

Thematic Group on Valuing Farmers' Wider Contributions to Society

Context Paper

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This context paper on valuing farmers contributions is substantially about perceptions. While it aims to provide an unbiased overview of the topic area, readers should please bear in mind that it cannot reflect all views.



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1. Introduction

Farming is often perceived solely in terms of agricultural production, overlooking its broader societal contributions. However, farmers — particularly small-scale and family farmers — can play a critical role in maintaining vibrant rural communities, preserving ecosystems, and sustaining cultural heritage. Despite these contributions, there are misconceptions about their role in society.

The European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [has emphasised](#) in her vision that farmers should not only be seen as providers of food, but also as custodians of the environment and vital players in achieving biodiversity and climate goals. Similarly, the Commissioner for Agriculture Christophe Hansen [has highlighted](#) that 'we need a clear compass to make farmers' environmental efforts visible and recognised'. He also stressed the need to make the farming profession more attractive.

Of particular note is the 2024 [Strategic Dialogue for Agriculture](#), launched under the leadership of the European Commission. It represents a forward-looking initiative aimed at addressing the challenges and opportunities facing European farmers. [The Strategic Dialogue's report](#) (September 2024) underscores the urgency of reconciling agricultural productivity with environmental sustainability. Recommendations also include supporting future generations of farmers by creating public visibility for the farming profession, by repositioning farming as an attractive and rewarding career choice through education and by making agriculture more accessible to young people, women, and new entrants.

This paper aims to highlight key challenges in recognising European farmers' value and to present some of their wider societal contributions.

Drawing insights from the EU Strategic Dialogue on Agriculture, key policy documents and a range of commentators and views, the paper aims to foster greater understanding and recognition of farmers' diverse roles.



2. Challenges in achieving farmer recognition within the EU

Farmers across Europe face multifaceted challenges in gaining recognition for their societal contributions. These challenges are rooted in misconceptions about their roles and insufficient public understanding of farming's diversity and realities, among other factors.

2.1 Misconceptions about farming

The general public often views farmers primarily as food producers, neglecting the broader roles they play in sustaining rural communities, protecting the environment and preserving cultural heritage. This narrow perspective can lead to the limited recognition of their wider contributions. Small-scale and family farmers, in particular, face the added challenge of having their efforts overlooked in favour of larger, industrial-scale operations.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), although central to EU agricultural policy, has not always resonated positively with farmers. While the policy provides significant financial support, its design and implementation have often left many feeling alienated or inadequately supported. These frustrations have led to public demonstrations in several EU countries, signalling a deeper disconnect between farmers and the policies meant to serve them. This has impacted the public discourse which was often centred around rather negative headlines and sometimes even an unfair criticism – so called 'agri-bashing' – which left farmers demotivated and further deepened the misconceptions about farming.

Additionally, farmers' role in environmental stewardship is frequently misunderstood. While some narratives position farmers as contributors to environmental degradation, many European farmers actively adopt practices that support biodiversity, mitigate climate change, and conserve natural resources. Without clear communication of these efforts, public perception remains skewed, perpetuating stereotypes about agriculture being at odds with sustainability goals.

2.2 Knowledge gaps about farming's diversity

The diversity of European farming is one of its greatest strengths but also one of its most overlooked aspects. There are often prevailing narratives about farming, but there are many different realities that should be considered. Farming encompasses a wide range of scales, practices, and cultural traditions:



- **Farm sizes and models:** Small-scale and family farms are often undervalued compared to industrial-scale operations. Yet, they are vital to local economies, community cohesion and sustainable food systems.
- **Conventional vs. alternative practices:** The rise of organic, agroecological and regenerative farming highlights the adaptability and diversity of European farmers. However, the public and policymakers often lack a nuanced understanding of these approaches and their potential contributions to environmental and social goals.
- **Regional variations and importance of local context:** Farming practices, challenges and cultural significance vary widely across Europe, influenced by geographical, economic and historical contexts. A lack of awareness about these regional differences can lead to one-size-fits-all policies that fail to address local needs.

The knowledge gap is further exacerbated by limited engagement between farmers and the broader public. Urbanisation and the decreasing visibility of farming in daily life have widened the rural-urban divide, leaving many unaware of the realities of modern farming.

3. Farmers' contributions to society

Farmers contribute to society far beyond agricultural production, playing essential roles in food systems, environmental sustainability and rural community development. However, their contributions often go unrecognised due to societal and policy gaps. This section delves deeper into the multifaceted ways farmers enrich society, highlighting their roles as food providers, environmental stewards and community builders.

3.1 Food and supply chain contributions

Farmers are essential to ensuring food security, promoting healthy diets and reducing the environmental impact of food production.

- **Farmers' role in food security:** Farmers are critical to Europe's food security, producing a stable supply of food even amidst global disruptions. They produce a reliable supply of nutritious, high-quality food, even in the face of market fluctuations and global disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic or climate-induced crop failures.
- **Shortening supply chains for sustainability and profitability:** Initiatives like farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture and direct-to-consumer sales are gaining traction across Europe. These models not only reduce the environmental footprint of food distribution but also, to some extent, allow farmers to enjoy a greater share of the value of their products. By fostering closer connections between consumers and producers, they also promote transparency and trust in food systems.



- **Provision of high-quality and local traditional food:** European farmers produce diverse, nutritious food, often marketed locally. Smaller farms, in particular, play a critical role in providing organic and artisanal products that cater to evolving consumer preferences. These farmers also contribute to preserving local culinary traditions that are in many cases endangered, offering traditional and specialty products that enrich culinary cultures.
- **Contributions to healthy diets:** Farmers play a key role in addressing public health challenges by supplying fresh, nutritious food. Organic and small-scale farms, in particular, respond to growing consumer demand for sustainable and healthy diets.

3.2 Environmental stewardship

European farmers are frontline defenders of the environment, playing a key role in preserving biodiversity, combating climate change and maintaining traditional landscapes.

- **Preservation of biodiversity:** Many farmers actively engage in conservation practices that protect local flora and fauna. For instance, agroecological approaches, often employed by smaller farms, maintain biodiversity by integrating crop diversity and wildlife-friendly practices into farming systems.
- **Carbon sequestration and climate mitigation:** Through sustainable practices such as agroforestry, cover cropping and reduced tillage to improve soil health, farmers contribute to carbon sequestration, a vital part of the [EU's Net Zero strategy](#). In addition, organic farms are recognised for their lower greenhouse gas emissions compared to conventional farms. These practices not only align with EU environmental goals but also highlight the ingenuity and adaptability of farmers in addressing pressing ecological challenges.
- **Preservation of landscapes:** By maintaining traditional agricultural landscapes, farmers contribute to the beauty and ecological health of rural areas. These [landscapes](#), such as terraced hillsides and hedgerows, are often iconic features of European heritage and tourism.
- **Environmentally beneficial side practices:** There are many other approaches which farmers implement that help maintain a healthy environment, or, as in the case of buffer strips along waterways, prevent pollution.
- **Regional variations in environmental stewardship:** The specific roles that farmers play - and the extent to which they are able to play them - varies significantly across regions, depending on local ecosystems, agricultural practices and policy frameworks. Environmental stewardship means different things in different contexts. In Mediterranean countries like Spain and Italy, farmers combat desertification by



maintaining terraced landscapes and managing water resources efficiently. In Nordic countries, such as Sweden and Finland, farmers contribute to carbon sequestration through forest-agriculture integration and peatland management. Meanwhile, farmers in Central and Eastern Europe often maintain traditional grasslands, which are biodiversity hotspots. These diverse roles reflect the complexity of balancing agricultural production with environmental conservation.

3.3 Community and cultural contributions

European farmers are at the heart of rural communities, which are facing numerous challenges threatening their vitality. Rural areas across Europe are grappling with declining populations, aging demographics and limited economic opportunities. Young people often leave for urban centres due to a lack of jobs, educational prospects and services, resulting in the closure of schools, healthcare facilities and local businesses. These trends weaken the social fabric of rural communities, leaving behind isolated elderly populations and struggling economies.

- **Strengthening rural communities:** Despite these challenges, farmers play a crucial role in sustaining rural life. Family and community-based farms are the backbone of rural areas. They generate employment, either directly on farms or indirectly through local supply chains. By purchasing goods and services locally, farmers support small businesses and create a ripple effect (a weak 'multiplier effect') that sustains rural economies. They also sustain critical services, such as schools and health centres.
- **Mainstays of community life:** Farmers often act as community leaders, fostering cooperation through producer organisations, cooperatives and community-supported agriculture initiatives as noted above. Additionally, farmers often participate in local governance and community initiatives, fostering social cohesion.
- **Generational renewal:** Attracting young entrants to farming significantly contributes to the generational renewal of aging rural communities. This is closely linked to the revival of community life too, as young farmers as well as their families boost local services and cultural happening.
- **Preserving cultural heritage:** Farming is deeply intertwined in many different ways with cultural heritage and many farming practices are deeply rooted in local traditions, contributing to a shared sense of identity and cultural continuity. Festivals, traditional foods and markets, and craft-making linked to agriculture are all examples of intangible cultural heritage supported by farming. Throughout the EU farmers ensure that these cultural traditions endure. These actions, often linked to the traditional farming calendar, strengthen community bonds and, very importantly, connect rural traditions with urban populations.



4. Conclusions

European farmers are vital contributors to society. Their work underpins food provision, embodies environmental stewardship, sustains rural communities and preserves cultural heritage. Despite these significant contributions, misconceptions about farming and limited societal recognition persist.

A collective effort is required to recognise and support the diverse roles farmers play in society and to bridge the gap between the two. Fostering a culture of recognition and collaboration – which can happen in a multiplicity of ways - can ensure that farmers are better valued not only for their economic contributions, but also for their indispensable role in sustaining communities, cultures and ecosystems. Through strategic actions and inclusive policies, a more sustainable and equitable agricultural sector that benefits farmers and society alike can be created.

This transformation cannot happen overnight and can only be achieved through the further activation of a wide range of stakeholders engaging in a wide range of actions.

