

Valuing Farmers' Wider Contributions to Society

Thematic Group - 1st meeting

The first meeting of the Thematic Group (TG) enabled members to reflect on existing narratives surrounding farming and on farmers' wider contributions to society. Considering concrete examples and case studies, TG members jointly explored existing and innovative ways to raise awareness about farmer's multiple roles and discussed how to improve their overall recognition.

Overview of existing narratives about farming



The meeting started with a keynote presentation by agri-food journalist **Natasha Foote**, who shared her insights into how farmers are seen in public discourse. She pointed out that the media landscape has changed recently - there are fewer specialist journalists, which results in the topic being covered without field visits or an in-depth understanding of the specificities of agricultural issues. She also noted agriculture is not seen as a 'sexy' topic to cover and is often grouped together with environmental topics. On top of this, rather superficial journalism is marked by the 'clickbait' era, shorter articles and a focus on the quantity. In addition, farmers can be reluctant to speak to or trust the media.



Natasha outlined **several existing narratives** based on media reviews, interviews with farmers and analysis of inputs collected for the TG. These include: the 'angry farmer'; the 'struggling farmer' versus the 'armchair farmer', 'far-right farmer', 'farmer as food producer', but also 'sustainability as a burden', 'farmers versus the environment' or 'agri-bashing versus romanticisation'. She also pointed out two farmer images, either 'new' high-tech young farmer or 'old school' farmer, and the importance of using reality-based visuals as illustration material.



Event information

Date: 26 February 2025

Location: Brussels, Belgium

Organisers: CAP Implementation Contact Point

Participants: 48 individuals from 19 Member States (MS) and the EU across a range of organisations including farmers and farmers' organisations, European and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Managing Authorities (MAs), National Networks (NNs), agricultural education institutions, researchers, agricultural journalists, and the European Commission.

Outcomes: Exchanges and sharing ideas, experiences and proposing new practices on narratives about farming, multiple roles of farmers and how farmers can be better recognised.

Web page: https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/events/thematic-group-valuing-farmers-wider-contributions-society_en

In the plenary discussion, participants noted that the media can be a key factor in the reinforcement of narratives and stereotypes. Narratives are also shaped by other stakeholders such as political parties, educational institutions and farmers themselves.

Farmers communicating through social media can change the narratives and bring farming realities closer to people. Generally, there is a poor understanding of why farmers get subsidies and why there is a policy to support them, not recognising that the complexities of farming include seasonality and economic vulnerability.

Framing the wider contributions of farmers to society

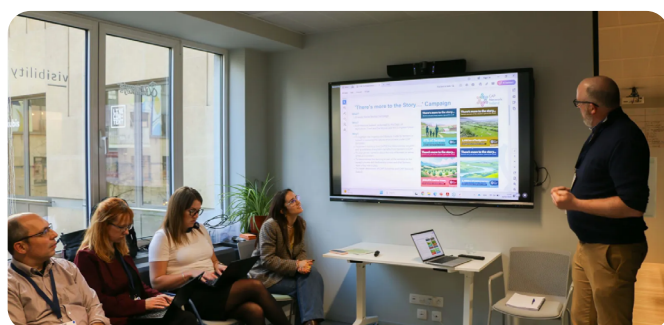
In the following session, **Veronika Korčėková** and **Adriana Borsellino** from the EU CAP Network delivered a presentation offering an overview of farmers' wider contributions to society. Farming is often perceived primarily in terms of agricultural production, overlooking its broader societal contributions. However, farmers can play a critical role in maintaining vibrant rural communities, preserving ecosystems, and sustaining cultural heritage.



The presentation highlighted the importance of recognising the diversity among farmers. Factors such as farm size, agricultural practices and local or cultural context all shape farmers' roles and challenges. Therefore, it is essential to move beyond a one-size-fits-all perception of farming.

Some of the contributions of farmers in society, described further in the [presentation](#), were illustrated through real-life projects:

- **Food providers** - exemplified by the Municipal Farm project in France
- **Environmental stewards** - demonstrated by the Regenerative Farming project in Slovakia
- **Community builders** - showcased by the Social Farming project in Ireland



The plenary discussion on how to tackle the mismatch between existing narratives and reality outlined several points:

- Both society and farmers themselves should recognize and present the diverse range of farmers' societal contributions. In particular, the social aspect and the role of farmers as rural keepers and community builders (e.g. educators of future farmers, local employers, sponsors of local activity etc.) is often omitted.
- Participants emphasised the need to promote more compelling narratives that better reflect the diverse societal contributions of farmers. A narrative about food processing and marketing is also currently missing.
- Innovation in farming extends beyond digital technology and includes sustainable, biological, technical, marketing and community-building practices. Recognising farmers as skilled professionals who continuously evolve and embrace new methods is key to reshaping public perception.
- Society should valorise the various contributions of farmers, which they often provide on a voluntary basis. Relevant policies, including the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), should be backed up by appropriate funding mechanisms to give a financial value to a broad range of contributions, not only those linked to food production.

Group discussions



Members were split into four parallel groups to discuss how the wider contributions of farmers can be better promoted from various perspectives, sharing examples of relevant initiatives and considering related enabling factors, barriers, and stakeholders involved.

1. Education

Discussion in this group began with a contribution from [Claudino Matos](#) from the Portuguese farmers' association ACOS, who presented [MUDA TT+ project](#). The second example on [farm visits and rural classes](#) was provided by [Els Verte](#) from Farmers at a Crossroads, Belgium.

Enabling factors for successful educational initiatives include multi-actor collaboration and cooperation, farmers being open to visitors, sufficient resources, education from a young age and a holistic approach covering the entire agri-food system. Barriers were seen in conventional interests and divisions within the farming community, time and capacity constraints, balancing scientific and practice-based farmer knowledge as well as bureaucracy and administrative burdens (e.g., for organising farm visits and stays for schools). Schools and other educational institutions, farmers and their associations, politicians and government, the full value chain, science and research were identified as key stakeholders.

2. Farmers' self-promotion


[Virve Hindstrom](#) from the Finnish Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners introduced their own [Farmers' Communication Guide](#), followed by a [presentation](#) on [Farmfluencers](#), provided by the Austrian Chamber of Agriculture.

The key enabling factor identified was farmers' possession of soft skills for authentic self-promotion. If the initiatives are realised by a group of farmers, the impact multiplies. External factors such as crises can raise awareness of the importance of farming and food security. Time, money and energy are always constrained for farmers, hence investing in self-promotion could be a barrier. Relevant stakeholders besides farmers could include educators, representatives from communication agencies or investment funds.





3. Communication and awareness-raising campaigns

 The Irish CAP Network's **'There's More to the Story...'** campaign was explained by **John Murphy**, together with the **Farm Open Days** initiative, presented by **Reve Lambur** from the Estonian National Network.

Enabling factors discussed encompass using the 'right narratives' (i.e. well-presented real stories) but also using the right channels (e.g. videos or TV programs such as **Clarkson's Farm**), and accessible language with appropriate visuals. Communication training for both farmers and the media could also enable better results. On the other hand, barriers include limited resources, heterogeneity of farmers, distrust of the media, fear of being exposed to the public or a lack of time to gather the content. The scope of relevant stakeholders is wide: the next generation of young farmers, schools, policy makers, elected officials, consumers, local development associations, and indeed farmers and the public.



4. Awards and recognition programmes

 **Veronika Resch-O'hógáin**, from the Austrian Federal Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry, Regions and Water Management, presented the **Farming for Nature competition** and **Cristina Rascón García**, from the EU CAP Network, presented the EU CAP Network good practices competitions; **Agricultural and Rural Inspiration Awards (ARIA)** and **EIP-AGRI Innovation Awards**.



It was emphasised that clear recognition frameworks should be established, covering entire farming systems rather than focusing solely on individual practices.

Initiatives that encourage farmers to connect, collaborate, and acknowledge each other's efforts should be promoted. This recognition process should ideally start at the local level and gradually expand to broader platforms. A major challenge is the lack of awareness and misinformation among the public, which can hinder recognition efforts. In addition, political obstacles, an insufficient number of awards dedicated to farmers, and a risk that awards may unintentionally exclude certain farmers can further complicate the situation. Outreach strategies should involve not only farmers but also other rural stakeholders and the public in general.

Panel discussion

The panel discussion explored how to improve the recognition of farmers from a perspective of different stakeholders:

- Farmer **Janel Jan-Marcus Lohvart**, Estonian young farmers' organisation (MTÜ Eesti Noortalunikud),
- Journalist **Yanne Boloh**, European Network of Agricultural Journalists (ENAJ),
- Professor of food technology and science **Filipe Ribeiro**, Vagos Professional School of Agriculture and Rural Development in Portugal, and
- Web content editor **Szabolcs Zoldreti**, European Commission, DG AGRI, unit 'External Communication and Promotion Policy'.

Several notable aspects were pointed out in the discussion:

Reality-based image of farmers – Public opinion is important for farmers and therefore they should proactively reach out to mainstream media and use social media channels for transparent public informing. This might be easier for farmers' organisations compared to individual farmers, however. Educators and schools could have a better impact when connecting with farmers, local community and researchers, while involving the media is also beneficial. Since the farmers' protests, journalists are asked to cover more agricultural topics. Organising capacity-building training for journalists on technical agri-food issues is a very useful way to avoid misinterpretation. There are many stories in agriculture and therefore a direct contact with farmers is necessary. Journalism and communication are not the same and should not be used interchangeably.

Explaining CAP Subsidies – even if the recent **Eurobarometer survey** showed a surprisingly positive public perception of the CAP, it still has to be stressed that CAP subsidies are not income or welfare for farmers. Even if farmers' organisations are learning to communicate better with the public, especially since the protests, there is still a big scope for explaining why farmers are subsidized. In addition, the enormous diversity of nine million farmers in Europe need to be recognised.





Farming versus environment? – Farmers need to take care of their land. A majority of them consider the protection of the environment to be very important and the divide between agriculture and environment therefore seems to be an artificial issue. At the same time, the dominant food system in Europe is industrialised and does contribute to climate change. There is a tendency towards compensating farmers for environmentally-friendly practices, but change is slow. The European Commission is aware of that and is currently developing an easily applicable measurement of farm sustainability. To educate future farmers, agricultural schools run various educational projects that link farming to biodiversity, e.g., the pollination role of bees. Consumers should be aware that their choices impact the environment and farms (e.g., cheap food means more intensive farming).

Connecting producers with consumers – Chefs have a specific role in recognising agriculture in their area through integrating local and seasonal products in daily meals. Showing the links between local farmers and restaurants proves to be a very good subject for media articles too. Agricultural education institutions also play a role in connecting students and consumers in large urban centres with farmers. At the EU level, valuing food has been recently highlighted in the [Vision for Agriculture and Food](#), as well as by promoting food with geographical indications and organic farmers' awards, among other actions.

Next steps



In terms of next steps, it was agreed that the EU CAP Network would work with TG members to elaborate two topics selected in a vote (i.e., 'Connections between farmers and society' and 'Rebranding farming as an attractive career choice for younger generations'). These topics will be further explored during online informal meetings in between in-person TG meetings. Additionally, the selection of inspiring examples and initiatives and a context paper enriched with the outcomes of the meeting discussions will be prepared, with a view of including them as final outputs from the thematic group.

