

Stichting  
**Boerengroep**  
Wageningen

Stichting  
**Inspringtheater**  
Wageningen



# *50 years*

SPECIAL EDITION

Celebrate food and farming with us and  
dive into the head, heart and hands of  
peasant farmers

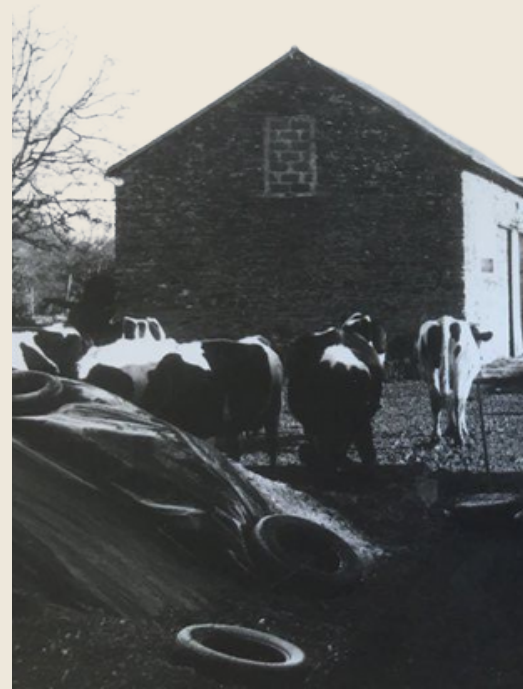
# WHERE DO WE COME FROM WHERE DO WE GO

## 50 years of Stichting Boerengroep

The birth of Stichting Boerengroep is closely linked to the struggle of European peasants against the injustices generated by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and more precisely against the vision of Sicco Mansholt, former Minister of Agriculture in the Netherlands, who became President of the European Commission in 1958. Mansholt was a great figure of agricultural modernization in Europe. With the "Agriculture 1980» program, also known as the "Mansholt Plan», he aimed to massively repair agricultural land and mechanize farms to promote large-scale agriculture, thus halving the number of European farmers.

He sparked one of the most violent demonstrations of the post-war period. On 23 March 1971, between 100 000 and 500 000 European farmers went to Brussels to demonstrate against the Mansholt Plan. Among them: the founders of Boerengroep.

The Mansholt  
Plan: no more  
hunger





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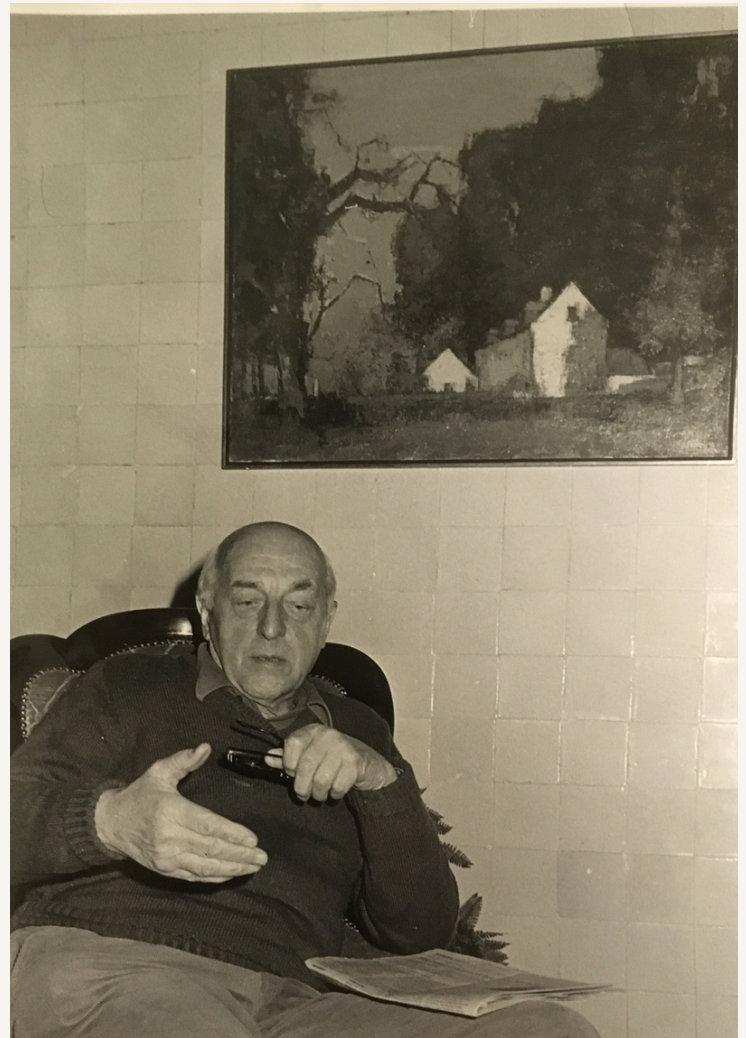
*This policy did not only provide enough food in Europe, but caused an overproduction*

#### **- Interlude on Mansholt -**

Sicco Mansholt became the European commissary of agriculture in 1958. At that time, the European Economic Community (EEC) had just been founded, and included Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Luxembourg, and West-Germany. The aim of Mansholt was to design an agricultural system that produced sufficient and cheap enough food to prevent hunger as was experienced during the Second World War.

Mansholt formed the first version of the Common Agricultural Policy, which was introduced in 1962, together with the Treaty of Rome. Trade within Europe was stimulated, while tariff walls were developed for agricultural products imported from outside of Europe. This way, food in Europe became cheaper and farmers could earn a good income. Mansholt also wanted small-scale farms to disappear in favour of more efficient, large-scale farms. This policy did not only provide enough food in Europe, but caused an overproduction with lakes of milk and mountains of butter as a consequence. The EU had to compensate for all of this, and Mansholt soon realized that the CAP

was becoming too expensive. In **1971** Mansholt published a new CAP reform which had as a goal to reduce the farming sector with 5 billion farmers and 5 billion hectares of agricultural land (CLM,...). This, of course, was not well-received with farmers all over Europe, and in February 1971 the first protest action began, when a group of farmers from Wallonia succeeded in bringing three cows into the Congress Palace in Brussels. The biggest protest march took place in Brussels on the 23rd of March in 1971, where 140 farmers got wounded and 1 farmer died.



Picture taken by Boerengroep as part of an interview with him for Landbouwmaand



These events were barely discussed in Wageningen University at the time, and a group of students, inspired by the global student protests starting in 1968, took matters into their own hands to close the gap between agricultural theory and the real struggles of farmers. This was the beginning of Boerengroep.

**Who were the founders and what vision of peasant resistance did they defend?**

The first Boerengroepies went to farmers themselves to ask them about their reality and brought this information back to the university. The students fought for a fair price for farmers on a political level and brought farmers together to organize themselves. A couple years later, they started with the Boerentoneel (Farmers' Theatre), which performed theatre plays about farming life on farms, to engage the audience in constructive dialogues. At that time, Boerengroep had about 40 to 60 active members, and had a large network of students and farmers. It was an organisation founded upon marxist ideas, opposing itself to the

dominant agricultural paradigm. The students analyzed agriculture from a political economy point of view, and did theory building on the class position of the peasants. In the very beginning of Boerengroep, one was even expected to follow a course on Marxism by the University Socialist Union before joining the group.

At the same time, the beginning of the 1970's was marked by an increasing awareness of the negative environmental impact of industrialized agriculture. "Silent Spring" by Rachel Carson, which came out in 1962, was a fundamental book that triggered this awareness. It was only then that we started to realize that pesticides not only kill pests and insects, but also pollute rivers, kill fish, frogs and birds, thereby turning agricultural fields into a dead landscape. Some people in Boerengroep were very much involved with this, among others, Kris van Koppen.

It was a roaring time, a moment in history when different struggles started to converge: the student

demonstrations, the environmental movements and socialist uproar. Indeed, the birth of Stichting Boerengroep coincides perfectly with a moment in European agricultural history in the years when the problems of pollution, landscape degradation and loss of biodiversity lead consumers and producers to question the ethics of production. However, the fights the students were leading were above all social. Agricultural modernization and the dependency systems it creates were criticized; the fight against agribusiness was a priority and the improvement of the living conditions of agricultural workers too.

Stichting Boerengroep was therefore an autonomous association that favored direct action and wanted to raise awareness of the damage of industrialization. However, it also included other actors in its network in order to put pressure on the dominant structures. Especially in the first two decades, Boerengroep had close contacts with several institutions among which the Ministry of Agriculture, as well as the ministries in France and Germany, where they advocated for a different CAP. Apart from this lobby group, one of the main goals remained to bring critical awareness in the university.

According to a survey we conducted among more than 80 former members, at that time, students were mainly involved in political and social causes. The most frequented working groups were de Toneelgroep (Theatre Group), de Zuivelgroep (Dairy Group), de Landinrichtingsgroep (Landscaping Group), de Boerinnen-

groep (Female Farmers' Group) and the group that developed the monthly magazine "Landbouwmaand". They all did different things. For example, the Boerinnengroep addressed the gender relations in agriculture with the production of the documentary film "Als je met een boer trouwt" ("If you marry a farmer"). Other groups were concerned with cooperation with public and private structures for rural development at regional, national and international level. This has had an impact on the careers of Boerengroepers, thus transforming them into real changemakers. Indeed, the Boerengroepers at that time were always discussing the effects of limiting production and the impacts of the Green Revolution on peasantries – this really worked in favour of creating a network of students critical of the dominant model and one of the key issues on which they acted on was the struggle for fair prices for farmers. They met at Café Troost to talk and analyse the agricultural world from a radical left-wing perspective, therefore moving away from what was taught in Wageningen. As we see in the survey, being a part of Boerengroep left a mark on the students:

« Being an activist in Boerengroep was an important source of inspiration for membership activities and for advocacy. Multiple ex-members (such as Peter Munters) worked at the NAJK [afterward] »

« What I learned, has remained important in my further work as SNV in Burkina Faso, and later as UD gender and irrigation at 'Tropical Culture Technology' ».





« I was formed by the critical sound we gave to social developments with the Boerengroep. I still have that critical attitude. After my studies I worked for a while as a socio-economic researcher and Communications Officer for the sustainability sector. But after a few years I decided that my critical attitude deserved an entrepreneurship of its own. I decided to start my own organic store and now I organize, among other things, reflection retreats in nature » *Laura Jonker.*

This way, as some former Boerengroep members specify, the organisation and the critical sounds that were produced by it, has an indirect influence in policy and the agricultural sector in itself.

« As a student, you can (fortunately) afford to develop sometimes radical ideas. I think the Boerengroep, meanwhile, has been formative for a number of people who later ended up in influential positions. In those kinds of positions (in the day-to-day practice of policy/advice/implementation) you often have to compromise, but the ideas you developed in the Boerengroep often continue to play a role. In this way, the Farmers' Group has had indirect influence » *Huib de Vriend.*

How has Boerengroep's vision evolved over the past fifty years?

Nearly 50 years later, has the peasant foundation changed its strategy? Not so much! The working groups have changed, the modes of

action too but the vision still remains the same: to create sustainable food systems from a social, economic and ecological point of view. The organization defends a project of transition of food systems integrating the defense of farmers' rights and the protection of the environment.

If the birth of the organization was based on the ideology of the coordinators and members of that time against the Mansholt plan, the Nyéléni conference in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) really inspired the new generation of Boerengroepers to give the organization's fight a new direction; it was the agroecological turning point of the peasant foundation. Elske, the coordinator at the time, says: *"When we came back [from Nyéléni], we started to focus on agroecology. Because the movement was becoming more alive, and we thought it was a topic we really needed to introduce in the university. There was already something about agroecology here [at the WUR], of course... There was Pablo Tittonell. But there were also classes where they [the professors] treated agroecology very differently from the way the movement sees it; very scientific. It was said that agroecology was a science and so on, not mentioning the practical part and the movement. So we really tried to introduce that to the university as well and bridge the gap."*

If some readers still doubt it, agroecology is political. It questions the modes and means of food production and fights for the recovery of these by small-scale farms and producers. Indeed, as a result of the loss of power in nation-state planification, the struggle

against power asymmetries between actors of a globalized food system is above all a struggle for the recovery of a form of autonomy and food independence of producers – the Via Campesina speaks of moving from the paradigm of food security to that of food sovereignty. This now requires, among other things, the strengthening of short supply chains and direct relations with consumers as well as the enhancement of the economic and ecological resilience of peasant agriculture in the face of large-scale productivist and extractivist agriculture of the corporate food regime.

The same survey shows us that the members of the Boerengroep are now mainly committed to building bridges between agricultural theory and practice – a key issue to train the professionals of tomorrow engaged in the transition of food systems. Thus, Stichting Boerengroep tries to bring WUR students who are interested in theoretical agroecology to understand the social and practical aspects of the agroecological movement to understand that their role in the transition is to create bridges between actors to integrate these three aspects. Louise, current coordinator defends an alter-globalist vision of Boerengroep and its agroecological struggle: *"Agroecology is another way of thinking about the environment, the relationship to food and soil – it should be the basis of the whole system [...] Agroecology allows us to rethink our position in the world, in our system, our capitalist system."*

To develop this critical vision of WUR students, Stichting Boerengroep actively seeks to link theory to agro-

scientific practice, link social sciences to natural sciences, link academic theories to practical challenges and innovations; in other words, to build bridges between communities of actors. Thanks to the trusted network built with our partners, we are able to identify farmers' needs and communicate them to researchers and students in order to develop conscious research at Wageningen University.

But Stichting Boerengroep is also about supporting local practical initiatives, local markets, seed exchanges, educational but also festive events to energize the rural world and carry a message of hope: the transition is underway! The objective of the new generation of Boerengroepers who responded to our survey: *to develop and feel-think alternative agricultural models and climate-smart agriculture while denouncing the power asymmetries created by agro-industries and legislation.* The modern agroecological struggle is a social and environmental struggle against inequalities. Boerengroep is a pioneering organization in Wageningen committed to this fight.

### **The future of Boerengroep**

In our survey, we gave former Boerengroep member the chance to give advice for the future of Boerengroep. These were some of the answers:

«Nothing is more important than close contact with the people for whom you do your work. [...] Scientific research and exchange can

support their struggle for political change and a more just society. The WUR must continue to hold space for this! The increased attention of the current Boerengroep for sustainable agriculture is a good thing. Research and contacts around issues such as Vía Campesina, food sovereignty also remain very important.» *Barbara van Koppen*

«1) preserve, create and use margins at the Agricultural University, that gives depth, strength and continuity and pushes the mammoth Agricultural University a little bit in a different direction 2) analyze driving forces and interests to explain the dynamics of changes and political choices» *Peter Keet*

When asked about the current challenges, people mentioned that on the one hand, sustainability has become increasingly important, but that, on the other hand, many of the same challenges as 50 years ago remain. The struggle for a good income and a fair price, are still fundamental, also to reach any environmental standards.

«Agriculture is an essential factor in the food economy but because of its various potential functions (landscape, nature, care, biodiversity, water, energy, food, raw materials, etc) it cannot be handed over to market forces. It could be circular, sustainable, regional, cooperative, multi actor production systems...with citizens as shareholder members?» *Jifke Sol*

«The social and political dimensions of the Dutch agricultural transition towards sustainability and the



perspective of farmers. Also the position of primary producers in the chain remains an important theme. Now the debate is dominated by ecological and economic perspectives.» *Froukje Boonstra*

### **How did it end for Mansholt?**

In 1972, Mansholt wrote a letter (known as “the Mansholt letter” directed at the President of the European Commission Franco-Maria Malfatti. In the letter, Mansholt reconsiders his own policy, stating that the upscaling of agricultural production should be stopped and that a better balance with nature should be sought. This came after the publication in July 1971 of an alarming study of System Dynamics Group at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) that warned of the pollution and depletion of natural resources by a rising population and

an increased industrialization of food production. It is said that he never got an answer, and in January 1973, his office at the European Commission stopped. Certainly, the carriage of the European agricultural policy has not changed since then.

Sadly, not much has changed when it comes to the difficult balance between nature and agriculture, let alone when it comes to giving farmers a fair price without obliging them to become bigger and more industrialized, which often leads to enormous debts. However, in the past 50 years Boerengroep has steadily taken root in the margins of the agricultural University of Wageningen. Generations of students have found a critical environment in Boerengroep, to question this paradigm and turn to farmers to hear about their struggles and imagine possible futures of the food system. .



# MY BOERENGROEP EXPERIENCE OVER THE COURSE OF ITS EXISTENCE

By Gerard Hendrix



I never realized that I took courses at Wageningen University around the time the Boerengroep was established. However, during those years of the student protests, Wageningen - somewhat later than Amsterdam - was the center for the Pronk-iaanse approach to development aid. The small-farmer-movement gave a home to all those students that disputed the Green Revolution, as advocated by the World Bank and other capitalist conglomerates, closely linked, already then, to Monsanto/Bayer and UN research institutes, like IRRI etc.

During that period, I studied Human Geography at Utrecht University where research was valued higher than the applied sciences. That orientation was more dominant in Wageningen. So, in doing my major, I chose extension education, one of the practice driven courses at the Wageningen University. During that same time another student 'outreach' initiative originated. Students, with slight international field experiences taught, amongst others, volunteers of SNV, the Dutch international volunteer organization. Peer to peer training as one would call it now. Niels Röling was founding father of the initiative and Louise Fresco was one of its first student trainers of the ITV, institute of applied extension communication.

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*hier zou iets  
interessants  
kunnen staan*

Obviously, as a sort of ‘visiting student’ in Wageningen I am not fully aware of the complex network surrounding all the revolutionary groups. But it all fitted well into the political atmosphere of that time, as the main aim of the Boerengroep was - as I remember - twofold: to be critical on development cooperation as area for study and practice. And, secondly, to seek ways to export the critical thinking outside Wageningen’s boundaries, internationally and - later - nationally.

One of the means, apart from studies, meetings, etc, was ‘Inspiring’-theatre. I never participated actively therein but what I gathered was that the Paulo Freire approach - which obviously also featured in the ITV training courses -, was applied.

During my work in Ghana in the 80th, as part of IFCAT (one of those legendary small-farmer projects) those interactive training and communication approaches were part of the training tools which we applied in teaching agricultural extension. One of the popular methodologies in that region, the GRAAP method (Groupe de Recherche et d'Appui à l'Autopromotion des Populations), was also indebted to Freire.

Years later, I had a chance to come into contact with the work of the Boerengroep directly when its theatregroup was invited to the Agricultural College in Deventer where I taught. During those years (mid-eighties) the college was involved in ongoing debates related to its raison d’être. In order to show the strength of the ties between the regional farmers community and the Deventer college, during one of the promotion events, the Boerengroep acted out the future of Dutch agriculture. I was - as one would call it now - the (co-)joker in the discussion with the audience of farmers, staff and students.

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interessants  
kunnen staan*







Also, during my years of teaching regional development, I applied the principles of 'inspringtheater' myself via a staff-student play on 'streekontwikkeling'. I experienced then that this type of theatre is not necessarily always ideology-driven, since it was foremost fun to do: interactive scenes led to hilarious situations on stage.

With all these experiences in mind I decided some five years ago that interactive theatre ought to have a place in the work I have been doing as part of HX, the company I started 20 years ago. I work, as during the days of development aid, in regional development, by organizing development projects and processes in rural areas whereby local people are involved.

For a heritage foundation on farmsteads, (Stichting IJsselhoeven), I am foremost interested in what is at stake in the rural areas, as is the case now with climate change, agricultural technology, biodiversity or demography. The sheer restauration and renovation I leave to others. Since renewable energy is an important issue at present, I decided to translate that topic into a theatre play. Sustainable energy is a subject that leads - when implemented or even planned - to heated discussions, often resulting in torn-apart neighborhoods and the like.

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Therefore, to my opinion, a good approach to make rural energy (solar parks, wind turbines etc) tangible, is through interactive theatre. To that aim, I approached Forumtheater of de Boerengroep whether they were willing to co-develop the play. Geertje Klaver, Patricia Lemmens, Maarten de Graaff and, as Forumtheater-director, Suzanne Prak, took it up.

Together we made the interactive theatre play KringLopen. In six scenes, the various stakeholders in the realm of durable energy - residents, the industry, government officials, young and older farmers, science - were presented. In all scenes we used interactive methodologies. Players were students from Wageningen University and performers living in the IJssel area. It proved to be a great success, not in the least because of the locations we played in and the contacts between the younger and older players. Obviously the Forum-interactions were superb.

Unfortunately, after six performances, we had to stop the production because of COVID.

Finally

Only now, I realize that KringLopen as a play, can also be considered as a sort of personal development cycle that started in the 70th and that closed with KringLopen.

In all, this type of theatre provided minor, though important contributions to a world in which people and not institutions and government are important. Forumtheater offers useful tools in that respect.



B e c o m i n g   a   f u t u r e

# P E A S A N T

Text: Cristina Biddlecome  
Featuring: Capucine Pélissier



“ *Peasant agriculture should not be seen as outdated, but rather as a revalorization of circular and small-scale agriculture!* ”



Peasant agriculture, and the concept of the peasant, go well beyond generalizations held within the popular imagination. Presently, it is uncommon for a child to say “I want to be a peasant when I grow up!” If not for the lack of clarity surrounding the term, then for fear of living in the margins of power and society. A peasant livelihood would much more likely be embraced - neigh, celebrated! - should peasants live in the dignified reality they so passionately work toward. Namely, to work within a system of living nature with the capacity to know, deal with, develop and convert living nature into food (van der Ploeg, 2016). The peasant and nature are not being let live in empowered concert in the way agroecologists so ardently advocate for. A dear former member of Boerengroep, Capucine Pelissier, indulges us in the stubborn act that is to say *I want to become a peasant*, for all that it isn't, and should be worth.

How did a Paris-native find herself in the quiet forests of Renkum, petting donkeys and studying organic agriculture? It all started with geography.

*In my bachelor of geography I did a course on rural geography about the desertification of rural areas in France, and learned how a lot of life had been taken out through big commercial centers. Farmers were exploited, causing them to disappear. It made me realize how distanced I was from food production systems living in Paris. I investigated food chains and wanted to become familiar with the first step: farmers. Then I loved living in*

*Wageningen so much that I wanted to become a peasant!*

What came first, the chicken or the egg? The question is equally as suitable when it comes to joining Boerengroep and developing dreams of peasantry. Capucine stumbled upon an internship with the Peasant Foundation, but it may have been her desire to change humanity that led her there.

*Being involved with Boerengroep helped me to meet farmers and to talk with them, to be on the practical side of many issues, and not only theoretically as in class. I used to blame farmers for being destructive to the environment. Now I can see it is not the farmer's fault, rather the capitalist system we are in. It is essential to help farmers in the transition toward agroecology - it can't be black and white.*

Capucine's talks with farmers were well-informed by her personal experience in the dirt and wet outdoor conditions of the Netherlands (now drying quickly due to climate change). She dedicated every Sunday to her personal outdoor cathedral known commonly as the Creative Garden. It is the closest thing a WUR student can find to the Garden of Eden in the surrounding area. One can come into close contact with the root of creation simply by weeding. Capucine describes

***“In an ideal world, peasant agriculture would be the perfect balance between the environment and the human***

grasping the bigger picture of farming by working in the garden and seeing the whole cycle from seed to vegetable. A winter's worth of kale and beetroot pesto marked the end of this delicate life cycle.

It is worth exploring what peasant agriculture could mean to someone who, against the grain, desires a life of peasantry. If not a life on the margins, then what? Peasant life turned on its head (according to myth and popular perception) is the future that Capucine dreams of.

*In an ideal world, peasant agriculture would be the perfect balance between the environment and the human (off the record: and then the human can live happily ever after!). It is a good livelihood for the peasant; meaning he or she can live and sustain his or her family while having healthy food and living with dignity. On the other side, the environment would be supported by these practices through the promotion of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Peasant agriculture really integrates the group of peasants and the importance of sharing knowledge, ideas, and innovations. It should not be seen as outdated, but rather as a revalorization of circular and small-scale agriculture.*

One can dream, but one can also grab a shovel and get to work on building a socially just, and vibrantly diverse future bursting with abundant, locally-produced food!

So, what will Capucine dig up in the coming years?

*Ideally it [the dream] would be a mixed farm with a friend and anyone who wants to join. I envision joining an integrated project that is already existing, or creating a project somewhere in France with animals and crops. I would like to work on a small-scale farm that could feed nearby villages or cities through direct selling. I can't see myself being on a farm without social connection. The project I'd become involved in would integrate social activities on site, like reintegration programs and maybe connecting to schools. Being a peasant does not mean being a hermit, sharing my knowledge and passion would be my main motor. And with donkeys of course!*

She wants the people to know that:

*We need to take away the negative image of the peasant as a poor self-sustaining person; peasantry can be seen as a way of life and developing ideas and projects!*

