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## THE NEW EUROPEAN COMMISSION VISION FOR AGRICULTURE AND FOOD – ARE WE CULTIVATING A BETTER FUTURE?

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### ABSTRACT:

*THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY REPRESENTS ONE OF THE MAIN AND THE OLDEST INITIATIVES DEVELOPED BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO IMPROVE THE PEOPLE'S LIVES. IN THE LAST YEARS, IN THE CONTEXT OF STRONG ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES, THE ATTENTION ADDRESSED BY POLICY MAKERS TO THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY. IF WE CONSIDER THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMICAL CHANGES ON A GLOBAL SCALE, THE EUROPEAN DISCOURSE ON AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SHOULD BE SUBSTANTIALLY UPDATED. THIS ARTICLE IS STUDYING THE NEWEST EUROPEAN DISCOURSE ON ASSURING A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR EUROPEAN CONSUMERS, BUT ALSO FOR THE EUROPEAN FARMERS WHO NEED PROTECTION IN THE NEW POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND CLIMATE CHANGES. THE METHODOLOGY USED IS FOCUSED ON ANALYSING, PROCESSING AND INTERPRETING THE DATA PROVIDED BY THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS, ESPECIALLY BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION. FOLLOWING THE RESEARCH CARRIED OUT BASED ON THE ARTICLE, THE FOLLOWING RESULT IS REVEALED: THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION HAS A REAL DESIRE TO IMPROVE THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL PLANS AND STRATEGY THROUGH THE MONEY ALLOCATED IN THIS DIRECTION.*

**KEY WORDS:** EUROPEAN COMMISSION, AGRICULTURE, SUSTAINABILITY, COMPETITIVENESS

### INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is a key role activity of every country in guaranteeing the food security of its citizens. At the same time, in Europe, it is the activity which is highly impacted by climate change, but also by the current economic and political decisions as those to ensure peace and stability. It is well-know that the EU policy is prioritizing the financial aid to agriculture from the first years of the European construction. Whether in the form of structural and cohesion funds, direct payments or grants, sustainability remains of paramount importance in the long-term use of such instruments [1].

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The common agricultural policy (CAP) was established with the Treaty of Rome in 1958 and continues nowadays to be one of the most important directions for the EU. At that time, the goal was to reduce the national intervention mechanisms which were incompatible with the common market and to transfer them to Community level. Currently, article 39 TFEU sets out the specific objectives of the CAP:

- To increase agricultural productivity by promoting technical progress and ensuring the optimum use of the factors of production, in particular labour;
- To ensure a fair standard of living for farmers;
- To stabilise markets;
- To ensure the availability of supplies;
- To ensure reasonable prices for consumers. [2]

As is highly expressed in their status, the specific economic and social objectives are searching to safeguard the interests of producers and consumers, which means that the substance of common agricultural policy is still the same since its establishment. The question nowadays is whether that is enough in the new political and environmental climate, or should the European Union reconsider a new and more updated approach [3]. In this regard, the objectives and strategic plans of CAP are periodically updated to allow a greater degree of flexibility between the two available funds for agriculture and rural development - European agricultural guarantee fund (EAGF) which has now has an allocation of €291.1 billion; and European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD) with allocation amounts to €95.5 billion [4].

Still, this allocation has decreased over the past 40 years, from 73.2% in 1980 to about 24.6% in 2023 [5]. The reason behind this fact is that other EU policies are having a greater share of money. In a short analysis, we mention that in the 1980's, the CAP budget was mainly spent supporting the public interventions in the development of agriculture. With the CAP reform from 1992, the mechanism of direct payments was introduced and the allocation on rural development measures were also increased and this pattern continued with the reforms from agenda 2000, 2003 and 2008. The reforms continued in the same direction, but introducing more direct support to environmental and climate measures with the reforms from 2013 and 2023.

The strategic plans, which are elaborated by each EU member state, play an important role in securing access to food for citizens, but also in developing the rural areas. The plans are formulated to include strategies and instruments compatible with the CAP objectives, taking into consideration the ambitions of the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy. For the period 2023-27, the common agricultural policy is built around ten key objectives: to ensure a fair income for farmers; to increase competitiveness; to improve the position of farmers in the food chain; climate change action; environmental care; to preserve landscapes and biodiversity; to support generational renewal; vibrant rural areas; to protect food and health quality; fostering knowledge and innovation [6]. In accordance with the objective, in total, EU countries have planned 2500 interventions in their CAP Strategic Plans [7]. In general, we can notify that the governance structure for the CAP proposed by the Commission under the new delivery model will be performance-based rather than compliance-based [8].

In the below graph we can see the CAP expenditure and CAP reform path from 1980 until 2024, from 12 member states to 27 nowadays. The black line is representing the CAP as percentage of EU GDP and the coloured fields the mechanism in which the money was distributed. We easily observe the introduction of direct payments (blue colour, from 1992) and the focus on green measures as most recent reform of CAP.

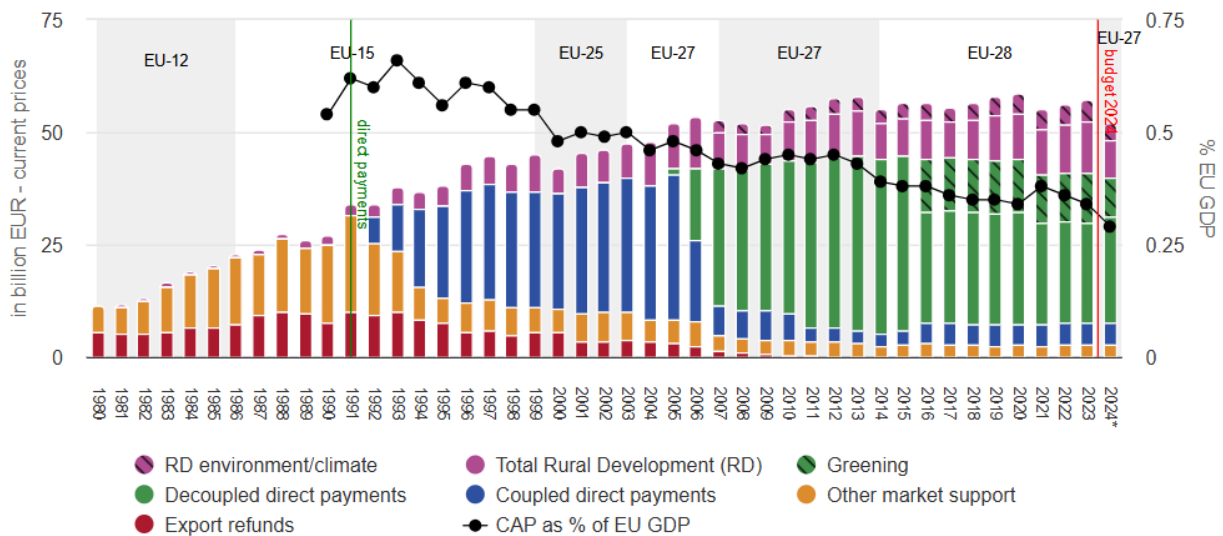


Figure 1. CAP expenditure and CAP reform path - 1980-2023: actual expenditure [9]

## CURRENT PROPOSALS AND FACTS

In the context in which European Union farmers continue to struggle to be competitive and sustainable in a global market, we are questioning whether the objectives and budgets are directed to effective measures [10]. With the huge protests around the biggest agricultural countries manifested in 2023 - 2024, the answer is no, and a change should be made rapidly. The protests were sparked by proposed policy changes, tighter environmental regulations, perceived pressures on farm incomes and increased trade competition [11].

Since more than 70% of the CAP's budget is spent on so-called direct payments, aimed primarily at securing farmers' incomes [3], the question is how can agriculture become more attractive for farmers with so many regulations and not so many competitive measures? Should we continue making direct payments to small farmers for crops that are not productive in smaller areas, or should we invest more in those struggling with climate change?

This comes in the context in which in June 2018, the EU Commission's proposal for the next CAP included a focus on climate and environmental challenges, along with extra benefits for "eco-schemes" – as an incentive for farmers to deliver safer products [12]. On 2 December 2021, the agreement was formally adopted and the new legislation entered into force on 1 January 2023, paving the provisions for the period 2023-2027. The new prerogatives included a more prominent accent on a fairer, greener and more performance-based CAP [13]. The total allocation under the CAP strategic plans 2023-2027 is distributed as follows: 189.20 EUR billion for direct payments (72%), 66.00 EUR billion for rural development (25%) and 8.90 EUR billion for sectoral (3%). Another important aspect to be mentioned is that the budget for the EAFRD includes €8 billion from Next Generation EU [13] instrument dedicated to support rural areas make improvements and being capable to achieve the goals of the European Green Deal and the digital transition.

Improving competitiveness as one of the objectives of European policy is also mentioned in the CAP 2023-2027 by mentioning as a priority the cooperation between farmers, market orientation and a financial reserve amounting to at least €450 million per year [13].

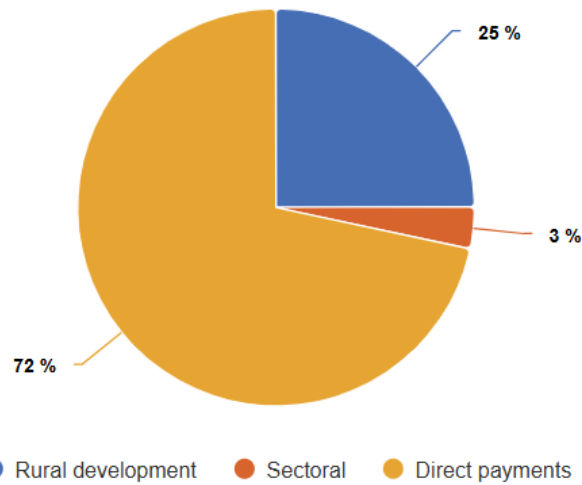


Figure 2. Planned financial allocations under the CAP Strategic Plans 2023-2027 (in EUR billion) [14]

Firstly, the CAP 2023-2027 sustains agriculture in making a stronger contribution to the implementation of the European Green Deal. This is visible by implementing conditionality on every farm which should have at least 3% of arable land dedicated to biodiversity and non-productive elements and by directing at least 25% of the budget for direct payments to eco-schemes (such as organic farming, agro-ecology, carbon farming). As an important provision, we also mention that 40% of the budget is oriented toward climate-relevant initiatives, since the European Union has been committed to tackling climate change both internally and internationally and has placed it high on the EU agenda, as reflected in European climate change policy [15]. All of this to support climate, biodiversity, environment and animal welfare as important prerogatives of the European Green Deal.

Secondly, the new CAP wants to be defined as fairer to farmers and rural inhabitants by prioritizing smaller and medium-sized farms, identifying and addressing real active farmers or by supporting young farmers and increasing the participation of women.

Since in 2025 a first performance review of each CAP was planned, we already have a new intervention through the Vision for Agriculture and Food delivered by the European Commission. Presented in February 2025, the new Commission's roadmap for a thriving EU farming and agri-food sector includes some good elements for making European agriculture more competitive, productive, fair and resilient. Since this is a new vision and not a revision, it is important to identify the needs for new directions and strategies. The new vision outlines four priority areas: an attractive sector, a competitive and resilient sector, a future-proof sector, fair living and working conditions in rural areas [16]. As we can observe, the new plan is simplified and better targeted and is focused on creating the proper conditions for future farmers to produce food by assuring a fair income and accessibility.

It is already well known that European farmers have imposed multiple restrictions in using pesticides which is guaranteeing a healthy, quality food to citizens. But this comes with a burden for European farmers and makes more difficult for them to be competitive and profitable when still a significant amount of food is brought from outside the EU and is significantly produced at lower costs.

With the new vision, the European Commission states that our farmers are vital for quality food and that the entire agri-food sector and rural areas are facing multiple challenges [17], which makes more important to make agriculture financially sustainable and fighting back

unfair practices. All the measures should be made by considering the weather difficulties and the protection of the environment, along with the political and economic global context in general. Despite proper opportunities for farmers, it is also an objective of the new vision to create opportunities for young people in rural areas, making them interested in choosing agricultural careers and fostering the agri-foods businesses.

At the same time, how do the European citizens perceive the support that the EU gives to its farmers through the Common Agricultural Policy? In conformity with the latest Eurobarometer on this subject, 77% agree that the EU, through the CAP, is fulfilling its role in securing a stable supply of food in the EU at all times and 71% agree that the EU is fulfilling its role in providing safe, healthy and sustainable food of high quality, which is actually the highest level of awareness of the CAP since 2007 (when it stood at 43%) [18]. This proves a high understanding of the key role EU agricultural policies play and how important is the financial support for European farmers which are facing multiple challenges, especially in the latest years. The EU farmers and their products are preferred by the citizens which accept the policies and the need of funding to provide good quality in agricultural production.

Another important element to verify the efficacy of policies and practices in the field of agriculture would be an exploration of the import-export of cereals traded in the EU. From the statistics [19] about the relation between import-export of cereals at EU level we can see that the general total of export of grains is with 32% lower in the last six months, this being strongly influenced by the lower agricultural production in the last year, mostly influenced by the weather and the still traditional approach of the farmers in working the fields (an important amount of farmers are still doing conventional rather than conservative agriculture). So, for the period 01/07/2022 - 19/02/2023 the general total export of grains was 29 260 281 tonnes and the import - 27 161 806 tonnes. We can observe not a significative difference between the two indicators which is leading to a positive correlation but is not defining the European agriculture as very competitive and performant. For the period 01/07/2023 - 18/02/2024, the balance between export and import of grains is 30 123 372 tonnes for export and 21 970 353 tonnes for import. We remark a smaller increase in the exports, but a more remarkable change in the imports section which is defining the European agricultural being more performant for this period. In the latest months, 01/07/2024 - 16/02/2025, the export rate reduced significantly to 20 417 725 tonnes, but the import maintained around the same number as in the previous statistics - 20 428 218 tonnes. The newest statistics sustain the need of reforms in the European policy and new strategies and initiatives in the climate change environment. Unfortunately, the political instability and war at the European Union border is intensifying to need for reforms and new strategies to make agriculture competitive and attractive for farmers.

As import destinations, we can mention Ukraine (the increase of imports from Ukraine is determined by help in the war context), Canada, United States of America, United Kingdom and Moldova. As regards the exports, we remember as favourite destinations Algeria, United Kingdom, Switzerland along with other non-UE countries from Europe or Middle East as the most common destinations [19].

The European Union continues to be one of the world's largest agro-food players [20]. In the continuous changing economic and political environment, the EU agriculture and food delivery system must demonstrate its resilience and its capacity to keep productivity and sustainability growing. This desideratum can be achieved by financing the agricultural sector and making it performant.

The last years were impacted by multiple crises, as climate change, COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, which profoundly affected also the European Union's agricultural sector in its path to a more sustainable future. The statistics regarding transitions

of grains demonstrate the resilience of European agriculture, but it is also a warning for new visions and strategies if we want to continue productivity growing, to reduce GHG emissions intensity, and to foster cross-sectional collaboration on the agro-food chain.

The slower pace paved the way for new policies as design and especially at the level of implementation. The actual CAP, which represents about one-third of the EU budget, is recently rephrased by a new Vision for Agriculture and Food, which is composed of several priority areas with simplification of EU rules, research, innovation and digitalisation as cross-cutting drivers [21]. The next years will demonstrate if the actions and policies were suitable for the needs and the context, or they only reduced the capacity of performance and resilience of the European agricultural sector. Better results can be achieved through better targeted payments of the farmers by strengthening the link between budget allocation and performance, environmental sustainability or innovation. For this, it is important to support specific measures for different activities and to have the mechanism to delimit the goals and potential for each business, practice or initiative in agriculture.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Political and economic instability, business uncertainties and environmental changes have a huge impact on farming, justifying the need for proper and updated reforms and strategies all the time. More than any other sector, agriculture depends on weather and climate (in the last years, the impact has been devastating) and despite the importance of food production and the inevitable gap between consumer demand and farmers being able to supply, farmers' income is around 40% lower compared to non-agricultural income [22]. Adding to all these aspects, farmers should be cost-effective by protecting the environment and maintaining the healthy soils and biodiversity.

Agricultural policies can in theory produce both positive and negative economic impacts [23]: it can help farmers to be more productive and to provide enough healthy and affordable agricultural products or can negatively affects farmers' choice of what and how to produce, determining in the end an increase in the prices and a bad management of how the public funds are allocated.

As it was since its creation, the next European agricultural vision will continue to invest to sustain the development of this sector, which represents a fundamental part of the European context. Researchers have underlined the relevance of initiatives, plans, visions and strategies, as important vehicles in increasing the European agricultural potential, but how effective are this in the current context (war at the frontiers, climate changes, agreements of third parties) we will face in the next years.

Building on this evidence, that the European Commission is constantly updating plans on agriculture, this analysis reveals the suggestion for European policymakers to involve farmers in their decision-making processes because they are firstly influenced by the plans and by the real conditions on the ground. Also, a cross-sectional approach between policymakers, practitioners and academics could determine a more efficient strategy for development in the agricultural sector.

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