



## XXI Conference on Fragile Areas

# Voids and appetites: the future of soil in fragile rural areas

*26-27 March 2026, Rovigo, Italy*

[Call for abstract](#)

### Premise

The environmental crisis, and the policies designed to address it, are generating a series of profound contradictions that cut across the relationship between society and territory, particularly evident in fragile rural areas. Land is at the centre of these contradictions: an increasingly contested resource, subject to institutional reorganisation and multiple pressures. On the one hand, there is growing competition over land uses linked to the ecological transition, as well as processes of erosion and loss of fertility; on the other, large portions of territory are being abandoned, while climate change is transforming their characteristics.

It is estimated that more than 60% of soils in the European Union are unhealthy. Soil is a complex and fragile ecosystem that must be carefully managed and safeguarded for future generations, on a par with – if not more than – other ecosystems, because it forms the basis of life for the entire biosphere. An inch of soil can take hundreds of years to form, but can be lost in a single extreme weather event or industrial accident. Restoring soil health is therefore one of the European Union's priority commitments.

The conference aims to address the different dimensions of the “soil question”, a problematic issue that manifests itself with great intensity in fragile rural areas, where depopulation, demographic ageing, economic marginalisation and rewilding intersect with the new challenges of environmental sustainability and the ecological and energy transition. These challenges are introducing increasing complexity into such contexts, calling for interpretative approaches capable of grasping the interconnections between local and global, between endogenous dynamics and exogenous pressures, between conservation and innovation, and between autonomous development projects and new forms of dependency.



## **Abundant land, denied land**

Marginal rural areas are characterised by a dual dynamic. On the one hand, there is a growing availability of land that falls out of active agricultural production and feeds processes of abandonment, with a series of problematic consequences for the hydrogeological stability of the territory and for changing landscapes. On the other hand, as highlighted by research on neo-rural residents and young farmers, access to land remains one of the main obstacles to active land management, rural development and generational renewal in the agricultural sector.

Land fragmentation, a phenomenon historically rooted in many European and Mediterranean rural areas, is a central element in this picture. It has produced a mosaic of small plots that are often difficult to bring them back into circuits of production and active management. Property rights prevent access to land, even when abandonment generates problematic effects for the community. At the same time, an unsatisfied demand for land is emerging from young agricultural entrepreneurs, social cooperatives, solidarity economy projects and rural innovation initiatives. These actors, rich in skills, vision and capacity for planning, often find themselves excluded from access to land.

There are relatively effective initiatives that, without questioning long-established property rights, seek to address the issue of fragmentation, such as the Land Associations (Asfo, Italian acronym), which arise from below out of a renewed drive towards community development, and the “Earth Banks”, mostly institutional initiatives that aim to connect the supply of and demand for land.

## **Scarce land, coveted land**

While we observe the contradiction between abundance and the impossibility of access, we also see growing competition over land use, which turns apparent abundance into actual scarcity. This phenomenon is particularly evident in rural areas where ecological transition policies have multiplied potential land uses, creating new forms of territorial competition that require innovative coordination strategies.

The spread of renewable energy is one of the main drivers of this new competition. The installation of photovoltaic and wind power plants requires ever larger areas of land, often in conflict with agricultural uses and traditional landscape values. The development of agrivoltaics, while offering potential synergies, raises complex issues relating to territorial governance and the redistribution of economic benefits, as well as disputes among experts over the real capacity to reconcile agricultural and energy uses of the soil.

Rewilding projects, and the conservation of large carnivores, represent another source of tension. Rewilding can conflict with production needs and local cultural identities, generating resistance and conflict. The presence of large carnivores brings different uses of territory into competition, with land contested between local communities and wild animals. The encroachment of wildlife, which is becoming increasingly confident, offers significant cases for studying perceptions and practices around disputes over land control.



In addition, the growing frequency of extreme events related to climate change requires the allocation of large areas to retention basins, floodable zones and buffer areas for the management of hydrogeological risk, thereby creating new forms of territorial competition. Finally, the emergence of carbon credit and nature credit markets introduces new dimensions to competition over land use. Afforestation and carbon farming projects can create new economic opportunities for rural areas, but at the same time require appropriate governance mechanisms to ensure the fair participation of local communities. The literature on Payments for Ecosystem Services has shown that these mechanisms can represent innovative tools for sustainable land management, provided they are designed with close attention to the specificities of local contexts.

These phenomena overlap with various climatic pressures that are profoundly transforming the characteristics of soils, their health and their fertility, for example through the expansion of high-salinity areas and the increased risk of desertification. Anthropogenic factors also play a crucial role: they contribute to widespread soil pollution, making it unsuitable for agricultural production and further reducing its availability. At the same time, they can have positive effects, helping to restore the internal balance of the soil ecosystem through, for instance, the widespread application of organic and regenerative agricultural practices.

### **Objectives of the conference**

The conference aims to critically analyse the conflicts, integrations, contradictions, pressures and aspirations that take shape around land and soil in fragile rural areas. The main objectives are:

1. To analyse the dynamics of access to land in fragile rural areas, with particular attention to the phenomena that are reducing its quality and equilibrium, and to the mechanisms that exclude actors who aspire to land, as well as to possible strategies to overcome existing obstacles and interventions to restore soil health;
2. To explore the new forms of territorial competition generated by the ecological transition, assessing the impacts, opportunities and conflicts associated with different land uses, also in the light of climate change and the ongoing transformation of biodiversity.

To identify territorial governance models capable of reconciling different needs and promoting socially inclusive and respectful forms of development of soil as a complex ecosystem, and to foster exchange and comparison between innovative and shared experiences of soil management.

The conference will be structured around two main thematic axes:

#### **Axis 1: Land abundance, land fragmentation and access problems**

- Analysis of the mechanisms of formation and reproduction of land fragmentation
- Legal, economic and social barriers to access to land



- Innovative tools for overcoming fragmentation: land consolidation, land banks, consortia, land associations
- Experiences of facilitating access to land for young entrepreneurs and innovative subjects
- The role of public, community and associative bodies in the management of land assets

## **Axis 2: Land scarcity, competition of uses, conflicts and integrations**

- Projects for the study and recovery of soil fertility and health.
- Renewable energy, storage and land demand
- Renaturation, rewilding and local community projects
- Infrastructures for the management of hydrogeological risk and land consumption
- Markets for carbon credits and ecosystem services
- Tourist and recreational enhancements

The call is aimed at scholars, operators, witnesses of the themes and processes. Those who want to respond to the call send an abstract of up to 200 words and 5 keywords. Registration for the conference will cost €50.00 for those who have access to a refund and €10.00 for those who do not have access. The deadline for submitting the abstract is December 31, 2025. The abstract form is available [here](#).

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