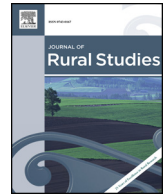




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# Farmland conversion to fight climate change? Resource hierarchies, discursive power and ulterior motives in land use politics

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## A B S T R A C T

In December 2013, local politicians celebrated with a champagne toast as the municipality of Trondheim received permission from the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation to develop 110 ha (272 acres) of high quality farmland for housing and business. The primary reason for this decision was the promotion of a more climate-friendly city. The land in question had been singled out as especially important for agriculture in previous planning processes. Based on documents, media texts and interviews, this article utilises situational analysis to scrutinise this puzzling political decision. It emphasises the importance of discourse in local decision making regarding scarce resources. Local interests and global issues are connected and made sense of in what Foucault (1972) called a “system of meaning”, which allows powerful economic interests and climate change mitigation measures to justify the permanent loss of farmland. As food production is invisible on the local political agenda, the re-implantation of multifunctional urban agriculture in the local food system could be a viable approach to slow further conversion of high quality farmland on the urban fringe.

## 1. Introduction

Farmland is disappearing under urban expansion all over the world, although feeding the rapidly growing global population is one of the great challenges of our time. Most biological processes that sustain animals and plants depend on soil, making it valuable in ecological and economic terms. Soil is a renewable resource when sustainably managed, but its potential for food production is lost forever when put under asphalt (Ingram et al., 2010).

Major cities have thrived when the conditions for food production permit dense settlements. Yet, urbanisation means that built-up areas gradually expand at the expense of farmland. The highest quality agricultural land is often on the outskirts of areas with high population pressure because rich farmland was often a reason for settlement in the first place. The loss of farmland to urban growth has been accelerating since World War II. Although productivity increases in agriculture have largely compensated for land loss, the resource base for agriculture is shrinking on a global scale. Coupled with deterioration in the capacity of soil ecosystems to provide high yields, the shrinking resource base for food production has aroused concern for preserving arable land (FAO, 2015).

Europe is characterised by limited farmland in relation to its high population concentrations, whereas North America is less densely populated and has a larger proportion of agricultural land. Yet, the loss of high quality soil is a matter of serious concern on both continents. In

Asia, the combination of rapid population growth and urbanisation has also threatened farmland. In recent years, the amount of high quality cultivated land in China has been shrinking in response to a governmental policy of moving large rural populations into new, centrally planned villages (Fang et al., 2016; Li et al., 2014; Long et al., 2016; Tang et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2017) and, therefore, not much land is left for reclamation (Xin and Li, 2018). China is increasingly outsourcing its food production to developing countries, stimulating a global rush to acquire farmland (McMichael, 2012a). Investment in land in the global South increased after the 2007–2008 crisis in food prices. Competition to acquire farmland has intensified around the world.

In contrast, farmland seems to be of low economic value in Norway, even though the country has relatively little arable land in its total land area. Paradoxically, by Norwegian standards, a large-scale conversion of high quality agricultural land into urban housing and industry was justified in the municipality Government of Trondheim by the argument that this development mitigates climate change. Drawing on discourse (Foucault, 1972; Fairclough, 1995) and narratives (Czarniawska, 1997) as conceptual tools, this paper provides an in-depth study of the knowledge claims behind a decision to convert farmland into urban purposes. It examines a case of farmland conversion that was politically adopted under a pretext of being environmentally friendly, whilst it is mostly municipal- and developer economy-friendly. In a discourse that pitted environmental goals against continued agricultural production, global environmental

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benefits served as a rationale for urban expansion. First, the paper presents the climate narrative that rationalises the decision. Then, it identifies an appropriated planning language and the manner in which farmland is made invisible as characteristics of the narrative. Later, the paper points to political and economic motives of the decision-makers by examining how financial logic permeates an area policy that is seemingly based in environmental principles of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction. It concludes by addressing how the discourse both secures power to the joint interests of municipal politicians and farmers who have become property developers and disguises the most climate-friendly housing options.

## 2. Farmland governance and policy

Land use can be seen as a mosaic of cooperating as well as competing interests. In his classic article “The Growth Machine” (1976), Harvey Molotch described coalitions between landowners and developers with public officials to support continued growth. Large economic values are at stake in how areas are defined in land use plans. On the urban fringe, many interests conflict with farmland, especially transport infrastructure and residential development. Planning is supposed to ensure democratic decision making and balance differing interests with one another. According to Hajer (1989: 21), planning can be defined as “the activity of the state organising the use of space”. Here, different actors engage in argumentation for different outcomes. The way these arguments are framed heavily influences what decisions are made.

Competition between municipalities in securing resources lies at the heart of politics (Molotch, 1976). In an economic logic, the value of a farm field in the real estate market greatly exceeds its agricultural production value. Planners have been concerned with how to control urban sprawl and keep cities from devouring their hinterlands. Some reasons for preserving farmland focus on the resource itself: sustaining food production, securing biodiversity, preserving open space and controlling floods (Tomlinson, 2013; Newman et al., 2015; Wästfelt and Zhang, 2016; Brinkley, 2017). Other arguments have pointed out that farmland preservation mitigates the negative side effects of cities by curbing sprawl and increasing housing density, thus limiting motor vehicle traffic, pollution and costly infrastructure, and preserving ecosystems (Cadieux et al., 2013).

A wide variety of policy tools are used to manage urban sprawl as well as preserve the open countryside and the productive agricultural land on the fringe of large cities. National laws and processes for protecting farmland differ significantly. Ensuring that farmland cannot be converted into more profitable uses requires intervention in the land market (Nelson, 1990). The purchase of development rights by public or private trusts is a common method of land conservation in North America (Bengston et al., 2004), whilst legal regulation by the central or local government is more typical in Europe (Koomen et al., 2008; Tan et al., 2009). The European Union lacks a common farmland policy; although EU land policy guidelines were endorsed in 2004, they have not been recognised in practice. In 2015, over 70 civil society organisations joined Via Campesina Europe in a petition, “Preserving and managing European farmland as our common wealth”, to make sustainable governance of farmland more explicit (European Confederation Via Campesina et al., 2015). Improving urban residents' access to land can strengthen public support for farmland preservation. Although faced with financial challenges, programs for community land access in British Columbia, Canada, have proven to foster an improved connection between city dwellers and suburban farmland (Wittman et al., 2017).

The reasons put forward for protecting Norway's farmland have varied over time. Protecting the remaining farmland has been seen as a matter of societal security justified by making the country more resilient in the face of crisis (Vinge, 2015). Only 48.6 per cent of agricultural calories consumed in Norway were produced nationally in 2016 (Norwegian Agricultural Authority, 2017). This is just below the

level that has historically been deemed necessary for national security, a goal first described in policy papers in 1975 (White Paper 32, 1975–76). Norway, as a non-EU member, protects its agricultural market with toll barriers, but, in 1991, adjustment to EU policy led to the removal of self-sufficiency as an official political goal (Almås, 2002).

Norway is a land of mountains and forests, and productive farmland comprises only 3 percent of its total land area, compared to 25 percent in the United Kingdom, 17 percent in the United States and 11 percent in China (World Bank, 2016). Since the 1970s, Norwegian agricultural policy has treated maximum utilisation of the country's natural resources as a core value (Almås, 2002). Grain production is concentrated in areas with suitable temperature, precipitation and soil quality, whilst dairy farming is concentrated in the less favourable mountainous and northerly areas. An extensive body of research has examined the quantity of land that has been converted into non-agricultural purposes in Norway (Grønningsæter and Aurbakken, 2009; Fystro, 2010; Straume, 2013). Other research has identified main drivers for urban development on farmland (Falleth and Saglie, 2007; Slätmo, 2014; Skog and Steinnes, 2016). However, surprisingly little research has examined decision making on farmland in land use planning. This article scrutinises the knowledge claims used in the political decisions regarding farmland conversion.

## 3. Conceptual tools: situational analysis to examine power in a political process

Situational analysis, first described by Adele Clarke (2005), is designed to investigate a complex situation with multiple arenas, levels and events in a systematic way (Christensen and Casper, 2000; Friese, 2009, 2010; Kalenda, 2016; Washburn, 2013). This approach helps the researcher navigate situations with a plethora of data both to analyse power relations and represent the diversity of perspectives in the situation. In contrast to the grounded theory approach described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), situational analysis focuses on differences rather than commonalities. Clarke emphasised that language and materiality must be analysed symmetrically. By using the situation as the basis for the analysis and explicitly including all analytically relevant non-human elements alongside the human, the researcher can identify how different circumstances appear as significant in the empirical situation, and who is constructing what and why (Clarke, 2009).

### 3.1. Power through discourse, narratives and knowledge claims

Discursive material is central for analysing situations of power, according to Clarke (2005). The term discourse points to a certain methodology for analysing social interaction and meaning creation as a key part of a societal process. Michel Foucault wrote that “discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault, 1981: 53). In political conversation, discursive power is of vital importance, influencing everything from what is defined as the problem to be solved in the political arena to the reasons that are chosen for solving the problem in a particular way. Power also comes into play when specific knowledge regimes are used to legitimate a certain point of view. Discourse has been supported by institutions and created and reinforced by a wide range of everyday practices (Foucault, 1981).

The social construction of knowledge that is taken for granted and comes into play in language and social interaction was analysed by Berger and Luckmann (1967). In planning processes, politicians must prioritise societal goals and values. Certain modes of argumentation can attain a hegemonic position in the discourse. Some actors are heard, whilst other voices are excluded. Powerful actors with specific interests and objectives can influence land use planning processes in both subtle and obvious ways. Bunce (1998) showed how the discursive power to “construct ‘systems of meaning’” (Foucault, 1972) around the urbanisation of agricultural land has had a significant influence over farmland

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