

# Food Commons in Albania

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*At European level, Albania counts amongst the countries of which an important part of its national territory can be qualified as Commons, and even more, as “Food Commons”. We estimate that a minimum of 1.3 million ha (around 46 % of total land use) are territories governed collectively (either de facto or de jure, through customary institution or contemporary arrangements – under State or territorial authorities’ control) where different type of food is produced, gathered or collected.*

## **1. Common lands in Albania: historical background, and current diversity of local situations**

The prevalence of Food Commons over private agricultural lands in Albania is related both to its long term and contemporary history (Bernard-Mongin & Lerin, 2017). As part of the margins of the Ottoman Empire, most of Albanian territories were granted of some powers of auto-administration. Most of food producing lands were managed under customary, local and evolutive arrangements. Land tenure modernisation reforms administrated by the “Sublime Porte” only had an impact on a small part of the territory (Kasaba, 1988) representing around 15% of total utilized agricultural area (UAA) which was reaching up to 393,355 ha at that time (Sjöberg, 1991, p. 33).

Achieving its independence from the Ottoman Empire only in 1912, away from the main trade routes, granted from a very mountainous topography, Albania has experienced what can be qualified as a late economic modernity (Lorenzoni, 1930; Mile, 1984; Roucek, 1933). Unlike what happened in most of European nation-states, Albania did not experiment either a large agrarian reform under the pressure of political agrarian Parties, nor the creation of great capitalist modern estates. We can only recount of incomplete attempts to reform Albanian land tenure situation from 1912 to 1940’s (Zhlilima & Guri, 2013).

The Albanian communist (and isolationist) regime (1946 - 1991) implemented a radical agrarian collectivisation process (1946 - 1988), leading to the creation of 622 Farm States and Agricultural Cooperatives of an average of 1,056 ha (Guri & Jouve, 2009) – while that private family plots only represented 4,3 % of the total UAA. In the meantime, agricultural land has doubled (irrigation, massive land amendments, terraces) to reach 702,000 ha in the 1980’s, to the detriment of pastures and forests (Instat, 1991). However, even under this radical land property regime, large part of nationalized pastures and forested areas remained under *de facto* collective and local management, used for their resources, from wood fire collection until MAPs exploitation (Bernard-Mongin, Hoxha, & Lerin, 2021).

After the collapse of the Communist regime, the *Law on Land* (Law n° 7501, of July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1991) led to a quasi-total privatization of agricultural lands on an egalitarian basis, giving birth to 467,000 farming units of 1.3 ha each (Civici, 2001; Lerin & Biba, 2001). On the long run, this myriad of small mixed-

farming holdings did not evolve toward specialisation while expected land consolidation did not occurred (Cungu & Swinnen, 1999; Rozelle & Swinnen, 2004). Massive rural exodus led to a land abandonment in remote rural areas (Müller & Munroe, 2008; Sikor, Müller, & Stahl, 2009). Today, small mixed-farming holdings weight for 86% of total farms number – 350,916 units (Instat, 2017), when agricultural population is counting for 38.2% of the 2.8 million inhabitants. In overall, agricultural sector contributes to GDP for 21.8% in 2017(Eurostat).

Longevity of this specific agrarian profile relies on an extensive use of “saltus” areas (i.e. areas of semi-natural vegetation: grasslands, garrigue, hedges, etc.), but also on the multifunctional Mediterranean forests. Left apart from productive specialization trends and land privatization, those territories of “food commons” are essential to the functioning of the current Albanian agricultural sector, to the resilience of rural populations, and represent a vast reservoir of biodiversity. Those territories, remained in the national domain after 1991, were managed under various local informal arrangements, determined not on a spatial basis, but from the resources and services they provide (Bardhoshi, 2007; Bernard-Mongin, Crouteix, Lerin, López, & Proko, 2015).

Starting in 1996, most of food commons underwent a long controversial or even contradictory “devolution process” which is reaching to an end, the management of forests and pastures being transferred to the 61 new Municipalities<sup>1</sup>. Under this new land tenure, formalization of “user rights” are in process, leading to multiple context-dependant reinterpretations (ibid).

## **2. Food commons in Albania: a statistical assessment**

### **2.1. How much land is owned, governed or managed in practice as a common in Albania?**

In Albania, agricultural lands cover 24% of total country area, forests represent 37% when meadows and pastures are counting for 17%, while 22% corresponds to artificialized territories (cities, construction of new buildings, roads, etc.) (Instat, 2019). However, in the absence of dedicated statistical data on common land tenure in Albania, and more specifically on food commons, we proposed a quantitative assessment based on a systematic interpretation of the land use typology provided by Corine Land Cover (CLC) data set. Building on expert knowledge and previous field work on common land uses in Albania (Bernard-Mongin & Lerin, 2017; Crouteix, 2013; Garnier, 2014; Lopez, 2013), we assessed the likely distribution of food commons for each of the 44 land use categories, grouped together in 5 main categories (table 1). The map obtained provides information on the likely distribution of food commons in Albania (figure 1).

A red color shows areas with very low likelihood of food commons: urban areas as well as private agricultural lands, which represents 21.3% of total land use. The orange color indicates low likelihood of having food commons – even if potential activities of sea food collection on the shores could be further investigated. Yellow indicates medium likelihood of having food commons: high forests as well as complex cultivation patterns (mostly private agricultural plots) could present some but limited common right uses such as pasture practices or wild fruit picking, they are counting for 31.5% of the total land use. Finally, blue and green colors show a high likelihood of having food commons, and encompass all grasslands, shrubs, bushes and woodlands areas as well as wetlands, rivers and lakes. They count respectively for 43.1% and 2.8% of total land use.

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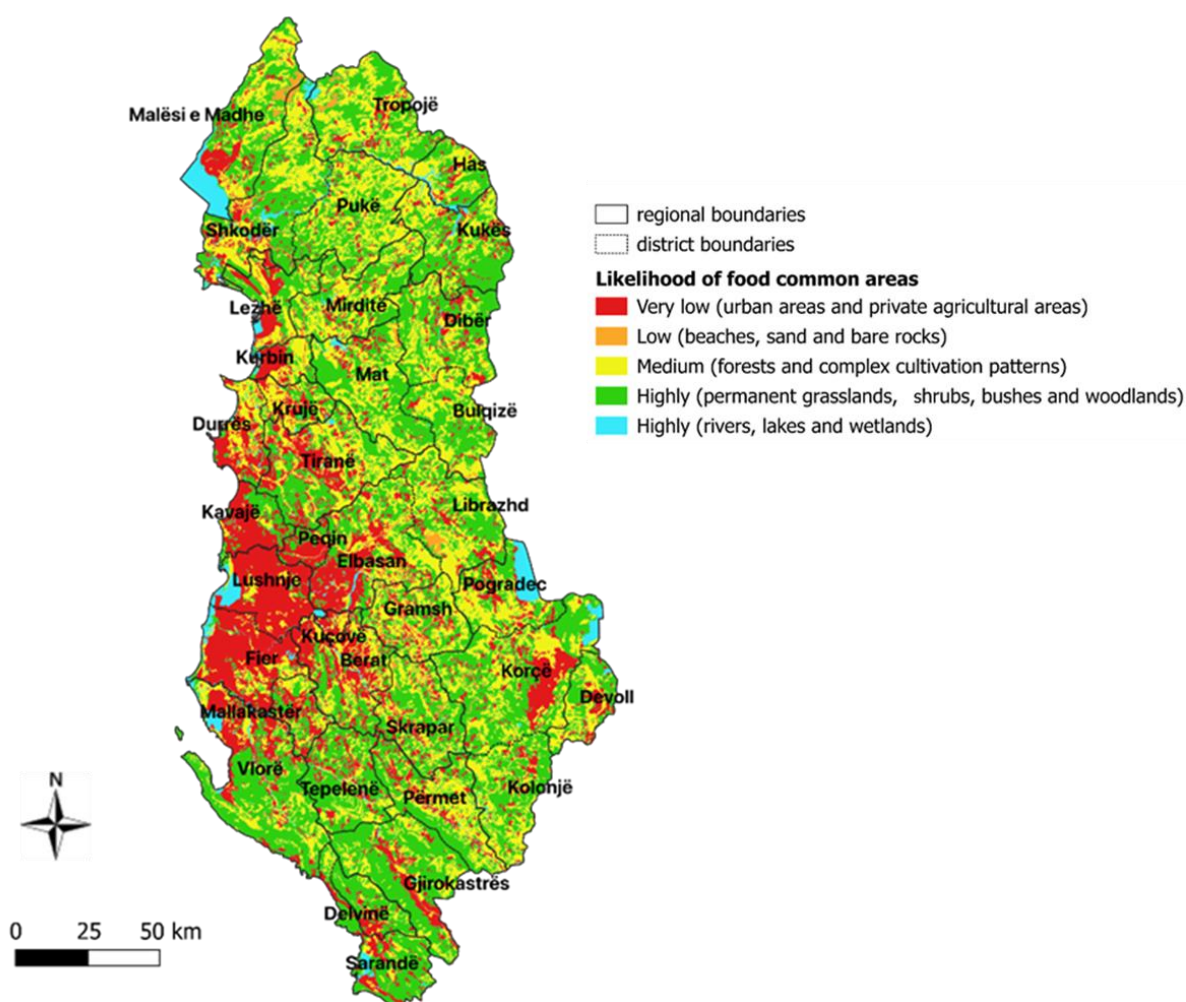
<sup>1</sup> The new law on territorial reform adopted by the parliament on July 31th, 2014 divided Albania into twelve regions and sixty-one municipalities.

**Table 1 : Main land use categories according their likelihood of being owned, managed or used as food common (in ha and in % of total land use)**

<i>Food Commons Likelihood by Main Land Use Category</i>	ha	%
Very Low - Urban areas and private agricultural areas	610 634	21,25
Low - Beaches, sand and bare rocks	39 766	1,38
Medium - Forests and complex cultivation patterns	905 147	31,50
High - Permanent grasslands, shrubs, bushes and woodlands	1 237 352	43,06
High - Rivers, lakes and wetlands	80 643	2,81
Total	2 873 542	100,00

Source: authors' estimates, according CLC, 2018

**Figure 1 : Map of Potential Food Common Areas in Albania**



Data: Corine Land Cover, 2018  
AIDA Association 2021

## 2.2. How much food is produced in those “territories of commons”?

**Meat products:** if we exclude pig production (very low in Albania) and poultry (raised on private lands), Albania produces 120,000 tons of meat (live weight) of ruminants (cattle, sheeps and goats) (Instat, 2019). The major part comes from common lands used by mixed-farming holdings. This production provides Albania with high level of food autonomy in animal products (around 42 kg / year / person) and a positive net trade balance (Marku, 2018). **Dairy products:** around 1,112,000 tons of milk are produced annually in the country, part of which is processed into a wide variety of dairy products (cheeses, butter, cream, *salcë kosi*, *gjizë*, etc.). Note, on the one hand, that those figures do not consider informal on-farm production and/or transformation, sold on local market places as well as dairy auto-consumption, which represent an important part of domestic dairy products consumption. On the other hand, to obtain a global estimate of animal products from "food commons" it would be necessary to subtract from these figures (1) the share of products from farms that do not use commons, and (2) the production during winterage period when herds are fed with fodder that does not come from common areas. This share is difficult to estimate, but we can say that it remains low in Albania.

Additionally, a **wide array of food products** is collected from Albanian commons. Few statistical data are available, but amongst the best identified productions we can highlight medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs), honey and chestnuts. Out of the 3,250 plant species identified in Albania, more than 300 are identified as MAPs, and 182 are commonly known and harvested from the wild (Imami, Ibraliu, Fasllia, Gruda, & Skreli, 2015). It is estimated that around 7,000 to 10,000 tons/year of MAPs are extracted out of Albanian food commons, and the largest part is exported on international markets (stable trend), weighting around 18% of total agricultural exports value at national level (Boban Varghese, 2014). The remaining part is used on domestic market for traditional phyto-medicines and herbals teas in Albania (Pieroni, Dibra, Grishaj, Grishaj, & Gjon Maçai, 2005), which has been growing trend over the past 4 years. Honey production is also an important one in Albania, highly dependent on food commons. Total production is estimated around 4,000 tons/year (Comtrade). Chestnuts are also an important product, extracted from Albanian common lands. Chestnut stands are spread over all Albania, for a surface estimated between 9,000 ha up to 17,7000 ha depending on the definition (Dupré la Tour, 2013). Approximately 6,000 tons/year are produced in Albania, and 50% are exported on international markets (growing trend) (Skreli & Imami, 2019).

## 2.3. How relevant is the food produced at national scale?

National Albanian agri-food market is characterised by direct sales and short local value chains which supply all cities in fresh, local and seasonal food, though a dynamic network of small private retails trades or public markets places. Even if supermarkets and imported products have gained a growing share in Albanian food supply networks in the mid 2000's, the share of local/domestic (and informal) food production remains very important in Albanian diets. Most of traditional dishes and food-products of cultural value are produced from Albanian common lands: pastoral cheeses and creams (such of *Kashkaval*, fresh white cheese, *Salcë Kosi*, *Gjjizë*, etc.), regional meat dishes from pastoral meat, such as *Tavë Elbasani*, famous beverages such as Mountain Tea (*Çaj Mali*), *Salep*, or *Raki* (distilled wild fruits). Note that current trends on the demand side show a growing practice of traditional phototherapies based on MAPs as well revalorization of traditional beverages from dried wild plants proposed in the bars and restaurants, as well as a renewed interest in organic, local, traditional products, through the development of dedicated market places (eg. AgroHub in Tirana), organic/local products restaurants and retails shops, or regional food events, such as the first agricultural fair dedicated to regional farmers organized in Tirana in 2019: «Enjoy Tirana Local Products» (*“Shijo Produktet Lokale të Tiranës”*).

## 2.4. How many people are involved with those “territories of commons”?

An important number of people are depending on Albania food commons for their living, with varying degrees, depending on the resource considered and their socio-economic situation. We can draw a rough estimate at national level, when considering that all **mixed-farming holdings (286 900 units)** are depending on food commons (pasture, woodfire, animals feed, as well as sub-production: MAPs, honey, chestnuts, etc.). If we postulate a standard rural household size of 4,1 individuals (Instat, Institute of Public Health, & ICF Macro, 2010) we can propose a number of **1.2 million people** involved with food commons in Albania. Important to note also that some 20,000 households are involved in MAP harvesting from the wild, either 80,000 to 100,000 individuals, providing a substantial income especially for the rural poor.

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