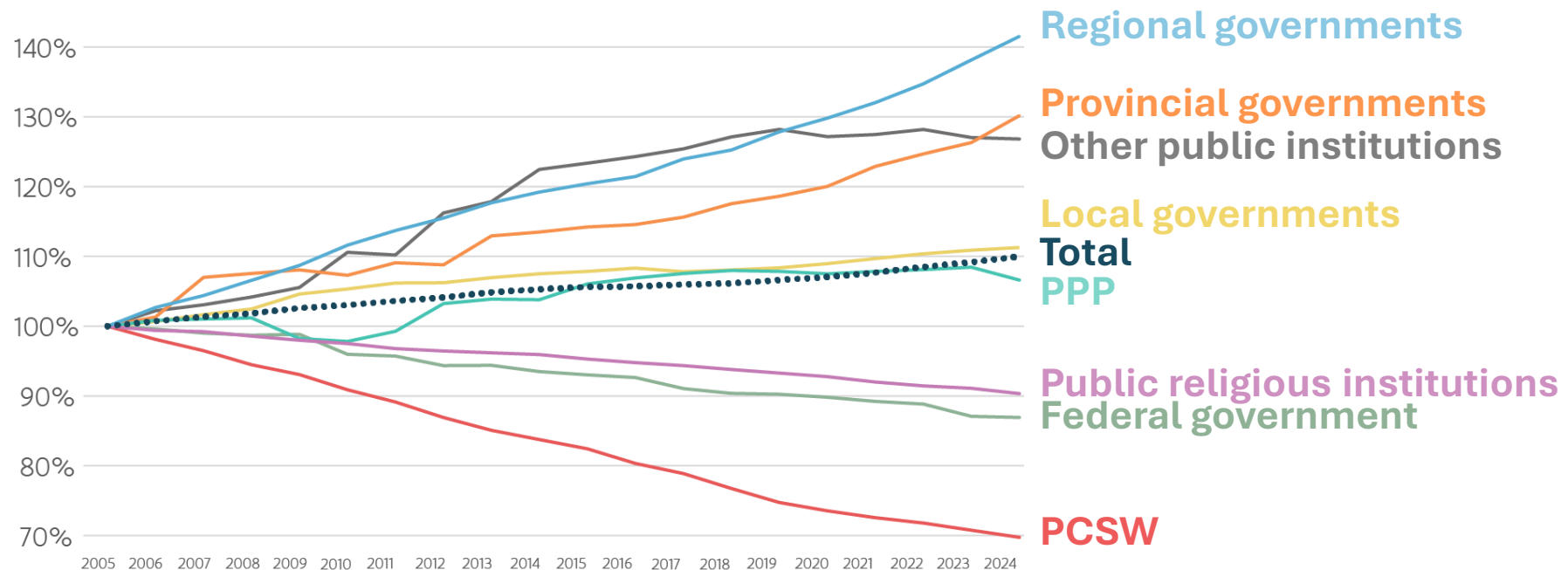
Public landownership in Flanders & Brussels

- Almost 17% of total parcel area in Flanders and Brussels has public ownership rights (2024)
- 2/3 in agricultural and green areas
- 7% of all agricultural land has public ownership rights <> other policy domains with (much) stronger tradition in public land policy and ownership



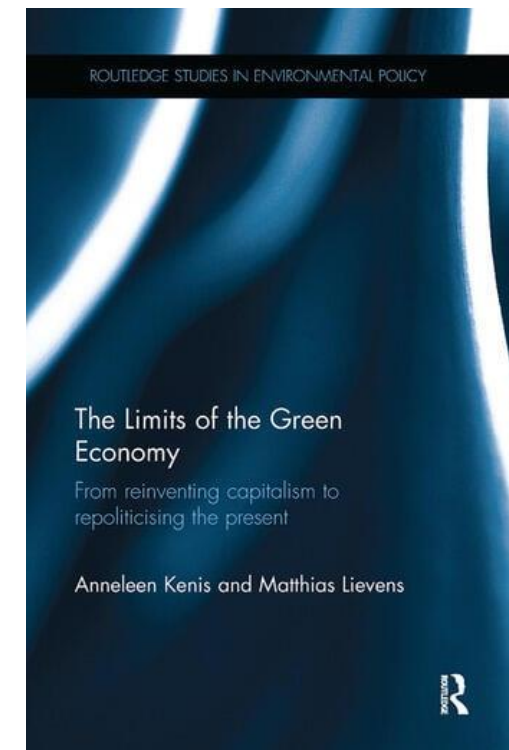
Some figures on public landownership

- **Public institutions are very active** on the land market: public landownership increased by 10% in almost 20 years
- **... Yet only rarely for agricultural purposes** → as opposed to active land policies for many other policy objectives (nature, water, industry and ports, mobility, housing, recreation... and agricultural flanking measures to compensate farmers for land lost due to other policy objectives
- **Spectacular sell-off of historical public farmland** ownership by PCSWs and public church institutions for reinvestment purposes

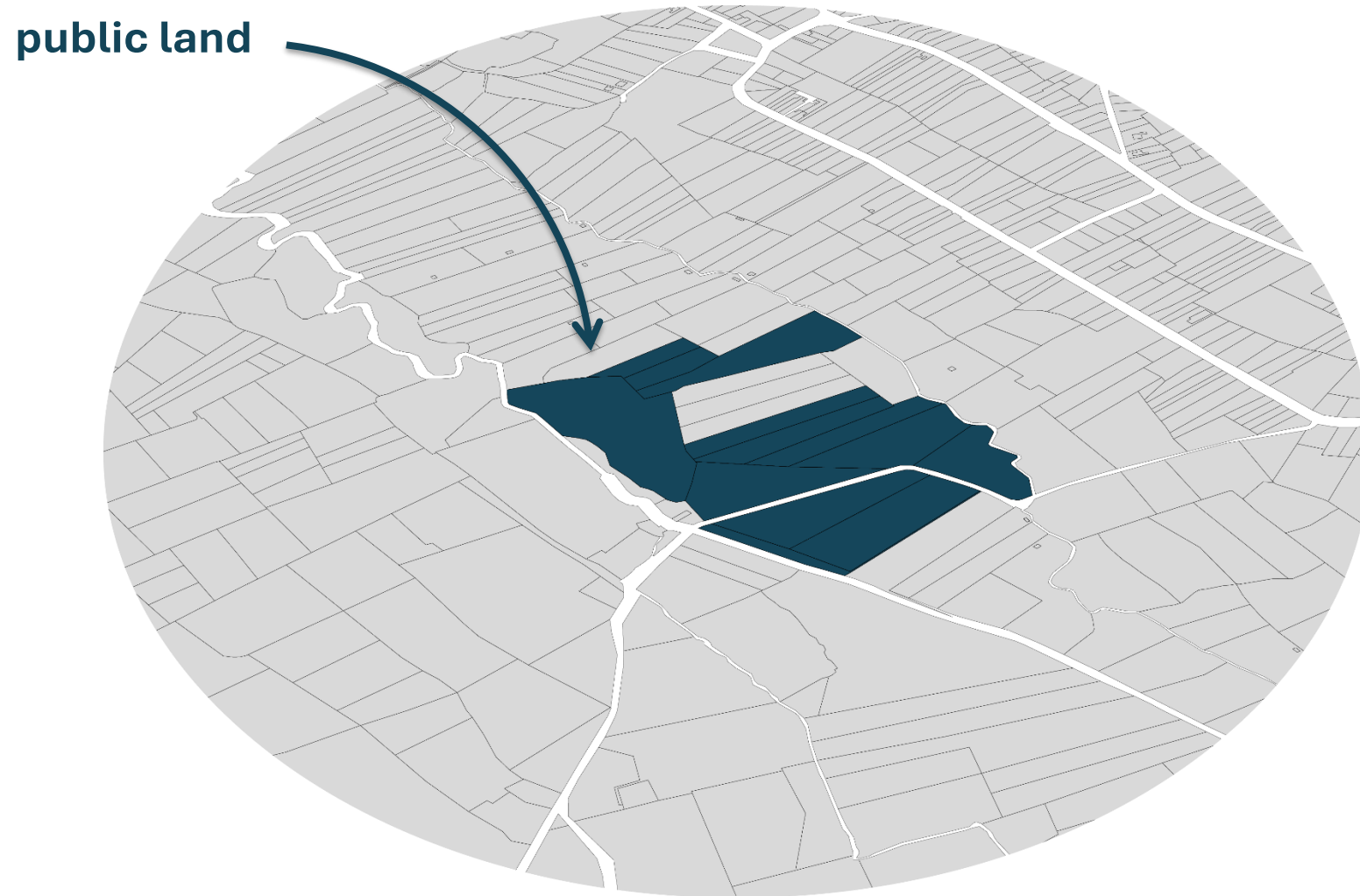


(Re)politicising land issues

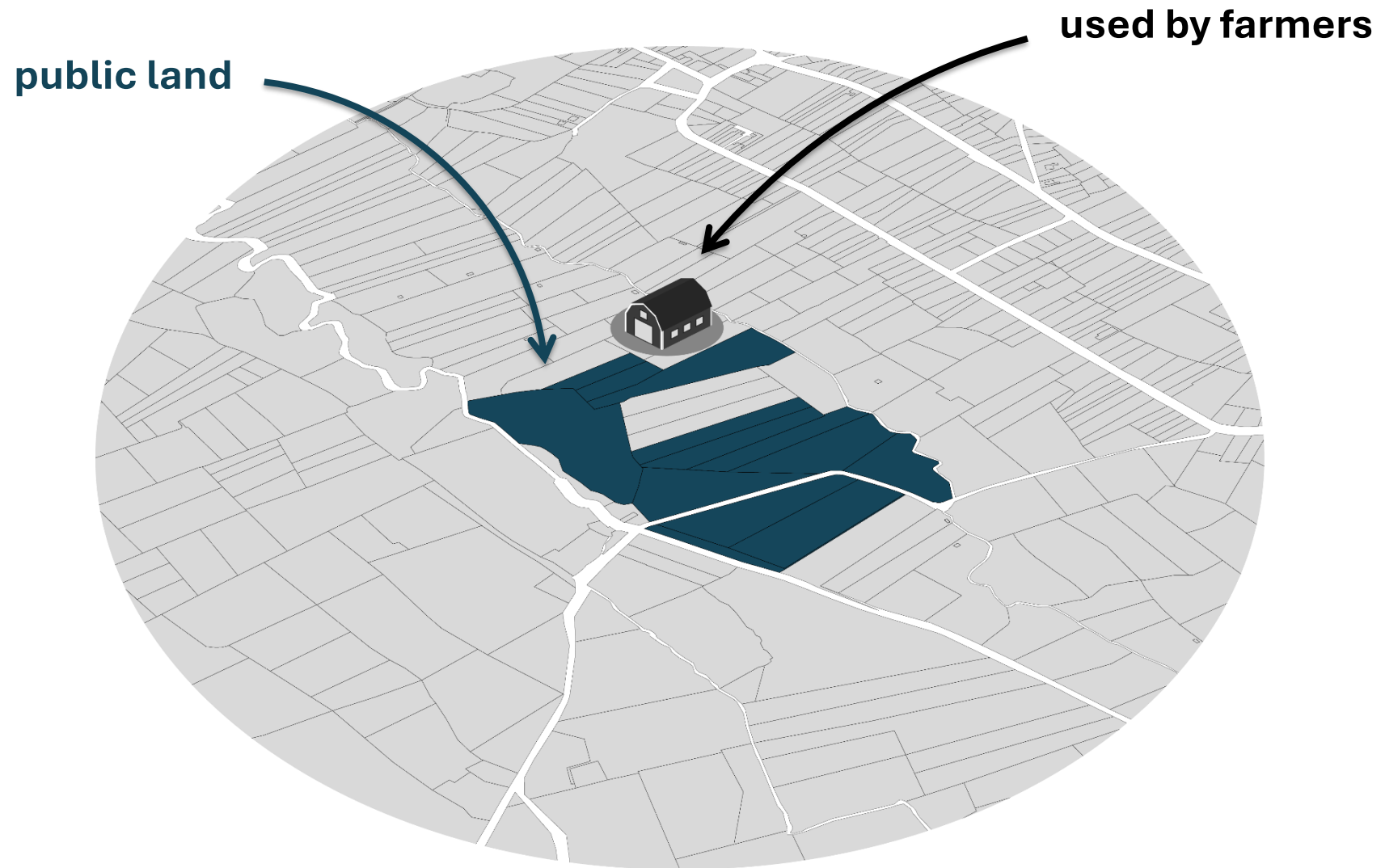
- *Politicisation* means **making visible the social conflicts, power relations, and ideological choices** that are often hidden behind technocratic or supposedly neutral solutions
- As opposed to *depoliticised* realities = issues, decisions, or debates are **removed from the political sphere**, meaning they are treated as neutral, technical, or purely administrative matters – even though they involve important values, interests or conflicts
- **Repoliticisation of the ecological field in three moments** (Kenis & Lievens, 2015)
 1. Moment of **critique** (of post-political representations of the present)
 2. Moment of **subversion** (disrupts existing ways of seeing, hearing and doing and opens space for alternative practices)
 3. Moment of **construction** (alternative ideas, demands and projects are developed and brought together in a counterhegemonic discourse)



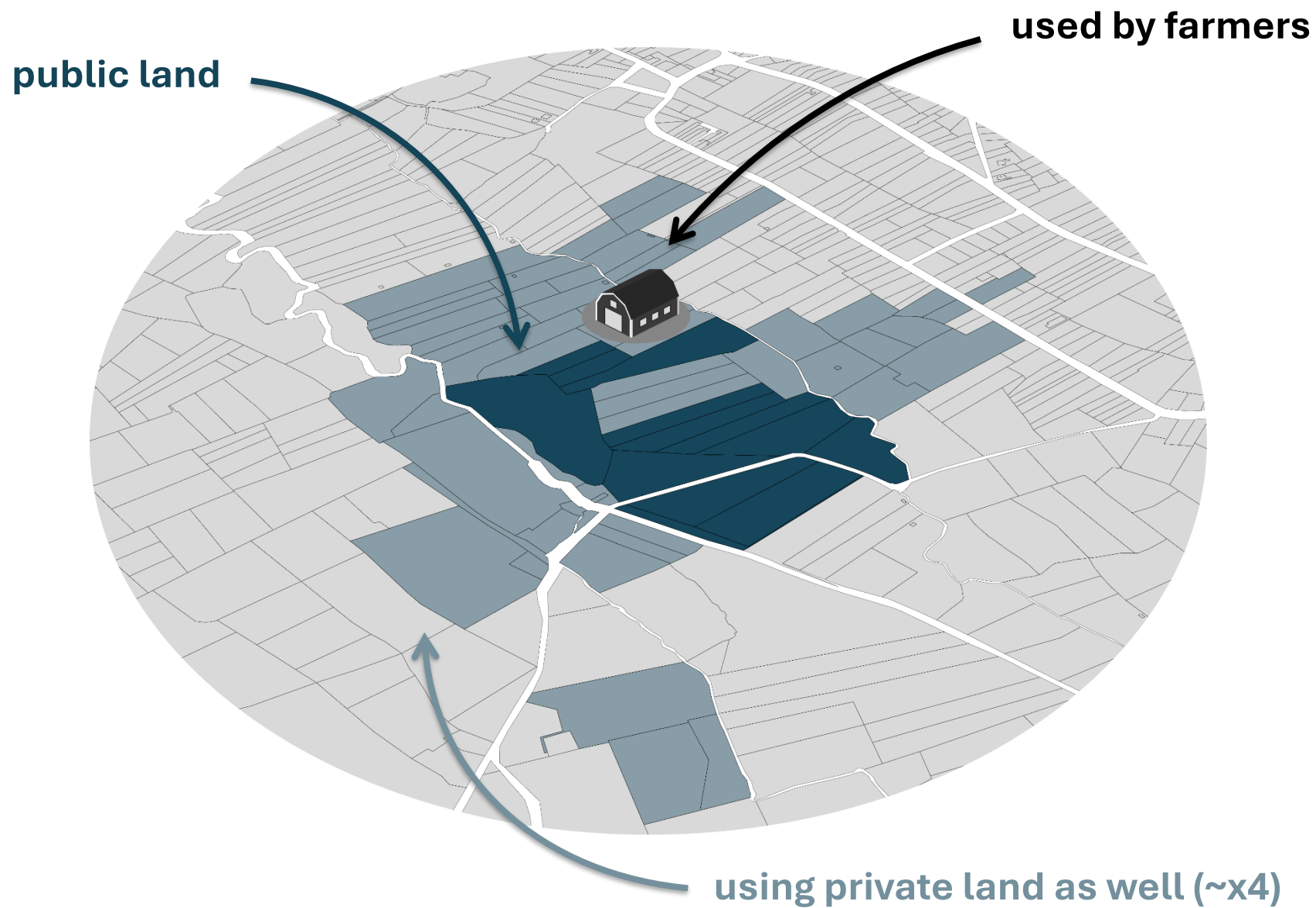
1. From plot level to farm level



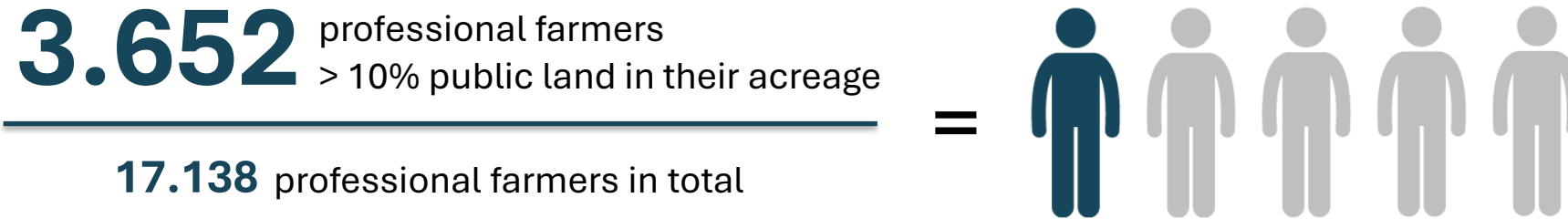
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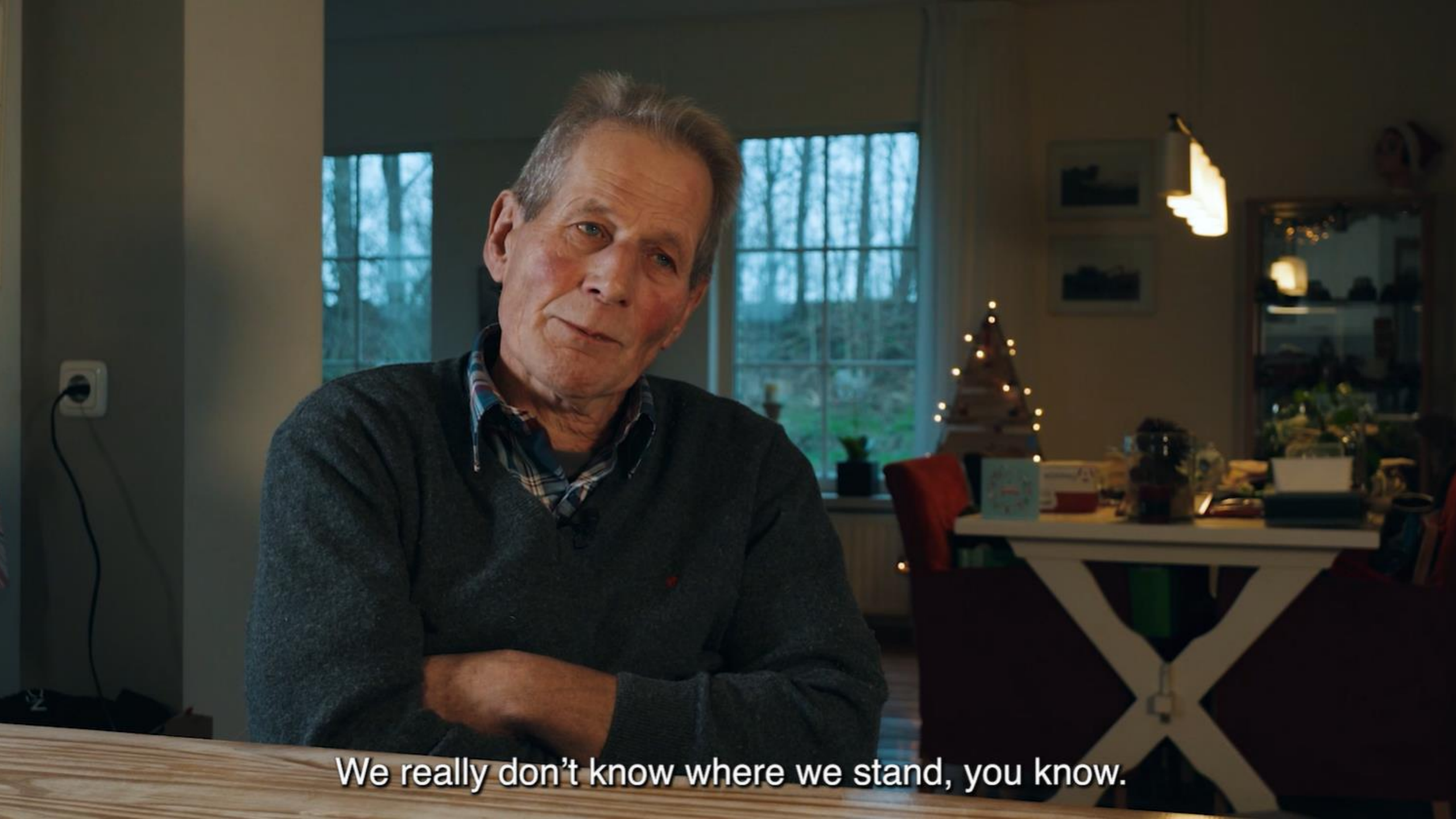
1. From plot level to farm level



1. From plot level to farm level



- Shifting debate from “public land as opportunity for pilot projects” to “public land as foundation of 1/5 existing professional farms”
- **Synonymous with long-term tenure security for centuries**
because “public institutions never sell and never die”
= foundation for sustainable farming and generational transfer
- Recent decades’ sales turned it into exact opposite:
source of uncertainty and even anxiety
hindering sustainable farming and generational transfer
- Used for interrogating citizens and urban dwellers on “their” land share: “You are making clear you want a more sustainable agricultural sector. But **by giving up public land ownership, you are actively depriving these farmers of the means to do so.**”

A middle-aged man with grey hair is sitting at a wooden table in a dining room. He is wearing a dark grey sweater over a plaid shirt. He has a thoughtful expression. In the background, there is a white dining table with a red chair, a small lit Christmas tree, and a window showing a view of trees. The room is dimly lit with warm indoor lights.

We really don't know where we stand, you know.



To the OCMW of Ghent, we were
just people who transferred the lease.





2. Public landownership decline as opportunity to expand community landownership?

- **Speed** of sale public farmland and land acquisition by community land funds are **worlds apart**
- Strategy?
 - **Legitimises further sale** of public land at much faster pace
 - **Consumes scarce resources** that could be used for community land acquisition as a complement to public landownership, a.o.
 - Accepts **disintegration of functional farming unites** with public and private land and **reinforces newcomer's lock-in** in small-scale horticulture and absence of infrastructure

“I would consider it a disaster if De Landgenoten had to use its scarce resources to buy land that is already publicly owned. Are we then supposed to persuade our friends and relatives to buy shares in a community land fund to acquire land that was once donated to the community to serve social purposes?”

Eline Vermeir, young agroecological farmer (2022)



3. Regaining democratic control over the allocation of public farmland

- Just because public land ownership yields little or no return today does not mean that it cannot do so in the future
- Worth remembering that *“in a democratic system, where the state is electorally accountable, **public landownership does at least preserve the possibility of the public having some kind of say over land use**”*
– Brett Christophers (2018)
- Despite continued sales in Belgium, we are also seeing the **emergence of a new practice** in civil demands, policy development and political discourse
 - Strategic allocation of public land to farmers seeking to voluntarily enhance farm sustainability
 - System of open calls by government and proposals from (groups of) farmers (clear framework + scope for entrepreneurship)
 - Looking for spill-over effects onto associated private land (multiplier effect)
 - Importance of long-term land use contracts



3. Regaining democratic control over the allocation of public farmland



Allocation 5 ha PCSW farmland by city of Ghent
Mendonk (Ghent), 2024

- Unlike previous call, **no long list of imperative criteria**
- Prior publication “Vision on agriculture in and around Ghent” (2023) → New call essentially asks for **proposals that relate to it**, that translate it to their own farming context
- Awarded to nearby conventional dairy farmer seeking to experiment with grass-clover and reduce soy imports
- If successful farmer will **transform remaining grassland (x10 multiplier)**



“DubbelDoel” project by Nature and Forest Agency & Flemish Land Agency
Scheldt river left bank, 2024

- Starting point: reverse **steep decline of marsh harrier** = dependent on agricultural nature = need dedicated crop rotations & field margin management
- Nature policy could have claimed **public land** in region for itself, but instead chose to **offer it to farmers willing to participate with own land**, rewarding them with access to public land (up to 1 ha for 3 ha public land)
- No net loss of acreage for farmers + **enlarged area of measures** for marsh harrier (multiplier)



Izenberge call for 30 ha by Flemish Land Agency & Agriculture Agency & Environmental Department
Izenberge, 2025

- Highly flood-prone area → importance of retaining water on nearby plateau
- Farmers willing to take **soil and water measures on own land** are **compensated** with access to public land (farmers prefer land above cash)
- Looking into 2nd round + implementation of similar projects in other regions
- **Towards regional land allocation policies** in which local authorities can voluntarily input their land holdings?
- Exploring **linkages with risk management** in context of climate crisis and challenged public finances



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Have a look at the digital afterlife of the “Ghent’s Land” exhibition

Follow the SPADES project for updates on our work on public land allocation for soil care
www.spadesforsoils.eu

