

# Automatic detection of available area for rooftop solar panel installations

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**Abstract**—In this work, we used a state-of-the-art convolutional neural network architecture for automatic detection of available rooftop surfaces on aerial images. We labelled data and tuned on multiple hyperparameters. Our best-tuned model has a  $F_1$ -score of 0.77 and an intersection-over-union (IoU) of 0.62 on an unprocessed dataset, where many images might exhibit no available area.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Importance of the task & Related work

With global warming, renewable energy and in particular solar energy has become a major topic of interest. In Switzerland, solar panels have furnished 3.4% of the electricity consumed in 2018 and this number is increasing each year. [1]

To encourage the efficient deployment of solar panels, the Swiss Federal Office of Energy provides an interesting tool to estimate the potential of solar panels on the roofs of Switzerland. [2] However, roofs often have obstacles to the installation of solar panels (chimneys, windows, pre-existing solar panels, etc.) which the tool does not account for. In this paper, we propose a model to detect roof surfaces available for solar panels since there is no existing baseline for this task.

### B. Data

The dataset used consists of ortho-rectified aerial images of the Geneva canton (Switzerland) provided by the Swiss Federal Office of Topography. The images are split in tiles corresponding to different region of the canton. Images are  $250 \times 250$  RGB arrays saved in PNG format. Each pixels correspond to  $0.25 \times 0.25$  m<sup>2</sup>.

## II. MODELS AND METHODS

### A. Data labelling

Together with another student group working on the same project, we labelled 876 images using an updated version of an existing labelling tool based on OpenCV. [3] This tool was made to label solar panels which are usually rectangular, and we extended it for our task by making it possible to extrude parts of a labelled region (here, parts of a roof not available for solar panels). Pixels that represent rooftop space available for photovoltaic panels are referred to as *PV pixels*, whereas the others are referred to as *no-PV pixels*.

The labelled images were chosen from a randomized subset of the dataset mentioned above, taken from different tiles (regions of the canton) in order to have the most representative variety of rooftop shapes and types: industrial area, old town, center town, countryside, etc.

### B. Data preprocessing

1) *PV images vs. no-PV images*: We distinguish PV images that contain at least some PV pixels from no-PV images that contain only no-PV pixels. We separate our images based on whether they are PV or no-PV, to control how many no-PV images are used during training.

2) *Data augmentation*: We artificially enlarge our dataset by applying a random transformation on each image-label pair. The transformation is composed of:

- a random square crop which takes at least 60% of the image and is then resized to  $250 \times 250$  pixels, and
- a horizontal flip of the sample, with probability 0.5.

3) *Training, validation, test*: The dataset is split into train, validation and test sets in the following proportion 70%/15%/15%.

The model should not require any pre-processing, hence the validation and test sets are not augmented by transformations and they exhibit the original ratio of PV to no-PV images. We alter this ratio and transform images *only when training* the model.

### C. U-Net

Convolutional networks are a model of choice in computer vision. Here we use such a model called a **U-Net**, [4] a sort of encoder-decoder architecture introduced in 2015 for image segmentation in biomedical imaging; it can yield state-of-the-art results with only few images. The U-Net as shown in Figure 1 consists of two parts, the contracting and the expanding path. The former is used to *detect features* on an image and the latter to *find the locality* of these features in the original space.

The contracting path we use consists of 5 stages where we apply two  $3 \times 3$  convolutions padded by 1 pixel on each side, each followed by a batch normalization layer and a rectified linear unit. We use the same number of channels as described in Figure 1, namely 64, 128, 256, 512 and 1024 for each stage of the contracting path. Stages in the contracting path are separated by a  $2 \times 2$  max-pooling layer with a stride of 2.

The expanding path we use consists of 4 stages starting by an upsampling by a factor of 2 and a  $2 \times 2$  convolution

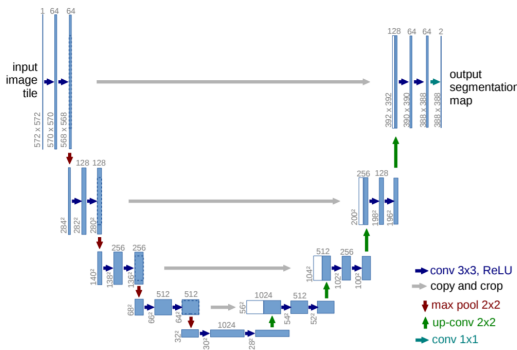


Fig. 1: U-Net example as described in the original paper [4]. Blue boxes correspond to multi-channel feature maps; the number of channels is found on top of the box, and the dimensions are at the lower left edge. White boxes represent copied feature maps.

to halve the number of channels, a copy of the feature map in the corresponding stage of the contracting path is concatenated and then  $3 \times 3$  convolutions padded by 1 pixel on each side are applied, each followed by a batch normalization layer and a rectified linear unit. We use the same number of channels per stage as in Figure 1, namely 512, 256, 128 and 64.

The model terminates by a  $1 \times 1$  convolution to a feature map with only one channel; we finally apply a sigmoid to get the probability that each pixel is PV.

#### D. Loss

This is a binary problem, the pixel is either PV or no-PV. We try the following three losses:

- Binary cross entropy (BCE),
- Weighted binary cross entropy (wBCE), and
- L1 loss.

The weighted binary cross entropy can be used when there is a class imbalance, which is the case here: most pixels are no-PV. The formula for this loss is:

$$L = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{n=1}^N [p y_n \log(\sigma(x_n)) + (1 - y_n) \log(1 - \sigma(x_n))],$$

where  $x_n$  and  $y_n$  are respectively the raw output of the model and the true class (0 or 1) for pixel  $n$ , and  $p$  is the weight given to the positive class. Setting  $p > 1$  increases the recall, whereas  $p < 1$  increases the precision. As described in the documentation of PyTorch we set this weight as  $\frac{\text{support}(0)}{\text{support}(1)}$  in the dataset.

#### E. Training

We train the model with different hyperparameters and choose the combination which has the best results on the validation set. In particular, we look at the following parameters:

1) *Optimizer*: We decide to try Adam [5] and Stochastic Gradient Descent (SGD) to train the U-Net.

2) *Effect of using no-PV images during training*: We surmise that using too few no-PV images might lead to overfitting (many false positives), while too many might incentivize the model to always predict no-PV (many false negatives). Hence, we vary the proportion of no-PV images compared to PV images in the train set, between 0%, 25% and 50%.

3) *Loss*: We compare the three losses mentioned in subsection II-D. For the weighted cross entropy loss we use a different weight depending on the percentage of no-PV images in the train set; we compute it as  $\frac{\text{support}(0)}{\text{support}(1)}$ :

Percentage no-PV	Weight for wBCE
0%	5.13
25%	6.46
50%	8.10

4) *Learning rate scheduling*: For the optimizer, the learning rate is an important factor: small values tend to lead to a lower minimum of the loss function but very slowly and might easily get stuck in local minima, while big values lead to faster convergence but do not guarantee the best minimum. To combine the best of both, we also use a learning rate scheduler, decreasing the learning rate as training progresses.

#### F. Tuning threshold on probability after training model

After using a sigmoid to transform the model output into numbers in  $[0, 1]$ , we still need to find a decision boundary to compare the prediction with the true label—a threshold probability  $\theta$  over which a pixel is decided to be PV. We hence perform a grid-search over thresholds between 0 and 1, computing the  $F_1$ -score over our validation set for each threshold.

As a reminder, the  $F_1$ -score is computed as  $2 \times \frac{\text{precision} \times \text{recall}}{\text{precision} + \text{recall}}$ , where the precision of the prediction corresponds to  $\mathbb{P}\{\text{Pred} = 1 \mid \text{Label} = 1\}$  while the recall corresponds to  $\mathbb{P}\{\text{Label} = 1 \mid \text{Pred} = 1\}$ . As such, both are susceptible to become undefined if  $\#\{\text{Label} = 1\} = 0$  or  $\#\{\text{Pred} = 1\} = 0$ , respectively.

Since we must have no-PV images in the validation and test sets in order to faithfully represent real-world usage, these possibilities must be accounted for. By default, the precision and recall functions we use can catch these errors and arbitrarily set the each value to 0 or to 1.

Setting the value to 0 in case of no-PV is not sensible, because in this case, even if the model perfectly predicts all pixels as 0, both precision and recall will be set to 0 (and so will the  $F_1$ -score). However, setting the value to 1 also seems suboptimal, because then we cannot make the difference between getting a high score because PV pixels are predicted well, and just because the image is no-PV. In both cases, the  $F_1$ -score is being influenced artificially in a varying way.

Another solution was then to compute precision and recall as weighted averages, as is done with multi-class

problems. In this case, we compute the precision and recall, once with PV as the positive class (so that a true positive corresponds to a pixel that is no-PV both in the predicted label and the true label) and then once with no-PV as the positive class (so that a true positive corresponds to a pixel that is no-PV both in the predicted label and the true label). Then, we take a weighted average of the two, where the weights are the support of each class. Using this method, division-by-zero issues naturally disappear. Unfortunately, we could not interpret the results because we tended to get a disproportionately high precision whereas the recall was not as affected.

Finally, we decided that the best would be to *concatenate all the images in the set* and compute each metric just once. That way, though we lose out on the statistical power that computing for each image might bring, we are certain that no undefined behaviour will occur, and interpretation is easier than with modified metrics.

Using this strategy, we could compute precision-recall curves and maximise the  $F_1$ -score. Such a precision-recall curve is shown in Figure 3.

### G. Testing

Once the best threshold is found, we use this to produce the final model; we apply this on our test set and compute standard classification metrics for each prediction, using the last method presented in subsection II-F.

Because the precision, recall and  $F_1$ -score were used to find the best threshold, it makes sense to use other indicators for testing (the same way that using the training data for testing is not the best indicator of real-world performance). We use the IoU loss for testing, as it corresponds to the tightness of the overlap between predicted and true labels. If our task is used to estimate the total area available for solar panels, this tightness is a very relevant metric.

## III. RESULTS

After selecting appropriate learning rates we choose to train the models listed in Table I.

We notice that rescheduling the learning rate during the training only once after 50 epochs gives the best results. We also notice that when rescheduling, we need to shorten the training to 80 epochs to avoid overfitting, whereas with a constant learning rate we train for 100 epochs to have the best results before overfitting.

Each model is run on a validation set to perform a grid-search of the best threshold, and the model is then applied with that threshold to a test set. Various standard classification metrics are computed and collected in Table II.

We choose the model 21 as the best model because it has the best IoU and  $F_1$ -score. The train and validation error during training are shown in Figure 2. We see that there are some peaks but their frequency and intensity decreases after the rescheduling after 50 epochs. This suggests that using the learning rate scheduling was a

N°	Optimizer	%noPV	Learning rate	Loss
1	ADAM	0%	$10^{-3}$	wBCE
2	ADAM	0%	$10^{-4}$	wBCE
3	ADAM	0%	$10^{-3}$ and $10^{-4}$	wBCE
4	ADAM	25%	$10^{-3}$	wBCE
5	ADAM	25%	$10^{-4}$	wBCE
6	ADAM	25%	$10^{-3}$ and $10^{-4}$	wBCE
7	ADAM	50%	$10^{-3}$	wBCE
8	ADAM	50%	$10^{-4}$	wBCE
9	ADAM	50%	$10^{-3}$ and $10^{-4}$	wBCE
10	SGD	0%	$10^{-3}$	wBCE
11	SGD	0%	$10^{-2}$	wBCE
12	SGD	0%	$10^{-2}$ and $10^{-3}$	wBCE
13	SGD	25%	$10^{-3}$	wBCE
14	SGD	25%	$10^{-2}$	wBCE
15	SGD	25%	$10^{-2}$ then $10^{-3}$	wBCE
16	SGD	50%	$10^{-3}$	wBCE
17	SGD	50%	$10^{-2}$	wBCE
18	SGD	50%	$10^{-2}$ and $10^{-3}$	wBCE
19	ADAM	0%	$10^{-3}$ and $10^{-4}$	BCE
20	ADAM	25%	$10^{-3}$ and $10^{-4}$	BCE
21	ADAM	50%	$10^{-3}$ and $10^{-4}$	BCE
22	ADAM	0%	$10^{-3}$ and $10^{-4}$	L1
23	ADAM	25%	$10^{-3}$ and $10^{-4}$	L1
24	ADAM	50%	$10^{-3}$ and $10^{-4}$	L1

TABLE I: Hyperparameter combinations for the different models we consider. We write two values for the learning rate, when we use learning rate rescheduling.

N°	Jaccard (IoU)	$F_1$ -score	Precision	Recall
<b>21</b>	<b>0.6223</b>	<b>0.7672</b>	<b>0.7491</b>	<b>0.7862</b>
4	0.5999	0.7499	0.7047	0.8013
6	0.5921	0.7438	0.6939	0.8015
7	0.5862	0.7391	0.7339	0.7444
8	0.5834	0.7369	0.6716	0.8164
9	0.5781	0.7327	0.6742	0.8022
20	0.5762	0.7311	0.6932	0.7735
15	0.5685	0.7249	0.6707	0.7887
2	0.5659	0.7228	0.6542	0.8075
22	0.5609	0.7186	0.6919	0.7476
18	0.5493	0.7091	0.6493	0.7810
19	0.5472	0.7073	0.6550	0.7688
23	0.5338	0.6961	0.6650	0.7303
14	0.5265	0.6898	0.6149	0.7856
24	0.5243	0.6879	0.6530	0.7268
3	0.5159	0.6807	0.5951	0.7949
1	0.4868	0.6548	0.5479	0.8137
5	0.4766	0.6455	0.5629	0.7566
12	0.4703	0.6397	0.5533	0.7581
17	0.4570	0.6273	0.5915	0.6678
16	0.4026	0.5741	0.5190	0.6422
11	0.3841	0.5550	0.4453	0.7364
13	0.3471	0.5153	0.4583	0.5885
10	0.2351	0.3806	0.2745	0.6207

TABLE II: Test results for all models, each with its best threshold according to  $\arg \max F_1(\theta)$ . Sorted according to the IoU (Intersection-over-Union).

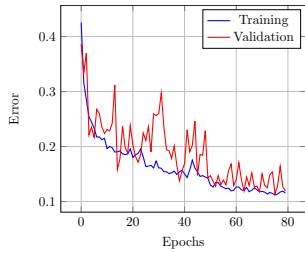


Fig. 2: Train and validation errors during training of the model N°21.

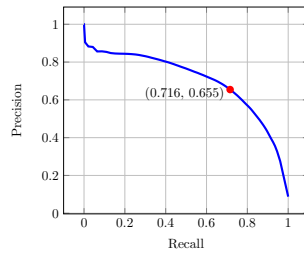


Fig. 3: Precision-recall curve of model N°21. Red dot indicates best threshold.

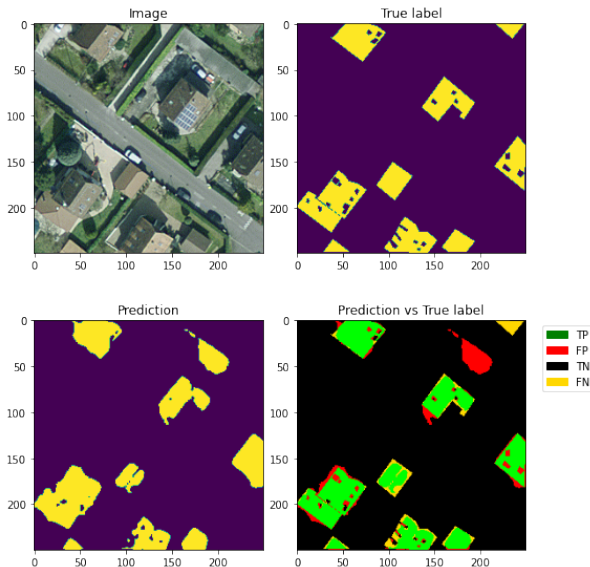


Fig. 4: Prediction of model N°21 on an image from the Test set using a threshold of 0.37.

good idea. Figure 3 shows the precision-recall curve and highlights the point that has been chosen as a threshold (0.37), giving the results shown in Table II.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

We convince ourselves that this model works well by looking at the predictions it makes. Figure 4 shows the prediction of the model on a test image. We see that the model recognizes roofs really well and manages to exclude many obstacles and solar panels. However it has more trouble spotting small obstacles on the roof, and differentiating a roof from a flat ground surface. From our experience in labelling the data, we can note that the scenarios mentioned above can be hard to label for humans as well. Also, it often happens that the model makes better predictions than humans, so more accurate labelling could increase its performance.

We used a test set corresponding to the real distribution of PV and no-PV images, so that our model stays as general as possible. Another model might give better results on a preprocessed dataset with less no-PV images.

In general, we see that ADAM outperforms SGD. We observe that using the L1 loss is consistently the worst and surprisingly, using the weighted version of BCE does not always give the best results. This might be due to the fact that we are basing our predictions on a threshold that we calculate once the U-Net is ready, independently of the loss used during training. By doing so, we ensure that even models trained with an unbalanced loss, that would tend to more easily predict no-PV pixels, can give meaningful results by using a low threshold. Indeed, we see that models trained with BCE have significantly lower decision thresholds. We also note that training with more no-PV images generally yields better results.

Depending on the use case for which this model would be used, it can make more sense to use a different metric to set the threshold value for decisions. If the user wants to minimize the false negative rate, in order to make sure not to underestimate the available area for solar panels, we would suggest to decrease the threshold and vice versa.

Because we are using a shared GPU from the lab running other experiments, we are limited in our computational resources, but more fine-tuning of the hyperparameters, especially the learning rate and its scheduler, could further increase the performance of our model.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In this project we propose a model to detect rooftop solar panels in aerial images based on a U-Net. When applied on a test set of images that have not been preprocessed (e.g. removing no-PV images), we get a  $F_1$ -score of 0.77 and an IoU score of 0.62. In our analysis, we fix the decision threshold for this model to 0.37 but we also give insights on how to change this value depending on the final use of the model. The U-Net could give better performances with more labelled data. We thus provide a tool that enables to label new data more easily.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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