
Transitioning to Sustainable and Resilient Farming Systems in Europe

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European farmers are under increasing pressure. Climate change, loss of biodiversity, input dependencies, generational renewal and low profitability constitute critical and growing threats to farmers and European food production. Decades of ecologically and economically unsustainable agricultural policy in the EU have not only failed to build resilience to shocks but have also exacerbated ecosystem degradation and failed to address the declining economic resilience of farmers. High input dependencies and large power asymmetries in food value chains are risks to most farmers' incomes.

Europe has seen a steep decline in the number of farms and farmers. Between [2005 and 2020](#), the EU lost 37%, corresponding to 5.3 million farms. The largest subsidy scheme, the area-based direct payments, continues to favour the largest farms, with 20% of beneficiaries receiving [80% of the payments](#). These untargeted payments lock farmers into a size rationalization dynamic that both promotes and forces the unsustainable expansion of industrialization to achieve profitability. This industrialization often entails large investments and the risk that sunk costs make it difficult to change direction. It also fails to stimulate smaller, more intensive exploitations, such as urban farming models. Sustainability, farmers' incomes, and resilience should be the core goals of EU farming policies.

A substantial reduction in meat and dairy consumption is necessary for both public health and for food systems to function within planetary boundaries. In the interest of the planet and the health of the people, animals, and ecosystems that inhabit it, less meat and dairy must be produced and consumed. This shift means moving towards more plant-based sources of protein, which EU policies have so far failed to realize. Additionally, a

mandatory labelling system needs to be introduced to provide reliable information about animal welfare and food processing.

EU policy has failed to rebalance European agriculture to become more ecological, sustainable, and plant-based. A fundamental shift is necessary to support services for the common good such measures that protect biodiversity, soil, water, animal welfare, and the climate rather than direct subsidies for large-scale cultivation.

Although [70% of arable land](#) in the EU is dedicated to feed production for animals, this still only covers 30% of the feed required for current levels of meat production. An agricultural system built around meat production and consumption undermines European food sovereignty. Comparing sectors, 82% of CAP subsidies are directed towards [animal-based products](#) (including subsidies for feed production). EU policy has also failed animals and citizens' calls for higher welfare in animal farming with, among others, outdated legislation for transport, slaughter, and the confinement of animals, especially by continuing to allow animals to be kept in cages.

Eco-schemes introduced in the reform of the EU Common Agricultural Policy reform for 2023-2027 to incentivize sustainable farming practices were far from sufficient in both design and implementation across member states. Similarly, the [European Court of Auditors](#) recently raised concern about significant weaknesses in the EU's strategy to support organic farming, which has a high risk of failing to reach the target of 25% of agricultural land to be under organic production by 2030. Organic farming needs to be strengthened by supporting its development across the entire sector, including downstream actors and incentives for increased consumption. Circularity must be advanced throughout the food system.

Synthetic pesticides continue to contaminate air, water, and soil, while driving the decline in biodiversity. Yet binding targets to reduce the use and risk of synthetic pesticides at member state level are still absent. Extensive investments and the funding of advisory services will enhance the uptake of existing alternatives for pest management. To make sure that enough

alternatives are present, market approval of sustainable biopesticides should be fast tracked.

Not investing fully in the transition to sustainable farming and food systems will be very costly, already in the near future. Europe is the fastest-warming continent and agriculture is one of the most vulnerable sectors. Heatwaves, droughts and excessive rainfall are already posing a substantial risk to food production across Europe and are a critical risk in southern Europe. While 95% of the food we eat depends on soil ecosystems, [60-70% of EU soils](#) are considered unhealthy, posing the risk of amplifying impacts from climate change, such as floods, desertification and water shortages. Such risks will probably accelerate with further global warming. Globally, temperatures in 2023 and 2024 have been in the order of 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures. Moreover, unhealthy soils increase the need for fertilizer inputs, creating a vicious circle that must be broken.

Agriculture has a great potential for adaptation. The need to develop a resilient food system is higher than ever. Transitioning to low-input sustainable agriculture would extensively benefit local communities and society as a whole. For instance, increasing and managing soil fertility and biodiversity reduces the need for synthetic fertilizers and pressure from pests and diseases. Diversifying farming and cropping systems increases both ecological and in-farm economic resilience. Multiplying urban farming initiatives increases food resilience in cities, stimulates local food production, and contributes to education about the benefits of healthy food among children and citizens.

Improving animal welfare and reducing intensive animal farming contribute to climate change mitigation and less pollution as well as reducing risks of zoonoses. Reducing the number of animals is necessary although, when sustainably managed, livestock in farming systems can be an integral part of maintaining biodiversity as well as providing organic fertilizers.

The upcoming CAP reform should drive the transition of our agricultural and food system towards sustainability. This includes prioritizing prevention over short-term coping policies. In our vision, the following measures are key if EU

agricultural policy is to support a transition to sustainable and resilient farming systems:

- **End untargeted subsidies and use public money for public goods.** Phase out the area-based direct payments in exchange for a significant increase in funding for result-based incentives for sustainable practices which reward farmers for environmental goods rather than simply covering costs. Farmers should be paid for strengthening ecosystem services. Ensure subsidies are resource efficient, regional specific and contribute to long-term resilience. The current CAP needs to be audited from a sustainability perspective. Subsidies that clearly harm the environment and our health and safety need to be stopped, such as subsidies for water-intensive crops in water-stressed regions.
- **Investing in the transition to make agro-ecological and regenerative farming the norm,** and include extensive and independent advisory services. Conduct a robust assessment of the farm types most affected by phasing out direct payments and set up a just transition mechanism for those farms most affected, entailing financial and advisory support for the establishment of long-term transformation plans.
- **Ensure fair and decent incomes for farmers** by ensuring that farmers are not paid less than production costs by adding “selling under production costs” to the blacklist in the Unfair Trading Practices Directive. It is crucial to combat power imbalances in the food value chain by, among others, supporting primary producer organizations and the infrastructure of shorter supply chains to increase local production and consumption, for instance by supporting alternative food networks and revising the Public Procurement Directive. Promote generational renewal and a variety of farm sizes and localizations, by targeted support to young farmers and small-scale farms, favoring the creation of public land banks and strengthening those that already exist, whether in the countryside, in or around cities.
- **Introduce a robust set of quantitative binding EU and national targets and impact indicators. The Common Agricultural Policy should be aligned with the European Climate Law and the European Biodiversity Strategy.** In particular, introduce a target to reduce agricultural greenhouse gas emissions by 2040 by at least 30% compared to 2015 and binding targets to decrease the use of chemical pesticides to at least 50%

less in 2030 than in 2015, starting with the most hazardous ones. The impact indicators should be in line with international commitments and should at least cover greenhouse gas emissions, the use and risk of pesticides, the use of synthetic fertilizers and nutrient leakage, the use of antimicrobials, farmland biodiversity, soil health, water use, and water quality.

- **Genuine practice of the precautionary principle** regarding Genetically modified organism (GMOs) / new genomic techniques (NGTs), including the effects resulting from market power/relations and consumer transparency.
- **Ensure effective implementation and accountability** through efficient monitoring which makes use of (or investigates the potential use of) information and communication technologies to simplify administrative management, such as satellite data. Enforce a robust accountability mechanism ensuring that member states are held accountable to targets.
- **Ensure stronger links and better coherence between the upcoming CAP and EU environmental and market regulation policy.** All legislation concerning agriculture and food needs to work towards the same objectives and targets. Subsidies provided in the CAP, for instance, must be consistent with the legislation and objectives concerning nature restoration, water resilience, climate mitigation, circular economy, climate change adaptation, soil health, pesticides, and unfair trading practices.
- **Effectively rebalance food production to more plant-based foods** by strengthening the production of local and varied protein crops for human consumption. Investigate economic incentives for reduced meat consumption at an EU level.
- **Ensuring ethical animal farming** by making animal welfare a stand-alone objective in the CAP. Allocate sufficient financial and advisory resources to farmers who transition from intensive to extensive animal farming. Ensure sufficient financial support for farmers for the protection of livestock damage from large carnivores to promote coexistence. Rapidly update outdated animal welfare legislation.
- **Integrate food culture into school curriculums, providing knowledge of crops characteristic of local regions, and promoting respect for food and farmers' work.** To increase consumer knowledge and thus willingness to buy the products of the more sustainable farms a thorough outreach programme including communication towards the general public as well



as education of students at all levels should be launched, with science-based and mandatory curricula in all schools.

- **To accelerate the food transition and enhance food security, promote a greater role for local authorities in strengthening local food systems.**

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