

**Europe and Middle East Workshop on the Commons:**  
***Establishing a Common Strategy for the support and recognition of common governance of natural resources in Europe and the Middle East***

**23-25<sup>th</sup> October 2017**

**Introduction:**

European and Middle East landscapes, biodiversity and natural and semi-natural ecosystems have been shaped by local communities for centuries, through their own governance systems, usually in the form of commons (common managed forests, grasslands, irrigation systems, hunting societies, etc.). Current figures indicate that common management and governance of natural and semi-natural ecosystems in Europe and the Middle East (by legal common rights or de facto) is still a very relevant phenomenon providing key socio-economic and environmental values to society in general. Nonetheless, the role of these communities in the governance and management of natural resources in Europe, and its conservation, has been largely unrecognized and their support neglected. In addition, the social and economic role of these governance systems, although crucial for the communities, has been disregarded as a result of judging it by a pure short-term market value approach. Furthermore, some policies, such as the EU Common Agricultural Policy, are detrimental for these collective, participative, local and sustainable governance and management systems, conversely promoting highly intensified, unsustainable and high carbon footprint exploitation systems. Nonetheless, in the last few decades, local communities and indigenous peoples' organisations, with the support of some NGOs and academics, have increasingly raised the issue of common governance values, achieving very relevant goals, not only at local level but also regarding legal recognition at national and international level, as well as increasing public awareness on issues such as direct democracy, sustainability, participation and responsibility.

**Background:**

On September 2011, the ICCA Consortium gathered over thirty-five people in Gerace (Italy), for a workshop entitled "Understanding community conservation in Europe". The result of the workshop was to provide a focused opportunity for assessing the current state of community conservation in Europe and to examine how local communities contribute to managing and governing their own natural environments.

In October 2013, local communities governing commons in Spain gathered in Valdeavellano de Tera (Spain), along with members of the ICCA Consortium, to coordinate the support and recognition of commons governance in Spain. As result "The Valdeavellano de Tera Declaration on the Recognition and defence of the Commons and ICCAs in Spain" was issued and a working group was established, which continue linking communities during the following years and eventually became what is today the national association of commons in Spain called "Iniciativa Comunes" ([www.icomunes.org](http://www.icomunes.org)).

More recently, on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2016 in Brussels, at a workshop organised by the European Forum for Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP) and the ICCA Consortium, more than thirty commoner organisation representatives from nine countries met to analyse the detrimental impact of EU policies on common farming and its governance institutions. One of the main conclusions was the need to network at European level with other affected commons institutions to promote a more sustainable approach to European agricultural policies, including the consideration of the existence of common rights along with private and public rights.

Finally, on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2016, in Bern, the first meeting of the "European and Middle East Working Group on Commons and Common Land Rights" of the International Land Coalition (ILC) was held. One of the conclusions was the need for data at a European level on figures and current legislation on common governance, including a preliminary common approach to the socio-economic value of common governance at European level. To achieve this, the need for a meeting with representatives of a minimum of fifteen European countries –including both practitioners' leaders and other representatives of civil society and NGOs- was identified.

Currently, at European and Middle East level, several national and regional organizations supporting and representing communities governing commons are starting to networking, learn from each other work and finding out that there is much to be done at supra-national level, both in terms of community conservation of natural resources, but also regarding the survival of the common governance systems and rights that makes this collective approach possible, providing in addition very important added values as direct democracy and participation, social justice and cohesion, transparency, access to livelihoods, sustainable use and a healthy environment (among many others). This meeting is intended also as the needed stepping stone to consolidate a fluent and resilient European Network on Commons.

Most communities governing commons are working almost exclusively at a local or regional level. Nonetheless, this is greatly changing, as they get conscience on how much is at stake (including their own future) in supra-national arenas. At the same time society in general, NGOs, governments and academics are beginning to recognise their beneficial social, economic and environmental role, including an increasing recognition in policies and regulations. As

consequence of this awakening, communities are increasing their level of self-awareness, organisation and networking outside their natural boundaries, and many of them are now joining national and regional networks, federations and associations in order to pursue common environmental, social and economic goals.

**Results of the workshop:**

- The workshop has improved the common knowledge, networking capacity and communication tools between 20 organizations, from 12 countries, working on the support and recognition of common governance of natural resources in European and the Middle East
- The workshop has identified the key threats and opportunities for the commons in Europe and the Middle East
- As result of the workshop, it has been developed a Strategic Plan to prioritize and tackle the identified threats and respond to the identified opportunities at supra-national level
- The participants has shared tools, responsibilities, approaches and means for the implementation of the Strategic Plan