

# CULTIVATING A SHARED HOME

**A RELATIONAL VISION  
FOR AGRICULTURE IN EUROPE**

**Dr Matt Williams**



ECPP FOUNDATION

## Cultivating A Shared Home A Relational Vision for Agriculture in Europe

By Dr Matt Williams

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## Introduction

*Farmers arrived in Brussels on the morning of Monday 26 February 2024. Source: Belga / Benoit Doppagne (<https://www.brusselstimes.com/1340111/the-future-is-not-europe-building-with-brussels-famous-mural-demolished-tbtb>, accessed 24.4.25)*

This report sets out a relational vision for agriculture in Europe.<sup>1</sup> **Section 1** begins with a discussion of agriculture in the EU in light of the unprecedented farmer protests of 2024. Is European agriculture in crisis? If so, how has EU policy been developed to address (or aggravate) the challenges facing farming? **Section 2** develops our understanding of farming in Europe and the role of EU policy through looking at three case studies, which will include hearing the voices of farmers on the ground. The three countries selected are Romania, Northern Ireland and the Netherlands (a rationale is given for this selection at the start of the section). **Section 3** carries out a relational analysis of EU agriculture, taking into account the general picture of section 1 and the specific stories told in section 2. It identifies the key areas vulnerable

to crisis and proposes a relational vision in response which prioritises the unique role that agriculture has in society to retain the environmental, economic, cultural, social and spiritual relationships at the heart of human wellbeing and dignity. Examples of more relational approaches from the Netherlands are discussed before some concluding words on a way forward.

**A relational vision for agriculture gives farming a role at the heart of society. Those who farm are not only producing food or managing land but are cultivating a shared home, local ecosystems in which people, animals and plants flourish. This is achieved through agricultural practice that is ecologically integrated and agricultural business that is well connected to local communities.**

<sup>1</sup> Part of the 'Future of the EU' stream, this report takes a topic of structural importance and analyses it relationally in dialogue with current EU policy. It is written in exploratory mode and not an academic text; references are offered to readers for further investigation of a particular issue rather than as analysed evidence for each claim.



Farmer protests in Brussels later on the same day, (26.2.24). Source: Dave Keating on X (<https://www.farmersjournal.ie/news/news-farmers-dump-slurry-and-tyres-at-brussels-farmer-protest-807112>, accessed 24.4.25)

# Section 1: Agriculture in the EU: Challenges and Policies

## 1A: European Agriculture in Crisis?

### 1. *The 2024 farmer protests*

The two photos above depict a scene that many people would have said was impossible. In late February 2024, thousands of people and hundreds of farm vehicles flocked to the administrative centre of the European Union (EU) to protest. These protests were part of a larger wave of discontent that had been sweeping the continent since the end of 2023.<sup>2</sup> But their ferocity on Monday 26<sup>th</sup> (which resulted in injury to law enforcement officers) raised the stakes to a new level.<sup>3</sup> Such scenes struck at the heart of the positive and united message that the EU had been reinforcing in light of triple shock caused by Brexit, Covid and the war in Ukraine. What the political leadership meant by the bold statement “The Future is Europe” was profoundly at odds with the existential crisis that significant sections of the agricultural community were voicing. Perhaps symbolically, the block of flats displaying that bold statement was torn down at the end of 2024. A new vision for the future is being demanded, one that all stakeholders – including farmers – can get behind.

<sup>2</sup> An overview can be found at <https://www.politico.eu/article/farmer-protest-europe-map-france-siege-paris-germany-poland/>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.brusselstimes.com/940714/farmers-protest-hundreds-of-tractors-rolling-in-to-brussels-closing-roads-tunnels-and-stations-tbtb>, accessed 1.12.25

Those farmers and their supporters who arrived in Brussels on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February were not just from Belgium but came from as far afield as Spain, Italy and Portugal. Their slogans – as well as their non-verbal actions such as spraying officers with liquid manure and setting fire to mounds of tyres – targeted the EU.<sup>4</sup> Special areas of frustration included its Green Deal policies and the low food prices for which it was seen to be responsible partly due to its international trade deals. Elsewhere in the country (e.g. Antwerp and Ghent), protesting disrupted routes logistically strategic to EU trade, but some of action undertaken in other countries between late 2023 and mid-2024 was also geared more directly against more nation-specific concerns as well as European ones.<sup>5</sup>

German farmers had been protesting since December 2023 (especially in Berlin) against proposals to scrap tax breaks for agricultural diesel and vehicles,<sup>6</sup> a move which arose from an apparently unrelated internal legal dispute around German government budget reallocations.<sup>7</sup> In France, similar matters of dispute were raised (including subsidies for agricultural diesel),<sup>8</sup> whilst in Poland and Romania, there was a special focus on the impact of trade with Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Other than Greece, most other protests were in Western Europe and directed at EU-level issues (including Spain, Italy and Ireland),<sup>10</sup> but the Netherlands is the most significant. Dutch farmers had been at loggerheads with the authorities since 2019 and were instrumental in the regime change that bought Mark Rutte’s 14-yr premiership to an end. In fact, the roots of the conflict go back much further and spread far wider than technical questions of nitrogen pollution to bigger social issues.

We will take a closer look at the Netherlands later in this report. It is a particularly informative case and demonstrates the reality that the conflict surrounding agriculture cannot be understood on a purely superficial level in isolation from the

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/feb/26/farmers-protests-brussels-eu-agriculture-leaders-riot-police>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/959219/wont-let-this-happen-again-farmers-to-protest-again-this-week>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.topagrar.com/management-und-politik/news/landwirte-protestieren-gegen-agrardiesel-aus-erste-traktoren-in-berlin-13554804.html>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>7</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/germany-covid-climate-funding-court-a749380aa10a6b-7c5e48af5234252592>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/29/french-farmers-drive-tractors-towards-paris-in-blockade-threat>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/farmers-protests-in-poland-turn-violent-and-get-more-political/a-68460882> and <https://www.politico.eu/article/romania-farmers-truckers-protests-ukraine-grain-government-fail/>, both accessed 1.12.25

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2024/2/21/photos-greek-farmers-drive-tractors-to-parliament-to-demand-financial-help> and, on Irish protests, <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/europe/2024/02/01/irish-farmers-protest-in-solidarity-with-european-counterparts/>, both accessed 1.12.25

broader stories of nations. Alan Matthews, a prominent expert on EU agricultural policy and consultant for the EC, sees such protests as common throughout history.<sup>11</sup> As with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Corn Laws campaign (UK) and Granger movement (USA), wider socio-political developments are always contributing factors.<sup>12</sup>

As well as the nation-specific matters of dispute, there were three particular areas of concern that can be distilled as the driving forces on the protestors' agenda. These were common factors in protests across the continent, even if raised with different emphases depending on different national and regional circumstances. These were a) overly stringent environmental regulations, b) low prices (and low incomes as a result) and c) trade agreements with non-EU countries (especially Ukraine and the Mercosur block) that created unfavourable market conditions for EU farmers. More generally there was a sense that farmers were undervalued and that their very livelihoods were being threatened - hence the most prominent slogan, "No Farmers, No Food!".

Despite farmers' complaints that they are unseen by the political establishment, the protests have by no means gone unnoticed. Indeed, Matthews notes in a separate article that 'European authorities and national governments have hastily put together a series of responses to what the Commission has described as "a crisis situation in EU agriculture"'.<sup>13</sup> Generally speaking, the EU leadership has tried to appease farmers and each of the three main areas of protest have been addressed, often quite quietly in the background. Several controversial environmental policies have been dropped or diluted, work is being carried out to improve farmers' position in the supply chain and restrictions on Ukrainian imports have been tightened.<sup>14</sup> More publicly, Ursula von der Leyen established a 'strategic dialogue' with all agricultural stakeholders in order to move forward. More will be said about these developments as we address EU policy below.

Similar concessions have happened in various nations. Indeed, several weeks before the late February protests in Brussels, European governments had already pledged around €400 million to appease farmers, one of the first being French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal with an offer of €140 million.<sup>15</sup> On top of these responses,

11 See his blog at <https://capreform.eu/author/alan-matthews/>, accessed 1.12.25.

12 Matthews, A. (2024), 'Farmer Protests and Income Developments in the EU'. *The Political Quarterly* 95/2, 344

13 Matthews, A. (2024), 'Farmer Protests and the 2024 European Parliament Elections'. *Intereconomics* 59/2, 83

14 Key concessions are detailed Matthews's aforementioned article as well as various media articles, e.g. <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-commission-unveils-concessions-for-farmers-after-protests/a-68566472>, accessed 1.12.25.

15 <https://time.com/6632372/farmer-protests-europe-france-germany-brussels/>, accessed 1.12.25



there has been a marked increase in the political power of parties - predominantly on the right - who are aligned with farmers and their interests, whether through traditional links or more recently established political arrangements.

Despite many organisations calling off protests and a certain amount of appeasement in evidence in the period since early 2024, fundamental tensions seem to remain. There have been continued protests, such as the Polish farmers who have set up roadblocks at the Ukrainian border.<sup>16</sup> They are no longer willing to accept the economic consequences of allowing agricultural produce from Ukraine (especially grain) exceptional access to EU markets. However, the real issues go deeper than finances or farming; evidence of smuggling and corruption raise the spectre of distrust between neighbours that even connects to wartime atrocities.<sup>17</sup> What this suggests is that the roots of the protests might not have been addressed by EU responses, which makes a deeper analysis of the real issues at stake vital. Before looking at EU policy in more detail, we will look at the presenting issues in a broader context than media reports tend to engage with.

## 2. *Environment: regulations and geographical conditions*

The first main issue raised by protestors concerned environmental regulations. On the pretext that the farming sector accounts for over 10% of EU greenhouse gas emissions, changes in agriculture were seen by authorities to play a big role in achieving climate neutrality (or net-zero) by 2050. This was the flagship aim of the European Green Deal (EGD) championed by in 2019 by then incoming president Ursula von der Leyen. Measures being proposed included carbon tax, pesticide bans, nitrogen emission curbs and restrictions on water and land usage, especially to protect wetland and peatland (proposed 4% of arable land to remove from production and reduce fertilizer use by 20%).

These measures and others were codified within Statutory Management Requirements and Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC) standards that, from the start of 2023, became part of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) regulations. Because extant levels of subsidy receipt depended on meeting these demands, the administrative and logistical burdens were effectively increased without

16 <https://www.visahq.com/news/2025-10-22/pl/farmers-renewed-blockades-leave-1300-trucks-stranded-on-the-polish-ukrainian-border/>, accessed 1.12.25

17 <https://www.politico.eu/article/angry-farmers-push-poland-away-ukraine-war-russia-donald-tusk-rafal-trzaskowski-presidential-election/>, accessed 1.12.25

compensation. From this perspective, farmers' frustrations are understandable. But it leaves open the question of the justification for such environmental regulations in the first place. Is there a genuinely ecological component to the challenged faced European agriculture that is at risk of being obscured by political and economic considerations?

## Geographical conditions in Europe

To answer this question we must begin by getting a clear sense of the land itself, which is exceptionally rich from an agricultural point of view. Europe's varied topography includes four main physical regions that run from north to south: Western Uplands, North European Plain, Central Uplands, and Alpine Mountains. Apart from the last of these four, each of these regions contain good farmland. In fact, those nations with a sizeable portion of alpine territory (such as France and Austria) also have large swathes of arable land and even the more remote European regions are accessible enough to facilitate transport between them. The continent as a whole is also 'characterized by mostly fertile soils... the capacity of soils to sustain food production is very high'.<sup>18</sup> Although cool temperatures and limited sunlight shorten the vegetation period in the north and water supplies are not always plentiful in the south, the moderate climate is generally amenable to productive growing seasons.

What Europe has, therefore, should lead to highly productive farming. However, it is equally true that the advantages of this physical geography are being jeopardised by human activity. Whilst a certain proportion of this activity is directly connected to the agricultural sector, much of it is not. The continent's hugely rich store of natural resources is being compromised – both in quality and quantity – far quicker than it is being renewed. Some of the changes in the climate (for which agriculture also has only limited responsibility) compound the degradation of resources, making conditions for farming doubly challenging.

There are four interdependent elements upon which agriculture depends: soil, water, air and sunlight. These are all impacted to a large extent by factors over which agricultural practice has no control. In particular, the climate – both in its natural and humanly caused variations – and human developmental activity that

18 S. Thiele-Bruhn, "Agricultural Soils in Europe – Special Demands Related to Intensive Agriculture in an Industrialized Environment", *Encyclopaedia of Life Support Systems Volume 2* (UNESCO-EOLSS, 2002–2023), 1

affects these resource stores. Climate is becoming hotter and drier in Southern Europe and wetter in the north.<sup>19</sup>

Some activities have an effect less directly than others, but any mining or quarrying, deforestation, ground clearing, building, burning and (mainly as a result of those activities) discharging has environmental impact. All these things are of course necessary for human life to continue, but the way they are practiced in Europe (and much of the world) today means that the amount and quality of soil, water and air are reduced, and the amount of sunlight further increases, with added impact on the other three elements.

## Specific impacts of farming in Europe

Europe as a continent is, as we have indicated, rich agricultural resources; in fact, over half of its land is able to be farmed, a much higher proportion than any other continent. The 27 out of 44 nations that make up the EU comprise 'a wide range of farming systems over a wide range of agroecological conditions from South to North, East to West, and across elevation gradients'.<sup>20</sup> There are both natural and social factors that are highly advantageous for farming in the EU.<sup>21</sup>

Arable farming – including fruit and vegetables – depends directly on the right amount of sunlight, the right composition of soil (the desired balance depending on the crop being sown), the right amount and quality of water and the right combination of elements in air. Achieving and maintaining this balance should not, in principle, be impossible since none of the resources needed for this process are necessarily limited, i.e. they are self-generating as part of a naturally occurring cycle. However, when agriculture is practiced intensively, this cyclical process is disturbed. Chemical fertilisers and pesticides improve short-term yields but reduce the health of soil and add toxicity to water and air. Loss of good soil is accelerating with urban growth as well as certain agricultural practices.<sup>22</sup>

Developments in land cultivation – which includes the abandonment of fallow systems

19 The European Environment Agency places these within a bigger picture of climate change; see <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/in-depth/climate-change-impacts-risks-and-adaptation?activeTab=07e50b68-8bf2-4641-ba6b-eda1afd544be>, accessed 1.12.25

20 European Academies Science Advisory Council (EASAC), *Regenerative agriculture in Europe* (Halle: German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina, 2022), 4

21 'Farming' here refers to land-based food and crop production activity, including arable, horticultural and livestock farming but excluding forestry and fishing. Statistical information and the bodies responsible for dealing with this area often include more than this within 'agriculture'. This will be acknowledged where it is the case.

22 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Agri-environmental\\_indicator\\_-\\_soil\\_erosion](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Agri-environmental_indicator_-_soil_erosion), accessed 1.12.25



– turns over the soil quickly and repeatedly but does not allow it time to regenerate. On top of these direct impacts, preparing the land involves deforestation, which has a host of ecological impacts, even when reforestation is also occurring. As well as the process of cultivation itself, technological processes of manufacturing and transporting the inputs needed for farming use up countless kilowatts of energy and involve a disproportionate amount of carbon combustion.

What can be said about arable farming also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, for livestock farming. Animals can be part of a regenerative cycle with the right quantity and distribution, but they tend to be kept in concentrated groups and thus require excessive resources for food, transport (often long-distanced) and processing of faecal matter, only some of which can be used for manure. Large numbers of ruminants raise the atmospheric proportion of methane and the character of local insects and micro-organism life can change uncontrollably with any concentrated population of livestock. Impacts from both main types of farming are multiplied several times over when we take processing and distribution into account, with increased intensification and specialisation coming with longer and more complex supply chains.

So we can conclude that, insofar as the EU has a key role to play in promoting farming across its member states, environmental regulations are a necessity. In fact, the direction of travel (for which the EU is primarily responsible, as we shall see) has been towards an industrialised intensification whose reversal requires a much altered approach. There is clear justification to attend to the main areas of focus in the controversial regulations – carbon emissions, chemical pesticide use, and nitrogen emissions, which harm air, soil and water quality when used in high quantities. There is also a need to maintain the ecosystem services of certain land types (such as peatland and wetland) with dedicated protection measures. The question, however, is the extent to which farmers should be forced to care for these natural resources and, if so, how they can be appropriately remunerated for doing so.

### 3. *Economy: Trade, prices and incomes*

It is important to preface what we say here by reaffirming the ways in which European agriculture can be considered as economically successful. Combining the aforementioned riches in natural resources with societal progress (technologically and politically), the EU's has put itself in the position of the largest global food exporter.<sup>23</sup> This hegemony has drawn negative attention from the current US administration, which is actively seeking to usurp the EU's position and to reverse

<sup>23</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/media/news/eu-agri-food-exports-reach-record-levels-eu2354-billion-2024-2025-04-08\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/media/news/eu-agri-food-exports-reach-record-levels-eu2354-billion-2024-2025-04-08_en), accessed 1.12.25

its own trade deficit in agri-business.<sup>24</sup> Whatever the precise reasons for the EU's success in this area, and however long it can maintain its advantage over the USA, nobody (including farmers) is branding the CAP as a total economic failure. Yet its achievements around food sovereignty and production as well as high socio-environmental standards have not prevented farmers from protesting about explicitly economic issues that they perceive as being at crisis point, namely foreign trade and low prices.

## Trade with non-EU countries

Taking the relatively simpler of the two issues first, farmers have expressed particular anger at trade agreements made by the EU. Two agreements that have been particularly problematic have been with Ukraine and the Latin American Mercosur bloc (of which Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia are the current full members). As has already been mentioned in relation to the Polish farmer protests, sentiment towards Ukraine has changed over time. The initial desire to stand with a neighbouring nation against Russia, perceived as a common enemy, initially came with no price tag but financial considerations are making it increasingly problematic.

With the case of the Mercosur agreement – which was only finalised in December 2024 – the matter was more plainly economic from the beginning and include the standard objections in such situations.<sup>25</sup> Cheaper produce from elsewhere not only drives down local prices but can constitute unfair competition. This is because different standards (particularly around environment and animal welfare) are used, nearly always less stringent than the notoriously exacting EU versions. Such concerns are understandable, but it is also true that other, more legitimate, competitive advantages may be influencing lower prices.

## Low prices and low farm incomes in Europe

The issue of low prices and low farm incomes is more difficult to disentangle, despite the clarity of the issue as raised by farmers.<sup>26</sup> Several have drawn attention to the fact that prices and farm incomes were in early 2024 (and still are) higher than ever, despite Covid and a later fall in prices after 2022. Matthews points out we can go further:

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.americafirstpolicy.com/issues/driving-rural-prosperity-by-reducing-the-u.s-agricultural-trade-deficit> and <https://www.usimportdata.com/blogs/us-food-exports>, both accessed 1.12.25

<sup>25</sup> For details of the agreement, see [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/mercosur/eu-mercosur-agreement\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/mercosur/eu-mercosur-agreement_en), accessed 1.12.25.

<sup>26</sup> See the Eurostat statistics quoted here: <https://www.politico.eu/article/farmer-protest-europe-map-france-siege-paris-germany-poland/>, accessed 1.12.25.

In fact, the evidence suggests that farmers have made steady gains in their income from agriculture since 2005 and agricultural income levels in the EU have been at their highest in the past three years, despite higher input costs.<sup>27</sup>

So does this mean that the complaint about prices and incomes was a misperception or even deliberately disingenuous? Not necessarily. For one thing, prices have not always risen in comparison with farm inputs or cost of living in general. Moreover, aggregate rises do not mean rises for the majority. Indeed, the rise in incomes results from a fall in the number of farmers and farms. The winners from this consolidation process (the minority with bigger farms, who nevertheless produce the majority of the output) are doing very well, whilst the vast majority of farmers still have relatively small farms and therefore low incomes. This is especially true the further east that one goes in Europe (despite the concentration of protests in the West).

**Table 1: Agricultural income in the EU by economic size class, 2022**

| Economic Size   | Farms represented (no.) | Average farm output (€/farm) | Agricultural income (€/AWU) | Share of farms (%) | Share of total output (%) |
|-----------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 2 000–8 000     | 517666                  | 9.500                        | 3,484                       | 20%                | 1.5%                      |
| 8 000–25 000    | 866339                  | 22.485                       | 10,881                      | 34%                | 6%                        |
| 25 000–50 000   | 377410                  | 52.832                       | 20,551                      | 15%                | 6%                        |
| 50 000–100 000  | 322292                  | 102.156                      | 32,414                      | 12%                | 10%                       |
| 100 000–500 000 | 412654                  | 308.319                      | 57,420                      | 16%                | 38%                       |
| >500 000        | 82011                   | 1.572.961                    | 74,959                      | 3%                 | 39%                       |
| Total           | 2578372                 | 2.068.253                    | 199,689                     |                    |                           |

This table shows that most farms (i.e. anything under €100k output) are not producing a decent return on labour. On a purely economic basis, there is an inexorability to the process of consolidation and the income for smaller farmers has no prospect of rising.

<sup>27</sup> Matthews, A. (2024), 'Farmer Protests and Income Developments in the EU'. The Political Quarterly 95/2, 344

Matthews adds the important overall observation that 'agricultural incomes have traditionally lagged behind non-farm incomes in developing economies'.<sup>28</sup> Those employed in the farming sector are less 'productive' (in the sense of GDP contribution) than others in the economy, with lower average incomes reflecting this (though this gap is closing).<sup>29</sup> Despite the huge amount of European land (38% of its 413 million hectares) and still considerable amount of labour occupied by farming, it contributes only about 1.4% of EU GDP.<sup>30</sup>

Economically speaking, therefore, the success of EU agri-business in terms of exports should not mask the fact that agriculture is incredibly unproductive at the primary level, despite the massive financial potentiality of food which is realised as soon as it leaves the farm. Farm subsidies are the clearest sign of this, and they are not new. They have aided farmers in Europe to recover from the Second World War. EU support helps make farming and food production far more lucrative than it is in most of the world.<sup>31</sup> In the USA, they have been in place since the Great Depression of the 1930s and reached their peak under the first Trump administration in the bailout scheme; this tactic could be repeated, even though the current agriculture secretary formerly wanted to abolish subsidies altogether.<sup>32</sup>

One response would simply be to accept that one must 'get big, or get out' and view objections from the agriculture sector as being akin to an alarm ringing on a sinking ship.

This ongoing process of structural adjustment, however necessary and inevitable, causes frustration, resentment and anger among those involved and is no doubt a deeper factor behind the recent protests.<sup>33</sup>

Accepting the demise of large numbers of farmers on the basis of economic inevitability implies that their value is only really economic anyway. But economic

<sup>28</sup> Matthews, A. (2024), 'Farmer Protests and Income Developments in the EU'. The Political Quarterly 95/2, 345

<sup>29</sup> Matthews, A. (2024), 'Farmer Protests and Income Developments in the EU'. The Political Quarterly 95/2, 346, from which the table below is also taken.

<sup>30</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Performance\\_of\\_the\\_agricultural\\_sector](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Performance_of_the_agricultural_sector), accessed 1.12.25

<sup>31</sup> For the 2021-2027 period, €387 billion in EU funding is allocated to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); see [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/cap-2023-27\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/cap-2023-27_en), accessed 1.12.25.

<sup>32</sup> <https://usafacts.org/articles/federal-farm-subsidies-what-data-says/> and <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/farmers-put-plans-investments-hold-under-trump-usda-spending-freeze-2025-03-10/> and <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trumps-usda-secretary-pick-led-group-opposed-ethanol-farm-subsidies-2025-01-22/>, all accessed 1.12.25

<sup>33</sup> Matthews, A. (2024), 'Farmer Protests and the 2024 European Parliament Elections'. Inter-economics 59/2, 84.

processes are not autonomous and neither is economic value; valuation takes place in conjunction with a wider set of societal developments. Low prices *communicate* low value, but they are not *equivalent* to low value. Hence a key element of the farmer protests went beyond finances themselves to 'the sense that society no longer values the work of farmers in the same way as in the past'.<sup>34</sup> One essential aspect of the farmer protests that needs further examination, therefore, is the question of value.

#### 4. *Beyond environment and economy: the value of farming*

A wealth of natural resources such as Europe has correlated with the development of farming, whose value in turn is demonstrated by the huge amount of effort put into technical advancement.<sup>35</sup> Revolutions happened within the agrarian systems of the continent that enabled progression from the initial slash-and-burn or pastoral methods to rainfed cereal cultivation and animal herding that no longer involved fallowing and could be enhanced by technological innovation. The latter has moved from animal-powered cultivation techniques to mechanised and increasingly electronically powered methods that are still only really common in the West.

Together with this is the social capacity that has been built up through communities that have cultivated traditions of farming over centuries. As a result, many areas produce food and drink that have come to be synonymous with certain places and actually require regulative protection to maintain their unique status.<sup>36</sup> Local markets, which have existed for centuries, have become increasingly interconnected through the improved communication networks across Europe as well as the political integration, and relative peace, that the European Union has achieved. Advanced import and export mechanisms – both within the EU and with countries outside it – have incentivised specialisation without the food supply becoming imbalanced.

### **Declining role of farming in society**

Overall the continent has seen high levels of social and political development, as well as being economically strong in global terms, with agriculture being a key part of it. However, as food security and local food culture became assumed rather than aimed for, market requirements gradually played more of a determining role in the shape of farming, which has then had to be rebalanced by a renewed focus on natural resources.

<sup>34</sup> Matthews, A. (2024), 'Farmer Protests and Income Developments in the EU'. The Political Quarterly 95/2, 344

<sup>35</sup> This paragraph draws on the introduction to Marcel Mazoyer and Laurence Roudart, A History of World Agriculture: From the Neolithic Age to the Current Crisis (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/farming/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes/geographical-indications-food-and-drink\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/farming/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes/geographical-indications-food-and-drink_en), accessed 1.12.25

Since World War II, European agriculture has changed significantly. To remain economically profitable, farmers have continuously increased the farms' size, efficiency and external inputs (e.g., pesticides), while minimising the labour use per ha... Growing concerns regarding nature conservation and the environment, as well as increasing demands from areas like housing and recreation, have put pressure on the sector... In response, farmers started agricultural diversification in several European rural areas.<sup>37</sup>

What these developments show is that the value of agriculture as an integrated aspect of development in the broadest sense (including culture and society) has been eclipsed by its economic and then its (negative) environmental value. Today, profound systemic changes are afoot that push food production (core to the value of farming) further down the set of priorities.

Rural Europe is facing processes of fundamental social change' which 'involves a shift from a rural, agriculture-and manufacturing-based economy towards a more service centred economy... European countrysides are evolving from being "landscapes of production" to "landscapes of consumption".<sup>38</sup>

What this means is that the value of farming is determined in relation to a set of priorities in which food production (and the cultural goods that come with it) no longer figures. There is no longer a coherent way to value the unique role of agriculture within a social whole, and the economic weakness of the sector is both a cause and effect of the devaluation.

More concretely, the loss of a situation where farmers were at the heart of local food culture feeds into unsustainable dietary patterns. High agricultural productivity initially led to a quantitatively better diet for Europeans, and the diversity of diet has dramatically increased since the Second World War. However, the availability of non-indigenous foods has encouraged the over-consumption of high fat, high sugar and highly processed foods, which in turn perpetuates a market geared to specialisation of production in each region and, concomitantly, a reliance on imports and exports. There is now no need for local areas to be producing a balanced and healthy diet for their inhabitants. This pattern of consumption not only exacerbates the environmental impacts but also involves a lot of food waste and malnutrition (including dietary obesity). In addition, it decreases people's connection to

<sup>37</sup> Hassink, J., et al. (2020), 'The Care Farming Sector in The Netherlands: A Reflection on Its Developments and Promising Innovations' Sustainability, 1-2

<sup>38</sup> Dessein, J., Bock, B. and de Krom, M. (2013), 'Investigating the limits of multifunctional agriculture as the dominant frame for Green Care in agriculture in Flanders and the Netherlands'. Journal of rural studies 32, 50-59

agriculture in their own geographical areas and consequently allows the majority of food traditions (i.e. those that do not yield high value specialised produce) to gradually die. In short, the food system is unsustainable in its health impacts, supply chain demands, and suffocation of local farming.

## Shrinking agricultural workforce

Unsurprisingly, in light of the observations above, farming workforces are declining (in employment and in training).<sup>39</sup> Although there are some 10 million farms in the EU, there are only 22 million regular farm workers (this number is doubled if we take into account the food sector more broadly).<sup>40</sup> Farms are becoming bigger and more mechanised (especially with various developments in AI), which does replace a certain amount of labour and increases access to knowledge needed for efficient operations (at least that which is based on quantitatively measured data collection). But there are large human resources gaps in agriculture and those who remain in the sector are likely to have less understanding of the details of farming practice the more that technology is given a leading role in the process. This will inevitably have negative impact on distinctive local products that depend on living traditions of cultivation in a place.

Whether as cause or result of the decrease in farm workers (it is almost certainly a combination of both), rural areas face depopulation and urban centres – together with higher paid, less manually involved jobs – are more attractive to young people in particular. Even management-level agricultural work is increasingly stressful with a large administrative burden, relatively low pay, and little social or political power to push for a change in conditions or a rise in the price of farm produce. Between the physical health and safety risks and the high levels of poor mental health in farming, it is reasonable that the sector is not particularly attractive, but this adds to the general devaluing of farming.<sup>41</sup>

### 5. *Beyond European agriculture: a wider crisis?*

We need to return to join this consideration of value back to the original set of economic and environmental factors to complete a picture of agriculture in the EU. Even without the specific shocks caused by geopolitical developments (such as the war in Ukraine and now the tariff strategy of US President Donald Trump), farmers are in a tough position. Journalists Hanne Cokelaere and Bartosz Brzeziński, writing

<sup>39</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Farmers\\_and\\_the\\_agricultural\\_labour\\_force\\_-\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Farmers_and_the_agricultural_labour_force_-_statistics), accessed 1.12.25

<sup>40</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy_en), accessed 1.12.25

<sup>41</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/767154/EPRS\\_ATA\(2024\)767154\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/767154/EPRS_ATA(2024)767154_EN.pdf), accessed 1.12.25

for Politico, express the situation well:<sup>42</sup>

Farmers are being burdened by debt, squeezed by powerful retailers and agrochemical companies, battered by extreme weather, and undercut by cheap foreign imports, for years now — all while relying on a subsidy system that favours the big players

The mention of subsidies brings in the question of how EU policy plays into this situation. But before looking further in that direction, we need to recognise that this is bigger than European agriculture. Firstly, the challenges faced by farmers are not unique to the EU. Several years after Brexit, parallel problems are arising in the UK. Especially in England and Wales, farmers are sensing an existential threat from the need to hit environmental targets, unfavourable income tax rules and an end to sustainable farming incentives.<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, many challenges faced by European agriculture are universal and amount to what some experts identify as a global crisis in farming.<sup>44</sup> Two further issues, global in scope, can also be mentioned here. There is an increasing trend to decouple food production from agriculture towards lab-grown food, especially as the race for technological supremacy in the areas of AI and space exploration gain pace.<sup>45</sup> More immediately relevant is the global trend towards urbanisation. Big cities and connections between cities are central in the world economy. Whatever the merits of (or agendas behind) the “15-minute city” idea, such visions of urban utopia can hardly include farms in the list of essential services in each residential zone.<sup>46</sup>

What role does EU policy have in relation to the long-term, multi-faceted crisis in European agriculture, with its complex set of precipitating factors? That is the question to which we now turn, and which first requires an overview of the relevant policy itself.

## 1B. EU Agricultural Policy

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has become synonymous with the agricultural policy of the EU and contains what is most directly applicable to farmers. CAP does

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/farmer-protest-europe-map-france-siege-paris-germany-poland/>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gpv0qx9wwo>, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/budget-2024-inheritance-tax-and-family-farms/> and <https://defrafarming.blog.gov.uk/2025/03/11/an-update-on-the-sustainable-farming-incentive/>, all accessed 1.12.25

<sup>44</sup> Hence the subtitle of the aforementioned Mozoyer and Roudart text, From the Neolithic Age to the Current Crisis.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp34wzql2xvo>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>46</sup> For an account of the controversy around this idea, see <https://www.politico.eu/article/dont-lock-me-neighborhood-15-minute-city-hysteria-uk-oxford/>, accessed 1.12.25

not encompass the whole of EU agricultural policy and certainly does not work in isolation. It is shaped by the wider strategic priorities of the EU and is intertwined with a number of other policy areas, as we will see. Therefore we start with CAP itself and move onto its wider policy context.

### 1. *CAP through history*

According to the EU website 'the CAP is a partnership between society and agriculture that ensures a stable supply of food, safeguards farmers' income, protects the environment and keeps rural areas vibrant'.<sup>47</sup> It is clear from this statement that this policy encompasses a whole range of areas, from production to consumption to the social and environmental conditions necessary for agriculture. Because of this, we should not be surprised that 'agriculture is the largest single expenditure item in the EU... and is the area in which European integration has advanced the most'.<sup>48</sup> The story of CAP is therefore at the heart of the story of the EU itself and indeed was introduced right at its inception.<sup>49</sup>

Following the Second World War, Europe had a shortage of food and relatively low levels of development in a number of sectors. As part of the economic battle against communism, the USA provided resources in the form of funds and equipment to build up agriculture in the continent. This trajectory towards the goals of maximal productivity and economic viability continued with the establishment of the EU, whose 1957 original treaty introduced the CAP.<sup>50</sup> The policy had three main ways of achieving its goals: income support for farmers, market measures that kept prices sustainable and rural development that kept farming areas viable as places to live and work. Out of these three, the second was the most complex and controversial. Setting prices involved, among other things, harmonising competition laws, subsidising exports, and tempering imports through restrictions and tariffs, requiring constant legal revision.<sup>51</sup> Eventually pressure from GATT (the international trade regulating body that was forerunner of the WTO) led to the so-called MacSharry reforms of 1992 that drastically reduced the price-fixing aspect of CAP.<sup>52</sup>

47 [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy_en), accessed 1.12.25

48 Détang-Dessendre and Guyomard, *Evolving*, 28.

49 The following paragraph draws on the potted history of CAP in Détang-Dessendre and Guyomard, *Evolving*, as well as the EU's own account of the policy's development on its various official pages.

50 See Articles 38 & 39 of the Treaty for the Functioning of the European Union, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:41f89a28-1fc6-4c92-b1c8-03327d1b1ecc.0007.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:41f89a28-1fc6-4c92-b1c8-03327d1b1ecc.0007.02/DOC_1&format=PDF), accessed 1.12.25

51 Joseph McMahon traces the intricacies of this legal development in *EU Agricultural Law and Policy* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

52 The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade became the World Trade Organisation in 1995.

Up to the reforms of 1992, CAP had been relatively stable compared to the period from then until now, where it has undergone a series of significant changes. Agenda 2000, enacted in 1999, further decreased guaranteed prices for farmers and made the income support they received more dependent on environmental criteria and less dependent on production. The 2008 CAP Health Check simplified the policy and made it more flexible for farmers and farms in different situations as well as making it more environmentally oriented. With the 2013 Ciolos reforms, CAP went further in the direction of flexibility, decoupling from production and environmental sustainability. By this stage it had become clear that agriculture policy, though initially geared towards the economics of farming (its production, producers and produce) had to be conceived as part of a wider social and environmental strategy. Therefore, before taking stock of the shape of CAP in its 2023–2027 form (which results from the latest reforms initiated in 2019), we need to have a brief look at how policies in other areas relate to the agricultural sector.

### 2. *Policies connected to CAP*

Although CAP was assigned a specifically economic function, it was part of the wider political aims of the EU. What concerned the six founding nations was to establish and maintain a peaceful union that removed the potential for armed conflict and guarded against totalitarian forces within and without. Agricultural policy has therefore always been bound up with free movement and free trade, two core tenets of this union. At the same time as forming a single market, however, there has been an effort to strengthen those areas (not least the rural ones) that are in danger of falling behind economically and becoming disaffected and politically dangerous to the mainstream.<sup>53</sup> This effort, which became codified as the Cohesion Policy, pledged to focus 'on the poorest and most backward regions' in the face of the arrival of new member states in the 1980s that were economically weaker than those who had joined previously.<sup>54</sup>

The interplay here between various policies is problematic: a single market draws people to where the most profitable work is (nearly always in sectors *other than* agriculture) whilst the cohesion policy tries to discourage people from leaving their home areas by developing them. Further internal tension is apparent from the fact that what is considered as 'rural development' is itself contested and articulated

53 A single market 'ensures free movement of goods, services, capital and persons in a single EU internal market. By removing technical, legal and bureaucratic barriers, the EU also allows citizens to trade and do business freely' ([https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/actions-topic/single-market\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/actions-topic/single-market_en), accessed 1.12.25).

54 [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/policy/what/history\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/what/history_en), accessed 1.12.25

inconsistently in the EU's own policies, especially in relation to environmental conservation goals.<sup>55</sup>

There are other policy areas that have a considerable impact on agriculture, such as research and innovation (which develops the technical side of food production), and policy for land use, including housing (which determines where farms can be in relation to residential areas). Recently, however, a more profound potential impact on farming has appeared on the horizon. This has come through the overarching aims of the EU as reformulated under Ursula von der Leyen's presidency of the European Commission. She is responsible for introducing the European Green Deal (EGD), which places agricultural policy within a broader commitment to sustainable economic development that will make Europe climate neutral by 2050.<sup>56</sup>

The EGD is itself part of a wider 'Green New Deal' phenomenon with various global iterations that can be defined as 'an economic narrative that links human well-being to the well-being of the planetary eco-system'.<sup>57</sup> Though characterised by carbon neutrality, its scope is more than technical ecological measures and involves the pursuit of UN Sustainable Development goals, which are socio-economic, political and cultural as well as environmental. Since they involves a broad range of stakeholders, Green New Deal agendas are set out to be accomplished collaboratively within a (national and international) government-led partnership with the private sector, a collusion that has drawn criticism from both left and right.<sup>58</sup>

Where Europe's own plan, the EGD, has most immediate bearing on EU agricultural policy is in two ambitious strategies that deal with the food system and conservation of nature respectively. The Farm to Fork Strategy introduced in 2020 aimed for food systems that are 'fair, healthy and environmentally friendly' by the sustainable

55 Marco Fama and Alessandra Corrado (2023), 'EU Agricultural and Rural Development Policies Vis-à-Vis the Ecological Crisis'. *Forum for Social Economics*, 1–19.

56 Von der Leyen famously referred to this commitment as 'Europe's "man-on-the-moon" moment' in her December 2019 inaugurating speech, in which she heralded the European Green Deal ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/speech\\_19\\_6749](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/speech_19_6749), accessed 1.12.25)

57 Kyla Tienhaara and Joanna Robinson (eds), Routledge handbook on the Green New Deal (London: Taylor and Francis, 2022), 25

58 Adler and Wargan claim that private interests underlie the EGD, which reflects 'the capacity for its central decision-makers to co-opt democratic demands and repurpose their rhetoric in order to inject fresh legitimacy into an existing, unpopular paradigm' (Tienhaara and Robinson (eds), *Green New Deal*, 509). Benjamin Zycher, writing for the American Enterprise Institute, claims that the Green New Deal's 'real goal is wealth redistribution to favored political interests under the GND social-policy agenda and a dramatic increase in government control of resource allocation more generally' ("The Green New Deal", 1, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/RPT-The-Green-New-Deal-5.5x8.5-FINAL.pdf>, accessed 1.12.25)

production, distribution and consumption of food.<sup>59</sup> The Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (introduced in the same year) aims to 'protect nature and reverse the degradation of ecosystems', combatting the five main drivers of biodiversity loss as set out by the UN-birthed body IBPES.<sup>60</sup>

Such massively cross-cutting agendas cannot but have radical implications for a farming sector that has for decades been built upon the EU's prioritisation of efficient maximal production, an extractive aim that is *prima facie* incompatible with the purportedly universal (i.e. encompassing wider social and environmental goals) benefits of the EGD. With this in mind, we turn now to look at the latest iteration of CAP, which on a formal, structural level is shaped by the EGD along with EU policy as a whole. How this works out in the details is a question that we will be examining as we go.

### 3. CAP 2023-2027: National Strategic Plans

The latest set of major CAP reforms took several years to develop, partly because of delays caused by the Covid pandemic and partly because of the increased involvement of individual member states. These reforms entailed the formal adoption of the CAP reforms by the EU legislature in December 2021 and a planned year-long (though still ongoing) process of developing European Commission approved National Strategic Plans through which CAP would be enacted from 2023–2027.

As we have already seen, the EGD sets the overall direction for all EU policies. Specifically, two of its main strategic plans – the Farm to Fork strategy for food systems and Biodiversity strategy for nature conservation – set goals to whose achievement CAP will contribute.<sup>61</sup> The new CAP pledges to make farming greener, fairer and more competitive, offering a more sustainable future for European farmers (especially those with smaller farms) and giving greater flexibility to individual member states. These overarching aims are to be achieved through focusing the contents of CAP's objectives towards the EGD agenda, decentralising the mode of implementing them (it will be led at national level) and improving the method of measuring them (through a common evaluative framework).

59 [https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy\\_en](https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy_en), 1.12.25

60 These are (1) changes in land and sea use, (2) direct exploitation of organisms, (3) pollution, (4) climate change and (5) invasive alien species ([https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en) and [https://files.ipbes.net/ipbes-web-prod-public-files/inline/files/ipbes\\_global\\_assessment\\_report\\_summary\\_for\\_policymakers.pdf](https://files.ipbes.net/ipbes-web-prod-public-files/inline/files/ipbes_global_assessment_report_summary_for_policymakers.pdf), both accessed 1.12.25)

61 The basic explanation in this paragraph is adapted from the EC's CAP overview at [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/cap-2023-27\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/cap-2023-27_en), accessed 1.12.25

We can divide the ten objectives of the new CAP into three main categories, with one cross-cutting objective that applies to all of these. The first category is objectives for farmers, of which there are three: fair income, better position in the food chain (i.e. higher prices) and generational renewal (encouraging younger farmers). The second category is for farm produce, which is aimed to be produced more competitively and made more healthily (especially in relation to animal products). The third category is for the environment of rural areas, in which there are three objectives: to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, to manage natural resources (especially soil, air and water) and to conserve landscapes and biodiversity.<sup>62</sup> Finally, the tenth objective is to build capacity in research and innovation in order to more effectively develop the agricultural sector as a whole (although it applies more to improvements in farm production than the other two categories). This objective is mainly funded through the EU's key programme for research and innovation, Horizon Europe.<sup>63</sup>

The main instrument for achieving these aims at EU level is the revamped basic payment scheme, now the basic income support for sustainability (BISS). It is still paid to each active farmer by hectare of land (rather than a measure of production) out of the European agricultural guarantee fund (EAGF).<sup>64</sup> Another fund, the European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD), provides the budget for both social and environmental objectives in rural areas. These basic allocations retain the traditional 'three pillar' CAP structure; the EAGF mostly finances the first pillar (income support, up to €270 billion) with a small portion left for the second pillar (market measures, around €20 billion) and the EAFRD finances the third pillar (rural development, the remaining €90 billion). However, the three pillar structure is also somewhat diluted because not all of the ten objectives are identified with one specific pillar and certain funding allocations are tied to multiple objectives. Some of the rural development objectives regarding the environment actually happen through the BISS, which include, for example, stipulations regarding farmers' participation in certain eco-schemes. Indeed, '40% of total CAP expenditure will be dedicated to climate action' across various objectives.<sup>65</sup> This aim was enacted in the January 2023 CAP regulation changes that were a key driver for the protests.

62 To a greater or lesser extent, these environmental objectives go beyond dealing with rural ecosystems and have a bearing on the environment of Europe and beyond.

63 [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en), accessed 1.12.25

64 [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/income-support/biss\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/income-support/biss_en) and [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/financing-cap/cap-funds\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/financing-cap/cap-funds_en) (both accessed 1.12.25)

65 This is explicitly stated in the aforementioned page dedicated to CAP financing ([https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/financing-cap/cap-funds\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/financing-cap/cap-funds_en), accessed 1.12.25)

The developments outlined above starkly illustrate how far EU agricultural policy seems to have shifted in its orientation and puts the farmer protests in clearer context. From its initial focus on economic development and maximal production of farmers, CAP then assumed (rather than aimed for) a level of food security and prosperity. An assumption of economic stability – which turned out to be naïve at the very least – provided the basis for a shift away from productivity towards improving the environment, or at least reducing environmental damage. Although the EGD, and other Green New Deal proponents globally, insist that it is possible to achieve both economic and environmental goals simultaneously, the response of the agriculture sector suggests otherwise. Or, to be more exact, farmers have voiced opposition to the specific mechanisms that the EU has chosen to achieve its economic and environmental goals. We now turn to look in detail at the response to this opposition, which brings us to the current state of play in EU agricultural policy.

#### 4. *The state of play in 2025: strategic dialogue and vision*

We have already noted that the farmer protests drew a very public reaction from EU leadership. Most visible within this reaction was Ursula von der Leyen's January 2024 launch of a 'strategic dialogue'. Its aim was 'to shape a shared vision for EU farming' with the involvement of all the 'key stakeholders from across the whole agri-food chain'.<sup>66</sup> A 56-page report was produced in September 2024 – working according to a deliberately compressed timeframe – that emphasised predictable themes for the agriculture sector: collaboration, sustainability, resilience, attractiveness and access to knowledge and innovation. But its precise contents are relatively less important than two developments to which the strategic dialogue gave rise.

The first is the establishment in January 2025 of the European Board for Agriculture and Food (EBAF), an expert group chaired by the Commissioner for Agriculture and Food. This board is made up of the same basic membership as constituted the strategic dialogue and has the purported function of maintaining longer-term engagement between key stakeholders and EU leadership so as to avoid repeated conflict.<sup>67</sup> The second main outcome of the strategic dialogue is a new roadmap for food and agriculture, launched in February 2025 with the communication "A Vision for Agriculture and Food Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations".<sup>68</sup> It is a forward-looking (it sets its sights on a roadmap to 2040) and potentially policy-shaping document, as we look towards the

66 [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/overview-vision-agriculture-food/main-initiatives-strategic-dialogue-future-eu-agriculture\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/overview-vision-agriculture-food/main-initiatives-strategic-dialogue-future-eu-agriculture_en), accessed 1.12.25

67 EBAF is not a permanent body and is set to expire at the end of 2029, though is subject to renewal. See <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/core/api/front/expertGroupAdditionalInfo/53411/download>, accessed 1.12.25

68 [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/overview-vision-agriculture-food/vision-agriculture-and-food\\_en#documents](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/overview-vision-agriculture-food/vision-agriculture-and-food_en#documents), accessed 1.12.25

EC's next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). As such, the contents of the Vision itself are politically more significant than the strategic dialogue report, which deals with similar themes at twice the length (though with some differences, as we will see).<sup>69</sup> It is therefore worth taking a closer look at the text.

## Vision for agriculture and food

Farming and food are core to the European way of life. Rooted in rich traditions, the ways we produce and enjoy food have shaped the communities, cultures, and landscapes that define Europe (p.2).

So begins the Vision, on a note that is particularly interesting considering the deeper issues that we have highlighted in relation to the farmer protests. Equating economic value with social or cultural value leads to farmers' sense of being devalued. But here is a statement that identifies value firmly with non-economic factors. There is an immediate irony in the fact that the four key areas addressed revert to treating farming as an economic sector that must be attractive, competitive, sustainable and fair (with the cross-cutting objectives of simplification and innovation underlying them all).

An **attractive** sector is one with higher incomes and prices. This necessitates a 'fair functioning food chain' that combats 'current imbalances in the food chain where an unfair distribution of revenues, risks and the burden of costs often disproportionately affect primary producers' (p. 5). Aware of the danger of sounding idealistic, extant efforts to ensure farmers do not sell below production costs are pointed out (through Common Market Organisation and Unfair Trading Practices regulations).<sup>70</sup> Moreover, a drive towards transparency in this area is signalled via the formation of the EU agri-food chain Observatory (AFCO).<sup>71</sup> A key aspect of sector attractiveness is that CAP direct payments will continue (accounting for nearly a quarter of farm income) but will be better targeted and simplified, reducing the administration burden on smaller farmers. Opportunities for innovation (bioeconomy and more tech-related ideas), investment and entrepreneurship (especially generational renewal, including land ownership) will be developed.

A **competitive** sector will be resilient in face of global trade challenges, contributing

<sup>69</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0075>, accessed 1.12.25. Quotations and page numbers in the paragraphs that follows are from this (English) version of the document.

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/293655/the-common-organisation-of-the-markets-cmo-regulation> and [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/agri-food-supply-chain/unfair-trading-practices\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/agri-food-supply-chain/unfair-trading-practices_en), both accessed 1.12.25

<sup>71</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/agri-food-supply-chain/afco\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/agri-food-supply-chain/afco_en), accessed 1.12.25

to global food security.

In an interconnected world in which the EU is both the world's largest agri-food exporter and one of the largest importers, the way we produce, consume and trade agricultural products has a major impact on our relations with third countries' (p. 11).

Whilst the EU has high standards and universal aims, some trade partners see these as irritants, making strategy on global position all the more important. Five key areas of focus achieve this:

- Diversified supply chains and input dependencies (e.g. protein supply and fertiliser)
- Fairer global competition through co-operation (including bilaterally) and promoting the EU framework for competitive agri-food (which includes environmental regulations)
- Closer attention to risks and shocks, including climate events, and necessary insurance
- Specific sectoral support for products like wine) and, notably, livestock, which 'is and will remain an essential part of EU agriculture, competitiveness and cohesion' (p. 16).
- Reducing administrative and bureaucratic burdens, including a simplification package of the agricultural legislative framework.

A **sustainable** sector must be 'functioning within planetary boundaries', i.e. climate, biodiversity and pollution. 'Future-proofing' must include being 'climate neutral by 2050' and also 'carefully integrate economic and implementation challenges' on a regional and territorial basis (p. 17). This involves incentivising sustainability; carbon farming, for example, is already attractive to investment, and reporting can be streamlined and harmonised through simplified benchmarking. It also involves increasing capacity to implement nature-friendly solutions, e.g. only ban pesticides when alternatives are sufficiently available. 'Healthy soil is the basis for farming, today and tomorrow' (p. 19). Water quantity/quality and nutrient management are also relevant priorities here.

Finally a **fair** sector upholds the value of food and working conditions, both of which characterise vibrant rural areas. This is primarily about forging or developing connections between people and communities as well as between food and territory, connections that have been lost. 'Re-establishing the link between food, territory, seasonality, cultures and local traditions is very important' (p. 22). It necessitates fair living conditions in rural and coastal areas (especially income, services and mental health provision) and more integrated policy and budget support through LEADER

and its successor, the Community Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) method.<sup>72</sup>

The Vision reaffirms that research and innovation, particularly in terms of digitalisation and knowledge dissemination have to be 'at the heart of Europe's agri-food economy' (p. 24). It then concludes by asserting once again the centrality of multi-stakeholder engagement, claiming that this document 'launches this dialogue to enrich the Commission's reflections on the way forward... and find solutions in close engagement with relevant stakeholders and policy makers', facilitating 'territorial and tailored response' (p. 26).

### Prospects for renewal in the new vision

Given that the Vision is only a relatively short communication document without legislative facilitation and technical detail around its aims, there are positive signs in its content. Most hopeful from the perspective of this report is the relational emphasis, expressed through the prominence of connection as a theme (we will return to this issue in more detail below). Explicit concerns of farmers around environmental regulations, prices and trade competitiveness are addressed with a combination of practicality and openness. There are some concrete suggestions for a way forward alongside acknowledgement that the exact path can only be set with stakeholder involvement. Crucially, the Vision seems, without being explicit about the details, to safeguard the basic structure of CAP as an independent programme, including its large sum for subsidies within its €387 budget up to 2027. This was already demanded by the Council of the EU assertion of the continued "strategic importance" of CAP in its current form in the face of rumours that it may be absorbed into other financial packages.<sup>73</sup>

However, there are also indications that prospects for renewal along the lines of this vision may be weakened on a number of fronts. Firstly, there is the classic problem of saying one thing but apparently doing another. Since publication, it has emerged that there is continued pressure from EC leadership to shift rural development money to broader national packages keeping CAP with only farmers' income support. Rural development payments often function as additional direct payments (around a quarter of the CAP budget), and these would be made conditional on other EU priorities.<sup>74</sup>

72 [https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/leader-clld\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/leader-clld_en.html), accessed 1.12.25

73 <https://www.politico.eu/article/farmer-protest-europe-map-france-siege-paris-germany-poland/>, accessed 1.12.25

74 <https://www.politico.eu/article/farm-fight-erupts-over-brussels-budget-shake-up/>, accessed 1.12.25

Secondly, the effectiveness of key measures lacks substantiation. Most significantly among these is the commitment to address justice in the food chain, an immensely complex and deeply-rooted challenge. There is neither any evidence that past efforts have tangibly improved the situation nor that an observatory body such as AFCD will have any real clout. In fact, a key submission by Alan Matthews (mentioned already in this report) in its third and most recent meeting questions whether data is clear enough to identify where food chain imbalances really lie.<sup>75</sup> Another ambition requiring a better approach is prioritisation 'local, seasonal products'; these are promoted without a joined-up commitment to integrated local food systems, which will not come about through Geographical Indicators (GIs) alone.

Thirdly, the Vision has a number of formatting and terminological inconsistencies, making it quite unclear at points. Of particular concern is the lack of consistency in the four main themes (attractive, competitive, sustainable and fair). These are expressed differently at different points within the document as well as contrasting with the summary on the accompanying factsheet (where the terms 'future-proofing' and 'connection' are used instead of 'sustainability' and 'fairness'). More seriously, the subheadings within sections confuse the categories, with most of those under the 'attractive' theme referring to being 'fair' and many under the 'competitive' theme referring to 'sustainability'. Far from a merely academic observation, this suggests a lack of clarity underlying the Vision, with communication and implementation suffering as a result.

Fourthly, and most problematically, stakeholder contributions may not be valued within the process as they are claimed to be. Environmental groups are particularly upset with the perceived sacrifice of genuine sustainability goals (which include human health as well as ecological priorities) highlighted in the strategic dialogue for the 'status-quo' of agri-business competitive priorities.<sup>76</sup> This is despite the fact that the same basic membership (which includes several such groups) that constituted the dialogue also makes up EBAF. However, the latter body was only consulted (at its first meeting) two weeks before the text was released, making hollow the promise that 'these contributions will inform the drafting of the Vision prior to its publication'.<sup>77</sup> What ended up in the document appears more like a political response to the backlash from farm unions to the original dialogue report than a collaboratively

75 This was the 13.3.25 meeting, see <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/meetings/consult?lang=en&meetingId=60821>, accessed 1.12.25

76 One organization represented in the strategic dialogue and EBAF but unhappy with the Vision is Birdlife (<https://www.birdlife.org/news/2025/02/19/press-release-eu-agriculture-vision-goes-rogue/>, accessed 1.12.25)

77 <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/core/api/front/document/115161/download>, p. 4, accessed 1.12.25

created roadmap.<sup>78</sup>

But the apparently farm-friendly tone should not be allowed to obscure the fact that farmers' voices are conspicuously minimal in the makeup of stakeholders. Of the 30 members of EBAF, there are 14 NGOs (one of which specifically represents farmers), 13 trade and business associations (again, only one of which specifically represents farmers) and three other organisations. Suspicions that the whole process is as far away as ever from the situation 'on the ground' are only heightened by the German academic overseeing the strategic dialogue being paid around €1,000 per day, 10 times the average income of a European agricultural worker.<sup>79</sup>

### 5. *EU policy in light of European agricultural crisis*

To conclude this opening section, we need to summarise the relationship between the European crisis in farming symbolised by the early 2024 protests and EU policy. Three key points can be made in this regard about EU agricultural policy, which:

**1. Assumes the fundamental value of farming and farmers:** the existence of the CAP at the heart of EU policy and budgetary support is testament the central role that agriculture plays in European identity. This is inscribed in the physical geography of the continent as well as the culture (or mixture of cultures). Whilst this centrality may be under threat, it is far from being abolished and the response to the protests demonstrates the enduring political power of farmers, even if their social value has been compromised.

**2. Operates top-down under the influence of forces external to agriculture:** whether through lobbying from businesses or environmental groups, or from less tangible societal shifts, EU agricultural policy is not often driven by what works best for the actual farming happening in its member states but imposes its broad agenda in two main areas:

- . Market orientation – increasingly (and especially since the Industrial Revolution), the dictates of national and international trade have determined farm production more than the long-term requirements of the local community and the land itself. Farm consolidation will always continue if economic productivity is prioritised.
- . Environmental and public health concerns – ideologically prioritising ecological and personal health (a late 20<sup>th</sup> century trend) conflicts with area-specific practicalities of production in the name of an aggregate commitment to wellbeing.

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-farm-agenda-agri-lobby-copa-cogeca-backlash/>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>79</sup> For more on this see <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-farming-agri-culture-italy/> and the November 2023 EC paper "Explore Farm Incomes in the EU", [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/analytical-brief-3-feo-brief\\_en.pdf](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/analytical-brief-3-feo-brief_en.pdf), both accessed 1.12.25

**3. Attempts to promote farming without a coherent notion of its inherent value:** the movement between divergent priorities in response to external forces reveals a lack in the EU's value system. But there are indications in the new Vision of a holistic conception of farming that integrates social, political, cultural, environmental and economic value. In view of the above, EU policy would seem to have an ambivalent role in relation to European agriculture. But in order to conduct a deeper analysis and propose an alternative approach, we must move from the abstraction of the 'EU' to consider particular case studies. This will involve considering what we can learn from real farmers in their national contexts.

## Section 2: Case Studies

# Analysing Challenges of agriculture and Policy Response

Three countries have been selected for this section, namely Romania, Northern Ireland and the Netherlands. A specific introduction to each will be given in what follows, but the rationale for the selection is twofold. Firstly, we wanted to include a geographical range of countries, from Eastern and Western Europe. Secondly, each country is significant for its own reason; Romania has by far the highest number of farmers; Northern Ireland straddles the space between the EU and the UK (bringing into relief EU-specific issues) whilst the Netherlands has always been at the forefront of European farming (both in its industrial-conventional and more alternative forms) as well as the protest movements sweeping the continent.

A brief note on method is also warranted. This is not a piece of academic research but an endeavour to add weight to this report through attention to real-life situations. Whilst there is broad consistency of approach, a standardised methodology has not been employed in each case study. Such standardisation would in any case undermine the aim to treat each case study in accordance with its particular features and the distinct relationship that the researchers have to it. The only constant factor in the interviews conducted was that the farmers should be approaching their work from a Christian perspective in order to assess the congruence with Sallux's *relational thinking* approach (addressed in the section below), which shares this perspective.

The Romanian case study was compiled by Dr Ștefan L. Bătrîna, the Northern Irish one by Dr Rebecca Stevenson, with the main author acting as editor in each case (see author notes). The Dutch case study was compiled by the main author with consultative input from Dr Jan Hassink from Wageningen University and Research.<sup>80</sup> Additional notes on method, as well as data underlying the information compiled here, can be found in the appendices.

<sup>80</sup> Dr Jan Hassink is an agricultural Researcher in care farming, green, health and citizen initiatives and agroecology and biodiversity. The opinions expressed in the Dutch case study remain those of the author and do not imply the agreement of Dr Hassink at every point, though our discussions revealed some basic consonances.

## 2A. Case study 1: Romania

Romania is a particularly informative case study. It has the largest number of agricultural holdings (comprising a third of the EU total), one of the largest numbers of workers (comprising around 18% of farm labourers, compared to Romania's 4% of the total EU population) and has a relatively recent pre-EU history with which we can compare its functioning under CAP (Romania joined the EU in 2007).<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, as an Eastern European nation it has relatively less power and visibility within the EU and so is worth foregrounding here.

### 1. Meeting a local farmer: Denisa Hetea<sup>82</sup>

The best way to enter into an understanding of agriculture in Romania is to meet one of its practitioners, which we now do through an interview with Ms Denisa Hetea.

### ***Q. Can you tell me a bit about your farm; the size; type and if you are a first generation farmer or has the farm been passed down through generations?***

For my family it all started after the Romanian Revolution against communism when, according to the 1991 Land Fund law (no. 18), the Government gave to each family 0.5 hectares (ha) of farmland by issuing property titles.<sup>83</sup> So my grandparents began practicing subsistence farming without seeking to obtain profit and even if they needed to have an income from another job, in order to support themselves, they continued to grow different crops for livestock feeding.

Over the years my father bought a tractor and used to work their little piece of land as a hobby. Gradually he bought other agricultural machinery, more farmland and by combining craftsmanship, passion, perseverance with modern technology he created a real farm. In present we manage a conventional farm of 750ha which became a successful agricultural investment and produce a large amount of food and other agricultural products for sale.

<sup>81</sup> Jean Vasile Andrei and Mihaela Cristina Drăgoi, *The Common Agriculture Policy and Romanian Agriculture* (Boston, MA: CAB International, 2019), 21

<sup>82</sup> The following interview took place in Romanian and was translated by Dr Bătrîna.

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.global-regulation.com/translation/romania/3070086/law-no.-18-of-19-february-1991-land-fund.html>, accessed 19.12.23. This page has since been removed but relevant information can also be found at <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/rom27729.pdf>, accessed 1.12.25.



Picking corn by hand, 1995



Plowing, 2006



Soil preparation for sowing, 2012



Barley crops, 2021

### ***Q. What formal or informal training have you had?***

In 2019 I graduated from University of Life Sciences "King Mihai I" with a BEng degree in Agricultural Science. After that I haven't searched for other employment opportunities and I returned to my family and farm but I continued my studies the same University at a Master of Agriculture program called "Sustainable technologies for field crops" to support my knowledge and improve my career.

### ***Q. What is your view of the CAP Strategic Plan for Romania and its communication?***

I read the recommendations written and published by the Romanian Government, Romanian Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and European Union about the CAP Strategic Plan and I still watch the topic closely on media channels to keep up with the latest news.

From my point of view, in Romania the new Common Agricultural Policy has been described to farmers and agricultural sector, as a package of restrictive measures with a budget support which still remains highly uncertain. It has not been described as a clear national target to stop the climate crisis and the nature-killing practices in order to succeed in making the transition to organic agriculture. The main goal, producing quality food while protecting nature, improve animal welfare and

revitalise rural areas, wasn't explained enough.

In consequence, while this CAP was considered by many as an important opportunity to make the transition to a more sustainable future, I consider that most of the farmers and agribusiness practitioners did not understand the major importance of this change showing a shocking lack of ambition on implementing the Eco-schemes and Rural Development measures and low interest for organic agriculture in their farming plans.

I believe that in the near future the perception of most farmers won't change and they will continue to use huge amounts harmful and self-defeating products such as synthetic fertilisers and toxic pesticides which damage biodiversity, degradate soil and harm human health. They will not contribute to a significant development of organic farming, perhaps because conventional plant growing trends work for sure and also because they haven't fully understood the impact of their practicies on the environment.

### ***Q. Can you describe how perceptions of farming have changed in your local community?***

Perceptions regarding agriculture are not very diverse in my community, but polarized in two directions. While some consider agriculture being essential but not attractive at all, the others are committed to agriculture and work with a "never give up" attitude, making it possible to push through the challenges and failures.

The biggest and the most important change I have seen not only in my area, in the whole country is that after years of slow progress, agriculture reborns and is turning into an industry again. Many farmers stopped working individually, they are now associated in cooperatives being in total synergy, access European funds, continuously specialize themselves, use efficient technologies, they no longer sell agricultural products but create processing industries, get involved in political decisions regarding agriculture, name representatives to support their interests in international forums all of these building a strong economy for the country.

### ***Q. How do you assess the political factors impacting farming in your area?***

United Nations data show us that in 30 years the demand for food on the globe will increase by 70% as a result of the population growth, and the battle of the future will be over food and water.

Our country is a blessed place. We have millions of hectares of fertile land excellent for agriculture, a treasure that could feed over 80 million people and Romanian agriculture contributes with 4% to country's GDP. But since Romanian Revolution against Communism, the most significant problem is the lack of a national strategy.



*Abandoned farm after 1989*

After 1989, people received farmland from the Romanian state, the land was broken up into small plots that were only a few meters wide. People did not care about the farmland, worked chaotically or sold it to the foreign investors. Romanian agriculture was destroyed, farms were abandoned and arable land was left non-cultivated.

Those were antagonistic times when Romanian farmers couldn't survive from agriculture but Foreign Investment Funds were developing massively in our country.

In the strategy devised by the World Bank for Romania in 2015, it is mentioned that Romania has 2.7 million economically unviable farms and 70% of the Romanian farmland is owned by small farmers who practice subsistence farming which are poorly technologically equipped and not oriented to the market. Romania has a third of the farms in the EU, but farms which generate only a small part of the agricultural production of the entire Union. The World Bank also mentioned in the report that land merging should be a national priority.

Despite significant progress from recent years, the lack of political involvement is the main risk for agriculture regarding the political factors. There is no continuity in terms of political decisions, laws change from one minister to another. Politicians have consistently favored short-term economic interests of some sectors over the national interest in solving the huge challenges in agriculture system. There is a clientelistic relationship of offering friendly legislation in exchange for electoral support.

Politicians in Bucharest and Bruxelles mostly listen only the big farmers represented by national unions. The leaders of these organization have close relationships with politicians and most of the times they are party members who end up having important positions in the government. This is a system of "revolving doors" – a way

in which officials from the government pass into the private sector and vice versa. Big farmers occupy leading positions, such as secretaries of state or associations presidents, influencing the political agenda and reaching their personal interests. This things show that small farmers are not represented and left out when it comes to key problems of the future of agriculture, either nationally or regionally.

All this time structural problems persists, farmers face challenges like weather climate changes, large costs of equipments, less available workforce, trade disputes, uncertain and fluctuating commodity prices, competition for farmland with the Foreign Investment Funds which can afford to bid above the reference price of the market representing a big disadvantage for Romanian farmers. The relationship between government policy and agricultural supply requires analysis on multiple levels. Research on agriculture, policy and public health requires attention to all of these factors and efforts to piece together this puzzle into a comprehensive understanding of how these factors intersect.

The main opportunity from these political factors/decisions are, on one hand, that Romania became a Member State of the European Union. Agriculture itself has been deeply transformed by the forces of EU. Policies of the EU were important in providing guidelines and directions to be followed in improving agriculture, thus reduced poverty and improved the agricultural infrastructure. And on the other hand the political factors also helped for food security and nutrition development; management for pest and diseases problems; improving farmers access to new technology and planting methods; institutional capacity building and human resource development; sustainable irrigations management and infrastructure; trade and investment development; strengthening agriculture; research and extension services; seed production, processing and storage; improving farmers access to new technology; post-harvest handling and technology; creating agricultural cooperatives; improving information collection, analysis, storage and dissemination about agriculture to introduce stability in agricultural sector; commercialization and intensification of production especially among small scale farmers.

### ***Q. What is the relationship between your Christian faith and your farming practice?***

Farming is not just a typical job, is a way of life, a commitment to the land. Such as God created the world being responsible for all of us, we as farmers, who have Christian values, are responsible for keeping the land healthy and fruitful and have respect for the environment. Faith transforms a farmer's knowledge into vocation.

King Mihai I of Romania once said this:

"Nu văd România de astăzi ca pe o moștenire de la părinții noștri,

ci ca pe o țară pe care am luat-o cu împrumut de la copiii noștri.  
Așa să ne ajute Dumnezeu!”

*meaning*

“I don't see Romania today as an inheritance from our parent, but as a country we borrowed from our children. God help us!”.

I turned these words into a philosophy of life. I am trying to do my best as a human being, as a farmer and I consider that we cannot have a future without respecting agriculture and God.

I don't consider that farming is necessarily my “calling”. I rather consider that is my responsibility to carry on the work of my parents and grandparents.

## 2. *Overview of agriculture in Romania*

### **Historical survey**

To comprehend the intricate tapestry of contemporary Romanian agriculture that underlies the story of Denisa and many others, one must embark on a historical odyssey through the tumultuous landscape of the 20th century. This pivotal period, marked by seismic political, social, and economic shifts, laid the foundation for the agricultural sector that exists today. By scrutinizing the historical contours, from the post-World War I reform to the era of communist collectivization and the subsequent transition to a market-oriented economy, we unveil the threads that weave the narrative of Romanian agriculture. This exploration serves as more than a mere historical reflection; it is a lens through which we can decipher the roots of challenges and opportunities that define the present agricultural landscape.

#### **Post First World War Romania**

In the aftermath of World War I, Romania embarked on a path of agrarian reform to address social inequities and stimulate economic growth in rural areas. The land reforms aimed at dismantling large feudal estates and redistributing land among the peasantry. This shift toward private landownership empowered farmers, providing them with the autonomy to make independent decisions about crop cultivation and land use. The diversification of agricultural practices became a hallmark of this period as peasants embraced their newfound sense of ownership.

However, the journey towards a more equitable agricultural system was not without challenges. The fragmentation of land holdings, while empowering individual farmers, also posed logistical and administrative challenges. The transition from a system dominated by large estates to one with numerous small private farms required adjustments in infrastructure and resource management.

### **Communist Collectivization (1948-1989): A Tumultuous Era**

The advent of communism in Romania brought about radical changes in the agricultural landscape, and nowhere were these changes more pronounced than in the era of collectivization. Initiated in the late 1940s and intensified during the rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu, collectivization aimed to consolidate agricultural resources under state control. The forced consolidation of individual farms into state-controlled cooperatives or ‘kolkhozes’ was met with widespread resistance from the peasantry.

The impact of collectivization on the lives of peasants was profound. The forced abandonment of private holdings disrupted traditional farming practices and communal structures. Peasants faced coercion, threats, and intimidation to join collective farms, and those who resisted risked imprisonment or loss of property. The social disruption was not limited to individual households; entire communities underwent a transformation as the collective farm system replaced traditional communal structures.

While collectivization aimed to increase agricultural productivity through economies of scale, the results were mixed. The focus on quantity over quality led to the development of mechanisation, chemical fertilizers and the establishment of agro-industrial complexes. This is indicative of the fact that the communist era in Romania, particularly under Ceaușescu's rule, was marked by a fervent drive for industrialization. But inefficiencies and mismanagement remained as the rigid centralized planning often led to neglect of best farming practices. Crop choices were often dictated centrally rather than local conditions, resulting in ecological imbalances and decreased soil fertility.

Forced consolidation of farms into state-controlled cooperatives left an indelible mark on the collective memory of the nation. The legacy of collectivization reverberates through contemporary attitudes toward agriculture, landownership, and state intervention, shaping the cultural identity of rural communities. At the same time, the transformation after this period was stark.

### **Post-Communist Transition (1990s Onwards): Embracing Change**

The fall of communism in 1989 marked a turning point for Romanian agriculture. The transition to a market-oriented economy brought challenges and opportunities. Restitution laws returned land to its previous owners or their heirs, leading to the fragmentation of agricultural holdings. This period witnessed the emergence of private farmers who, motivated by the prospect of profit, began adopting modern farming techniques.

The privatization of agriculture brought both opportunities and challenges as farmers navigated the complexities of a new economic system. The agricultural sector became more dynamic, with a diverse range of crops and farming practices emerging. However, the transition was not without difficulties. The adaptation to new economic structures, the need for modernization, and the tension between tradition and innovation became a central theme as Romanian agriculture grappled with adapting to new economic structures.

### **EU Accession and Modernization (2007 onwards): Navigating the European Landscape**

Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007 marked in a new chapter for its agriculture. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) provided subsidies and funding for rural development, encouraging investments in modernization. Access to EU funds facilitated upgrades in infrastructure, technology, and sustainable practices. The adoption of EU standards required adjustments in farming practices, food safety regulations, and environmental sustainability.

While the EU accession brought about positive changes, it also presented challenges. The need to align with EU regulations and compete within the common market required adjustments in farming practices and business models. The process sparked further debates about the balance between traditional practices and the demands of a globalized agricultural economy. As Romania navigates the 21st century, its agriculture faces persistent challenges. Rural depopulation, outdated infrastructure, and the need for sustainable farming practices remain pressing issues. The loss of young people to urban areas for better opportunities poses a threat to the continuity of traditional farming practices.

In response to these challenges, Romania is exploring new avenues. Agro-tourism has gained popularity as a means to diversify income sources for farmers and showcase the country's agricultural heritage. Sustainable farming practices and organic agriculture have emerged as potential solutions to address environmental concerns and enhance the long-term viability of the sector. The history of Romanian agriculture is a narrative of resilience, adaptation, and transformation. From the struggles of land reforms to the complexities of EU integration, Romanian farmers have navigated diverse challenges and they will continue to do so. The nation's journey reflects not only the challenges inherent in transforming agricultural systems but also the enduring spirit of the Romanian people to adapt, innovate, and build a sustainable future for their agricultural heritage.

## **The contemporary situation**

Romania stands out through the diversity of pedo-climatic conditions (areas of relatively homogenous soil type and climate conditions). Such conditions are favourable for obtaining diversified agricultural productions that can cover the vast majority of domestic demand for agri-food products. Recent trends show a notable production increase in the three main agricultural sub-sectors, i.e. arable, horticulture and livestock.

**Arable farming** includes cereals, oilseeds and protein. Cereal production (maize, wheat and to a lesser extent barley and rice) covers over 5.25 million ha and produces around 30 million tonnes. This represents a decline in cereal cultivation areas can be attributed to various factors such as crop rotation, using high-potential biological varieties and hybrids, changes in land use, leaving land fallow, and restrictions on plant protection substances. But this is compensated for by vastly improved yield due to biological methods (varieties and hybrids) and production technologies (mechanisation) that control fertilizer, pesticide and growth regulator use. This reflects benefits of access to EU knowledge and inputs markets mentioned by Denisa. Although the proportion of area cultivated is slightly larger than the proportion of yield, pesticide use per ha in Romania is only around 30% of the EU average, making it more efficient in environmental terms.

Oilseed production stands at around 1.8 million ha overall with around half for sunflower (producing around 2.5 million tonnes), 600,000 ha for rapeseed (producing around 1.5 million tonnes) and 200,000 ha for soybean (producing around 500,000 tonnes). A huge amount is exported, some of it unprocessed, due to the lack of processing facilities and demand, though a large amount of soybean is also imported. These crops are relatively expensive to grow (needing irrigation as well as high levels of other inputs) and are in decline. Protein cultivation, on the other hand, are increasing, especially peas, whose growth is due to coupled support. Alfalfa is increasing more modestly and bean production is actually decreasing.

**Horticulture** takes up around 500,000 ha with vegetable production adding up to around 3.5 million tonnes (including tomatoes, onions, cabbage, peppers, eggplants, cucumbers, and garlic). Climate change and water shortage has contributed to less land being cultivated, but again yields have risen through biological methods (varieties and hybrids) as well as advances in mechanisation and plant protection, though there is more potential to use rotations.

**Livestock** farming holds a longstanding tradition in Romania, as evidenced by the prevalence of livestock and mixed farms. However, livestock units are falling and density, though relatively constant, remains well below the EU average. Cattle (dairy

and meat, including buffaloes) constitute the largest proportion with around 1.5 million head, followed by sheep, pigs and poultry at around 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of that figure and a smaller number of goats.

**Farm labour** is up around 1.5 million Annual Work Units (AWU) with around 75% - 25% male-female gender split and a rapidly aging sector. Around half of farmers work their land alone with only around 5% of the labour force being employed by others. Nearly 20% of the Romanian workforce works in agriculture, which is much higher than the European average of around 4%, though this figure is steadily falling. Correlated to this is the share of gross value added (GVA) by primary industries, which stands at close to 5% (compared to the 1.6% EU average). The biggest discrepancy is the income expected by farmers, which stands at around €5,750 per year, under 1/5<sup>th</sup> the EU average (though educational levels are lower than average).<sup>84</sup>

### 3. *Romanian agriculture in societal context*

Agriculture has long played a pivotal role in the economic, political, educational, and cultural fabric of Romania. As a nation with a rich agricultural heritage, Romania has witnessed significant transformations in its agricultural sector over the years. While economic shifts and globalization impact the sector, the resilience of its agricultural heritage is evident in its continued presence with a number of aspects of life. This presence is, however, under threat.

In term of **economy**, Romania, historically an agrarian society, has seen shifts in the economic landscape, impacting the role of agriculture in the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Traditionally, a substantial percentage of the population has been engaged in agricultural activities, cultivating the fertile lands that characterize the Romanian countryside. However, in recent decades, there has been a noticeable decline in the relative contribution of agriculture to the overall GDP, reflecting the broader trend of economic diversification and industrialization. Crucially, this decline does not diminish the sector's importance; rather, it underscores the evolving nature of Romania's economy. The agri-food system, encompassing agricultural production, processing, and related industries, contribute not only to GDP but also to employment and export revenues.

The **political** landscape surrounding agriculture in Romania is shaped by factors such as unionization and the representation of farmers in political arenas. Farmer unions, cooperative associations, and other organizations work to ensure that the interests of those involved in agriculture are adequately represented. However, despite the structures being in place since the fall of communism, relational

<sup>84</sup> See the analytical briefing "Explore Farm Incomes in the EU", [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/analytical-brief-3-feo-brief\\_en.pdf](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/analytical-brief-3-feo-brief_en.pdf), accessed 1.12.25

networks skew the balance of influence. As Denisa put it, there is a 'revolving door' between public and private positions of power, which now extends beyond regional or national to EU level.

The **cultural significance** of agriculture in Romania is deeply rooted in the nation's history and traditions. Romania's rural areas, where agriculture is a way of life, have preserved and passed down agricultural customs from generation to generation. Many national events, shows, and festivals celebrate the agricultural heritage that forms an integral part of Romanian culture. Throughout the year, various events are organized to mark significant agricultural milestones, such as planting and harvesting seasons. These celebrations often include traditional music, dance, and culinary experiences that showcase the rich diversity of Romanian agriculture. Folklore and cultural expressions are intertwined with agricultural practices, creating a unique tapestry that reflects the symbiotic relationship between the people and the land.

In addition to seasonal celebrations, agricultural festivals and fairs attract both locals and tourists. These events provide a platform for farmers to display their produce, livestock, and traditional crafts. The cultural significance extends beyond the rural areas, as urban populations also participate in and appreciate the cultural richness that agriculture brings to the nation. Furthermore, traditional Romanian cuisine is closely tied to agricultural products. Staple foods like mamaliga (cornmeal porridge) and various meat dishes highlight the importance of locally sourced ingredients. Festivals often feature culinary competitions and showcases, emphasizing the role of agriculture in shaping the nation's palate and gastronomic identity.

**Education** forms the bedrock of any society but in Romania, the educational system struggles to reflect the importance of agriculture in both rural and urban settings. Agricultural education in Romania is not well integrated into the national primary and secondary curriculum. By integrating agricultural education into the national curriculum, Romania could bridge the gap between urban and rural communities, fostering an understanding and appreciation of the agricultural sector among all citizens.

In Romania there are 57 technological high schools with a predominant agricultural profile that offer programs that blend theoretical knowledge with hands-on practical training. The curriculum encompasses general education subjects alongside specialized courses in agricultural sciences, allowing students to delve into areas such as crop cultivation, animal husbandry, agro-technology, and agricultural economics. Students enrolled in agricultural high schools often have the opportunity to choose specializations based on their interests and graduate well-equipped to pursue careers in agriculture, agribusiness, and related industries. While some choose to continue their education at universities offering advanced agricultural programs,

many take a different path and head to Western Europe for job opportunities.

In specialized universities the agricultural educational emphasis the historical and economic significance of agriculture in the country. Students, especially those from urban areas, are exposed to agricultural topics, including farming practices, agribusiness concepts, and sustainable agricultural methods. This educational approach serves not only to preserve traditional knowledge but also to promulgate modern agricultural practices. Practical training, such as farm visits and hands-on experiences, is often incorporated into the universities' curriculum. This ensures that students not only learn theoretical aspects but also gain practical insights into the realities of agriculture.

#### 4. *The national strategic plan for Romania*

The National Strategic Plan (NSP) provides support amounting to 15.83 billion euros, distributed as follows: Pillar I - support instruments provided through the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) - direct payments and measures to support the market, and Pillar II - instruments for rural development policy funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The funds will be distributed by the Agency for Payments and Intervention in Agriculture (APIA) for Pillar I and the Agency for Rural Investment Funding (AFIR) for Pillar II. Approximately 38% of the budget is allocated to investments in agriculture and rural development (for example, eco-schemes), 61% constitutes subsidies for farmers, while almost 1% is earmarked for market measures.

For the period 2023-2027, the NSP has objectives to improve the results and increase the performance of Romanian agriculture, promoting environmentally friendly agriculture, increased attention to animal welfare, detailed and flexible rules for selecting beneficiaries, expanding sectors funded by the NSP (including local irrigation and investments in protective belts), and funding storage, and product processing. According to the presentation of the NSP at events organized by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development for information dissemination: "The NSP has clear objectives for the development of agriculture, the food industry, and the Romanian countryside." Overall profitability of the agricultural sector in Romania is low, reflected in the low incomes of farmers compared to other economic sectors.

Increasing farm profitability, market orientation, and encouraging younger generations to engage in agricultural activities are challenges that need to be addressed to ensure sufficient, diverse, and high-quality food and to improve the livelihoods of peasants and farmers in Romania. To this it can be added that there is a long-running complaint

that Western European farmers are favoured by the subsidy programme.<sup>85</sup> Thus only Romania objected to a set of conclusions that pledged the support of EU nations for CAP under the Hungarian council presidency in 2024.

## 2B. Case study 2: Northern Ireland

Our second case study is Northern Ireland (NI), which may seem like a strange choice given that the UK is no longer in the EU. However, Brexit is part of what makes it informative for our purposes. NI retains a unique connection to the EU through its relationship to Ireland, whereby it remains able to participate in the single market (including its agri-food trade) through the Windsor Framework.<sup>86</sup> Examining NI sheds light on the impact of EU agricultural policy, within which it operated for the majority of the history of CAP (1973–2020, along with the rest of the UK). We will also see what happens when EU support is withdrawn, which will yield insight into what the EU provided as well as the complexities arising from its unique current situation. The comparative value of this case study will indeed grow over time as the difference between the fortunes of agriculture in NI and Ireland emerge. Not only are both working off the same basic plan, but both are proportionally very high in the list of Europe's agricultural producers. Six farmers were interviewed for the following (see appendix 3 for notes on method).

### 1. *Meeting a local farmer: David Brown, President of the Ulster Farmers' Union*<sup>87</sup>

David Brown is a 5<sup>th</sup> or possibly even 6<sup>th</sup> generation farmer based in Northern Ireland, and he farms in a partnership with his son. While his current farm has been passed down through generations, he has been able to trace his ancestry beyond that to a farm a few miles away, therefore his family have been farming in the local area for hundreds of years. He inherited a 40ha farm, and over the years has added to that and the farm size is approximately 80ha. They family farms, Suckler cows, finishing them through to beef cows and sheep, for meat.<sup>88</sup> When discussing his family's farm

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/farmer-protest-europe-map-france-siege-paris-germany-poland/>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>86</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/relations-united-kingdom/eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/windsor-framework\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/relations-united-kingdom/eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/windsor-framework_en), accessed 1.12.25

<sup>87</sup> This is the national farmers' union in Northern Ireland (see <https://www.ufuni.org/>, accessed 1.12.25). Whilst 'Ulster' is often used interchangeably with 'Northern Ireland', the former technically constitutes 9 counties, three of which are part of the Republic of Ireland (Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan) whilst the latter constitutes only the 6 counties that are part of the United Kingdom.

<sup>88</sup> For a definition of 'suckler', see <https://www.askaboutireland.ie/narrative-notes/suckler-cow/>, accessed 1.12.25

and its heritage noted the appreciation he had for the work of previous generations and the attachment that he and his family had to the land and the local area.

After being involved with the Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) for many years David was elected into leadership, initially as the County Vice Chair for 2 years and then was County Chairman for 2 years. During that time he was co-opted onto the management board of the UFU, then he was proposed and elected an Office Bearer in 2018 and was elected President of the UFU in April 2022. While acknowledging the opportunity that this role presents David noted that this role is 'intense' and has taken him away from the farm, as the role requires a lot of representation and travel to places like Westminster and Brussels.

As the role is one that represents all types of farms, he acknowledged the learning challenge that exists in needing to understand all the varieties of farms that exist in Ulster and where appropriate and necessary lobby and advocating on their behalf in the media and in the Public Square.<sup>89</sup> Given the extend and time commitment of the job, he joked during the interview, that he would currently describe himself as a part-time farmer.

After studying his A-levels and went for a year to the agriculture in college, to study a National Diploma in Agriculture. That was just a one year course, which he said he 'absolutely loved.' Following completion of that course he went to Queen's University Belfast to study an agricultural degree. However, he did not complete the course, in his own words stating, 'I wanted to farm more than I wanted to do chemistry and so forth.'. So he made the decisions to drop about and return to farming, noting, 'I had people who told me I would regret not finishing but, I've absolutely loved being a farmer.'

Through his work with the UFU he has been able to participate in the process of the NI trying to establish an alternative to Brexit and is sympathetic to the challenges that farmers face, whether that be a lack of understanding or the potential for reduced financial assistance. This is enhanced by his farming background and understanding of a working farm. Additionally, he addressed the challenges of farming demographics, whereby the average age of NI farmers is 60 years old and there is low number of women in farming, acknowledging that there was a challenge in encouraging female ownership or involvement in this male-dominated industry.

As a Christian, David believes that farming is his calling and that his faith has had a profound impact on the way he interacts with land and animal husbandry.

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.agriland.co.uk/farming-news/campaign-to-secure-special-aid-package-for-ni-potato-growers/>, accessed 1.12.25

Commenting on the issue, he said this:

"In terms of my Christian outlook, yes, I definitely do think it does have an influence because you know, when it comes to how we treat our animals and care for animals on the welfare of these animals, I would always look upon that as you know ... I'm a caretaker for my son or another generation will take that on and farm it in the future."

Reflecting on David's journey in farming, it is interesting to see how someone who described their reluctance to get involved in the leadership of the UFU, to become President and go on to help farmers navigate one of the most challenging situations facing farming in the last 100 years.

## 2. *Overview of agriculture in Northern Ireland*

The Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in NI conducts a farm census in June of every year, the findings of this census and other yearly reviews that DAERA conducts yearly has provided the data for the doctrinal research portion of this case study.

The statistical review of NI Agriculture revealed that the gross output of NI agriculture was estimated at around €3.5 billion, an increase of 23% on the previous year, and the gross value added (GDP) increased in 2022 to just over €1 billion. Additionally, the agricultural income of Northern Ireland Farms increased, with the total income from farming (TIFF) increasing by 17.4% from €600 million in 2021 to €705 million in 2022.<sup>90</sup> It should be noted that this is despite a cut to subsidies that were paid to farmers, which decreased by 5.8% just under €22 million.<sup>91</sup>

The majority (90%) of farms in NI derive two-thirds or more of their total standard output from grazing livestock, of this 9.7% were dairy farms and 79.2% as cattle and sheep, with relatively few farms dependent predominately on cropping with 1.1% of farms classified as cereal; 4.6% as general cropping and 0.7% classifies as horticulture.<sup>92</sup>

None of the interviewees farmed any crops or cereals and notably, they all had mixed herds, with three of the interviewees farming a mix of sheep and beef. One interviewee explained they begin farming dairy in 1976 but they choose to diversify

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/statistical-review-ni-agriculture-2007-onward>, p. 3, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/statistical-review-ni-agriculture-2007-onward>, p. 3, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/statistical-review-ni-agriculture-2007-onward>, p. 40, accessed 1.12.25

to beef in 2006 due to, 'circumstances that made it difficult to continue...' Further explaining that 'his son wasn't interested and he felt that the work load was too heavy.' However, in 2010 with his son's return to the farm to work they made a conscience decision to take up dairy farming again.<sup>93</sup>

## Farm sizes and labour

According to the 2022 Agricultural Census in Northern Ireland in June 2022 there were 26,089 farms in Northern Ireland farming just over one million hectares (1,043,270 ha) of land, with over three quarters or 20,506 of these farms considered 'very small'.<sup>94</sup> DAERA notes that these farms are 'unlikely to provide full time employment or adequate income solely from farming activities'.<sup>95</sup> These farms primarily involve cattle and sheep rearing; in 2022, 60% of beef cows and 52% of sheep were found on very small farms.

There were 2,667 small farms in NI, these generally involved one person working full time. Despite the size of these farms, they make a significant contribution to the farming sector, accounting for 23% of poultry; 25% of sheep activities; and involve 15% of the full-time agricultural labour force.<sup>96</sup> In 2022 there were 1,217 medium and 1,699 large farms in Northern Ireland, which dominate the dairy, pig and poultry layer sector. In 2022 the average size of a farm in NI was approximately 40 hectares compared to the UK average of 80.6 hectares.

In 2022 Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing employed 19,000 workers accounting for 2.2% of NI civil employment.<sup>97</sup> None of the interviewees indicated that they employed any additional help on the farm, however has previously stated all the interviewees farmed in conjunction with family. A 2019 Report from the NI Home Affairs Committee noted that the agri-food sector is heavily reliant on labour from outside the UK; the NI Food and Drink Association estimates that around 48% of the

93 Interviewee 4: Jackie Irvine

94 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/agricultural-census-northern-ireland-2022>, accessed 1.12.25. In the UK Farm Businesses are classified by size, this is based on the amount of labour used and is calculated by applying labour and coefficients (known as Standard Labour Requirements or SLRs) to individual enterprise types. Once the total annual SLR figure for a Farm Business has been calculated, the number of hours can be converted to an equivalent number of full-time workers. Therefore a 'very small' farm requires less than 1 full time worker (see [https://farmbusinesssurvey.co.uk/DataBuilder/UK\\_Farm\\_Classification\\_2014\\_Final.pdf](https://farmbusinesssurvey.co.uk/DataBuilder/UK_Farm_Classification_2014_Final.pdf), accessed 1.12.25)

95 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/agricultural-census-northern-ireland-2022>, p. 39 accessed 1.12.25

96 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/agricultural-census-northern-ireland-2022>, p. 39 accessed 1.12.25

97 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/statistical-review-ni-agriculture-2007-onward>, p. 4, accessed 1.12.25

workers employed in the sector are non-UK EEA nationals.<sup>98</sup>

## Farm ownership and rental

Almost all of the farms in NI have owned land and just under half include additional rented land. Within the farm in the 2022 census, 4.8% were entirely rented or leased, 43.3% had a mixture of owned and rented land and the remaining 51.8% were entirely owner occupied.<sup>99</sup>

These statistics were supported by the findings from the interviews, with 2 of the 4 interviewees indicating that they have expanded the size of their farms by renting additional land. Additionally, all of the interviewees farmed land that they had inherited with all of the interviewees describing themselves as a second or third generation farmer.

All the interviewees interviewed for this case study farmed farms which were larger in size than the NI average with all interviews explaining that they farmed alongside family members. One interviewee explained that was a 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> generation farmer, adding that his great-great grandfather had moved onto the farm from another one a few miles away, and that he had doubled the size of the farm, from 40 hectares to 80.<sup>100</sup>

All the farms were farmed with a combination of father and son partnerships. It should be noted that land in both NI and the Republic of Ireland is 'let' using a unique system of letting agricultural land called 'conacre.' This differs from a standard rental of land and it allows landowners who wish to retain their land but not farm it, by enabling them to licence the land to another farmer, usually for a period of 11 months.<sup>101</sup> A conacre agreement is a seasonal agreement which does not create the relationship of a landlord and a tenant, which has the potential to leave the licensee at a disadvantage, as they are not guaranteed certainty that the agreement will be renewed for the following seasons.<sup>102</sup>

The issue of conacre was raised by one of the interviewees in a follow up conversation, with him explaining that the reason they let additional land as opposed to buying

98 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmniaf/939/93908.htm>, para 152, accessed 1.12.25

99 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/statistical-review-ni-agriculture-2007-onward>, p. 40, accessed 1.12.25

100 Interviewee 1: David Brown

101 [https://www.isurv.com/downloads/download/2135/conacre\\_licence\\_agreement](https://www.isurv.com/downloads/download/2135/conacre_licence_agreement), accessed 1.12.25

102 <https://www.johnselliot.com/agricultural-tenancy-or-conacre>, accessed 1.12.25

it was twofold. The first reason was in relation to the price of land in his local area, explaining that they simply could not afford to buy the land; and secondly there he discussed that there was a mentality amongst the farming community in NI that families 'do not sell land' and that 'it's the only thing that they are not making more of' therefore you should retain it were possible.<sup>103</sup> The importance of retaining family owned farms was illustrated by another interviewee 1 stating this:

'Heritage is something that ... a lot of farmers recognise and appreciate and if its been passed down from generation to generation, there is an attachment to the area and land.'<sup>104</sup>

### 3. *Northern Irish agriculture in economic, political and social context*

There is a high level of public debate about agriculture in Northern Ireland. The theme of the environment, and concern that there was a perception amongst the public that farming was bad for the environment, this issue was addressed by interviewee 2, who stated this:

'In my [local] community there are still fairly good relations with the neighbours ... but in the towns that people wouldn't know as much about farming.'

When questioned further, regarding the veganism, he said

'I think that there's a lot of misleading information about that, and a lot of misinformation about that and smear campaigns against farmers.'<sup>105</sup>

The theme of the environment, creation care and environmental stewardship, was also present when farmers were asked the final question, if they considered farming their calling in life. All the interviewees indicated that they did believe that farming was their calling, when asked to elaborate, one stated this:

'You have to be a good representative of the Lord ... and you have to be respectful to the law and have respect for animals, you can't be polluting and you have to [employ] good animal husbandry.'<sup>106</sup>

103 This conversation was unfortunately not recorded during the interview, it happened after the interview had finished. It was with interviewee 2: James Stewart.

104 Interviewee 1: David Brown

105 Interviewee 2: James Stewart

106 Interviewee 2. James Stewart

Another stated as follows:

'I have always been privileged to be on the farm and I've always looked over the land and on the nature and I've always said how could I not believe in a God but the beauty of creation... So, for me land has always been something that has brought me closer to God made me very aware of the very privileged position that I have to actually be able to enjoy and work on smell the earth whenever we would be cultivating or something like that... I will be loath to cut a tree down or to change the direction of a flow of a shuck or something like that very aware of all those things and I with keep everything, try and keep everything as natural, not try to change nature, you know work with it .. not change it you know, so I wouldn't be into what you'd call high intensive farming.'<sup>107</sup>

### **Politics and economy: conflict and opportunity?**

Agriculture is a devolved policy area under the devolution settlements of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This means, that as a result of Brexit each administration can, in principle, take responsibility for shaping its own new domestic agricultural policies.<sup>108</sup> However, this also means that there will be differences in agricultural policies across the UK, and the UK Agriculture Act 2020 gives powers to England, Wales and NI to amend EU retained legislation and introduce new legislative powers.<sup>109</sup>

Farmers in the UK receive support from a variety of organisations including both government departments and NGOs. In the UK farming and farm policy is the responsibility of the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, (DEFRA) and the NI counterpart is the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs of Northern Ireland (DAERA). These organisations have a number of responsibilities including ensuring that legislation relating to agriculture has the appropriate policy mechanisms to ease implementation; a Farming Advice Service; and providing information on farming subsidies/grants.<sup>110</sup>

107 Interviewee 4: Jackie Irvine

108 <https://merid.org/case-studies/just-rural-transition/>, p. 3, accessed 1.12.25

109 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2020/21/contents>, Section 48 and Schedule 6, accessed 1.12.25

110 <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/farming-advice-service>, <https://defra.farming.blog.gov.uk/2023/03/02/grants-available-in-2023/>, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-farming-in-england>, <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/farming-grants>, <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/advice-and-guidance>, <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/rural-policy-framework-northern-ireland>, all accessed 1.12.25

Additionally, educational services such as agricultural research, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, and the agricultural colleges are also under the remit of DAERA. Historically, DAERA would have relied heavily on DEFRA for advice and guidance in implementing EU policy and legislation through the practice of ‘shelf-lifting’ of DEFRA policies by DAERA. However, the divergence farming policy may create additional challenges for DAERA, as the continue to implement certain EU policies while DEFRA may adopt specific policies for England and Wales.

There are a number of NGOs that provide support to farmers in both GB and NI, in England and Wales the largest NGO is the National Farmers Union (NFU). The NFU represents more than 46,000 farming and growing businesses, their purpose is to ‘champion British agriculture and horticulture, to campaign for a stable and sustainable future for British farmers and to secure the best possible deal for our members.’<sup>111</sup> Their role includes lobbying, on behalf of British farmers and farming industries to ensure that their members are represented at Westminster and Brussels.

In NI there is the Ulster Farmers’ Union (UFU), founded in 1918 the UFU is the largest democratic voluntary organisation representing farmers and growers in Northern Ireland. Its central objective is to promote their interests both at home and abroad through professional lobbying.<sup>112</sup> The UFU takes a close interest in rural affairs and services, works with politicians both in the U.K. and Internationally, and with other groups and organisations to advance rural interests. Additionally, the UFU works closely with the NFU in England (Scotland and Wales) and the Irish Farmers Association in Dublin.<sup>113</sup>

Historically in NI there has been less a tension between farmers and mainstream society in general and more specifically between farming and environmental protection. This tension appears to stem concern that enhancing the environmental protections may impede the economic viability of the Agri-sector.<sup>114</sup> The tension has been enhanced by political opposition from one of the largest political parties in NI, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). DUP ministers have been responsible for the environmental portfolio intermittently over the last decade, as a result any consultative exercises in examining environmental issues by environmental ministers from other parties, were discontinued once the ministerial portfolio

111 <https://www.nfuonline.com/about-us/>, accessed 1.12.25

112 <https://www.ufuni.org/about/>, accessed 1.12.25

113 <https://www.ufuni.org/about/>, accessed 1.12.25

114 For example, in 2016, Michelle McIlveen, former DUP MLA and the then Minister for the Environment told the Assembly that there was no need for a Climate Change Bill. ‘Environmental minister rules out separate climate change laws.’ (Belfast Telegraph, 05/12/2016) accessed 12/12/23

changed hands.<sup>115</sup>

A recent example of this political opposition, and the apparent contention between environmental protection and the economy, was evidenced by then-environment minister Edwin Poots objections to the emissions targets in the Climate Change Bill.<sup>116</sup> This resulted in Poots introducing a second climate change bill with opposing emissions targets and timeframe. The first Bill introduced by Claire Bailey in March of 2021 “aim[ed] to establish a mandate for climate change mitigation and adaptation in Northern Ireland and ensure that Northern Ireland meets net-zero carbon emissions by 2045”.<sup>117</sup> By comparison, the Executive Climate Change Bill (introduced by Poots) imposed a 2050 deadline and an “equitable contribution” by Northern Ireland to UK net zero.<sup>118</sup>

Yet, whatever the areas of conflict, huge economic potential remains. In 2021 the UK, agri-food sector accounted for a GVA of £127bn or 6.2% of the national GVA, an increase of 13% from 2020, and employment in the agri-food sector 3.3% over 12 months to 4.2 million by the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2022, to just under 4.2 million.<sup>119</sup> In 2021 the agri-food sector and agriculture in NI contributed 1.6% of the Gross Value Added (GVA), with food and drink processing accounting for 2.6% of the GVA, employing approximately 52,195 workers equating to 2.3% of employment in NI.<sup>120</sup>

## Culture and farming: a changing landscape

A theme that emerged during the course of the interviews and through informal discussions was the impact that the changing landscape of modern farming was having on traditional farming culture. This was most notable in the interviews with

115 Notable examples include Mark H Durcan when he was Minister for the Environment called for Climate Change legislation; see <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/environment/environment-minister-rules-out-separate-climate-change-laws/35269462.html>, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/doe-discussion-document-environmental-governance-in-northern-ireland-mag-res-porse.PDF>, both accessed 1.12.25

116 Edwin Poots DUP MLA tabled amendments to the Bill at Further Consideration Stage, his amendments where to ensure the agriculture sector is was not unfairly burdened by the zero net emission targets; see , <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-poots-brings-forward-amendments-his-climate-change-bill>, accessed 1.12.25

117 <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/legislation/bills/non-executive-bills/session-2017-2022/climate-change/climate-change-bill---efm---as-introduced.pdf>, accessed 1.12.25

118 <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/legislation/bills/executive-bills/session-2017-2022/climate-change-no.-2-bill/climate-change-no.-2-bill---efm---as-introduced.pdf>, accessed 1.12.25

119 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/agriculture-in-the-united-kingdom-2024/chapter-14-the-food-chain>, accessed 1.12.25

120 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/ni-agri-food-sector-key-statistics>, p. 4, accessed 1.12.25

those who have been farming for many generations. Concern was expressed that as farm sizes increased and smaller farmers were absorbed into larger ones that the culture of helping each other out and the closeness of rural communities would be lost.

With an interviewee stating this:

‘There used to be a helpfulness with neighbours, neighbours would have borrowed and worked together, not for payment, but “you help me, I help you.” And because of the pressure that’s on every farmer now, even if you wanted to do that, they just simply haven’t got the time. Because of the pressure and some people ... the farmers who didn’t increase [farm size] simply disappeared.’<sup>121</sup>

Another interviewee stated this:

‘I think we’ve lost the small family farm nucleus, where a farm would have had a number of cows, pigs, chickens ... and all the members of family would have been involved in that ... so yes, I would say culturally we have a deficit ... we absolutely do.’<sup>122</sup> Another interviewee commented on the changing sizes of farm, stating, ‘in my grandpa’s generation there were probably have been a thousand people farming in the area, in dads there’s a hundred and probably in mine by the time that I’m 40 or 50 there could only be ten.’<sup>123</sup>

Another theme that emerged from the interview findings related to the financial viability of smaller farms, with an interviewee commenting as follows:

‘I think in my community in my area, I’ve seen much, much more part time farming. So that small farm is not able to support a family longer ... in past generations it was just subsistence, in the sense that it put food on the table and so forth. But what you find with part time farming is that their salary and wage that pays the bills, and farming is perhaps more a hobby.’<sup>124</sup>

The difficulties regarding the financial sustainability of a small farm was also addressed but respondent 5, who wrote that ‘keeping [a] small farm business afloat is getting harder with larger overheads, and with farm outputs not matching with

121 Interviewee 3: Victor Chestnut

122 Interviewee 4: Jackie Irvine

123 Interviewee 2: James Stewart

124 Interviewee 1: David Brown

inflation or input costs.’<sup>125</sup>

While the researcher was unable to find any articles or policy papers regarding the impact that Brexit has had farming culture in NI, we could assume that the additional financial pressures from Brexit, such as lessening grants/payments, may perpetuate the intensification of farming in NI. This in turn will have an impact on farming culture as there may be a reduction in small family farms.

## Education: sowing seeds for the future of farming

A 2015 study which examined the education levels of farmers and those in farming families, this report noted that of those interviewed, the educational level was significantly lower than average.<sup>126</sup> Three of the interviewees confirmed that they were educated to GCSE (age 16) level, with the fourth indicating that while his farming education had been ‘on the job’, that his son who farmed with him had been to Greenmount Agricultural College.<sup>127</sup> All interviewees enjoyed studying at Greenmount found the one-year course in Agriculture was helpful. Notably Interviewee 1, explained that he ‘absolutely loved’ the experience, in contrast to the Bi-Agri degree at Queen’s University that he dropped out of because ‘I wanted to farm more than I wanted to study chemistry... so I came home to farm after the first term.’<sup>128</sup>

Each interviewee indicated that a large portion of their agricultural education and the skills learned were passed down generationally or through ‘on the job’ learning, with one interviewee when reflecting on his time studying at Greenmount college stating: ‘I did actually find it helpful, because I was only about 17, so I did learn things at it. But the vast majority of what I learned I learned by doing on the farm.’<sup>129</sup> The interviewee who had no agriculture education or formal training noted that, such education ‘would not be the case now’ going on to explain that his son who farms with him, ‘I would look at him with the most responsibility... he went to Greenmount

125 Respondent 3: C Morrow (wished to have his name partially redacted). Due to the working full-time was unable to schedule a time for an interview.

126 13% were educated to degree level; 10% were educated to A-level or equivalent, 19% were educated to GCSE/O-level at Grades A, B or C equivalent and that 5% were educated to GCSE/O-level Grade C or below; see <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/farmers-and-farm-families-in-northern-ireland.pdf>, p. 33, accessed 1.12.25

127 Greenmount campus is a 200-hectare site with is part of CAFRE (College of Agriculture Food & Rural Enterprise). The campus provides agriculture facilities for arable, dairying and lowland beef farming (see <https://www.cafre.ac.uk/about-us/our-campuses/greenmount/>, accessed 1.12.25).

128 Interviewee 1: David Brown

129 Interviewee 2: James Stewart

[College] and did an agricultural degree<sup>130</sup> Therefore, all the case study participants had someone with formal agricultural training working on their farm. It should be noted, however, that there is no legal requirement to have an agriculture qualification to pursue a career in farming in NI, however in order to qualify for certain grants/entitlements there may be a requirement to have undertaken agricultural studies.

#### 4. *A national strategic plan for Northern Ireland?*

As outlined above the UK's exit from the EU has left NI in a unique position, significantly that NI Farmers retain access to the single market but are no longer be entitled to CAP and the associated subsidies. As a result NI has an opportunity to redefine its agricultural policies and support schemes for the first time in over 40 years with the aim of developing an agricultural support framework portfolio better suited to local needs and one that will provide for and secure long term sustainability within the industry.<sup>131</sup>

In March 2022, the DAERA Minister Edwin Poots announced the Future Agricultural Policy for Northern Ireland. Discussing the Policy the Minister stated as follows:

We have been able to redefine how our agriculture sector operates and ensure a targeted delivery of programmes and funding to meet our needs. [The policy] provides a fresh vision for a future agricultural regime that promotes productive, efficient practices through greater innovation and capacity, increasing profitability whilst protecting the environment, animal health and welfare and public health.<sup>132</sup>

This Policy includes:

1. A Farm Sustainability Payment, this payment will provide a 'safety net' income support. The payment will be based on area size, use of entitlements and all land-based agriculture and horticulture business are eligible to apply.
2. A Beef Sustainability Package: this is aimed at increasing productivity and driving down carbon emissions.
3. Farming carbon measures which encourage low carbon emission farming practices.<sup>133</sup>

While the Future Agriculture Policy was produced independently from the CAP Strategic Plan, there is notable overlap between it and the broad themes and

<sup>130</sup> Interviewee 4: Jackie Irvine

<sup>131</sup> <https://merid.org/case-studies/just-rural-transition/>, p. 8, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>132</sup> <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/future-agricultural-policy-northern-ireland>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>133</sup> <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/future-agricultural-policy-northern-ireland>, accessed 1.12.25

Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan, for examples the new CAP for Ireland aims to:

1. Protect farm incomes
2. Support the rural economy
3. Ensure the production of high-quality safe food for consumers
4. Protect the rural landscapes and environment.

With limited developments up to the time of writing, it is difficult to predict the success and impact of the Future Agricultural Policy in Northern Ireland, if it is to follow the success of CAP then NI Farmers will benefit from the financial assistance. However, as pointed out by one interviewee the previous CAP policy may have fostered an attitude of dependence from some farmers, stating, 'when we were in the EU we did have the guarantee single farm payment which really carried many farmers ... actually farmers were dependent on that bonus [CAP payment] each year'.<sup>134</sup>

There were additional concerns about the DAERA policy voiced by another interviewee who said,

'There's a lot of stuff in there not fully developed yet. So there are bits of it, as I say come in and 2024 other pieces we have talking about 2025. Unfortunately it needs secondary legislation and that secondary legislation you know what ... that needs politicians to be in place and then Executive in place so that's probably a hope that it will come in and 2025. But I think ultimately at the end of the day, the direction of travel will be entirely new to farmers, I think at present are starting to get their heads around aspects of it. But other aspects of it don't have that level of detail'.<sup>135</sup>

When asked about their awareness of the DAERA plan (or agriculture policy in general), the interviewees with the greatest level of understanding of the plan were unsurprisingly those who have worked with the UFU.

## 2C. Case study 3: The Netherlands

### 1. *Meeting a local farmer: Govert Slob*

<sup>134</sup> Interviewee 4: Jackie Irvine.

<sup>135</sup> Interviewee 1: David Brown

Farmer Govert has been at his work since 1980, when he finished his education. He began by building a new shed for 60 cows and started increasing production, but came up against EU milk quota limits a few years later. This was problematic at first, but when he worked out how to buy quotas from other farmers, sufficient money was earned and the stable expectations helped him focus on optimising production. In 1989 he took over the farm from his parents, but the increased stringency of rules and regulations (including environmental ones related to nitrogen emissions – which is not a new issue) caused him to search elsewhere for opportunities.

In Canada he saw that one could produce far more in freedom and with potentially limitless scope for growth, but the ideal farm did not appear. Still, in his mindset, growth was the only way to stay in business and flourish. With this in mind, he sold the old location in 2001 and bought another farm nearby, with a shed for 100 cows and young livestock kept in other locations rented from local farmers. He owned that farm for two decades, and has farmed the land as an employee since 2021. Today he lives near to the farm in Gorinchem, enjoying the doing what he loves without the pressure of overall responsibility for the business.

Govert entered the profession out of a basic love for cows and fields (as he puts it) and is aware of political issues without being ideologically driven. Not everyone is on the extreme right or left, as the media might make us think. His main concern to understand policy has been pragmatic: what do I need to do in my own farm situation? He is increasingly familiar with ecological matters and takes these seriously, particularly soil health and water quality, but notes that this was not part of his agricultural training.

He observes that many in Dutch society are relaxed in their attitude to farming and only become concerned when 'the problems come too close to people when their children can't build their houses anymore and when the nature is under pressure because of stikstof [nitrogen]'. Another way in which people resist the reality of sustainable farming is in consumers' refusal to spend more than the 10% of their household bill that currently goes on food. That number is too low, he thinks. Despite popular hopes, the new Dutch government is as powerless to address this as it is the EU regulations to which the Netherlands signed up decades ago. What gives him hope about Dutch farming is the potential for diversity; conventional (i.e. industrial at scale), organic and nature-inclusive must all be part of a sustainable future.

Overall, farmer Govert has done what so many people do in their various spheres, which is to make sure that things are kept in order and that the family is provided for; with four children, that is more than enough work! Govert has always been content with this, resisting the drive towards 'more' and 'bigger' that characterises global

culture and economy (average dairy farm sizes have grown from 30-90 cattle in his 45 years of farming). His satisfaction with cultivating his own place also constitutes a wider social responsibility, which works generationally, i.e. through time rather than expanding through space to local community. He wants to make sure that the land is kept for his children or whoever farms it after him. In fact, generational stewardship is part of his responsibility to his 'heavenly Father', which defines his life through deeds more than words. In this, he is a typical farmer as opposed to a bureaucrat.

Govert's story is, in many ways, symptomatic of what is likely to be a 'silent majority' of farmers in the Netherlands. Those who focus on cultivating local connections to land and people and 'just get on with it' are the ones that maintain culture, but also the ones unlikely to come to public attention. As we turn to the story of Dutch farming, it's important to keep in mind that people like Govert are the main actors in the story, even if they never garner individual attention.

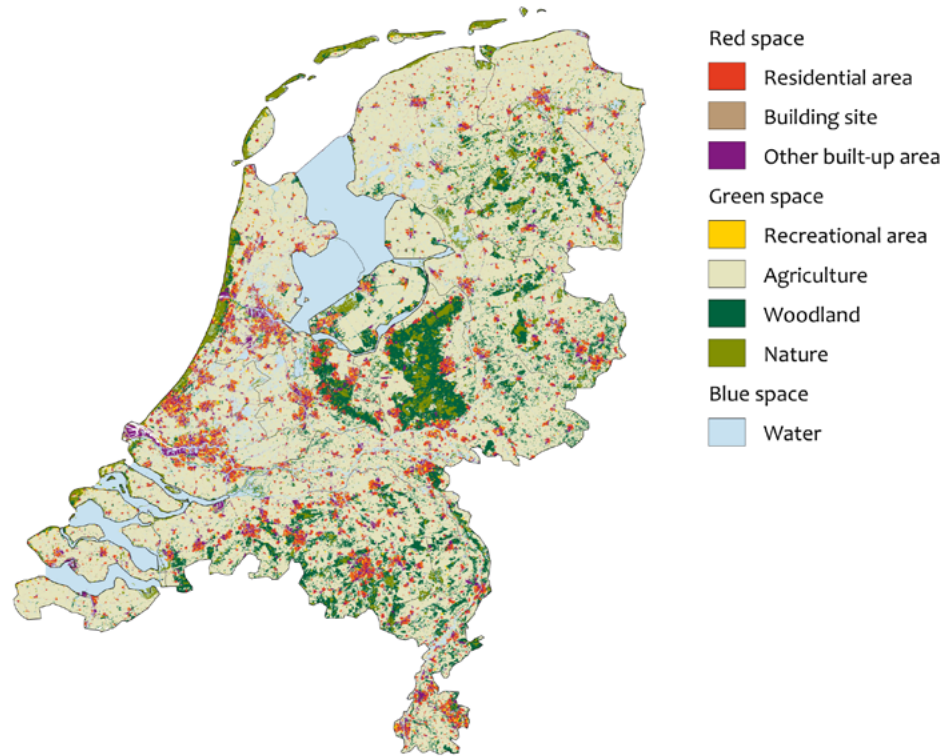
## 2. *The story of Dutch Farming*

The geography of the Netherlands makes it particularly suited to agriculture. It is relatively flat and green, with its huge amount of water being managed by famously advanced drainage, damming and diversionary systems. It has a variety of soil types and qualities, spanning the main categories of sand, peat, clay and loam. A very high proportion of the land is cultivatable, with agriculture estimated to cover up to 65% of the surface area. This accounts for the main use for the roughly 85% of The Netherlands's surface area which has not been built upon by habitation or other infrastructure (see map below<sup>136</sup>). Therefore, it should not be surprising that farming has always been crucial to the Dutch people; its current level of global exposure is due to peculiar political circumstances rather than agriculture's newfound importance in the nation.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>136</sup> See the CLO Environmental Data Compendium, <https://www.clo.nl/en/indicators/en006111-land-use-in-the-netherlands-2015>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>137</sup> As per the report as a whole, 'farming' here refers to land-based food and crop production activity, i.e. arable, horticultural and livestock farming, including growing non-food products but excluding forestry and fishing.

## Land use in the Netherlands, 2015



Source: Statistics Netherlands, Cadastre

CBS/jan20  
www.clo.nl/en006111

## From early marketisation to Industrial Revolution:

Jan Bielman looks back over half a millennium of Dutch agriculture and judges it to be 'one of the driving forces behind all the cultural, social and economic expansion' of the nation.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, it is a vital, though little-recognised, factor behind the Golden Age (c. 1575-1675). By the end of this period, Amsterdam was 'the centre of the world grain trade', making it likely that a strong set of market forces had already begun to determine production. It is true that many farms remained relatively self-sufficient, employing mixed farming to produce a variety of things for the household. This had been the situation for centuries before that, back to when it was nearly universal to cultivate one's own land; of course, this is also the situation for millions today. But

<sup>138</sup> Jan Bielman, *Five Centuries of Farming* (Wageningen Academic Publishers, The Netherlands, 2010), p. 23. This whole subsection is indebted to Bielman's detailed and informative study.

as the focus shifted on the surplus to household requirement that could be traded, agriculture was becoming more of a business rather than a means of survival or a way of life.

Along with the growing economic significance of farming came the necessity of efficiency. Specialisation and technological innovation continued even through the relative stagnation that came at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This paved the way for the most fundamental change in Dutch agriculture, which was part of a Europe-wide (and soon to be global) paradigm shift.

*The moment at which prices began to increase again after 1750 marked the emergence of a process of complex and fundamental changes in European society, which has become known as the Industrial Revolution. Roughly speaking, one could say that these changes marked the transition from the old, agrarian society to the new, industrial era. From this moment on, the urban sector would rapidly exceed the rural sector in numbers.*<sup>139</sup>

## Towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century: global economic and political enmeshment

Farming was becoming a minority occupation; the relative size of this labour sector shrank in the 19<sup>th</sup> century compared to rapid population growth in general. However, there were also setbacks during the period (such as the potato blight of 1845-47 and a severe depression in the 1880s), which exposed the vulnerability of an economic model based on scale. Nevertheless, Dutch exports remained highly lucrative into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with internal and external transport systems being supplemented by increasingly scientific approaches to livestock and crop production, stimulated by governmental support for innovation. Thus the previously laissez-faire approach was replaced by a 'chain of research, extension and education under the umbrella of one governmental body [which] formed the basis of the rapidly expanding agricultural success'.<sup>140</sup>

But the government's involvement went beyond encouraging farmers' productivity. Increasing governmental control was felt to be a necessary response to the depression of the late 1920s; it became a priority to try and maintain market stability, especially in relation to foreign markets. This excerpt from a 1934 debate in the British parliament illustrates how the role of the Dutch government in agriculture impacted international trade relationships.

<sup>139</sup> Bielman, *Five Centuries of Farming*, p. 81

<sup>140</sup> Bielman, *Five Centuries of Farming*, p. 165

**% of Care Frms Open to a Specific Group of Participants**

| Year | Intellectual Disabilities | Mental Health Problems | Youth | Older people |
|------|---------------------------|------------------------|-------|--------------|
| 2005 | 67                        | 39                     | 22    | 11           |
| 2009 | 53                        | 39                     | 32    | 24           |
| 2018 | 69                        | 60                     | 43    | 43           |

**Figure 1. Excerpt of a British parliamentary debate from 1934**<sup>141</sup>

Governmental interventions were not always popular with the farming community at home either, whose protests helped precipitate the Agriculture Crisis Act (*Landbouwcrisiswet*) of 1934, which ‘marked a true watershed in the relations between the individual farmer and the government’.<sup>142</sup> Various local associations had gradually come to operate under the Ministry of Agriculture (established 1935), so that the government now became chiefly responsible for the overall fortunes of the agricultural sector.

The ravages of war culminating in the ‘hunger winter’ of 1944-45 exposed yet more vulnerability.<sup>143</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the desire for food security made the involvement of even larger political forces attractive to the Dutch people. Thus when the European Economic Community (the EEC, forerunner of the EU) was founded at the start of 1958, its common agricultural policy had the same basic aims of Dutch policy: to provide adequate, affordable food and safeguard rural (especially farmers’) livelihoods. Even small, local farms had now become embedded within geopolitical dynamics; EEC agricultural investment had come largely from the USA to ensure that Europe would remain influenced by it, rather than the USSR.

What national and EU-level policy meant in practice was a drive towards efficiency. This was encapsulated by the (Dutch) EU agricultural commissioner Sicco Mansholt’s

<sup>141</sup> <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1934/may/17/skimmed-condensed-milk>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>142</sup> Bielman, *Five Centuries of Farming*, p. 168

<sup>143</sup> Curiously, Bielman omits any mention of this significant event. For an autobiographical account, see Henri A. van der Zee, *The Hunger Winter : Occupied Holland, 1944-1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

1968 plan that ‘aimed at stimulating farm business termination of the smaller farms in order to leave the released land for the benefit of the sound and viable ones’<sup>144</sup> Family-run agricultural enterprises had hitherto benefitted from developments in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, since the ‘profitability of labour-intensive farming systems generated a tendency that benefited family farming’.<sup>145</sup> But the so-called Mansholt Plan ensured that their decline was likely to be terminal.

In the 1950’s the Dutch countryside was the domain of agriculture as never before. Never had there been so many people active as farmers, land labourers or market gardeners, or with an occupation directly linked to the farming business’ but increased labour price meant that the ‘interwoven processes of intensification, mechanisation, rationalisation, scaling-up and specialisation that would change agriculture technically in an inconceivable and unprecedented way’.<sup>146</sup>

By the late 1990s, less than 3% of the Dutch workforce were in agriculture; unlike during times of rapid population growth, the absolute size, not just the relative size, of this labour sector had been in steady decline. With a less powerful grouping, it was particularly difficult for the farming lobby to deflect the blame for the environmental concerns that had been growing since the 1980s. Productive land began to be ‘returned to nature’ and ‘since 1981 the Dutch government has provided subsidies for agri-environmental management to conserve nature and landscape values in agricultural areas’.<sup>147</sup> Likewise, national government and the EU further exerted control over the sector by imposing on the use of the very chemical inputs that these bodies had previously convinced farmers to use as part of their drive for efficiency.

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, farming in the Netherlands kept increasing in productivity, playing a major role in global markets. This success continued to be supported by governmental and EU policies that recognised the sector’s economic importance. Along with this – and as part of this support – knowledge, education and technological innovation continued rapidly developing. Attempts to address unsustainable resource use and the damage done to ecosystems also went further than in most other nations, certainly further than most of the EU. And yet, despite all of this apparent progress, farmers themselves were increasingly unhappy and division grew between them and the vast majority of society who had no direct role in cultivating the land. The main features in Dutch agriculture that have shaped it for half a millenium – whether economic, political, technological, environmental or social – make it being world-leading and yet problematic.

<sup>144</sup> Bielman, *Five Centuries of Farming*, p. 248

<sup>145</sup> Bielman, *Five Centuries of Farming*, p. 158

<sup>146</sup> Bielman, *Five Centuries of Farming*, p. 316

<sup>147</sup> <https://www.clo.nl/en/indicators/en131712-agri-environmental-management-1981-2023>, accessed 1.12.25

In the Netherlands, agricultural modernisation was embedded into a food regime based on a neocorporatist alliance of Dutch ministries, industry, agricultural schools and universities.<sup>148</sup>

Before turning to look in more detail at the situation of farming in the Netherlands today, it is worth noting how deeply rooted this alliance was. Given the institutional entanglements of the past, it would be naïve to imagine that these have disappeared. Indeed, it will become apparent that they have not.

### 3. *The structure of Dutch agriculture today*

The Dutch Government website provides the key basic information on national agriculture, and it is factually corroborated by the much more detailed information given in the report on “State of Agriculture, Nature and Food” (“Staat von Landbouw, Natuur en Voedsel”, hereafter abbreviated to LNV) by Wageningen Economic Research.<sup>149</sup> This latter report is the main source of statistical information for what follows, except where indicated by footnote.

## **Economy: World leading and dependent**

**Production:** As we have already indicated, there is a massive amount of farming happening in the Netherlands, much of it industrial in scale and method. This is a geographically (under 42,000 km<sup>2</sup>) and demographically (around 18 million inhabitants) small nation with over half of its land under commercial cultivation (53% as of 2022).<sup>150</sup> Yet astonishingly, it is the world’s second largest exporter of agricultural produce and contains 25% of the world’s greenhouses.<sup>151</sup>

Arable crops are the biggest category of produce for the Netherlands, including cereals (especially wheat), potatoes and feed crops (especially for cattle, e.g. fodder maize). Horticulture is also a huge contributor, with vegetables (e.g. sweet peppers) and flowers (e.g. roses and of course tulips) being the main produce. Livestock farming is still economically crucial, however. Despite the perceived vilification of

148 Leitheiser, S., Horlings, I., Franklin, A., Trell, Elen-Maarja (2022), ‘Regeneration at a distance from the state: From radical imaginaries to alternative practices in Dutch farming’, *Sociologia ruralis*, 62(4), 705.

149 Berkhout, P. (ed.), van der Meulen, H., Ramaekers, P. (2023), ‘Staat von Landbouw, Natuur en Voedsel’ (Wageningen Economic Research).

150 For agricultural land use statistics, see <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators/Series/AG.LND.AGRI.ZS>, accessed 1.12.25

151 Heide, C. & Silvis, Huib & Heijman, Wim. (2011), ‘Agriculture In The Netherlands: Its Recent Past, Current State And Perspectives’, *Applied Studies in Agribusiness and Commerce* 5/1-2, 27

(and protests by) dairy farmers in particular, pig and chicken numbers have fallen whilst the number of heads of cattle has grown slightly (LNV).

**Agribusiness value:** The economic productivity of agriculture in the Netherlands comes into stark relief when we consider again its relatively small geographical size. It is one of the smaller countries in the world (ranking around 130<sup>th</sup> out of 195, which includes ‘microstates’) but ranks second in the world after the USA in terms of the value of its export produce at around € 60 billion in sales (LNV).

Overall, the added value of Dutch agribusiness is around €58 billion, with arable having the biggest proportion of the industry overall. However, most of this sub-sector’s value is in the form of processing (coffee, tea and cocoa etc), which in turn depends on importing relatively cheap raw material (LNV). Domestic agribusiness sales are less than exports and farms are dependent on a relatively small group of large corporations to whom their produce is sold. Of the €47 that the Dutch people spend on food and non-alcoholic beverages per year (out of €411 billion total household expenditure), 59% is spent in supermarkets and 29% in food service (LNV).

Albert Heijn, the biggest supermarket, is owned by a multi-national parent company and only a minority of restaurants and cafes etc buy directly from farmers. This accentuates the sense of relative weakness in the system that many farmers experience. Conversely it raises the question: if farmers are not making serious money from their produce, who (if anybody) is? In other words, how does the food chain work and who benefits and loses from it? This is a fundamental question to which we return later.

**Consumption:** One group whose relationship to the food chain highlights the ambiguities and complexities of the system is consumers. On the one hand, consumers expect food at low prices, regardless of whether the producers are making enough for a sustainable livelihood. Prices have generally risen slower than farming input and labour costs. Indeed, the percentage of household spending on food has decreased dramatically in the past century, from 29% down to less than 12%.<sup>152</sup> On the other hand, consumers themselves are squeezed by the rising price of other necessities. This is especially true of housing, which now takes an average of 23% of household income, one of the highest rates in Europe.<sup>153</sup>

152 <https://longreads.cbs.nl/the-netherlands-in-numbers-2023/what-portion-of-income-went-to-food-in-1936/>, [https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Countries-Regions/International-Statistics/Data-Topic/Tables/BasicData\\_HouseholdExpFood.html](https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Countries-Regions/International-Statistics/Data-Topic/Tables/BasicData_HouseholdExpFood.html), both accessed 1.12.25

153 <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2024/22/housing-costs-in-the-netherlands-higher-than-in-most-eu-countries>, accessed 1.12.25

Certain economic and social developments also mean higher proportions of income spent on transport (commuter patterns, cheaper air travel and mobility more generally), clothing, the hospitality industry and, especially, anything related to digital life (internet, phones and entertainment subscriptions). However we judge the benefit of these developments, the fact is that the average person's life involves spending on more things that compete with food expenditure now than ever before.<sup>154</sup> Paying higher prices for local food would need to be motivated by more than simply economic necessity, especially as food prices themselves are rising rapidly.<sup>155</sup> There would have to be an ethical choice made, whether to contribute environmentally by cutting supply chains, socially by increasing farmer livelihoods or culturally by developing local food culture.

## Politics: supporting, controlling or neglecting?

**Government agriculture policy:** The Government of the Netherlands website proudly highlights the levels of production from its agricultural and horticulture sectors, signalled by its high export value (second only to the United States, as has been mentioned). It firmly pledges its support to the sector as a crucial part of the nation's prosperity, 'accounting for 10% of the Dutch economy and employment'. Priorities for development revolve mostly around sustainability, whether saving fossil fuel energy and increasing biomass use, diversifying business models through 'multifunctional agriculture' or promoting organic farming.

In contrast, the same website initially contains not even a mention of livestock farming as a central feature of Dutch agriculture, despite the huge contribution that it makes (as noted earlier). A small subsection under 'see also' describes 'the livestock sector' simply in terms of what it produces and the fact that there are efforts to make it more sustainable.<sup>156</sup> Nitrogen is key here, as we will see below. There is no indication of the economic value of the sector or its proportional size of Dutch agriculture as a whole, either in terms of production or labour force.

**Dutch CAP NSP:** As is the case with most technical documents, the Dutch CAP National Strategic Plan is far too detailed for most people to have understood or

<sup>154</sup> <https://longreads.cbs.nl/the-netherlands-in-numbers-2022/what-do-we-spend-money-on/>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>155</sup> <https://www.iamexpat.nl/expat-info/dutch-expat-news/dutch-supermarkets-expect-groceries-become-more-expensive> and <https://www.oliverwyman.com/our-expertise/insights/2023/jan/food-and-inflation-in-the-netherlands.html>, both accessed 1.12.25

<sup>156</sup> <https://www.government.nl/topics/livestock-farming>, accessed 1.12.25

even read the whole thing.<sup>157</sup> The 18-page table of contents (in English) gives a clear picture of what the 642-page document (otherwise in Dutch) covers. Predictably comprehensive, the document deals with all 10 of the EU's key objectives, addresses each of the GAECs (Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions) and sets out strategic aims for CAP 2023-2027. These aims effectively correspond to the three main pillars of, i.e. direct payments, sectoral interventions and rural development. Sectors addressed include arable and livestock agriculture (including hops, fodder and biomass crops) horticulture as well as viticulture, apiculture and forestry but, as per the CAP in general, excludes fishing.

The chief aims of the strategic plan can be divided into the same basic three categories into which we earlier put the 10 key objectives of the EU CAP overall, with a final cross-cutting objective. In terms of economic security, there is income support as well as sectoral support (especially to horticulture) through producer organisations and help with weather insurance. For the environment, there is a commitment to increase organic farming and implement GAECs on nearly all agricultural land as well as protection for water course, biodiversity, peat meadows and soil more generally. Extra meadows (particularly for bird species) will be developed along with the extant Natura 2000 sites. Social sustainability (otherwise termed as rural development) will be pursued through encouraging young farmers and supporting regions through Local Action Groups, as well as improving animal welfare. Finally, knowledge sharing and innovation will move from a privately mediated focus to 'an impartial advisory system' to which all farmers will have access and even a grant (€1,750 each) for training.

Of course it is the purpose of each country's strategic plan to align with the EU CAP more generally but the Netherlands is especially closely aligned. This is unsurprising given that it is in some ways a symbol of EU agricultural policy, and not only because of its status as one of the founding nations of the Union. The most influential figure in Dutch farming development, Sicco Mansholt, was not only a national politician but also the EU agriculture commissioner as well as the president of the EC itself. Moreover, the Netherlands would appear to embody pan-European values such as pragmatism and international co-operation, not least around trade. By the same token, the push back against aspects of EU-wide policy has been the strongest in the Netherlands and, as we will see, it has also been a pioneer in farmer protests. What this suggests is that the role of politics in Dutch agriculture is ambivalent; the rhetoric and funding strategy is all about support, but there is at once a feeling that government and EU intervention amounts to undue control whilst, paradoxically, neglecting the welfare of farming communities under threat.

<sup>157</sup> Downloadable from <https://www.toekomstglb.nl/documenten/publicaties/2022/10/03/definitieve-nsp>, accessed 1.12.25

## Science, Technology & Education: Innovation Leader

The status of the Netherlands as an economic over-achiever and pioneer in policy for agricultural development could not be achieved without a strong innovation base. Indeed, some of the most radical experiments in agriculture are being developed through Dutch projects. Some of these push methods of food production so far that the term 'farming' no longer seems appropriate; instead of land being cultivated, food can be created through bio-chemical processes in a controlled environment. This includes 'vertical farming', algae farming and, as recently publicised, lab-grown meat (Mosa Meat has filed Europe's second application for producing this).<sup>158</sup> Indeed, the CEA (Controlled Environment Agriculture) sector is growing rapidly, with Dutch organisation GreenTech bringing together global horticulture professionals to facilitate collaborative commercial projects that maximise technological developments worldwide.<sup>159</sup>

Behind such mainly commercial initiatives is a highly respected research and education culture. The two legally separate entities of Wageningen University and Research (WUR) are the top two institutions in terms of receiving money through the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (research and university receive €57 million and €54 million respectively).<sup>160</sup> WUR is generally recognised as one of the very top agricultural training and research institutions in the world (it started life as an agricultural college and today covers all life sciences). It is recognised as the 'best in the Netherlands by students' and its research 'ranks highest in the field of agriculture, nature, and environmental sciences worldwide'.<sup>161</sup>

Again, being a world leader has the flipside of being most dependent on wider EU and global economic and political trends. Industry leaders such as those who partner through GreenTech proudly acknowledge the 'triple helix' of public, private and university collaboration as one of the ways in which Netherlands maintains its leading role in global food production.<sup>162</sup> Thus we see 'the cooperation between the government, education, and the business sector, and the engine behind the

<sup>158</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-mosa-meat-european-union-ceo-dutch-food-company-price/>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>159</sup> See <https://www.greentech.nl/>; for an insight into how such collaborative partnerships work, see the panel discussion at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_n7Qg7bQR8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_n7Qg7bQR8s), both accessed 1.12.25

<sup>160</sup> <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/r-d-funding/horizon-europe/wageningen-biggest-beneficiary-agriculture-and-environment-research>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>161</sup> Mulder, M., Biemans, H. J. A. (2018), 'Agricultural education in the Netherlands: from crystallizing to dissolving?', *The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, 24/11, 2

<sup>162</sup> This was a repeated theme in the GreenTech panel discussion launching the 'Farming the Future' campaign (see [https://youtu.be/\\_DiqWD2Vd0A](https://youtu.be/_DiqWD2Vd0A) and <https://farmingthefuture.nl/en>, both accessed 1.12.25

success of Dutch agriculture'.<sup>163</sup> However, problems will come if interest in farming as a career continues to decline and Dutch agriculture is not seen as something to be maintained for its own sake. There is a 'risk that agricultural education as a whole will be integrated in larger and broader comprehensive schools for secondary and vocational education'; the strength of the sector, and its economic output, will shrink. This will render it less economically attractive and weaken the case for government support (which is key for WUR in particular).<sup>164</sup>

## Environment: exemplary but problematic

**Exemplary policy?** In line with wider EU (and indeed global) conceptualisation, policy on the environmental impact of farming activity is framed primarily as climate adaptation.<sup>165</sup> Necessary adaptations are identified in relation to five pillars: water, soil, crop cultivation systems, livestock farming and public sector support (from municipal to international levels).

A cross-cutting priority for crop and livestock farming is energy saving. Thus the Dutch government states that 'energy savings will be a priority for the Dutch (greenhouse) horticulture sector, while the livestock sector will need to focus on animal welfare and the environment over the next few years'.<sup>166</sup> This involves not only using less energy overall but using more biomass energy in comparison to fossil fuels. Likewise, reducing nitrogen affects all agricultural activity, and is the issue that has the most severe political consequences, especially as it pertains to livestock farmers and the contested ways to curtail their emissions (more on which below).

In terms of ecosystem services and biodiversity restoration, there is even more wide-ranging ambition. This is not a new priority - the goal of the NNN (Natuur netwerk Nederland) in 1990 was to expand natural habitats by 150,000 ha. This latter scheme is again a result of European-level legislation. Natura 2000 is a very large network of protected areas throughout Europe; it 'extended over 18.6% of the EU land area and 9% of its marine territory' by the end of 2022.<sup>167</sup> Although the controversy around its implementation in the Netherlands has reached international attention only

<sup>163</sup> Mulder, M., Biemans, H. J. A. (2018), 'Agricultural education in the Netherlands: from crystallizing to dissolving?', *The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, 24/11, 5

<sup>164</sup> Mulder, M., Biemans, H. J. A. (2018), 'Agricultural education in the Netherlands: from crystallizing to dissolving?', *The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, 24/11, 5

<sup>165</sup> <https://www.government.nl/topics/agriculture/climate-adaptation-in-agriculture>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>166</sup> <https://www.government.nl/topics/agriculture/agriculture-and-horticulture>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>167</sup> <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/indicators/natura-2000-sites-designated-under>, accessed 1.12.25

recently, it has a long history. The 1979 Bern Convention made by the Council of Europe (independent of the EU) led to the Birds Directive in the same year, and the Habitats Directive in 1992, pledging to protect these areas.<sup>168</sup>

**Problematic practice?** Since 1995, agricultural production in the Netherlands has grown significantly – by over 20% in fact (LNV). And yet there has been an overall decrease in ecologically damaging by-products, not least through pesticide & fertiliser usage. Greenhouse gas emission has decreased 20% since 1990, mainly due to lower nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) cuts, though ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>), phosphates and particulate matter are also less overall (LNV).

However, it is pointed out in the CLO Environmental Data Compendium that ‘on 1 January 2023 the area of farmland under agri-environmental management was approx. 104,000 hectares, or about 6% of the total area of cultivated land. The majority of this land is in the provinces of Friesland, Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland and is under grassland management for the protection of meadow birds’.<sup>169</sup> Likewise, the European Habitats Directive; there is only favourable conservation status for 12% habitat types and 26% of species (LNV). Likewise, despite being a bastion for alternative approaches, organic farming is about 4%, less than half the Europe average.<sup>170</sup>

Progressive policy measures should not, therefore, mask the fact that the industrial system dominating Dutch agriculture continues to exact a heavy toll on the land. Industrial methods still prevail: high levels of pesticide usage have been highlighted by Pesticiden Eetwijzer (the Pesticide Action Network).<sup>171</sup> More generally, there has been a decline in the match between soil type and agricultural land use, meaning that the environmentally most suitable type of farming activity is not often enough taking place, with market forces increasingly determining what is produced where.<sup>172</sup> All this suggests that the systemic reasons for environmentally problematic farming (i.e. that economic considerations dictated by a global market rather than social-environmental considerations dictated by the needs of the local people) are still in place. Improvements are in technique and matters of detail, but do not go as far as

168 For the Bern Convention see <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treaty-num=104>; for the Birds Directive see [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/birds-directive\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/birds-directive_en); for the Habitats Directive see [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/habitats-directive\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/habitats-directive_en), all accessed 1.12.25

169 <https://www.clo.nl/en/indicators/en131712-agri-environmental-management-1981-2023>, accessed 1.12.25

170 Leitheiser et al., ‘Regeneration at a distance from the state’, 703

171 <https://www.pan-netherlands.org/eetwijzer/>, accessed 1.12.25

172 Bakker, M. M. et al. (2013), ‘Trends in soil-land-use relationships in the Netherlands between 1900 and 1990’, *Agriculture, ecosystems & environment* 181, 134–143

actually regenerating the land and making farming genuinely sustainable.

## Dutch farms and farmers: changing landscape

There is, yet again, a contradiction in the status of Dutch farmers. On one hand, their contribution seems to be valued; as mentioned earlier, the government website proudly states that ‘the agricultural and horticultural sectors play a crucial role’, accounting for ‘10% of the Dutch economy and employment’.<sup>173</sup> This suggests a large and respected role for farmers. However, only a minority of this 10% are directly involved in cultivation since so much of the work in agribusiness (to which the Dutch government refers) involves non-primary activities such as processing rather than actual farming. By 2023, only 158,900 of the 600,000 total AWU labour force for agribusiness were in agriculture and horticulture, and even this figure includes a lot of administration time. Likewise, whilst the number of older (age 55+) farmers with a successor appointed has risen to over 40%, the larger holdings were much more likely to have a successor (LNV). Farms are increasing in size, mechanisation and economic productivity, and fewer farmers are needed, with many of the more menial roles going to migrant workers.

**Dutch farms:** the number of holdings continues to decrease by over 2% per year (now down to around 50,000) whilst the area of cultivated land falls much more slowly. It is therefore unsurprising that farms are getting larger overall. In fact, there is a large group of very small farms (37%) and a small group of very large farms (9%) which carry 2% and 58% of the Standard Earning Capacity respectively (LNV). With the low-income capacity of so much farm produce, it is understandable that so many agricultural holdings – nearly half in fact – have diversified their income streams (the figure rose 10% in 2023 to 24,434, according to LNV). This of course indicates an economic problem but, at the same time, opens up opportunities for farms to have a greater role within society with a multi-function approach, as we’ll see below.

Agricultural holdings have risen in value to an average of €3.8 million, which is an average yearly rise of €160,000 since 2016 (LNV). When the price of Dutch land is so much higher than everywhere else in Europe, it makes it nearly impossible for new farmers to enter the vocation.<sup>174</sup> Besides, high land value does not counteract relatively falling prices of produce, since the figure includes intangible assets, capital infrastructure and equipment that is not paid off. Moreover, prices across the board

173 <https://www.government.nl/topics/agriculture/agriculture-and-horticulture>, accessed 1.12.25

174 ‘Liberalisation of the Dutch agricultural land market has seen the price of land in The Netherlands rise by 450% from 1963 to 2018’, and is the highest in Europe (Leitheiser et al., ‘Regeneration at a distance from the state’, 714)

are rising faster so that farmers' outlays are increasing, both for farm inputs and basic living needs. Even with diversified income streams, many farms are therefore asset rich but cash poor, increasing the pressure to sell, especially in the absence of viable family succession in farm ownership. Additional pressure to sell comes from the pressure of national and EU environmental goals, including long-term plans for increasing the amount of land under conservation. Sometimes explicitly (but more often implicitly), environmental policy portrays farming as working against ecological sustainability. This is a large part of what has contributed to the so-called *Stikstofcrisis* (nitrogen crisis), which we turn to now.

#### 4. *Stikstofcrisis (nitrogen crisis)*

It might be surprising that a dispute over a chemical element should be such a major issue but the Dutch farmer protests have been well publicised globally. Just as is the case with the protests across Europe in different cities, however, there is widespread ignorance about the story behind them. Having looked at the features of Dutch agriculture today as the culmination of a history stretching back half a millennium and longer, we can identify several factors that are bound to cause tensions between farmers and government. There are five specific aspects of agriculture in the Netherlands that raise this tension and put farmers under increasing pressure.

Firstly, Dutch agriculture is **market-oriented**. This may sound obvious to modern ears, with our assumption that farming is basically a business, one more sector in the economy. However, as we have seen, this was not always the case in Europe and is still not the case in much of the world. When farmers are almost entirely subject to market demand with limited power to shape this demand, some degree of tension is inevitable. Secondly, Dutch agriculture is **politically determined**, both nationally and at a EU level. This situation arose initially because of the need for political powers to bolster industrial farming against the effects of market liberalisation and the ravages of war, but more recently industrialism itself is being targeted in favour of environmental priorities. These interventions have given rise to protests, with nitrogen emissions already being at issue as far back as 1989-1990.

Thirdly, though, the human factors should not obscure the reality – true everywhere and at every time when farming has been practiced – that agriculture is **environmentally dependent**. No matter how much economic and political realities shape the context within which farmers work and even the innovation that comes from institutions such as WUR, the availability of natural resources and the behaviour of weather still must be grappled with. When these conditions shift (as with the changing climate or crop pests and diseases, for example), food production systems have to be adaptable. The bigger the operation and tighter the profit margin, the harder such adaptability is. Fourthly, and finally, Dutch agriculture is becoming

**socially marginalised**. It is not that farmers are generally despised; in many, especially rural, areas, they are recognised as pillars of society. But marginalisation is the inevitable result of increasing farm sizes, mechanisation and a shrinking agricultural labour sector combined with general aspirations *away* from outdoor manual work in favour of 'laptops and coffee shops'.

### The protests and their aftermath

It will be clear from the context outlined here that Dutch farming has been subject to the control of the various forces of the establishment whilst being increasingly alienated from it. This is a bad structural combination that invites conflict. When a government committee headed by Johan Remkes announced that nitrogen emissions would have to be reduced by closing livestock farms, dissent could not remain under the surface. During rush hour on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2019 around 2,000 tractors descended on The Hague, causing over 1,000km of tailbacks across the country. Farmers (including farmers' groups, such as eventually formed the Farmer's Defence Force), were protesting not only against the specific nitrogen-cutting directives, but the logic that facilitated the cuts being made.<sup>175</sup> Since farming, so the argument went, was responsible for 80% of emissions but only 1% of GDP, the cost to society of reducing agricultural volume (especially livestock) was worth making for the sake of the environment.

Issues raised during protests were indicative of a broader discontent on the part of Dutch farmers. Apart from the feeling that the government was irresponsibly rendering agriculture dispensable (hence the most memorable slogan, "no farmers, no food"), there were complaints about cuts in rural investment, unsustainably low prices and the sense that farmers were being punished despite complying with government demands. Not only had they been told for half a century to expand and increase production using whatever means possible (including chemical fertiliser) but they had managed, through technical advances, to cut emissions by over 65% since 1990. Continued (apparently unrealistic) demands from an urban elite establishment that did not know (or seem to care) about farming came across as disrespectful at best. At worst, some took the scheme to buy out farms with high nitrogen emissions – which did not seem voluntary – as an attempted land-grab, dispossessing farming families of generationally held land.

Although there were some concessions that temporarily quelled the fury of farmers, tensions between them and the Dutch government have continued through to today. They have not only set a pattern for other farmers' actions throughout Europe, but

<sup>175</sup> For the Farmers' Defence Force, see <https://www.desmog.com/farmers-defence-force/>, accessed 1.12.25

seem to have influenced similar protests in India and even inspired the massive truckers' protests against Covid measures in Canada, which ostensibly had nothing to do with agriculture.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, the protests have contributed to a complete change in the balance of power within Dutch politics, with the newly formed Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB in Dutch – *BoerBurgerBeweging*) winning the 2023 provincial elections. This 'sent shock waves through the political establishment'.<sup>177</sup>

Whilst the resignation of Mark Rutte and subsequent national election victory of Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) had more to do with immigration than nitrogen, the issues became actually connected (rather than being two separate things normally associated with right-wing politics). Popular suspicion arose that land taken from livestock farmers would be used to build accommodation for immigrants, possibly within a massive transnational state-run urban project ('Tri-State City', as reported by Euronews weekly among other outlets).<sup>178</sup> Very soon after formation, the right-wing coalition that replaced the fourth Rutte cabinet has scrapped the €24.3 billion budget for state-imposed emission reduction measures, favouring voluntary and 'technological solutions'.<sup>179</sup> However, it then lost a court case brought by Greenpeace and has consequently been forced to commit itself to 'reduce nitrogen-based pollution in the country's most vulnerable habitats by 50% or face a fine of €10 million in 2030'.<sup>180</sup>

Today, there is something of an impasse with no policy announcement on nitrogen emissions and no easily accessible information on progress in previous policy implementation.<sup>181</sup> For example, it is unclear how far the two farm buy-out schemes approved in 2023 (called LBV and LBV plus, adding up to €1.47 billion) were being implemented and how many farmers were compensated by government for 'voluntary definitive closure of livestock husbandry sites'.<sup>182</sup> But it appears to have

176 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/indian-farmers-continue-protests-call-for-crop-price-reform-and-more> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-60164561>, both accessed 1.12.25

177 Matthews, A. (2024), 'Farmer Protests and the 2024 European Parliament Elections'. *Intereconomics* 59/2, 83

178 <https://euroweeklynews.com/2024/09/23/tri-state-city-europe-wants-to-merge-4-countries-into-1-european-city-capital/>, accessed 1.12.25

179 <https://www.politico.eu/article/dutch-government-ordered-to-cut-nitrogen-pollution-or-face-e10m-fine-greenpeace-netherlands/>, accessed 1.12.25

180 <https://www.dutchnews.nl/2025/01/dutch-government-considers-appeal-after-losing-nitrogen-case/>, accessed 1.12.25

181 The Dutch government website gives an interesting picture of 'sitting on the fence'. On one hand, the strategic role of livestock in national agriculture is minimised but on the other hand, there is no mention of any plans to reduce herd sizes or farm numbers as part of the climate adaptation measures described.

182 Eligible sites would be those whose nitrogen emissions were too high and which fell in at-risk Natura 2000 areas.

allowed large agribusiness firms to buy out land from farmers negotiating with the government; emissions may well be decreased on such sites, but the land will neither be in the hands of the state nor of the original farmers; it certainly will not be 'returned to nature'.<sup>183</sup> Political leadership in the Netherlands (whether right-wing or centre-left) is paying the price from its 'failure to articulate a vision for a sustainable agro-ecological future'.<sup>184</sup>

## Evaluating the claims made in the protests

It is true that a general sense of anger at the political establishment sometimes obscured the more specific issues being raised by the farmers protesting. However, it is still important to isolate what the core concerns were and evaluate the claims to which they gave rise. Two main points of contention can be identified: low prices and the loss of freedom (together with loss of land).

**Low prices** have to be understood in terms of income and wages, since most farmers are self-employed and what they receive is more closely linked to what they sell than for employees of businesses or other organisations. When dealing with 'prices', we are speaking relatively of course, both in relation to inflation generally (including input costs) and in relation to more money being made elsewhere. Do we find higher prices for work or products in other parts of the value chain, other sectors, or indeed other times and places? Obviously there are also plenty of people working in those other areas whose income is far lower than the farmers' average, and farm labourers or other similar work within the agricultural sector is particularly poorly paid. Likewise, relatively cheap final products on supermarket shelves can still be more than many people can comfortably afford. Whether Dutch farmers were paid more in the past is difficult to answer, since the material standard of life and the expectations that come with it have risen so much and certainly there are many other places in the world where farmers receive much *less*.

Despite these qualifications, the fact is that Dutch farmers (apart from those industrial horticulturalists) are relatively low in the value chain (as they are in the EU as a whole, hence the improvement of this position being one of the key objectives of the new CAP). Farmers' average income in the Netherlands is less than the average for those working in the other key parts of the value chain – farm inputs, transport, processing, trading, retailing and regulation and less than the average in most other professional sectors.<sup>185</sup> How this could be addressed without a fundamental

183 <https://nltimes.nl/2024/11/12/agriculture-giants-snatching-farms-govt-buyout-scheme-report>, accessed 1.12.25

184 Leitheiser et al., 'Regeneration at a distance from the state', 717

185 [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/csp-at-a-glance-netherlands\\_en.pdf](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-01/csp-at-a-glance-netherlands_en.pdf), accessed 1.12.25

reformation of the economic system is difficult to imagine.

**Loss of freedom** was not often stated directly but is around the rhetoric of protesting farmers. A greater set of regulatory burdens from statutory bodies, together with the already harsh economic conditions would make it near impossible to carry on doing their work. It is certainly true that environmental regulations have been tightened notably and there is a perception of a more general tendency towards increased bureaucratisation in Europe that is meeting resistance across the EU from a variety of sources.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, excessive bureaucracy is a common Eurosceptic criticism that can go hand-in-hand with accusations of Brussels imperialism (a line frequently taken by the leave campaign in Brexit, ironically alongside hints of British imperial nostalgia). What the farmers were responding to went further than bureaucratic empire-building to an actual takeover of their land. Can this claim be seen as anything other than sensationalism?

One must take seriously what the situation would have felt like from the perspective of farmers. The Dutch government to suggest farm buy-outs as an alternative to meeting emission reduction targets that they knew were economically unrealistic for most farms, making it a proposal that literally takes the ground from beneath their feet. It did not help the situation that there were conversations around a megacity project (Tri-State City) and plans to build extra housing for refugees and asylum seekers, all of which seemed to suit the liberal urbanites who spend their time on laptops in coffee shops. Even worse, suspicions that this sociological and ideological ‘other’ was trying to take control of land held by generations of rural communities were not taken seriously.<sup>187</sup> More explanations would have been helpful on key questions raised about government policy, e.g. what happens to bought-out farmland? Moreover, it was never going to convince opponents for the tristate city website simply to put up a disclaimer ‘this model has **no** relation whatsoever with the nitrogen policy of the Dutch government!’ and pause the website without answering concerns.<sup>188</sup>

Whatever one thinks of the ideological factors that amplified the farmers’ fears of land-grabbing, they should be examined fairly and rationally instead of being dismissed patronisingly as conspiracy theories. Besides, it is not unreasonable to feel like one is engaged in a power struggle. It is a sad fact of human existence that

<sup>186</sup> Jan Vogler questions whether this critique is justified; see <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euopp-blog/2023/09/04/why-do-so-many-people-hate-eu-bureaucracy/>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>187</sup> It is telling that Melle Nikkels, in an interview for the ProAdvice podcast in 2023, stated that ‘the only programme working [for nitrogen emissions] was where the government offered to buy land’ (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/0kSSQSji19uMDyXXNlfjP>, accessed 1.12.25)

<sup>188</sup> The EC press release fails to explain what would happen to land that is bought from farmers under the LBV and LBV plus schemes ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_2507](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_2507), accessed 1.12.25)

different factions are perpetually vying for control of sectors and spaces; despite the fact that the Netherlands excels in friendly collaboration compared to other countries, it is naïve to think that harmonious co-existence is the whole story. Efforts for greater power and control motivate state actors as well as corporations and private citizens – including many farmers themselves, who regularly take over others’ farms.

The aspect of human nature and socio-political reality for the strong to dominate the weak relativises the ‘freedom’ that anyone (including farmers, engaged in their own power struggles) can legitimately claim to have had. Where one may sympathise with farmers in the Netherlands, however, is that their position in relation to state and corporate interests has gotten progressively weaker. This process began with agriculture becoming primarily market-driven (as we saw in our historical sketch) and has only increased with the EU’s subsidisation of incomes and inputs along with government incentives to expand and raise production levels. In reality, therefore, the Dutch farmers were not defending their freedom in any absolute sense; it would be more accurate to say that they were trying to hold on to the last vestiges of freedom that has been whittled down over centuries of subservience to market forces and the various national and transnational government instruments that must attempt to regulate these forces.

**What about the environment?** One notable feature of the farmer protests is that it was not (at least initially) directed against the central claim upon which the policy they are opposing is premised. What do they actually think about the environmental priority of reducing nitrogen emissions? Usually the topic is not mentioned, with the implication that ‘sustainability’ is being used as a pretext by the government to achieve a separate (and hidden) set of goals. Where this topic is addressed at all, the counterpoint is sometimes raised: “why target farmers and not all the other nitrogen-emitting activities that politicians especially are involved in?”.

When one asks ‘why am I getting all the blame?’, it is a tacit admission that one bears at least some responsibility for a real problem. Other farmers have responded more positively, acknowledging the problem but saying that it is being dealt with as much as possible with the technical means available. After the protests, the attitude became more hostile, with farmers who had previously been positive about adopting nitrogen reduction measures given the right economic assurances turning to denial that such a problem existed at all.<sup>189</sup>

<sup>189</sup> A post-protest sequel to the 2018 WUR State of the Farmer survey found ‘approx. 73% of farmers stated they did not believe the nitrogen problem actually existed’ (Leitheiser et al., ‘Regeneration at a distance from the state’, 708)

The problem is that, behind the politicisation, there lies a scientifically very challenging issue. It is nearly universally recognised that excessive nitrogen emissions are problematic but there is no consensus on a sufficiently scaled farming system to reduce them satisfactorily. There are questions at the very micro-level of how to increase certain crops' nitrogen use efficiency. There are also questions at the broader systemic level regarding agroecological understanding of the kind of biodiversification needed for the overall ecological health of a local area, which would entail the regulation of nitrogen emissions within a (relatively) closed system.<sup>190</sup> Agricultural innovation does not always move hand-in-hand with scientific research of course, and neither are independent of larger public and private interests.<sup>191</sup> But we cannot afford to allow the issue of nitrogen emissions to be so politicised as to lose a focus on developing farming practices that contribute to long-term ecological flourishing.

<sup>190</sup> The former is the subject of a technical article by Butterbach-Bahl K, Baggs EM, Dannenmann M, Kiese R, Zechmeister, Boltenstern S. (2013), "Nitrous oxide emissions from soils: how well do we understand the processes and their controls?", *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society B*, 368.

<sup>191</sup> In fact, the 'triple helix' collaboration of state, business and university is something that some in the Dutch horticulture sector are particularly proud of. See the GreenTech panel discussion on 'farming the future', [https://youtu.be/\\_DiqWD2Vd0A](https://youtu.be/_DiqWD2Vd0A), accessed 1.12.25.



## Section 3: A Relational Vision for Agriculture

This final section of the report sets out a relational vision for agriculture in response to the current European crisis. It does so first through an analysis of the crisis that brings the relational elements to the fore, re-evaluating EU policy in light of this deeper analysis (3A). It then sets out what an alternative vision based on relational thinking might look like (3B) before turning again to look at the Netherlands as a case study of such a relational approach in practice (3C). The section and the report end with a consideration of some steps forward, particularly for EU-level policy-makers (3D).

### 3A. Analysing the agricultural crisis

Three core challenges and one underlying ideological feature emerge from the foregoing research as aspects of the crisis in European agriculture related to food production, culture, economy and ethics. These overlap and interlink, and can be best seen as different perspectives on one fundamental crisis rather than discrete issues. Food production both impacts on and is impacted by culture and is part of the wider economy, whilst ethics both underlies and is informed by all three. Nevertheless, identifying these points will build a nuanced perspective on the whole picture that will in turn help us to formulate a response via relational thinking.

#### 1. *Get bigger, sell more: globalised industrial food production*

Farming in Europe partakes of a food production system that is not only industrial but global in scope. Not every aspect of this system is negative, and we will be careful to identify facets of it that should be retained and built upon. But certain systemic elements are inherently problematic for agriculture and contribute to the crisis in which it finds itself.

#### Market orientation and economies of scale

It is generally taken as self-evident that farms are business that have to be oriented towards their market. However, European farming began as a means to sustain

families and communities (which remains the purpose of farming in most of the world today). Therefore, the aim is to produce that was nutritionally sufficient and suitable for production within their particular geographical area. 'Sustainability' in this case was not an optional side-aim but a means to the generational survival of a people in a particular place. When local, national and then international markets became increasingly determinative for agricultural productions, questions of what the local people and the land needed receded in importance.

There are dietary implications to this situation, and we will turn this and other consumer-related issues below. For now, the concern is with farming itself and particular the land. As we have seen with Northern Ireland and the Netherlands, countries in Western Europe especially have geared themselves fully to markets. As a result, intensive production of high-priced produce (particularly dairy) has caused problems for soil, water and air quality. It is not only livestock that has such drawbacks; large areas planted only with one kind of crop can have similarly detrimental effects, not to mention greater susceptibility to disease.

Focus on single commodities is lucrative not just because of price per unit but because of the scale of production that such focus allows. Economies of scale take precedence over what is more ideally sustainable for land but also perpetuate the process of farm consolidation for which there is no logical end: 'the death of small farms is being driven by economies of scale and leaps in technology that big farms are more able to embrace'.<sup>192</sup> This is not helped by the fact that bigger farm also end up getting the most subsidies, though British billionaire inventor and farm-owner James Dyson did point out that his farms spent more on environmental measures and paid more in tax than they got in subsidies.<sup>193</sup> When farms get bigger and more mechanised, there are not only fewer farms but fewer farmers, and the very real existential threat felt by so many farmers should make society ask whether we want apparent economic inevitability to take its course.

## Long supply chains and compromised food sovereignty

Another consequence of the globalised industrial food production system is the lengthy and increasingly complex supply chains that come with it. These not only require huge resources to maintain but exact a heavy toll on the environment and are very difficult to keep transparent. It is not only unfair profiteering or shoddy

<sup>192</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/nov/03/we-didnt-realise-how-hard-it-is-small-farmers-in-europe-struggle-to-get-by> and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/02/revealed-the-growing-income-gap-between-europes-biggest-and-smallest-farms>, both accessed 1.12.25

<sup>193</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/04/james-dyson-eu-common-agricultural-policy-subsidies>, accessed 1.12.25

practice that can go under the radar without transparency; more serious violations like human trafficking and modern slavery, which is a recognised issue in both Northern Ireland and the Netherlands.<sup>194</sup>

Long supply chains are also more vulnerable to geopolitical shocks, which are especially prevalent today, but food sovereignty issues constitute a wider challenge. The very concentration of agriculture on only a few products means that the majority of the food must be imported, even in regions that are highly productive financially and by tonnage. Moreover, urbanisation has developed in such a way that whole regions develop without any relation to food or water supply for city dwellers.

Raising the concept of sovereignty should cause us to ask who should be responsible for ensuring food supply (nations? Regions? Communities?) and, conversely, who does in fact control it. With a market-oriented system, it is the biggest players in the agri-food game that end up with de facto control of supply chains. In fact, only a few multi-national food and agri-business corporations such as Nestle and Bayer, with the essential backing of state and intergovernmental bodies, dominate the global system. Not only so, but such actors are also buying up agricultural land (as Denisa referred to in Romania). What is effectively happening is a concentration of power over global agriculture that may not look like centralisation (because of the dispersed nature of the entities involved) but removes food sovereignty further from local communities.

## An alternative food production system?

Despite these criticisms of the current paradigm, this should not be read as a call to abolish it altogether. Not only is this, of course, practically impossible but it is an unwise impulse without a better alternative in action. Besides, industrialism and the technological development that accompanies it have certainly had benefits. This includes the access to new techniques and inputs that have made such positive difference in contexts such as Denisa's in Romania, who reminds us that an increase in scale and yield is a good thing (at least within certain limits). Moreover, global trade will always be necessary in a world where not everyone can produce everything. Any alternative vision that we propose must take these realities into account.

### 2. *Laptops and coffee shops: farming marginalised by cultural ideals*

In Europe, people's aspirations are towards a characteristically Western working lifestyle that is as far removed as possible from farming. We do not think of this as 'culture' ('culture' is something associated with quaint tradition or aesthetic pursuits,

<sup>194</sup> See, for example, Siegmann, K. A., Quaedvlieg, J., & Williams, T. (2022), 'Migrant Labour in Dutch Agriculture: Regulated Precarity'. *European Journal of Migration and Law* 24/2, 217-24.

not a contemporary way of life). But lifestyle is lived culture, and when pattern of screen-based activity (both work and leisure) in urban areas is unanimously modelled by leaders, including European ones, this has a powerful force. This cultural trope of laptops and coffee shops is not incidental to the farmer protests, but gets to its very heart.

What counts as 'success' in society is determines the trajectory of the majority within it. This is basically the question of cultural aspirations. An easily recognisable vision of a successful life is the person sitting in front of a screen, sending emails and having zoom calls whilst sipping an americano. Work that can be done this way – whether as an employee or freelance – is removed from regular direct contact with people, manufactured objects or the land and depends first and foremost on high levels of cognitive ability. A less sought-after and apparently 'successful' version of this is the person who lives in order to spend more time on screens, whether gaming or engaging with social media. Media (especially social media) perpetuates this vision, not least through the fact that such a high majority of content is accessed through devices, capturing the imagination and shaping the existential desires of many who engage with them as they become more enculturated to a life mediated by screens.

In order to see the relevance of this to farming, we need to see the flipside of this vision. Rural areas are being depopulated at an alarming rate and much of the development in such areas involves connecting them more closely to urban life, with increased internet provision and transport links for example. In terms of education, agricultural training programmes are only offered in a small number of institutions (workers in the sector, even at management level, tend to be educated below average).<sup>195</sup>

A vision of life characterised by laptops and coffee shops effectively establishes a society of individuals connected digitally and commercially. Whilst there can be some semblance of community in such a context, especially in shared workspaces, it restricts the dimension of real people in real places interacting with their physical surrounds in a way that also establishes relational connection. Whatever else can be learned from the experience of the Covid pandemic, it did expose the illusory nature of a life defined by autonomous individuals plugged into the internet and sitting behind screens all day. It actually raised awareness of the impossibility of such a life to the extent that local community and interaction with nature came to the fore as being essential for people's physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, especially

<sup>195</sup> See the Oct. 2017 European Parliament briefing paper "Agricultural education and lifelong training in the EU" at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608788/EPRS\\_BRI\(2017\)608788\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608788/EPRS_BRI(2017)608788_EN.pdf), accessed 1.12.25

during lockdowns.<sup>196</sup> But there are also more specific problems for farming.

## Incompatible views of environment & farming

Those whose lives revolve around laptops and coffee shops inevitably develop different perspective on nature and the environment than those who work in agriculture. Although it may sound counter-intuitive, an 'environmentalism' that conceives of the human relationship to nature in terms of enjoyment without high levels of food production is a very urban elite idea. What people love or care about is often erased from debates on social issues. But if people love 'laptops and coffee shops' more than land and animals (a love for which clearly motivates all the farmers interviewed for this project), then this questions the reality of their commitment to 'nature'. It is little wonder that environmentalists clash with farmers in Northern Ireland or that Romanian farmers view certain innovations with suspicion. Conversely of course, agricultural training (such as Govert received) that was carried out under an industrial paradigm with no strong sense of ecological sustainability makes it hard for farmers to think of their land apart from its being a productive resource.

Whilst there may be cultural roots to the division between the urban elite and the less powerful inhabitants of the countryside, it has a tangibly socio-political character. Those working in agriculture are increasingly likely to be 'kingmakers', as illustrated by the issues that came to the fore in the recent Dutch elections.<sup>197</sup> This division is nothing new to Europe – it can be identified in medieval Italy and ancient Greece – and may well be universal. But the tensions surrounding it, as well as the shrinking agricultural workforce itself, show the unsustainability of the increasing divide. This is so on a global, not just European level. The tendency of policy makers to see primary production (including farming) as something that can be done 'somewhere else by someone else' further increases the tendency to undervalue and exploit such labour when it is out of sight, especially in the majority world where less stringent labour regulations apply.

## Eating junk food in front of screens

A final issue attached to the culture of laptops and coffee shops is the physical

<sup>196</sup> Various studies have been conducted on these issues; see, for example <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-022-09316-4>, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160412021002890> and <https://arc-w.nihr.ac.uk/news/the-uk-covid-19-lock-down-prompted-greater-community-spirit-and-involvement-in-neighbourhood-life/>, all accessed 1.12.25.

<sup>197</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/dutch-farmers-party-bbb-mark-rutte-netherlands-big-winner-in-provincial-elections/>, accessed 1.12.25

condition associated with it. Quite generally, sedentary indoor lifestyles are unhealthy, with particular benefits of contact with nature being lost. But although many who have a screen-dominated lifestyle may have the money and awareness to buy high-quality agricultural produce, such a life militates in the opposite direction towards junk food, especially of the ultra-processed variety attracting scrutiny.<sup>198</sup> (Just ask yourself what you have consumed whilst looking at this report). Hours spent online makes people even more susceptible to corporate messaging over food and the general disconnect from farming makes it harder to grasp the negative impact of poorly produced food. Conversely, it is harder to grasp the real cost of *well*-produced food. Consumers as a whole spend only around 10% household income on food, which is historically very low, and spend relatively far more on tech than ever before. This is not to say that everyone could afford healthier food if they wanted to, but it does point to a systemic problem.

Malnutrition has traditionally been caused by lack of access to healthy food. Today, however, there are roughly the same number of malnourished people who are *overweight* as those who are *underweight*.<sup>199</sup> Industries have found ways to produce and market cheap food that is high in ingredients (primarily those containing sugar, salt, and fat) that make it immediately satisfying and tasty, with the flipside being a decrease in nutritional value. These have proved extremely popular across the Western world and wherever its markets penetrate and for many constitute the majority of what households purchase. Consumer patterns are determined by convenience rather than nutrition or local culture.<sup>200</sup>

Health problems alone should make this situation urgent, with projects such as the EU-funded Foodshift 2030 highlighting the fact that '70% of all deaths in Europe can be ascribed to non-communicable diseases that are affected by what and how much we eat'.<sup>201</sup> But this dietary pattern also has further reaching impacts. It is so ingrained into consumer demand that the supply in bulk of petrochemical-fed cereals that go to processing plants (or ends up as animal feed) is far more lucrative than the mixed organic farming that healthily feed a local community. Serious environmental, economic and social consequences, as we have already seen, arise from agri-business geared to unhealthy consumer demand, which shape agricultural practice.

198 <https://eurohealthnet.eu/publication/tackling-ultra-processed-food-for-a-healthier-and-just-food-system/>, accessed 1.12.25

199 This is well documented, e.g. <https://www.eiir.eu/strategic-affairs/nutrition-security/overnutrition-problem-of-nutrition-security-in-developed-countries>, accessed 1.12.25.

200 This has severe health consequences highlighted by EU-funded project Food-shift 2030, namely that '70% of all deaths in Europe can be ascribed to non-communicable diseases that are affected by what and how much we eat' (<https://foodshift2030.eu/about/>, accessed 1.12.25).

201 <https://foodshift2030.eu/about/>, accessed 1.12.25

On one level this is a matter of social justice, in that corporate interests are taking advantage of people's low incomes and inadequate education to push cheap produce that is nutritionally deficient, environmentally damaging and economically unsustainable. Framed this way, we could see the problem of diet simply as an outworking of the extraction economy. However, this implies an economic system that exists in isolation from the people participating in it and fails to take into account the agency of all of its actors, including the consumers.

Another level to the problem emerges when we ask why it is that industry has been so successful in promoting dietary practices that are harmful. What they are doing is tapping into a human tendency to prioritise short-term sensory experience over long-term holistic wellbeing, which is linked to the tendency to pursue individual over common goods. This tendency is tragic because it is illusory, offering satisfaction but delivering only more hunger to those who consume too much of what does not nourish. Put this way, it is obvious that we are talking about something that goes beyond diet and applies to the consumption of everything. We are talking not least about the variety of material accessed through social media, with which people initially choose to engage before it quickly becomes addictive.<sup>202</sup> Addressing only the structural factors and controlling actors in the economic system neglects the pathological dimension of the whole issue, a predilection for satisfaction without nourishment.

## An alternative culture?

These criticisms should not be read to discount any good that has arisen from technological development. Everybody benefits in one way or another from what can be achieved or accessed through digital technology, not least farmers themselves.<sup>203</sup> In any case, the world's systems are too technologically determined to make non-engagement a realistic option. But there is still a necessity to raise the profile of alternative visions, not least because the laptops and coffee shop existence is unsuitable for many and not economically sustainable if all were to aspire to it anyway. The importance of this comes into stark relief when we consider how exclusively our education systems are geared towards it. To a greater or lesser extent, the education systems of Europe are geared towards this kind of ability and the most prestigious institutions have the fewest practical courses. Aspirations (as expressed through the education system) are for jobs with flexibility and digital

202 <https://hbr.org/2022/11/our-social-media-addiction>, accessed 1.12.25

203 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digitalisation-agriculture>, accessed 1.12.25

interaction.<sup>204</sup> Employment that is based on high levels of relational capacity (especially the caring professions) or manual facility (which includes agriculture) are relatively less attractive and systemically undervalued. Again, the balance must be redressed

### 3. *Extraction trumps creation: an economy set against cultivation*

At the heart of the global economy and the discourse around it is a paradox. On one hand, there is consensus that we cannot accept system in which a small minority control and manipulate natural and human resources at the expense of the great majority. On the other hand, the system is geared towards exactly this consolidation of resources with those who are already the most powerful. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting relatively poorer, even though nobody claims that this is what they want to be happening. Jeff Bezos unwittingly draws attention to this upon leaving his post at the company that made his fortune:

Bezos claims in his farewell email to staff that Amazon deserves praise for upping its minimum pay to \$15 an hour. What the letter doesn't point out: At \$15 an hour, an Amazon worker would have to labor over 32,000 years to earn even one of his billions.<sup>205</sup>

## **A global system that still puts shareholders over stakeholders**

The World Economic Forum (WEF), one of the most globally influential public-private collaboration organisations, made the following statement in their 2020 Davos Manifesto:

The purpose of a company is to engage all its stakeholders in shared and sustained value creation. In creating such value, a company serves not only its shareholders, but all its stakeholders – employees, customers, suppliers, local communities and society at large. The best way to understand and harmonize the divergent interests of all stakeholders is through a shared commitment to policies and decisions that

204 David Goodhart's study of tertiary education reveals this problem, particularly in the UK but also in Europe as a whole; see *Head Hand Heart: The Struggle for Dignity and Status in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Penguin, 2020).

205 <https://inequality.org/article/the-unintentional-honesty-of-amazons-jeff-bezos/>, accessed 1.12.25

strengthen the long-term prosperity of a company.<sup>206</sup>

Companies continue to function in practice for the benefits of their shareholders, as the discrepancy between the increase in dividends and wages demonstrates.<sup>207</sup> Ironically, this discrepancy is especially stark in many companies most closely associated with the WEF agenda.<sup>208</sup> Even projects that claim to champion sustainable innovation are tarred by revelations that the same minority in control of key resources stand to benefit from them.<sup>209</sup> Part of this is a natural result of the fact that companies are physically located away from natural and even human labour; those in control are not really creating *with* them but trying to extract *from* them (even if they are genuinely trying to create something themselves, as many are).

A system in which one prospers by extracting as much as possible from others – a shareholder-based economy – contrasts with a more promising alternative, where wealth is created through the capacity to collaborate constructively with others – a stakeholder economy.<sup>210</sup> But for the alternative vision to become a reality, change must go beyond words and happen at ground-level. Agricultural produce is not only low-priced because of efficient production methods that yield an abundance. As a sector, it is at the wrong end of extractive actors operating according to the 'accumulation-driven commodification and the exploitation of labour and nature'.<sup>211</sup>

The problem is not only that farm workers and the land are undervalued financially; their exploitation involves the demand for them to be constantly productive without proper rest. Where this applies to labourers, the situation is mitigated somewhat by employment laws.<sup>212</sup> With the process of farming itself, however, a fundamental development in modern European cultivation techniques has been the elimination

206 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/12/davos-manifesto-2020-the-universal-purpose-of-a-company-in-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/>, accessed 1.12.25

207 The European Trade Union Conference (ETUC) reported "Shareholder payouts rising 7 times faster than wages" last year (<https://www.etuc.org/en/pressrelease/shareholder-payouts-rising-7-times-faster-wages>, accessed 1.12.25).

208 <https://www.weforum.org/communities/strategic-partnership-b5337725-fac7-4f8a-9a4f-c89072b96a0d/>, accessed 1.12.25

209 See, for example, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/11/cop28-draft-deal-slammed-for-dropping-call-to-phase-out-fossil-fuels>, accessed 1.12.25

210 Sallux has produced resources for and advocated a stakeholder economy for years, and has adopted the extraction-creation contrast as a way to express its economic vision, as most notably in Steven Backhouse and Eve Poole's, *From Extraction to Creation* (Amersfoort, NL: Sallux, 2022).

211 Benjamin Selwyn, "A Green New Deal for agriculture: Whither capitalism?" in Kyla Tienhaara and Joanna Robinson (eds), *Routledge handbook on the Green New Deal* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2022), 162

212 Though a US-based study does point to some areas where problems might remain; see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10200688/>, accessed 1.12.25.

of following.<sup>213</sup> Giving the land rest enables regeneration that is short-circuited by chemical fertiliser use. It depends on aiming for the long-term common good rather than short-term individual benefit, the latter being what the drive for ‘efficiency’ often means in practice.

When an economy based on extraction rather than creation determines the shape of agriculture, the consequences go beyond the collapse of a single sector and threaten the environment upon which we as people are totally dependent. What Johannes de Jong notes on the broader economic issue of gross inequality is relevant here:

The core cause is the pressure that originates from the demand of the shareholders that companies continuously increase profits in order to increase their dividends and the value of their shares on the stock markets. In this case it led to extraction of money from the most vulnerable consumers<sup>214</sup>

What is stated about shareholders and vulnerable consumers applies to any companies (or public sector actors) who make money because of the relative economic marginalisation of agricultural workers, who are at the bottom of the food chain. With the increasing hold that agri-business has on farmers (traditionally with inputs and machinery, but now also with tech solutions), this particular value chain is one of the clearest concrete manifestation of the extraction economy.

### **What is not economically valued is not valued at all**

A fundamental aspect of the problem with the economy of extraction is not just its internal functioning. The issue becomes more serious when we realise that the economy is the dominant consideration that shapes political and social development at a structural and policy level. How this impacts agriculture is clear; any non-economic benefits it has are relegated below financial priorities. This comes out interestingly in a 2001 OECD report on multifunctionality in agriculture. In discussing the ‘cultural heritage’ benefits of farming, the report states that

While consumer tastes may to some degree adjust to incremental changes in landscape brought about by changes in market conditions and support policies, there may also be a demand for maintaining certain landscape features or making active landscape improvements.<sup>215</sup>

213 Marcel Mazoyer and Laurence Roudart, *A History of World Agriculture: From the Neolithic Age to the Current Crisis* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2006), 21.

214 “Foreword” to S. Backhouse and E. Poole, *From Extraction to Creation* (Amersfoort, NL: Sallux, 2022), 9.

215 OECD (1995a), ‘Multifunctionality: Towards an Analytical Framework’, Paris, 42.

In other words, it is inevitable that economic development (pursued jointly by private and public actors) will be prioritised over any other value attached to traditional farming. Consumer tastes (themselves shaped by the same prioritisation) will contribute minor adjustments based on ‘the preference of society for alternative types of land cover’. Any role that farmers have as ‘guardians of rural customs and traditions’ neither have economic nor environmental value, with such heritage being equally well passed on ‘through clubs and cultural associations’, without any need to actually maintain farming.<sup>216</sup>

### **An alternative economy?**

Again, the critique offered here should not be read as a blanket denouncement of the global economy. There are creative elements and a growing recognition of social and environmental value (even this is abused by greenwashing and used to bolster state-corporate alliances that control much of the system). And although inequality is rising, it remains the case that wealth is being created for millions, and that absolute levels of income are improving even for some of the poorest. Stories like those of Govert and, especially, Denisa’s parents attest to the enduring potential for innovation and social mobility even within the agricultural sector.

Things are not universally disastrous: people around the world go to their jobs, do a hard day’s work, and receive payment enough to live a decent life. Besides, we have no real choice but to operate within this economy for now and can choose to do so well or badly. There is no benefit in putting all of our energy into imagining something that does not exist whilst simultaneously participating unethically in what already does. Yet pursuing growth through extraction surely is an ultimately destructive basis for a global economy and we have a responsibility to imagine something better and move towards it. The crisis in agriculture adds urgency to this mandate.

#### **4. *Lonely individualism: a modern ethic of human dignity?***

Lurking beneath the three main causative factors behind the crisis in agriculture is a less tangible but no less real ideological phenomenon. Even though there may be agreement – at least in theory – that human dignity is a shared basis for ethics and morality, what is the view of the human person to whom dignity is purportedly due? For some time now, critics of the neo-classical economics that still shapes so much of our public discourse have talked about *homo economicus*. This is a view of the human person, rooted in Enlightenment thinking, whose rationality consists of materialistic self-interest. Such a theoretical abstraction looks far more real when we consider the tendency towards isolated, autonomous and materially driven individual existence that seeks ‘self-fulfilment’ through opportunities, mobility and,

216 OECD (1995a), ‘Multifunctionality: Towards an Analytical Framework’, Paris, 42

above all, consumption.

For such a view of the human person, relationships to people and to place (which includes the land and other living things in which he or she lives) are optional at best and mere hindrances at worst. Certainly farming, with its intimate connection to land and to others within the community that depend on it (even if not directly for their food supply) does not fit naturally within the priorities of such a person unless they can expect to get a very high salary. Indeed, we only have to look at global trends to see that development' is equated with individual realisation and a move away from an agrarian (community and land-based) way of life. Education is geared towards this ideal and its problems, as well as the practical manifestations detailed above.

Once again, the point is not to dismiss modernism altogether or ignore the obvious importance of a healthy sense of individualism. Those of us privileged enough to grow up in the West will have benefitted not only from technological innovation but from a liberal democracy where one is more than a 'cog in the wheel' in a totalitarian regime. But if farming is to be valued in a way that lifts it out of the crisis it is currently in, a view of the human person that is connected to inherent value in agriculture needs to be proposed. Just as there is such a thing as *Relational Anthropology for Contemporary Economics*, there needs to be one for contemporary agriculture to.<sup>217</sup> We turn now to look specifically at the contribution of relational thinking to this debate.

### 3B. Relational thinking and the agricultural crisis

#### 1. A relational gap in EU policy?

On the back of the underlying factors behind the crisis in European agriculture, we need to briefly reconsider the extent to which EU policy addresses the core challenges as they emerge from a deeper analysis. Certainly the bureaucratic, diplomatic and legislative machinery of the EU is not lacking in capacity for detail; each specific issue raised above, along with hundreds more, are dealt with through some scheme or regulation. What is lacking, however, is the kind of joined-up approach that would arise from a coherent alternative vision.

We see this of course in the basic acceptance of a market-driven agriculture, which

<sup>217</sup> For an alternative approach, see van Nes, J., Nullens, P., van den Heuvel, S.C. (eds), *Relational Anthropology for Contemporary Economics*. Ethical Economy, vol 61. (Springer, Cham., 2022).

militates its own commitment to rural development, but most specifically with local food systems. A whole-system approach appeared to have been the aim around a decade ago, but the concept is absent in the more recent policy documents.<sup>218</sup> There are separate elements of local food systems that EU policy commits to developing, such as shorter supply chains, Geographical Indicators (GIs) and public procurement policies.<sup>219</sup> But there are other elements that would be needed, and which could only be identified and appropriately balanced if a holistic vision for local food provided a guiding framework. Such a vision would have to address the structure of society within which agriculture could flourish. This in turn necessitates attention to relationships as the fundamental structural element, and this is something that EU policy does not do.

#### 2. An agricultural gap in Relational Thinking?

In order to grasp the rationale for Relational Thinking (RT) as an approach, we need to see how everything that has been said thus far regarding the crisis in European agriculture comes down to relationships. This is most obviously the case farmers' relationships with the 'laptop and coffee shop' crowd, which symbolises a wider urban-rural relational dynamic. But we also have to recognise a serious problem around people's relationships with nature, food and their own bodies are at play here, as well as the many complex relationships between actors in various sectors that make up the food production system, not to mention the political bodies and NGOs involved. Disconnection between people and the land itself is increasingly recognised as a problem.<sup>220</sup> In addition, people's treatment of their own bodies suggests that with a person the relationship to self is not what it should be. My concern is to diagnose a relational rupture that is necessarily multifaceted according to the holistic relational nature of the person.

What we need in response to the crisis in European agriculture is not only a general sense that relationships are important, but a social vision that can hold people, land and food together in a socially and ecological flourishing way. Indeed, even methodologically socio-scientific studies that focus on quantitative data can acknowledge this basic fact, as in the following example:

<sup>218</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586650/EPRS\\_BRI\(2016\)586650\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/586650/EPRS_BRI(2016)586650_EN.pdf), accessed 1.12.25.

<sup>219</sup> These are all mentioned within the new Vision; see also the short supply chain project Agribridges (<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101000788>) and the information on GIs ([https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/farming/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes-explained\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/farming/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes-explained_en)), both accessed 1.12.25.

<sup>220</sup> This is part of a concerning trend towards a general disconnection between people and nature; see, for example, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-022-01744-w>, accessed 1.12.25.

The role of agriculture in the economy as a whole must be analysed not only from the perspective of exploiting the existing agricultural and rural potential, or from the perspective of agricultural producers, but including the entire system of relations and determinations generated by this economic branch.<sup>221</sup>

As this quote implies, adopting a relational lens is the beginning, not the end of an RT analysis, which aims to do two things; firstly, to go deeper into the fundamental cause of this rupture and secondly, to move beyond it into a vision of what society looks like when relationships are as they should be.

If we are to move towards a specifically agricultural vision, we must acknowledge something of a gap in RT literature around the topic of agriculture. Whilst there are plenty of publications on social, political, economic and recently even environmental issues (including one specifically on food, which cuts across all these areas), there is nothing that deals with farming itself.<sup>222</sup>

It is worth noting that this gap itself is a symptom of the very issue that this report has been highlighting, namely the relatively low levels of engagement between political discourse and agriculture. However, it is equally important to note that RT has all the resources available to it that could be needed for a comprehensive vision of agriculture. Starting from the biblical material – the vast majority of which is the product of an agrarian society, it should be remembered – we can develop a vision that yields key relational insights for agriculture today. Before setting this out, it is worth stressing that setting out this vision is a first step – albeit a necessary first step – in a process that will be described in more detail further below.

### 3. *A relational vision for agriculture*

A relational vision for agriculture gives farming a role at the heart of society. Those who farm are not only producing food or managing land but are cultivating a shared home, local ecosystems in which people, animals and plants flourish. This is achieved through agricultural practice that is ecologically integrated and agricultural business that is well connected to local communities.

This vision starts from the following premise:

#### ***Farming and farms have multi-faceted but inherent value in society***

221 Jean Vasile Andrei and Mihaela Cristina Drăgoi, *The Common Agriculture Policy and Romanian Agriculture* (Boston, MA: CAB International, 2019), 1.

222 Publications dealing with these topics from a relational perspective can be found both on the Sallux (<https://sallux.eu/>) and Jubilee Centre (<https://www.jubilee-centre.org/>) websites, both accessed 1.12.25.

In other words, the value of agriculture can be analysed according to economic, environmental, social and cultural components. But if you try to produce these different components of value in society *without* actual farming, you lose something crucial. Likewise, if you emphasise one or two of these components to the detriment of the others (i.e. if all the focus on agricultural policy is economic or environmental), you lose the inherent value of farms and farming, which lies in the unique way it combines these forms of value. Each of the components of agriculture has its own relational significance that can be summed up under three categories as follows:

### **Local food systems for healthy communities**

Producing food has the obvious function of providing for people's nutritional requirements sustainably as well as providing surplus with which to trade. Contemporary European agriculture with its industrial, globalised model has been dominated by the economic aspect (or the conflict between the economic and environmental aspects) so that we have lost sight of whole variety of relational roles played by farms and farming. When we move our understanding away from the abstract economic categories normally used, this relational value begins to come into focus.

**Farming** cannot be conceived only as food production but **people's relationship to the land**. Farming might be economically productive in the short term without sustainable care, but as our farmer-contributors in all three nations emphasised, the aim is to preserve land for generations. This is only possible with farming systems that sustain the wellbeing of the whole ecosystem upon which the soil depends (being the key ingredient in any kind of farming, whether livestock, arable or horticulture). This requires attention to water and nutrient quality and quantity, which in turn is supported by biodiversity from the microbial level up to the apex predators that keep potential pests in line. Only patient observation over time, aided but not dependent on scientific monitoring, can build an understanding that establishes a system is sustainable. Such a system will always be mixed to some extent, but will inevitably emphasise one or two kinds of food depending on the geographical qualities of the place and the needs of the local market.

**Eating food** cannot be conceived only as consumption but **people's food relationships**. Counter-intuitive as it may sound, eating is a profoundly relational act, firstly in terms of one's relationship to one's own body. A tendency for immediate satisfaction with unhealthy food is increasingly under the spotlight as a driver of multiple health problems, a self-care issue that is connected to a wider separation from nature that exacerbates mental health crises.<sup>223</sup> Lone eating and loneliness are

223 <https://www.thelancet.com/series-do/ultra-processed-food>, accessed 1.12.25

also part of this, raising the point that eating is also an act of relating to others. The table is a place of building community and local food is key in establishing culture.<sup>224</sup>

**Supplying food** cannot be conceived only as *distribution* but **people's economic relationships**. Transportation, processing and retail are usually so separated by long, complex supply chains that the connection between these secondary procedures and farming is lost, along with the sense of connection between the people carrying them out. When supply chains are shorter, it becomes easier to grasp the relational significance of these forms of interaction, and harder for stronger actors within it to avoid accountability for the poor conditions or income suffered by the weaker. This connects to the bigger question of economic system, which we will address further below.

**Farms as community hubs** might sound idealistic, impractical and economically irrelevant, especially with regards to the specific activity of farming. However, growing crops and vegetables, and raising cattle, always involves some level of teamwork (particularly within family or household units, which can be strengthened as a result). This is especially so with more regenerative or agroecological approaches to farming, which are already more focused on relationships between non-human and human actors, and tend to need more intensive labour and less mechanisation. This site of relational interaction is also increased with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) models, where consumers also get to play a role in production. In fact, there are all kinds of other public-facing activities that farms are increasingly engaged with (hence the term 'Multi-functional agriculture'), such as accommodation, education and care or social farming. Both the economic necessity of diversification and the clear social benefits of such public engagement are enough reason to boost the status of farms as community hubs, which recognises the inherent value of agriculture rather than adding artificial functions to farms.

Two main objections must be faced before moving on to our second main point. Firstly, some would argue that a more relationally connected society can engender nepotism and cronyism, such as Denisa observed in Romania (which has far more small farms and local farming culture). However, although a close social network can provide certain opportunities for enable people to take advantage of positions of power, there is no evidence to say that such abuse is *more* destructive at community level. It may be more visible, but the sums involved are probably smaller. Indeed, a core motivation behind the farmer protests was the idea that a network of elite power-holders was controlling the system to the detriment of others. This actually determines the nature of EU agriculture policy, at least according to Yannis Varoufakis,

<sup>224</sup> See the 2019 Sallux publication on this; <https://sallux.eu/bookstore/thoughtful-eating.html>, accessed 1.12.25.

who views CAP as a 'contract between Europe's heavy industry cartel and Europe's wealthier farmers, according to which the largest chunk of the European budget, generated by the former, would be sprinkled upon the latter'.<sup>225</sup> Bureaucracy and anonymity are not necessarily barriers to the abuse of relationship for profit.

Secondly, is the idea of local food systems for healthy communities not an impossibility for cities? Sadly, it probably is, and a certain level of industrialised agriculture is bound to continue for some time. But that should not stop us aiming for long-term change in the recognition that, as Wendell Berry observes, 'some cities can never be sustainable at their present levels of population'. As he explains in one of his 27 propositions about global thinking and cities

To make a sustainable city, one must begin somehow, and I think the beginning must be small and economic. A beginning could be made, for example, by increasing the amount of food bought from farmers in the local countryside by consumers in the city. As the food economy became more local, local farming would become more diverse; the farms would become smaller, more complex in structure, more productive; and some city people would be needed to work on the farms. Sooner or later, as a means of reducing expenses both ways, organic wastes from the city would go out to fertilize the farms of the supporting region; thus city people would have to assume an agricultural responsibility, and would be properly motivated to do so both by the wish to have a supply of excellent food and by the fear of contaminating that supply. The increase of economic intimacy between a city and its sources would change minds.<sup>226</sup>

Agriculture is inherently valuable because of the unique way it combines people's relationships to the land, each other (whether culturally, economically or socially) and even to themselves, via the key role of food and nature in maintaining physical and mental health. Developing the idea of **local food systems for healthy communities** enables local areas to maintain the unique inherent value of farms and farming, which are then enabled to play their wider cultural, economic and ethical role in society.

## Farming as cultural, economic and ethical barometer

**Farms are a cultural barometer** because of the unique way they combine key relationships. When there is poor treatment of land or animals, production of

<sup>225</sup> <https://unherd.com/2024/02/the-eu-cartel-was-designed-to-crush-farmers/>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>226</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1991/02/out-your-car-your-horse/309159/>, accessed 1.12.25

poor food, and poor practices along the food supply chain (in which farmers often suffer), it points to cultural degradation in society as a whole. Conversely, farming is returned to its place as an honourable and desirable occupation when done excellently across all these areas. Farmers then become pillars and model citizens, as those most closely responsible for the propagation of a shared social vision at a local level, with a particular food culture as part of that. Practical work will be valued as an exposition of wisdom in this context, and not relegated to secondary importance as it currently is. Whilst digitalisation and screen-based work clearly play a key role, the option of a better balance of indoor-outdoor work will become more available with more smaller farms needing more (potentially part-time) labour.

**Farms are an economic barometer** because the extent to which poor farming is economically successful and good farming is economically unsuccessful illustrates the extent to which local economy is dominated by the global economy of extraction. Of course, an economy geared towards developing a thriving local community may still be tempted by practices of extraction insofar as it competes with other economies, not to mention internationally. But the difference between local competition and international competition is that local areas are aware of their mutual need for one another, quite literally sharing resources (especially watersheds, but also air quality and the biodiversity that benefits the whole ecosystem). Besides, part of the relational mandate for a stakeholder-oriented economy (as opposed to a shareholder-oriented one) is that there should be real relationships between parties, and a certain localisation is crucial for this:

The legal structure of companies needs to be examined in terms of its effect on relationships between and among the various stakeholder groups, in particular shareholders, directors, employees, suppliers, customers, the local community and regulators, as well as between the stakeholders and wider society.<sup>227</sup>

What is said here about companies must apply to the economy as a whole: only localised economies can truly be stakeholder ones and thus move from extraction to creation.

**Farms are an ethical barometer** because in publicly engaged mode of farming set out here, an understanding of human dignity is developed in its true relational character. The next sub-section of this report will expand what is meant by this, as it will require delving down into the root-system of relational thinking. However, to summarise very briefly, humanity is ontologically relational and the individual does not exist apart from his or her relationship to God, to others (particularly parents,

<sup>227</sup> S. Backhouse and E. Poole, *From Extraction to Creation* (Amersfoort, NL: Sallux, 2022), 52, quote J. Rushworth and M. Schluter, *Transforming Capitalism from within* (Relationships Global, 2011)

but also the wider social, economic and political fabric) and to the land. Human purpose is, then, for relational wholeness in all these areas, which determines ethics.

## Cultivating a shared home

A relational vision for agriculture that maintains farming as an inherently valuable yet composite phenomenon can sound quite complicated and be difficult to grasp. But one concept sums up the vision perfectly and provides a focal point for the complex parts: **cultivating a shared home**

‘Home’ is that reality that everybody understands, though it is difficult to define. At the heart of ‘home’ is people feeling secure in relationship to people and place, usually with a house and (in much of the world) often with cultivatable land. Everybody will agree that ‘home’ is important, and that the relationships it embodies are worth maintaining as society. As the post-agrarian society that the West is fast becoming, however, it is easy to forget that farms are part of this.<sup>228</sup>

Farming is the act of cultivating a space that can sustain life for every living thing on that land and provide for the flourishing of those who cultivate it. It is done by individuals as part of households and local communities and forms the very basis of those communities as people learn how to live and work in relation to a particular place, with all its ecological peculiarities. When we talk about ‘habitats’ for animals, we forget that the Latin word could equally well be translated as ‘home’.

Agriculture is at the heart of cultivating a shared home and farming is worth raising much higher than it currently is as a political priority, even if this faces opposition from those who take the economic system for granted and assume that only economic value is true value.

### 4. *Ideological basis for a relational vision of agriculture*

We now turn to a fuller account of the ideological underpinnings of this vision and draw out some further principles that can be applied to contemporary agriculture.

## Back to the roots – a biblical perspective on agriculture

The biblical social vision is a Christ-centred society with all things reconciled (Colossians 1:20), a right ordering of all relationships in the face of the dominant fallen reality that is at heart a relational rupture: a godless fragmentation and disorder of relationships, a ‘society’ of individuals in mutual opposition due to a

<sup>228</sup> See the University of Sheffield project ‘Our Agrarian Home’, <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/scibs/news/new-appointee-sir-henry-stephenson-fellowship>, accessed 1.12.25

lack of common orientation around the one at the centre of all things. Although this relational reading is fairly uncontroversial in mainstream Christianity, there has been a distinct lack of efforts to integrate an agricultural understanding into it. This has been addressed more recently by agrarian readings of Scripture from writers such as Wendell Berry, Norman Wirzba and Ellen Davis.<sup>229</sup> Although what follows is my own interpretation, it is broadly consonant with what these three North American interpreters – among others – have set out in various ways and at greater detail in a growing body of literature that is increasingly difficult to ignore for those in the Christian mainstream.

Specifically, in relation to agriculture, this is the biblical vision set out here: a society where communities (formed from networks of households) get their sustenance from the land, cultivating it together as a common home to be shared with each other and with other non-human creatures (Genesis 1:28). Every local area produces its characteristic food – it is mainly, though not totally, self-sustaining – and agricultural rhythms form the basis for cultural coherence (from family up to nation). But there is a further step. The answer is not a schematic re-ordering of relationships. Rather, it is the love of one's own place, which we may call 'home'. Otherwise, the biblical picture could be made into cookie-cutter reality, which is just what industrial totalitarianism does. The biblical vision encourages each one to cultivate an 'agrarian home'.

#### **Relational reality: Trinitarian creation and connection to the land -**

God's life is one of perfectly ordered relational harmony in the diversity of persons; Father, Son and Spirit together are 'love' and represented like a household (John 14). All things are created for relationally ordered participation in the 'household' of God. People have a special role (as those made in God's image) to manage this relational order for the flourishing of all creation – humans and non-humans. The first specifically relevant aspect of this relational order for agriculture is how people treat land. To understand this, we need to see non-human creation (including land) as God sees it, in three dimensions.

Firstly, God proclaims all of creation good (seven times in Genesis 1), owns the whole earth (Psalm 24:1) and loves all creation (Psalm 145:9). God is concerned not only for people (Jonah 4:10-11) but even trees (Deuteronomy 20:19), as Jesus confirms (e.g. Matthew 6:25-33). All of creation is made to flourish for God's glory (Psalm 19:1, Isaiah 55:12). Secondly, people are made to be dependent on the land and wider non-human creation that produces what they need to live (food, warmth, air and water). But terrestrial non-human creation is made so that it flourishes when

<sup>229</sup> Berry is foundational here: see this relatively recent piece for an introduction to his main streams of thought <https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-pleasures-of-eating/>, accessed 1.12.25.

humans govern and cultivate it (Genesis 1:28; 2:5-8).

Thirdly, contrary to the misanthropic conservationist idea that people are inherently problematic for nature, the land is given to people by God to be cultivated. This is *not* in the capitalist mode of making maximal short-term return for minimal input expense and then moving on to the next cultivatable plot when the first one fails to produce. Biblical cultivation is long-term. Some land is able to produce food perpetually for generations. Failure to farm sustainably means that the land is not being what it should be and that people are not able to benefit from it the way that God meant them to. But it is also beautiful, since God gives a *garden* for sustenance, not an agro-industrial 'unit'. These two ideas of long-term and beautiful cultivation come together to form the concept of 'home', a place for people (and ultimately God) to dwell (Revelation 21-22).

People cannot be in relationship to God or one another without interacting with creation. Chris Wright identifies a relational matrix of God, people and land, whereby God gives land (with its attendant limitations - 'each according to their kind') to be cultivated as part of people's multiplication to fill the world one home (household & garden) at a time. This implies a specific role for farming that many recognise without concluding it on biblical grounds. As Jan Bielman puts it, 'in many ways agriculture can be seen as the most fundamental interface between man, the earth and the plant and animal world'.<sup>230</sup>

**Relational rupture: Fall – broken relational order:** People break the relational order in a number of ways that impinge on agriculture. They both transgress God's limit of engaging with land (eating from a tree forbidden them) and fail to subdue the element in non-human creation (snake) needing to be subdued.<sup>231</sup> As such, people are punished in their earthly relationships as a result (Genesis 3:14-19). This has three consequences of note for agriculture: land does not easily yield food so agricultural production becomes hard; childbirth is hard (so the commission to 'bear fruit and multiply' is a challenge); the snake becomes an enemy of people (perhaps as part of an opposition that applies to other animals and members of non-human creation).

Ultimately, people are separated from God, a separation that happens through exile from their place, the fertile land given by God to flourish within and live forever. Note that the mandate to cultivate land still stands and is explicitly repeated (Genesis 3:22-24). Relationships get worse up to Noah and the whole land needs to

<sup>230</sup> Jan Bielman, *Five Centuries of Farming* (Wageningen Academic Publishers, The Netherlands, 2010), 18

<sup>231</sup> Evil may be present in the world through the snake but sin only comes through people (as per Romans 5).

be cleansed (though each species is saved) with the post-flood promise to Abraham involving the blessing of land.

### **Relational roadmap: Torah – God’s people Israel receive a constitution**

- Torah re-establishes original relational order within a redeemed but complex political, economic, social, cultural and liturgical context. Mosaic law is best understood in opposition to Egypt, the epitome of what the fall does to God’s people and society more widely: Israel are living as slaves under a regime that is centralised, forced labour with no rest and a decadent elite reaping rewards. In this context comes the (agricultural) promise of a ‘land flowing with milk and honey’.

Cultivable land is the basis for each household (‘each under his own vine’) and enables extended family life within local communities (towns & villages comprising households). Local areas are basically stable and self-sustaining for the majority of basic needs; trading is natural and good to exchange resources that are unequally distributed. International trade and centralisation (most civic functions happen at a local level) are deliberately curtailed through legislation, however. Likewise, urbanisation is tempered by the existence of permanent farmland surrounding it. This means that even cities do not become separate from agricultural rhythms and everyone can have an ‘agrarian home’, whether adjacent to where they live or in returning periodically to their farms.<sup>232</sup>

Stipulations on agriculture (Leviticus 25) maintain land socially and ecologically. Capital and labour are, like land, not freely tradable commodities from which money can be made at the expense of the social fabric. The national calendar is based on agriculture, food and drink (the calendar combines cultural and liturgical – there is no ‘secular’ culture defining Israel. Sacrifice, Sabbath and Festivals keep God at the centre, remind people that they receive their land as gift (thus putting ‘gift’ at the heart of the economy), gives rest to all (of any social status – and animals) and establishes national unity. In this case, the ‘environment’ is cared for as the aggregate result of everyone cultivating their own place. ‘Environmental policy’ is never set in opposition (or even addition) to agriculture, but is geared towards the same mutual flourishing.

Tragically, the promise of this ideal agrarian society ends in environmental degradation (see, for example, Jeremiah 4 and Isaiah 24), violence and exile. This is Israel’s collective equivalent of the fall (with its relational consequences) There some indications that issues of land and farming were part of what led to exile (Solomon destroyed the household basis of land allocation and governance; the prophets

<sup>232</sup> For an example of this in African farming, see chap. 25 of Duncan, J., Carolan, M., & Wiskerke, J.S.C. (Eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Sustainable and Regenerative Food Systems* (1st ed.). Routledge, 2020.

warn of the precarity of food; ‘the land will vomit you out’ is a threat; Sabbath/Jubilee is not apparently recognised; foreign invasive forces are described as destroying the land). However, there is not yet sufficient technological development to raise the kind of ecological problems around farming that came later.

**Relational Re-empowerment: Jesus and the Church** - Jesus comes to effect the reconciliation of all broken relationships on the cross. Jesus is God the Son become flesh – the life of God, a perfectly relational life of love, is lived within human reality and not restricted to heaven. But Jesus was rejected by a world for whom his relational life is contrary to the world’s individualistic, competitive system. He establishes a new, reconciled society in relationship to him as his body. It is formed socially through personal relationships, beginning with the disciples and moving outwards to the present-day global Church. At the same time, however, it is empowered by the Spirit, which enables the fulfilment of Torah (Romans 8:1-4), as summed up by following mantra: love God and love one another.

The challenge for readings of the New Testament in relation to the Old Testament law is especially acute around the question of whether love for God and love for neighbour includes a love for non-human creation, and especially land. To this we may answer in the affirmative for three main reasons. Firstly, Jesus loves creation and speaks about it as good (cf. Matthew 6). Secondly, people are wrong to isolate these love commands from their Old Testament context, which embeds them in a relational matrix that is social, political, economic and, crucially, environmental (more specifically, agricultural). Thirdly, practically speaking, one cannot love God and neighbour without caring for the land (Jesus does not call it ‘love’, but this does not take away any responsibility to it).

In addition we can point out that on at least two occasions, Jesus produces food abundantly in a context of scarcity (due to political-agricultural issues caused by the Roman occupation and hierarchical Judaism). Technological development and human population were insufficient to destroy land as we have done since the Industrial Revolution, which may explain why there is little explicitly environmental material in the New Testament. In any case, it makes no sense at all for a reconciliation of all things, which includes the relational nexus and order between God, people and non-human creation (especially land) to be a reconciliation that excludes non-human creation. Otherwise, how would Christians produce and consume food in a way that fitted within the relational order instituted by Christ?

The implications for this includes action by the Church as a body (with the land that they own) as well as individuals within it insofar as they interact in worldly systems. The consummation of the above process includes God, people and non-human creation (including land) in perfect relationship to one another (Revelation 21-22).

New Creation does not depend on human effort, but at the same time it is never separated from the Spirit-inspired efforts of the Church to see God's kingdom come on earth as in heaven.

## Contemporary relational principles for agriculture

Taking the richness of the biblical narrative and summing it up in five relational principles is not easy. However, it is helpful to do this insofar as it can give incision and shape to an RT perspective that may otherwise become over-complicated.

Firstly, agriculture is not just a source of food but the basis of local farming communities made up of a network of households – whilst it is unrealistic in most of the contemporary world for each extended family to cultivate their own land, it is not unrealistic for everyone to be connected to local cultivation (e.g. through direct markets or community farms). This facilitates the relational connection between farmers and others that prevents the kind of economic disparity and social alienation that creates political unrest at a national level.

Secondly, agriculture is best practiced when the land is received as a long-term gift to cultivate – instead of 'maximising land use', farming should aim for long-term sustainable and beautiful modes of cultivation that establish a home for generations. Only through such an approach will the knowledge of the land, which is itself beneficial, be instilled in communities. This involves different areas developing their own specialist produce. Diversity is good: areas grow different things (each according to their seed) and different areas specialise in certain things (we can work together fruitfully by trade), with all things made so to be integrated and complimentary.

Thirdly, agriculture is at the heart of flourishing non-human creation and is not opposed to it – when each household cultivates and cares for its own place, there is mutual flourishing. This applies at the local community, national and global level – the 'environment' is not inherently separate from human activity to provide for its own sustenance. Work is satisfying and productive: we are made to work manually and you reap what you sow (relationship between work and produce that is vital, though not absolute, because of the fall and because of grace).

Fourthly, the economic structure upon which this relational function of agriculture depends is a modified free market. Goods and services can be traded freely without regulation but factors of production (namely land, labour and capital) can only be traded subject to the societal benefits that they must guarantee. In practice, it is not always easy to decide what counts in this category (is energy a factor of production,

included broadly within the land?). But it serves as a rule of thumb. With labour, the key is to keep wages above shareholder dividends, hence retaining its value over capital (which requires regulation of trade around the financial market as well).

Fifthly, a social rhythm built around agricultural flourishing (especially Sabbath and the longer term equivalents) are essential for tying cultural life to farming, especially for those who are not directly engaged in the practice. Without regular rest, people, land and all non-human creation suffer. Developing such a rhythm is key to mutual flourishing (hence the Keep Sunday Special campaign in which Jubilee Centre was involved).<sup>233</sup>

### 5. *Economic rationale for a relational vision*

A relational vision for agriculture such as I have laid out in this paper puts agriculture at the heart of communities for the good of both rural and urban life.<sup>234</sup> This entails prioritising farm businesses characterised by two main things: agroecological management and strategic connection to the local population (primarily through food systems but also through other means afforded by a multi-functional approach). We have already seen how this addresses the cultural alienation between farmers and mainstream society that underlies much of the crisis manifest politically. But for this paradigm to also address the *economic* aspects of the crisis – expense of environmental regulations, vulnerability to foreign trade and low farm gate prices – we need an argument for its specifically economic rationale.<sup>235</sup>

From the outset we should be clear that the relational vision cannot be an immediate replacement for the current prevailing system; no large-scale system, yet alone farming (which requires many years of land development, infrastructure, logistics, supply chain and market structure change) can change quickly. A more relational approach could only be financially realistic within a broader transformation of the economic system from an extraction basis geared towards shareholders to a creation basis geared towards all stakeholders (including the environment). This is because farming currently has to operate within the dictates of economies of scale, unattractive labour conditions for agriculture sector workers and the gearing of the complex food system to supermarkets.

At the same time, we will see in the next section that the example of the Netherlands

<sup>233</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keep\\_Sunday\\_Special](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keep_Sunday_Special), accessed 1.12.25

<sup>234</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/699621/IPOL\\_ATA\(2022\)699621\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/699621/IPOL_ATA(2022)699621_EN.pdf), accessed 1.12.25

<sup>235</sup> My thanks to Alan Matthews for an informative email exchange on the economic challenge to the relational vision being set out here. Labour productivity and economies of scale temper its viability but do not nullify its value.

demonstrates how the kind of model being advocated here can flourish, providing more than a negligible contribution to farming nationally and across Europe. A relational vision for agriculture should therefore be pursued as a long-term strategy, starting as an alternative existing alongside the conventional mainstream that can also challenge, influence and, given enough time, ultimately supersede that mainstream. For this to be at all realistic, it needs to be clear how the social and environmental benefits of the relational approach have an economic dimension that facilitate flourishing in the long-term and not just quick – but unsustainable – profits.

## Economics of agroecological land management

There are four main factors that contribute to the economic viability of agroecological land management. The first point is a negative one and must be the context for the following three: the costs of environmental degradation are economically disastrous. As more ecological damage is done, especially through the industrialised farming practices that we have discussed here, there are direct costs incurred by losing biodiversity such as pollinators.<sup>236</sup> Besides, less of the global ecosystem will be amenable to land cultivation and as any economist knows, increased scarcity raises prices. For example, the degradation of topsoil (for example) is reducing the amount of high-quality farmland.<sup>237</sup> Of course, intensive monocropping and fertiliser use (itself an increasing cost) is productive in the short term even as soil is depleted, revealing the fact that the apparent conflict between economic and environmental benefits is illusory:<sup>238</sup> the conflict is between *short term* and *long term* benefits. Short-term economic gain that causes ecological damage is long-term economic disaster.

Secondly, as well as economic benefits of reducing environmental precarity, agroecological land management reduces economic precarity by facilitating shorter supply chains. Mixed farming adapted to local conditions is more suited to local markets and requires fewer off-farm inputs. Shorter supply chains increase the relative power of farmers within them and allow for proportionately more of the retail value to return to them. They also involve less reliance on global trade in a context where geopolitical developments can control prices and availability, quickly making commodities unaffordable. In recent times, the war in Ukraine most obviously illustrates this; the destruction of so much farmland by military activity

236 <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature20588>, accessed 1.12.25

237 Kopittke et al. (2019), "Soil and the intensification of agriculture for global food security", Environment International 132

238 The EU recognize this issue, hence the warnings about soil organic carbon ([https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/soil-organic-carbon-risk-large-part-european-agricultural-land-2025-03-18\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/soil-organic-carbon-risk-large-part-european-agricultural-land-2025-03-18_en)) and erosion (<https://esdac.jrc.ec.europa.eu/themes/erosion-europe-projections-2050>), both accessed 1.12.25

means that the impact will not cease until many years after military conflict itself has ceased.<sup>239</sup> Less prominent cases are potentially even more significant, for example, the European reliance on Brazilian soya for livestock feed (especially for intensive cattle farming) is vulnerable to Chinese policy decisions.<sup>240</sup>

Thirdly, agroecological farming is more productive for the economy as a whole. This sounds counter-intuitive because 'productivity' is usually thought of in a short-term, reductionist calculation of the amount produced per Euro spent without considering the externalities involved. But when we take into account the previous two points – that intensively farmed land is becoming degraded and that supply chains are increasingly vulnerable – it is clear that costs will rise and that productivity will fall. Productivity will have to be measured in relation to total agricultural output per hectare, not just the volume of one product. On this measure, the performance of agroecologically managed land can, under the right conditions, be higher than conventional monocropping setups.<sup>241</sup> 'Right conditions' includes high labour productivity, which could be the Achilles' heel of this approach. However, it is actually another strength.

Labour costs, even for agricultural sector workers, are high and rising in Europe in comparison to elsewhere in the world. As pointed out in this report already, the number of farm labourers is falling dramatically with technologization replacing many of these jobs. However, there is also an employment crisis in several EU countries,<sup>242</sup> not to mention mental and physical health issues exacerbated by stressful, sedentary, screen-based jobs (laptops or computers without the coffee shops!).<sup>243</sup> Agroecological work should be promoted as part of the response to this situation. Of course, the idea of returning to a subsistence or peasant-farming economy will not meet with public approval, but high levels of flexibility in employment arrangements make part-time farming a genuine option for many.<sup>244</sup> Why should there be such negativity around being employed (or running one's own business) in an outdoor, social environment that is skilled and varied but requires less formalised training than expensive and highly subsidised university courses?

239 <https://europeansting.com/2022/07/06/how-is-the-war-in-ukraine-impacting-the-global-supply-chain/>, <https://www.rau.ac.uk/about-rau/news-and-events/events/raus-research-impact-war-ukraines-farmland-benefit-ps500000-defra>, both accessed 1.12.25

240 This is detailed in a recent study from King's College, London; see <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/lci/assets/ksspplcipcypaper0122-brazil-china-trade.pdf>, accessed 1.12.25

241 [https://eara.farm/wp-content/uploads/EARA\\_Farmer-led-Research-on-Europes-Full-Productivity\\_2025\\_06\\_03.pdf](https://eara.farm/wp-content/uploads/EARA_Farmer-led-Research-on-Europes-Full-Productivity_2025_06_03.pdf), accessed 1.12.25

242 <https://www.destatis.de/Europa/EN/Topic/Population-Labour-Social-Issues/Labour-market/EULabourMarketCrisis.html>, accessed 1.12.25

243 See, for example <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10852174/>, accessed 1.12.25

244 Ben Rasken, from the Soil Association in the UK, has done a lot of work on this. See [https://www.benraskin.uk/files/ugd/1d0195\\_46bb1117733940818a6d714d0fd8e30a.pdf](https://www.benraskin.uk/files/ugd/1d0195_46bb1117733940818a6d714d0fd8e30a.pdf), accessed 1.12.25

Again, though, we must be realistic: job creation and vacancy in any sector is only economically beneficial if that sector is seen to be growing and attractive. Costs of agroecologically produced local food are still going to be high, especially with a larger, decently paid workforce. This is where the fourth and final factor comes in, that of public support.

Fourthly, and finally, agroecological land management is more publicly fundable. All the arguments about the economic superiority of conventional farming depend on agri-business as a whole (not just farmers) receiving public support to continue this model. As we have seen, CAP was initially tied to a high-input industrialised model and is in the process of pivoting towards a more sustainable one. Subsidies for high-quality, agroecologically produced and locally sold food can be part of this, as can a policy push towards true cost pricing.<sup>245</sup> Yes, this development is contested by the rise of right-wing parties who reject 'green' intervention from the EU. But the ecological reality – including, but not limited to a changing climate – and the economic reality of the geopolitical situation will become self-evident, even if 'scientific evidence' is dismissed as ideological. Regardless of recent political developments, investment in research and innovation programmes around environmentally sustainable farming (of which agroecology is the gold standard) will bear fruit in a situation where the necessity of agricultural transformation is more apparent to the general public.<sup>246</sup>

## Economics of locally connected agriculture

If the first pillar of a relational vision for agriculture has to do with the relationship between people and land, the second has to do with relationships between people themselves. There are three main factors here that make a locally connected agriculture economically beneficial, where farmers are economically, politically and culturally integral members of communities.

Firstly, local market orientation builds up local economies. Agroecologically produced food is also better sold to local retailers because of the lack of chemical inputs that mean it needs to be eaten faster. Small farms may not bring in more in absolute terms than large, highly-mechanised industrial farms, but selling varied produce through local markets and retailers would bring higher prices for producers. Subsidies could be targeted to farms producing high-quality, locally sold produce and where consumers still suffer from out-of-reach prices, extra funding

<sup>245</sup> [https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/publication/state-food-agriculture-2023-revealing-true-cost-food-transform-agrifood-systems\\_en](https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/publication/state-food-agriculture-2023-revealing-true-cost-food-transform-agrifood-systems_en), accessed 1.12.25

<sup>246</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/overview-vision-agriculture-food/research-innovation/agroecology\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/overview-vision-agriculture-food/research-innovation/agroecology_en), accessed 18.11.25

for locally produced food could be distributed through FEAD or ESF+.<sup>247</sup>

Through such models as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and Multi-Functional Agriculture (MFA), both food and non-food products are sold directly from farms to the public. This connection also serves as a way to develop and maintain local food cultures (under threat from globalised food production), which has the additional economic benefit of boosting regional tourism. Moreover, shorter supply chains and smaller retailing operations would create far less waste than is currently the case. This latter point, with huge economic ramifications, is often forgotten by those who argue against the possibility of smaller farms on the basis of their lesser productivity.

Secondly, an increase in consuming locally produced food from agroecologically managed farms contributes to healthier lifestyles. Just as there are financial costs to poor health, so there is an economic case for the healthy lifestyles (equally in the mental and the physical domain) that an agroecologically based.<sup>248</sup> A recent UK study finds the costs of its unhealthy food system are almost equivalent to the total annual national healthcare spend.<sup>249</sup> Money saved on medical intervention and care could justifiably be used to subsidise higher production (or purchasing) costs for a farming system more conducive to health. Indeed, health service money is beginning to go directly to farms through green social prescribing.<sup>250</sup> Increased involvement in farming is beneficial for physical and mental health for the public as well as the labour force.

Thirdly, the costs of managing relational breakdown between farmers and the rest of society are high. 'Good relationships' may sound like a nebulous and even irrelevant aim for the hard financial realities of the economy. However, systemic dysfunction and socio-political breakdown comes with both direct and indirect costs. Political efforts towards improved relations, such the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU agriculture, add further expense to the costly policing of protests, not to mention disruption in productivity.<sup>251</sup> In fact, the socio-political breakdown in relationships between farmers and allies on one hand and the 'urban cosmopolitan elite' on the other is a big driver in triggering elections (not least in the Netherlands), which

<sup>247</sup> [https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/funding/fund-european-aid-most-deprived-fead\\_en](https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/funding/fund-european-aid-most-deprived-fead_en) and <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/53/european-social-fund-plus>, both accessed 1.12.25

<sup>248</sup> [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK447219/pdf/Bookshelf\\_NBK447219.pdf](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK447219/pdf/Bookshelf_NBK447219.pdf), accessed 1.12.25

<sup>249</sup> <https://ffcc.co.uk/news-and-press/unhealthy-food-costing-uk-billions>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>250</sup> <https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/resources/major-new-project-launched-to-research-social-prescribing-for-vulnerable-communities-across-europe/>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>251</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/business/2024/02/02/how-much-could-the-farmer-protests-cost-europes-economy>, accessed 1.12.25

themselves are a burden on the economy. Changes in policy or government itself make consistent economic growth very difficult; a farming population alienated from society perpetuates this instability.

### Holistic context of economic benefits

We must reiterate at this point that stating the case for an economic rationale does not make the argument of this paper primarily economic. A relational worldview sees economy as a function of relationship rather than vice versa. But whilst economic considerations do not *drive* the argument, as they do in much political discourse, they remain *integral* to the argument. Relational wellbeing cannot survive in isolation from a healthy economy. Indeed, what is shown in this sub-section is that a holistic perspective necessarily incorporates economic concern so that a relational vision results in economically more healthy European agriculture. Pursuing such a vision will constitute an 'alternative' approach in the short-medium term and it cannot replace the status quo overnight. Yet it is not unrealistic to champion this alternative, any more than it is unrealistic to talk about the overall transition implied in the European Green Deal. Without ideals, it is impossible to move towards genuine change. Only we must be realistic about the prospect of these ideals in the real world. Developments in the Netherlands help us see how realistic it is to expect some progress with a relational vision for agriculture.

## 3C. Relational Alternatives: Inspiration from Dutch Agriculture

In order to make any assessment of the practicability of the relational analysis and vision set out here, we need to have a concrete example of how these might work in the context of a specific place. The Netherlands is suitable for this because of the diversity of farming approaches that many have noted as its strength. This fact serves as a reminder that relational alternatives do not constitute a set of practices that could (or should) immediately replace the conventional industrial agriculture already happening at such a huge scale. But there are enough relational practices already happening to make it realistic that these could be further increased until there is relatively much less industrial farming in the country.

### 1. Dutch agriculture: a relational analysis

One approach to the crisis in Dutch farming is, as we have seen, to adopt a set of technical measures to address them. Innovation in sustainable systems is a constant source of work for scientists and researchers, within industry and academia. But an exclusively technical focus misses the reality that underlying the problems in

the Netherlands and elsewhere are a series of more relational challenges. Unless relationships are addressed – relationships which *shape* technical change but are *more fundamental* than technical change – we are bound to have the same problems surfacing in different ways repeatedly. The relational tensions identified here show how deep-seated the challenges really are.

### People and food cultivation: declining relationship to the land

There is a profound disconnection between people and their natural environment, the ecosystem that sustains life in the local area. Whilst so much of the discourse around climate change and sustainability focuses on behavioural interventions and technical solutions, far too little attention is given to the question of how people relate to nature. The breakdown here is at least partly the result of food systems becoming industrialised, so that only the minority of people have any reason to enter into a productive relationship with the land. Some realisation of what has been lost by this is returning to Western society, however.

Especially in the aftermath of Covid lockdowns and government encouragement to exercise, the ways that people benefit from contact with nature is gaining research attention. Even though gardening (which is basically farming on a domestic scale) is one of the key outdoor activities seen to be beneficial in this way, there is very little recognition of the problems caused by separating people from agriculture. With a reduction in the number of people involved in farming – and especially the number of family-run farms – people's connection to the land, often maintained across centuries, is weakened.<sup>252</sup>

As well as the positive mental and physical health effects of this connection (which for many farmers are all but cancelled out by the job's stresses), a deep familiarity with the functioning of local ecosystem is lost. Quite rightly there are growing calls to maintain such vital 'indigenous knowledge', gained through many generations, particularly in postcolonial contexts.<sup>253</sup> But what about within the former imperial powers of the West, such as The Netherlands? This is not just a question of who owns intellectual property. It is about how land can best be cultivated to sustain

<sup>252</sup> 'For the first time in 2022, the volume of family labour (heads of holdings, spouses and participating relatives) was lower than non-family labour' (Berkhout, P. (ed.), van der Meulen, H., Ramaekers, P. (2023), 'Staat van Landbouw, Natuur en Voedsel' (LNV), (Wageningen Economic Research), 12).

<sup>253</sup> Yulia, Y., Malahayati, M. (2022), Traditional Knowledge of Coffee Farmers as Community Intellectual Property in Bener Meriah Regency, IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science, 27/2, Volume 27, Issue 2, 34-39.

its natural capacities, a consideration that is being eroded in Dutch agriculture.<sup>254</sup> It is fundamentally about how local cultures can be sustained; indeed, it is hard to imagine how any rural 'local culture' could be defined at all without reference to its agricultural practice and food.

Today, most people in the Netherlands (actually the vast majority) have no involvement in the production of their own food. The fact that so many consumers are disconnected from local food production is a problem with several dimensions. Certainly, the consumer/producer dichotomy is helpful to corporate forces that want to play them off against each other whilst obscuring where the profit is really being made and this relational challenge could have been identified as one of the major ones behind the crisis in Dutch agriculture. But specific to this issue of farming, when people are in touch with the realities of cultivating land, they are naturally more likely to care about their own local ecosystems and those whose work it is to produce food within them. How such a relationship might bear fruit will be explored in the following section.

### **Farmers and 'urban elites': farming marginalised in society**

There are divisions in society that seem to arise naturally from people being in different circumstances. The rural-urban divide embodies certain cultural differences whilst the distinction between mainly manual workers and those with office jobs (known in American terms as 'blue collar' and 'white collar') denotes economic status and even class. The increased digitalisation and administrative burden of many jobs – even those like teaching or nursing that traditionally involve more relational interaction – means that they are getting further from hands-on work on the land. Those at the top of the growing gap between the lowest and highest earners are the ones doing the least direct work with people or land. Finance company managers or even CEOs of more industrial outfits are effectively occupied with finding (often ingenious and innovative) ways to manipulate capital to make profits grow.

An online, screen-based mode of operation helps facilitate this ever more abstract engagement with human and natural resources. Urban desk jobs, even at lower levels of seniority and wage, mainly concern words and numbers; those whose jobs involve physically making things happen have a completely different experience of work and life. This is especially the case for those who work outdoors with plants and animals, engaged in processes that are difficult, messy and impossible to completely control. For most farmers in the Netherlands (as elsewhere), meetings

<sup>254</sup> Bakker, M. M. et al. (2013), 'Trends in soil-land-use relationships in the Netherlands between 1900 and 1990', *Agriculture, ecosystems & environment* 181, 134.

and administration facilitate (or, more often, get in the way of) their real work; for those in desk jobs, meetings and administration *are* their real work.<sup>255</sup>

It is a common populist tactic (from either right or left) to accentuate such divisions and we should be careful of accepting caricatures that absolutize the opposition between 'decent working people' and 'parasitic urban elites'. Much screen-based work is poorly paid, especially as increased bureaucracy infiltrates caring professions. Besides, many of the highest paid operate in high-pressure positions of responsibility that entail delicate engagement with multiple stakeholders and high levels of stress. They can be found on laptops in coffee shops working extremely hard, developing excellent ideas that benefit thousands. On the other side, farmers (especially on larger farms) can spend a lot of time in front of screens and do not necessarily prioritise social or environmental concerns over profit. Farm labourers can be treated extremely badly, as can labourers in all sectors (an issue that we will examine more closely below).

Because there are plenty of shared experiences and concerns between farmers and other sections of society, there should be some optimism about improved relationships. Nevertheless, if education is driven towards the cultural and economic ideal of 'laptops and coffee shops', the numbers of farmers will continue to decline and the gap between them and mainstream society will grow. This has not only national but *international* implications, as growth in automation and AI means that agricultural labour will be seen as something to be practiced only 'developing nations', perpetuating the core injustice in the global economic system.

### **Cultivators and money makers: economy favours extraction over creation**

Dutch agriculture has, as we have seen, made itself dependent on the global economy (even as it plays a leading role in this economy). A key feature of the prevailing economic system is that it favours those who *extract* value over those who *create* (or in the case of farming, *cultivate*) value. We have already seen how most farmers suffer from ever lower prices, even as industries that depend on farming (either at the production input side or the post-production side) gain relatively greater value from farm produce than farmers. Banks are of course at the top of this list; the heavy debt into which farmers generally fall binds them 'to a script defined by others, notably the food industry, trading companies, retail chains, input delivery industries, banks and state bodies'.<sup>256</sup>

<sup>255</sup> It must be acknowledged report has been researched and written nearly entirely in front of computer screens indoors, though all of those involved in its authorship (including the main author) have some hands-on experience or current involvement in agriculture.

<sup>256</sup> Leitheiser et al., 'Regeneration at a distance from the state', 706

At the very bottom of the food chain are agricultural labourers, who, where they are still needed at all, typically receive poor pay and working conditions. Indeed, poor treatment of these (often migrant) workers cannot be restricted to the occasionally publicised case on modern slavery; rather, such cases reveal exploitation as a 'structural component of the prevailing agri-food system rather than an exceptional aberration'.<sup>257</sup> The fact that such workers are often migrants highlights the global justice issue at stake here, which we cannot ignore.

If Dutch farming continues to be geared towards a market that functions according to the logic of extraction, the relational consequences will be severe and the social order will be unsustainable. Not only will farming communities in the Netherlands be extracted from with ever more intensity (through increased mechanisation, intensification and decreased labour), but any places with weaker economies will be able to be bought over. This can happen directly through corporations actually buying land or indirectly through industrial control of agriculture on land still nominally belonging to local people, with some degree of state co-operation necessary either way. It would be easy to see think immediately of Chinese investment in Africa, but corporate takeover of farmland is actually a huge issue in the heart of the 'developed world', namely the USA.<sup>258</sup> Besides, the injustice to poorer nations that this often involves is being perpetuated by the subsidisation of Western agricultural produce on the global market.

Some of the conflict between farmers and those who live a 'laptop and coffee shop' existence reflects a deeper systemic divide. The capacity to manipulate words and figures on a computer screen lends itself more to extraction than cultivation of real value. Cultivators lose out to extractors in the global economy, with farming becoming a dispensable part of society. The implications for food security have motivated some pushback against this economically determined industrialisation. At a more fundamental relational level, this is unsustainable, since society depends on mutual flourishing between people and land. If agriculture is reduced to a marginal operation conducted by poorly paid workers or robots overseas (as is happening with car manufacturing and call centres), the necessary human involvement in this mutual flourishing is lost. What we get instead is a dichotomy of intensively farmed land and nature reserves, which highlights an even deeper relational breach between humans and the natural world.

257 Siegmann, K. A., Quaedvlieg, J., & Williams, T. (2022). Migrant Labour in Dutch Agriculture: Regulated Precarity. *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 24(2), p. 236.

258 <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-deepen-industrial-agricultural-trade-investment-ties-with-africa-2024-09-05/>, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/investment-funds-stocking-up-us-farmland-safe-haven-bet-2023-11-16/>, both accessed 1.12.25

## 2. Dutch Relational Agriculture

Having analysed some of the challenges facing Dutch farming, a number of potential avenues for developing a more relational approach can be identified. We would start in different places depending on what we see as most fundamental – the economy, environment, socio-cultural dynamics or the political system that seeks to shape our relationship with all three. But as we have outlined in the previous section of this report, our philosophical starting point is relational thinking, whose basis in turn is Christian, i.e. in the Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament and the relational reality to which they bear witness.

Our approach entails the adoption of a holistic alternative social vision that does not prioritise one arena of human interaction over the others. Political discourse tends to exclude such a broad purview through its concentration on certain limited points of contention, but relational thinking looks at the whole picture.<sup>259</sup> Taking an approach that prioritises relationships is not an exclusively theological or Christian priority. Indeed, from a rural sociology perspective, the aim has been stated as how to 'imagine and engage in the construction of regenerative socioecological relationships'.<sup>260</sup>

Within the Netherlands there are hundreds of enterprises that aim for a relational alternative to industrial agriculture (though very few employ the language of 'relational' to describe their work). Any holistic social vision needs a concrete starting point, hence the transformative agenda associated with multifunctional farms, at least initially, whereby economies of scale could be replaced by 'economies of scope', where multiple outputs rather than more of one output can maintain farm viability.<sup>261</sup> There are also networks that group together initiatives with particular agro-environmental or agro-social priorities, rather than aiming to respond directly to economically unsustainable agriculture. Most of the initiatives we will look at originate within civil society or the green private sector, though come from public bodies initiated from the top down. Many projects are part of more than one sector, with universities (which themselves straddle the three sectors) often being a focal point for collaborative work.

259 'For example, paying farmers to stop farming is discussed regularly in the media, while a fully integrated agro-ecological farming system that begins to flatten the distinction between nature and farming is not seriously pursued' (Leitheiser et al., 'Regeneration at a distance from the state', 708).

260 Leitheiser et al., 'Regeneration at a distance from the state', 701. They later advocate for basing our analysis on 'a holistic understanding of humans as interdependent and in relation to each other and natural systems' (p. 702).

261 OECD (2001), *Multifunctionality: Towards an Analytical Framework*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264192171-en>, 29-32.

It should be stated from the outset that these ‘relational’ developments are not, at least on the surface, operating against public policy. Indeed, the Dutch position on this issue is stated clearly:

‘Government subsidies and knowledge help to stimulate multifunctional agriculture, a term used for farms that combine agriculture with providing care (so-called care farms) or nature management (by leaving fields to lie fallow for meadow birds to breed, for instance).’<sup>262</sup>

Promoting ‘multifunctional’ in this case signals a commitment to more healthy ecological, economic and social relationships. At the same time, much of what we consider in this section finds itself operating against the economic and political tide. As Stephen Leitheiser and his fellow authors put it, the ‘glaring problems’ in modern agriculture have been well acknowledged but ‘have not spurred a major shift towards a sustainable agricultural future’.<sup>263</sup> Again, we need to acknowledge the fundamental contradiction involved: the government and the EU are trying to both build the economy by improving position in the global market whilst at the same time trying to promote schemes for environmental benefit and farmers’ wellbeing.

This sub-section is split into four aspects of relational agriculture in The Netherlands: land use (how farming is conducted in relation to the environment), economic innovation (business models that are alternatives to conventional companies), social innovation (non-professional engagement between people and agricultural processes) and innovation within research, education and training. The next sub-section will take up the question of holistic system innovation.

## Land use innovation in the Netherlands

Cultivating the land in ways other than the industrial paradigm can be carried out in a number of ways. This goes beyond specific changes in what is actually cultivated, which in themselves will always have mixed effects. For example, biomass energy as an increasing focus can be analysed positively (more circular and renewable) but will increase the amount of land used on monocropping for fuel, rather than creating ecological and social systems. Systemic land use alternatives are ‘relational’ to the extent that they involve relating to the land differently, but also, as we will see, this difference in relating to the land entails a different social configuration to varying extents. These different innovations all entail an increase in farm labour and a different way that the farms and farmers have of connecting to their local area.

### Circular agriculture

<sup>262</sup> <https://www.government.nl/topics/agriculture/agriculture-and-horticulture>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>263</sup> Leitheiser et al., ‘Regeneration at a distance from the state’, 700

Although ‘intensification and efficiency’ have helped develop Dutch agriculture, ‘optimization’ is the new ideal:

Optimization of the interlocking systems at different scales is fundamentally different from maximization at the field, stable, greenhouse or farm level. It allows us to use land, water, chemicals and nutrients to optimal effects and to reduce or even eliminate the waste of residual biomass since this can be used elsewhere in the food system.<sup>264</sup>

This is *not* a return to the early 1900s but a ‘collective search’ by stakeholders for combinations of ecology and technology that brings yields without environmental damage.

Four main guidelines characterise circular agriculture. Firstly, land should be used according to soil type, mainly for crops, with livestock getting mainly grass and (converted) waste products. Likewise, crop farmers use waste products from animals or crop remnants. Precision technology can help with this. Secondly, health soil is the foundation – fertility and high organic matter content, maximising reuse and nitrogen fixing crops (only using artificial fertiliser when necessary). Again, precision technology helps with this. Thirdly, farmers will be aided in their fight against the problems of nature (diseases and pests) by enhancing genetic selection and agrobiodiversity. Fourthly, there are climate benefits from increased carbon retention and decreased greenhouse gas emissions that act as end goals and help shape the systems adopted.

‘Lighthouse farms’ are being developed in order to make concrete this rather abstract set of priorities. These real-life demonstration projects (similar to ‘living labs’ but without the necessary intensive research) will ideally become places of inspiration. But in order for this to happen, there must be ‘technical, economic, legal and social barriers’ overcome by the whole range of stakeholders. Likewise, as a relatively new term, ‘circular agriculture’ may become confused with other alternative or sustainable methodologies. Hence there has been care to define it as a broad set of concerns rather than a technical practice. Thus there can be a range of approaches within this broad framework. We now turn to one such approach, ‘a form of circular agriculture that takes things a step further... called agroecological “nature-inclusive agriculture”, which is specifically focused on ecosystem services.’<sup>265</sup>

### Nature-inclusive farming

<sup>264</sup> WUR (2018), ‘Circular Agriculture’, p. 3 (<https://www.wur.nl/nl/show/circular-agriculture-a-new-perspective-for-dutch-agriculture-2.htm>, accessed 1.12.25). The rest of this paragraph utilises material from this document.

<sup>265</sup> WUR (2018), Circular Agriculture, 8.

Farmers tend to want tidy spaces, which are connected to efficiency and good production levels. However, as well as the economic incentives needed, 'farmers would need to be able to consider biodiversity-friendly practices as consistent with their identity and pride as farmers.'<sup>266</sup> Nature-inclusive farming aims to encompass 'a range of farming practices that avoid a negative impact on biodiversity, benefit from biodiversity and enhance biodiversity', which 'combines existing concepts such as agri-environmental management, functional agrobiodiversity, ecosystem services, circular agriculture and agro-ecological farming' and 'aligns with regenerative and nature-based agriculture'. There are three levels, running from agri-environmental management through a 'fully integrated agro-ecological farming system'.<sup>267</sup> As we will see, agroecology is more holistic, ground-up and tradition-specific than circular or nature-inclusive agriculture.

Conservation measures on farmland have in fact been growing since the 1990s rise in awareness of pollution issues. It has mainly been voluntary and has been obscured by the recent nitrogen crisis.<sup>268</sup> What farmers react to, however, is not so much the idea of environmental concern but the fact of its imposition by government to the detriment of their economic freedom (as discussed above). Nature-inclusive farming runs the risk of meeting the same fate. However, there are ways that it can be promoted from the ground up by developing farmer subcultures, forming collectives (both with support from subsidisation). In addition to this, 'biodiversity can be a production goal in addition to food' with 'visible symbols' to display their skill in this area (e.g. number of meadow birds).<sup>269</sup>

What this does is not only to shift behaviour but to change the fundamental cultural understanding of what a 'good farmer is. According to research by Westerink et al. referenced already in this paragraph, a 'good farmer' takes care of land, animals and people, whilst producing maximally. There is already a value for the environment here, but since it involves minimising mess, it includes the use of pesticides where necessary. Therefore

an increase of biodiversity-friendly farming practice requires the build-up of new cultural capital within farming subcultures that offer alternative social capital and recognition for farmers who are willing to risk losing status in their local farming

<sup>266</sup> Westerink, J., Pleijte, M., Schrijver, R., van Dam, R., de Krom, M., & de Boer, T. (2021), 'Can a 'good farmer' be nature-inclusive? Shifting cultural norms in farming in The Netherlands'. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 88, 60

<sup>267</sup> Westerink et al. 'Can a 'good farmer' be nature-inclusive?', 61

<sup>268</sup> Hens Runhaar, Nico Polman & Marijke Dijkshoorn-Dekker (2018) Self-initiated nature conservation by farmers: an analysis of Dutch farming, *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability*, 16/6, 486-497

<sup>269</sup> The above two points are made in the aforementioned Westerink et al. 'Can a 'good farmer' be nature-inclusive?'

community because of the 'messy' landscape that they create.<sup>270</sup>

### Agroecology

As its name suggests, agroecology combines agricultural practice with ecological understanding. There are a number of different definitions offered by people in a variety of geographical and disciplinary locations. A broad agroecological approach in this case includes biodynamic and regenerative approaches as well as organic to an extent (mutual differences between the terms notwithstanding).<sup>271</sup> But to understand the importance of this particular term, a wide-ranging understanding is important, such as that given by Steve Gliessman:

Agroecology is the integration of research, education, action and change that brings sustainability to all parts of the food system: ecological, economic, and social. It's transdisciplinary in that it values all forms of knowledge and experience in food system change. It's participatory in that it requires the involvement of all stakeholders from the farm to the table and everyone in between. And it is action-oriented because it confronts the economic and political power structures of the current industrial food system with alternative social structures and policy action. The approach is grounded in ecological thinking where a holistic, systems-level understanding of food system sustainability is required.<sup>272</sup>

Research from 2022 found '66 organisations and 6 educational institutions connected to the Dutch agroecology movement'; this is only official figures, but this may not include local organisations or initiatives developed since then.<sup>273</sup> Key issues addressed by different organisations, which engage in quite a lot of collaboration are biodiversity and soil quality, with 'changed legislation and regulations' the specific thing needing changed. 'The most frequently mentioned motivation for cooperation is the formation of a counter-movement to industrialised agriculture'. Hence change in 'land use' implies something more wide-ranging and systemic.<sup>274</sup> We will look further into such movements in section 2.

<sup>270</sup> Westerink et al. 'Can a 'good farmer' be nature-inclusive?', 67.

<sup>271</sup> Compared to agroecology, 'biodynamic farmers have a longer history in the Netherlands and their number... is increasing' to around 100 (Hassink, J., Goris, M., Hijmans, J., Nieboer, S., van Dam, N., Katsaros, I. and Klapwijk, Ch. (2024), 'Mapping agroecology in the Netherlands' in Wezel, A., Grard, B., Kamilia, K., Gkisakis, V. (eds) 2024. *Agroecology in Europe*. Country Reports Series, Vol. 2, ISARA, Lyon, France; Agroecology Europe, Corbais, Belgium, 198). Part of the message of LNV is that organic holdings and hectareage is on the increase, but this is mainly on extant organic holdings. In fact, the organic sector in the Netherlands is still relatively small in comparison to the rest of Europe.

<sup>272</sup> Gliessman, S. (2018), 'Defining Agroecology'. *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* 42/6, 599.

<sup>273</sup> Hassink et al., 'Mapping agroecology in the Netherlands', 195

<sup>274</sup> Hassink et al., 'Mapping agroecology in the Netherlands', 196

## Economic innovation in Dutch agriculture

One of the key claims of this report is that agriculture should not be seen purely as an economic (or even environmental) activity. Rather, it has holistic cultural and social value that is being neglected in the focus on monetary support for (or neglect of) farming. At the same time, farmers must pursue economic viability to survive; a certain amount of financial-savvy operation is necessary to negotiate a complex and ever-changing market environment. In other words farms are businesses; yes, they are *more* than just businesses, but not *less*. Moreover, the idea of 'business' is not inherently non-relational; relationships within this context, though often dominated by cynical competitiveness, are still relationships. Adaptation in business models and their positioning within the economic system (within the Netherlands and beyond) is a crucial aspect of more relational agriculture. There are two main categories under which we will look at this aspect of the Dutch situation: alternative business models for food production and business models that diversify organisational activities beyond this in a 'multifunctional' direction.

### Alternative business models for production

As we have already seen, the key economic challenge faced by Dutch farmers is that the price of their produce is going down (relative to inflation). Their weak position in the value chain makes it difficult to demand higher prices. However, there are moves to improve this situation by the establishment of co-operatives, new forms of a general approach that has been around for many generations. Indeed, the government is specifically in favour of these when it comes to agri-environmental land management. There are 40 agricultural collectives with over 11,000 members managing over 104k hectares. These can apply for Agricultural Nature and Landscape Management (ANLb - Agrarisch Natuur- en Landschapsbeheer) subsidies from their province (LNV).<sup>275</sup>

Rather than strengthening one's own position by building a coalition in the value chain, one can try ways to shorten it. Thus there is a range of direct-buying initiatives, such as dairy company Elke Melk and FarmtoHome, which connect customers directly to local farmers for a wider range of products.<sup>276</sup> Even more broadly, there are efforts to cut down supply chains, through short chain initiatives such as we will examine in sub-section 2 below. Capacity to do this is related (naturally enough) to the amount of processing a product needs and the size of a company (with increases being most readily seen in very small and very large companies).

<sup>275</sup> See also <https://www.rvo.nl/subsidies-financiering/anlb>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>276</sup> <https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-10/EUCAP-GoodPracticeReport-Elke-Melk-DutchDairySettingUpANovelShortSupplyChain.pdf>, <https://www.farmtohome.info/>, both accessed 1.12.25

A specific type of shortened supply chain is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).<sup>277</sup> This is a scheme whereby members of a (usually local) community become involved in the production of the food that they will consume. CSA membership can involve purely financial commitment (buying shares in – or subscribing to – agricultural produce in advance, thus providing its inputs) but it can also involve hands-on work at the farm. The latter sometimes is taken as part of the payments for vegetables, so-called 'sweat equity'. CSA is associated with smaller-scale agriculture, which are more immediately responsive to customer demand. It is also connected to a wider trend, whereby consumers are also producers, so-called 'prosumption'.

What is interesting about prosumption as a trend is that recent research suggests it to rely mainly on people's enjoyment of the horticultural or livestock rearing experience rather than ideological commitment to systemic change.

'Our respondents experience prosumption as a pleasurable and satisfying activity that gives access to tasty, healthy, fresh, cheap and specifically home-made produce. This lack of 'higher morality' may be a blessing for the future of prosumption: it means that people are intrinsically motivated. Calls for responsibility for ethical or moral consumption do not have to be used to engage these citizens in an activity that may be quietly sustainable'.<sup>278</sup>

Of course, when people grow their own food, it does not benefit extant farmers. But it does solve a macro-economic problem, which is the lack of agricultural human resource needed for high-quality, labour-intensive produce. The difficulty of recruiting new farmers into the profession is a key issue underlying the second main innovation in business models, which revolves around land. It is well-documented that a major barrier to those who want to start farming from 'outside' the system (i.e. not being inheritors of a farm) is access to agricultural land.

One way to address this is through land co-operatives that provide opportunities to those who will engage in cultivation from a similar ethos such as Land von Ons, Stichting Aardpeer and Herenboeren.<sup>279</sup> Whilst functioning in diverse ways, all these operate under the principle of 'the commons', which is promoted more systemically by Toekomstboeren (the Dutch La Via Campesina chapter).<sup>280</sup> Thus they 'mobilise the resource pooling power of communities—not only of capital but of labour, time and

<sup>277</sup> <https://www.csanetwerk.nl/>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>278</sup> Veen, E. J., Dagevos, H., & Jansma, J. E. (2021), 'Pragmatic Prosumption: Searching for Food Prosumers in the Netherlands'. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 61/1, 275

<sup>279</sup> See <https://except.eco/projects/herenboeren-international/> and, for the discussion, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzS0Lx25oWg>, both accessed 1.12.25.

<sup>280</sup> <https://toekomstboeren.nl/>, accessed 1.12.25

knowledge— in order to achieve the goal of building regenerative food systems'.<sup>281</sup>

Whilst the above innovations stem primarily from civil society, there are policy measures at national level to achieve similar goals. Hence the Dutch government claims that it 'works with entrepreneurs towards a more sustainable agriculture and horticulture'. Specifically, 'to make organic farms more competitive with regular agriculture, the government signed covenants with supermarkets, the Dutch Confederation of Agriculture and Horticulture (LTO) and other parties for the joint promotion of organic products and a wider selection in the shops. These efforts should lead to a 10% increase in the sale of organic products'.<sup>282</sup> This initiative serves as a good reminder that one route for economic innovation is a renewed or deepened public-private (or at public-third sector) partnership.

### Diversification and multifunctional agriculture

As well as finding alternative ways to improve the economic viability of food (or agricultural commodity, including non-food) production, it is possible for farms to expand into other products and services. In terms of business models, this is a matter of 'income stream diversification', which is common enough throughout enterprises in a number of sectors. However, what we are talking about goes beyond the provision of alternative agricultural products to 'multifunctionality', where non-agricultural goods and services are produced. These can include both private and public goods in areas directly or indirectly connected to food, such as health and education.

Multifunctional agriculture (MFA) as a concept has been recognised globally since the 1990s. The UN's 1992 Agenda 21 places it within a wider development context (a 2001 OECD report specifies what it means for agriculture), providing the basis for its adoption in the EU's Agenda 2000.<sup>283</sup> It was then implemented through the Commission of the European Communities (CEC) strategy in 2006, which sought to 'reflect the multifunctional role farming plays in the richness and diversity of landscapes, food products and cultural and natural heritage throughout the Community'.<sup>284</sup> Its adoption in the Netherlands is not mentioned on any official

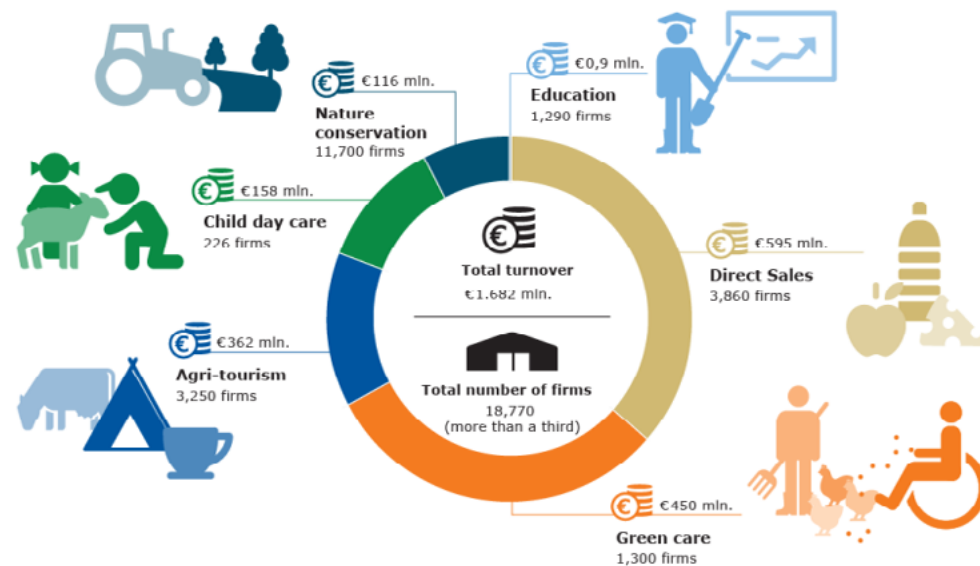
281 Leitheiser et al., 'Regeneration at a distance from the state', 716.

282 <https://www.government.nl/topics/agriculture/agriculture-and-horticulture>, accessed 1.12.25

283 D. Stobbelaar, J. Groot, D. Makowski, M. Tichit (2009), 'Multifunctional agriculture – From farm diagnosis to farm design and institutional innovation', *Journal of Environmental Management* 90/Supp. 2, S109-S111. The aforementioned 2001 OECD report Multifunctionality discusses MFA abstractly, with no discussion of the nature of multifunctionality globally or which activities are included within it.

284 CEC (Commission of the European Communities), 2006/144/EC, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02006D0144-20090119>, accessed 1.12.25.

government sources, but the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature did commission a report by WUR, published in 2022.<sup>285</sup> There it is stated that 'turnover in multifunctional agriculture in the Netherlands has increased by 15% to over one billion euros between 2018 and 2020, despite the corona pandemic.' A recent update (January 2025) indicates that the growth continued into 2023, with the division of income illustrated below.<sup>286</sup>



represented in terms of monetary value in the recently published infographic above.<sup>287</sup> Around 30% of farmers engage in MFA, with different types of farms tending to engage in different types of activities (e.g. dairy farms in farm education and child care and outdoor horticultural farms in direct sales).

The WUR report provides statistics without adding analysis, so it is hard to know what the government may be planning in relation to MFA. Curiously, despite a reported turnover increase from €300 million to over €1 billion from 2007-2020, very little

285 Meulen, van der, Harold, Jakob Jager, Daniel de Jong, Rob Stokkers, Gabe Venema en Marcel Vijn (2022). *Kijk op multifunctionele landbouw; Omzet 2007-2020*. Wageningen, Wageningen Economic Research, Rapport 2022-030. English translations offered below are courtesy of DeepL (<https://deepl.com/>, accessed 10.3.25).

286 <https://www.wur.nl/en/news-wur/show-1/dutch-farmers-are-making-more-income-from-extra-on-farm-services.htm>, accessed 1.12.25.

287 Meulen et al., *Kijk op multifunctionele landbouw*, 9. See also <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1015678/total-number-of-farms-with-multifunctional-activities-in-the-netherlands-by-type/>, accessed 1.12.25.

has been written about MFA in the Netherlands recently (it is not even mentioned in Berkout et al.'s 2023 LNV document or the Dutch government website). Perhaps the term will become fashionable again, as further research has been planned by WUR.<sup>288</sup> In any case, the innovation MFA represents remains significant, as do the key results of previous research into it (some aspects of this innovation are social, as we will see below). Dutch initiatives in MFA were studied by WUR alongside parallel developments in France in a joint project with the French Agricultural Research Institute (INRA) and the observations we can derive from it are noteworthy.<sup>289</sup>

Firstly, there was at the time (2009) an assumption that Dutch farming communities are permanent, which is not the case in France: '... in the Netherlands there is a strong focus on ecosystem services and leisure opportunities provided by agriculture. By contrast, in France much attention is given to social, cultural and economic functions of agriculture by sustaining rural population and employment levels' (p. S109). This may suggest that a different focus for MFA from the beginning may have made it more relevant to the Netherlands. Secondly, the lack of locally tailored policies are acknowledged as problematic:

The impact of the resulting policies is uncertain and not always favourable, because MFA by its nature is locally based and formed', hence the levelling of North Friesian hedgerows whose 'specific local characteristics' are not protected in management packages' (p. S110). Thus the conclusion that 'there is a need to describe and evaluate the landscape character of a region, in order to be able to assess the potential contribution of MFA (p. S111).

Ironically, however, despite this acknowledgement, the need for local level contextualisation is minimised in the conclusion of the project, which does mention national contextualisation but puts more emphasis on integration and unification of policy at a meta-level. Thirdly, the research recognises a need for 'unifying concepts' when combining social and natural sciences. This is exactly the advantage that a relational approach can offer, introducing concepts that are ideologically rooted in ancient tradition whilst being readily accessible to non-specialists.

Of course, the 2009 research did not take into account the depth of crisis (not least financial) reflected in the protests that erupted a decade later. But even the 2022 WUR research did not provide evidence that the benefits of MFA were sufficient to seriously alleviate the deep challenges faced by Dutch farmers. Indeed, there

288 <https://www.wur.nl/en/news-wur/show-1/dutch-farmers-are-making-more-income-from-extra-on-farm-services.htm>, accessed 1.12.25

289 This culminated in a special edition of the Journal of Environmental Management in May 2009, which bore the title 'Multifunctional agriculture - From farm diagnosis to farm design and institutional innovation'.

are some diversified income streams that are not only profitable but are more so than actual farming, with the whole agritourism industry being the prime example.<sup>290</sup> However, in such cases there is a need for significant adjustments to farm infrastructure and working patterns to accommodate visitors' needs, reducing production capacity. As an economic innovation, therefore, there is a question over whether MFA can achieve its goals without the self-defeating result of a gradual shift of focus away from agricultural production itself. However, its potential relational benefits are clearly substantial, especially with regards to specifically social goals, to which we now turn.

## Social innovation in Dutch agriculture

This has already been addressed in 'multifunctional agriculture' to the extent that the diversification of income streams that it involves already involves more social engagement. However, this sub-section is about innovations that have been made *from outside* of agriculture, moving from socially-oriented work into engagement with farming rather than vice versa. The key here is that the purpose of the activity is specifically social, rather than social activity being adopted for basically economic reasons. We start by looking at the role of MFA in this development in order to frame the issue, moving on then to the social developments themselves.

### Social innovation within MFA

From the perspective of agriculture, the social innovations included within MFA are highly beneficial. Specifically within the health, care and wellness mandate known as 'Green Care', there is an opportunity for farmers to diversify (and therefore increase) income whilst contributing to the growing welfare need in rural areas. Indeed, 'care farming or social farming [is] a promising example of the kind of multifunctional agriculture that is being developed in a number of European countries'.<sup>291</sup> Of course, deriving economic benefit and providing social services do not always complement each other, either in public perception or in reality. The former (business-oriented) approach has been taken in the Netherlands, in contrast to Flanders, for example, where the Ministry of Agriculture originally promoted care farming to 'enhance the social position and (self-) image of farmers'.<sup>292</sup>

European and then governmental support set up the Dutch practice to be financially

290 It includes international tourism (e.g. <https://www.agroreizen.nl/welcome-to-the-netherlands/>, accessed 1.12.25).

291 Hassink et al., 'Care Farming in the Netherlands', 1.

292 Dessein, J., Bock, B. and de Krom, M. (2013), 'Investigating the limits of multifunctional agriculture as the dominant frame for Green Care in agriculture in Flanders and the Netherlands'. Journal of rural studies 32, 55.

sustainable as ‘an example of rural entrepreneurship’, albeit through collaborative funding, most of which has its ultimate origin in public health budgets.<sup>293</sup> Together with this came an organisation to manage relationships with public and private institutional stakeholders (the Federatie Landbouw en Zorg).<sup>294</sup> These developments brought increased professionalisation, specialisation and regulation as well as profitability, which naturally encouraged more focus on care farming.

As care farming has developed technically in the Netherlands, however, some of its benefits – if not its *raison d'être* – have begun to be compromised. Again, as has sometimes happened with agrotourism, farms need to adapt in ways more favourable for care-oriented activities (and less for farming itself). Simultaneously, there is a diminishment of the informal atmosphere of care farming, in large part through being connected unpretentiously to real farmers and their work. So both clients and farmers end up losing out by being less connected to agricultural production. In addition, there is a certain financial precarity that comes with relying solely on public health funds, liable to be cut at any time.

### Socially originated innovation

As we turn to look at innovation that originates within social care itself, it is vital to note that we are not denying the genuine relational benefits of previously considered innovations. CSA schemes, though considered within the frame of business model innovation, clearly have a dual motivation (specifically social benefits of CSA will be touched on in this sub-section). Even straightforwardly commercial initiatives in agritourism bring people into contact with the land and farmers in a significant way. Quite generally, innovations should not be dismissed as socially beneficial just because they also make money. However, our specific interest in this part of the paper is in what is motivated by needs arising within socially oriented work. This means we will be looking at these innovations’ inherent features and benefits for participants rather than the role they play in achieving better socio-economic conditions for farmers. Of course though, in the relational emphasis we are making here, stakeholder benefit is not mutually exclusive.

‘Although Green Care practices have a century long, informal history... the legislative and financial institutionalisation of Green Care practices is a recent phenomenon’.<sup>295</sup> In fact, the Netherlands is ‘one of the pioneering countries in care farming’, with initiatives springing up as early as the 1960s.<sup>296</sup> Unlike other places within Europe,

293 Dessein, Bock and de Krom, ‘Investigating the limits of MFA’, 56. This whole paragraph is indebted to the argument made in this paper.

294 <https://www.zorgboeren.nl/>, accessed 1.12.25

295 Dessein, Bock and de Krom, ‘Investigating the limits of MFA’, 53.

296 Hassink et al., ‘Care Farming in the Netherlands’, 2.

and despite the increasing specialisation mentioned already, work in the Dutch context still takes place nearly exclusively on family farms within normal operations so that ‘GCA offers an informal, familial context that is considered to be close to “normal” life’. For public health and social inclusion, this is based on two ideas.<sup>297</sup>

Losing contact with the ‘earthly’ basis of human existence may also be seen as a cause of illness; re-establishing contact with nature may accordingly restore physical and mental well-being

Manuel physical labour generates well-being and a capacity for work

Green Care in Agriculture (GCA) therefore responds to the increased need for public services and individual desire for health, including ‘therapy, prevention, health care, rehabilitation’.<sup>298</sup> This is reflected in the diversity of groups that avail of care farming:<sup>299</sup>

**% of Care Farms Open to a Specific Group of Participants**

| Year | Intellectual Disabilities | Mental Health Problems | Youth | Older people |
|------|---------------------------|------------------------|-------|--------------|
| 2005 | 67                        | 39                     | 22    | 11           |
| 2009 | 53                        | 39                     | 32    | 24           |
| 2018 | 69                        | 60                     | 43    | 43           |

The variety of participants indicates that services offered can be quite broad:

Care farms engage in a variety of different activities, including horticulture, livestock farming, green maintenance or forestry, but they also carry out other types of recreational or social activities, including painting or running a tea garden or restaurant’.<sup>300</sup>

Together with this widening scope, which also includes educational services and nursing care, has come a growth in the number of care farms and a corresponding

297 Dessein, Bock and de Krom, ‘Investigating the limits of MFA’, 52-53.

298 Dessein, Bock and de Krom, ‘Investigating the limits of MFA’, 51.

299 Table below taken from Hassink et al., ‘Care Farming in the Netherlands’, 7.

300 Hassink et al., ‘Care Farming in the Netherlands’, 2.

increase in revenue from €11.3 million in 2011 to €88.6 million in 2018.<sup>301</sup>

According to Hassink et al., the notable growth in the Dutch care farming sector is 'due to professionalisation, specialisation and an increase in the number of participants per farm', plus expanding the offering of programmes to include those mentioned above.<sup>302</sup> Education provides an interesting example, because it combines care needs with pedagogical intentions. Veen, Pijpker and Hassink have shown how educational care farms in the Netherlands have had real benefits for children who have dropped out of school in particular.<sup>303</sup> These benefits come from interacting with green spaces and animals, though only when teachers devise programmes well; 'the elements of the farm context and the intervention itself work in tandem', with care and education combined.<sup>304</sup> Four specific benefits include rest, freedom, tailor-made education and the feeling of integration, especially important for children for whom mainstream education has proved unsuitable.<sup>305</sup>

As well as interventions targeted at those with specific needs that are not otherwise met in the health or education system, there are also farm-based programmes that have more mainstream application. Early years provision (including preschool) and childcare more generally, have seen increased turnover 'due to a slight growth in the number of locations, an increase in the number of child places per type of child care, an increase in the hourly rate in line with inflation and a slight improvement in the occupancy rate'.<sup>306</sup> In addition, farm school programmes are proliferating (especially through the Boerderijschool) and there is an organisation set up specifically to facilitate educational farm visits.<sup>307</sup> Although the latter may sometimes be purely observational, allowing children to see the processes on an industrial farm, many involve more hands-on engagement and curricular integration, building relationships with nature and others. With such activities we are only a relatively small step from training and education for relational agriculture, which is our next topic.

## Research, education and training for relational agriculture in the Netherlands

301 <https://www.age-platform.eu/care-farms-provide-nursing-home-care-in-the-netherlands/>, accessed 1.12.25

302 Hassink et al., 'Care Farming in the Netherlands', 8.

303 Veen, E. J., Pijpker, R. and Hassink, J. (2023), 'Understanding educational care farms as outdoor learning interventions for children who have dropped out of school in the Netherlands', *Journal of adventure education and outdoor learning* 23/3, 323–339.

304 Veen, Pijpker and Hassink, 'Educational Care Farms', 335.

305 Veen, Pijpker and Hassink, 'Educational Care Farms', 336.

306 <https://research.wur.nl/en/publications/kijk-op-multifunctionele-landbouw-omzet-2007-2023>, accessed 1.12.25

307 <http://www.boerderijschool.nl/>, <https://www.boerderijeducatienederland.nl/>, accessed 1.12.25

We have already seen that agricultural education in the Netherlands is regarded highly on a global level. There are strong pathways from early levels through to tertiary-level training, where WUR sets the world standard for training. However, within this system there are challenges. As well as the precarity of relying on agriculture's economic success (mainly through export) for the viability of educational programmes, there are relatively few relational alternatives to the mainstream training on offer. An overall attempt to remedy the lack of 'Green Education' is made by GroenePact, but it does not have the relational focus that we are taking here, and is quite 'top down' in that local farmers are not named as key stakeholders or partners.<sup>308</sup>

In terms of higher education courses, Warmonderhof is the only institution that offers full courses in agroecological farming.<sup>309</sup> WUR offers a masters in 'Resilient Farming and Food Systems'; this includes elements of agroecology, which can become a focal point in conjunction with a French institution.<sup>310</sup> This is the only programme that explicitly takes a more 'relational' approach (the MSc in organic agriculture has been discontinued). Like the similarly oriented MSc in Development and Rural Innovation or the MSc in Forest and Nature Conservation, the focus is more general and does not necessarily lead to the development of alternative food systems and has a more international rather than Dutch focus. Rural sociology, which has its home at Wageningen, is taught as an element of a number of programmes rather than having its own course.

In terms of less professionally-driven and more community-based training, Kraaybeekerhof in Driebergen offers public courses in a number of areas that connect people to nature and each other.<sup>311</sup> In addition, there is 'a huge variety of informal education bodies that complement formal education', often through peer-to-peer meetings between farmers.<sup>312</sup> On the specifically practically-oriented research side of things, a number of agroecological 'Living Labs' have been established since the initiative in July 2021 to 'support the agroecological transition in the Netherlands'.<sup>313</sup> Part of the slowness in these developments has been that agroecology has not

308 <https://greeneducationinnl.org/>, accessed 1.12.25

309 <https://www.warmonderhof.nl/>, where it is clear that the specific approach is actually biodynamic, which can be taken as a sub-category of agroecological farming although it has its own rich history and ideological bases (<https://demeter.net/about/history/>), both accessed 1.12.25.

310 <https://www.wur.nl/en/education-programmes/master/msc-programmes/msc-agroecology-european-master.htm>, accessed 1.12.25. The focus on agroecology is mainly carried out at the Institut Supérieur d'agriculture et d'agroalimentaire Rhône-Alpes (ISARA-Lyon) in Lyon, France.

311 <https://kraaybeekerhof.nl/>, accessed 1.12.25

312 Hassink et al., 'Mapping agroecology in the Netherlands', 192.

313 Hassink et al., 'Mapping agroecology in the Netherlands', 194.

been treated scientifically in Dutch science (unlike Germany). Today, there is an 80 ha 'Agroecology & Technology Fieldlab' at WUR, specifically aimed at 'developing nature-inclusive and regenerative agricultural systems'.<sup>314</sup> However, this looks more at technical solutions than more systemic and relational transformation, which requires more of a 'movement' approach, which we now turn to.

### 3. *Towards systemic change in the Netherlands?*

We have seen that with all the main areas of Dutch agriculture, there are initiatives that take a more relational approach than the conventional status quo. Whilst most of these do not employ the terminology of 'relational agriculture', they do move in this direction. This is especially clear when we see how the various developments mentioned above combine to create changes in the landscape of relationships. We need to acknowledge the impact made by changes in specific areas as well as movements towards more systemic change.

#### **Relational impact of specific innovations**

Changes in land use are not only technical but involve a different relationship between people and land. Especially with agroecology (which is seen as the most complete form of nature-inclusive farming), there is an understanding that natural resources – particularly the soil, plants, animals and habitats that interact with farmland – fit together within an ecological system. It is the farmers' role not only to work out how these elements interact with each other, but also how human actors can interact within it. This relational thinking also affects the way that agricultural projects are undertaken, with more collaborative and labour-intensive approaches being especially common with agroecological endeavours.

Again, with economic innovation, the alternative business models (together with a multifunctional approach) work to make people aware of themselves as stakeholders within a larger relational ecosystem. When everyone within this ecosystem flourishes, then this is good news for the individual. Competition can be healthy to an extent (when it comes to developing best practice, for example), but a general aim to eliminate 'competitors' is counter-productive to a healthy society, which thrives from having a lot of relatively autonomous, smaller-size farms.

Social innovations of course bring more people into contact with nature, farming and the food system, making the rise in this area of work undoubtedly positive from

<sup>314</sup> <https://www.wur.nl/en/research-results/research-institutes/plant-research/business-units/field-crops/field-crops-test-locations/testlocation-agroecology.htm>, accessed 1.12.25

a relational perspective. But these innovations are also linked to certain types of land use. Care farming is more likely to work on a labour-intensive farm rather than one that is too mechanised. It is likely that this explains the fall in horticultural and intensive livestock care farms, since these two agricultural areas are undergoing the most rapid technological developments and therefore employing less hands-on labour, as the table below shows.

**Table indicating the number of care farms by farm type in the Netherlands<sup>315</sup>**

|                     | 2005       | 2016       | Difference | %           |
|---------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Arable              | 29         | 32         | 3          | +10%        |
| Horticulture        | 72         | 46         | -26        | -36%        |
| Grassland-based     | 327        | 439        | 112        | +34%        |
| Intensive livestock | 43         | 40         | -3         | -7%         |
| Mixed               | 53         | 87         | 4          | +8%         |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>524</b> | <b>614</b> | <b>90</b>  | <b>+17%</b> |

So, whilst positive developments in each of these areas are interconnected and can be welcomed as progress, the dominant industrial system seems to prevent such efforts from being transformative. An indication of this is the lack of more relationally focused training at an education and training level (led by WUR). The fact that networks are developing around organisations committed to land, business and social innovation gives greater potential for systemic change as a greater political voice becomes possible. But there are also movements that promote overall systemic alternatives.

#### **Systemic alternatives**

There are three main angles to approaching systemic change in a relational direction within Dutch agriculture. One is to try to establish short chains, another is to establish regional food strategy, with a third opting being to push for wider change in farming practice as the basis for holistic system change. Clearly these overlap, but there is a

<sup>315</sup> Hassink et al., Care Farming in the Netherlands, 7

difference in focus and starting point, whether the economic and trade perspective, the other takes the social and cultural perspective, or the agricultural method itself. We now look at movements within all three of these main approaches.

The Short Chain Task Force (Taskforce Korte Keten) is a collaborative project set up to address the often unfair and unsustainably long supply chains.<sup>316</sup> An academic study on the pursuit of shortened chains (not restricted to the work of the Task Force) notes that 'in 2020 there were 7234 primary agricultural companies in the Netherlands that sold part of or all of their produced or processed food and horticultural products via a short chain. In this study, a short chain is defined as selling directly or via a single intermediary to the consumer' (p. 10).<sup>317</sup> There has been a recent increase in short-chain companies, suggesting other factors. In terms of these correlative factors, there are a few.

There is a strong link between selling products via a short chain and multifunctional activities', e.g. care farming, agrotourism and especially educational activities (p. 10).

The percentage of short chains in organic agriculture (39%) is three times higher than among companies with regular production systems (13%). Southern provinces have shorter supply chains. Otherwise, 'factors on the consumer side that affect sales scope via short chains are population density, recreation and catering' (p. 11). Many companies sell via a single intermediary, which is why so much 'greenhouse farming' is short chain.

Taskforce Korte Keten describes its goal as follows on its website:

"A short food supply chain is a supply chain with a limited number of operators committed to cooperation, local economic development and close geographical and social ties between food producers, processors and consumers."

The phrase 'social ties' specifically acknowledges the relational advantages of this arrangement. Indeed, there is a lot more at stake here than just the supply chains of a business. Likewise, challenges to develop short chains include logistics, bureaucracy around subsidies, knowledge development, stakeholder responsibility and development of markets. Superficially, the biggest challenge is economic, since it is much more likely that large companies can work with those to whom they supply produce (especially processors) to make sure that they are located relatively close together. However, there is the whole system that militates against this, which is

316 <https://taskforcekorteketen.nl/>, accessed 1.12.25

317 Venema et al. (2021), 'Agrarische productie ten behoeve van de korte keten. Een landelijke meting', Wageningen Economic Research. There is an English summary on pages 10-13.

why the short chain movement is basically one of holistic reform from an economic standpoint.

The Bunschoter statement aims for a National programme to promote regional food strategy (NPRVS). It is embodied in a collaboration between Jan Huigen's MansholtCampus and Eemlandhoeve community farm project together with several other local and national actors in the food system. It recognises the challenge of environmental sustainability and the need to move away from a production-volume model. It seeks to move towards an approach that prizes local (and health) food diversity, biodiversity regeneration and a renewed connection between citizens and farmers (which will help build a case for better prices for producers).

Taking a different starting point – the agroecological method itself – Voedsel Anders aims to combine all the elements needed to establish an 'alternative food system'.<sup>318</sup> It involves multiple stakeholders – farmers, NGOs, students & researchers – including the agroecology network, which sees its own role in terms of broad social reform, dealing with land access, research and labour:

"Agroecology is a practice, movement and science that supports life rather than destroys it. We are farmers, activists, researchers and other citizens. We are committed to strong food communities."<sup>319</sup>

Likewise, the Green Farmers Plan devised by the Federation of Agroecological Farmers (which organises the Boerenlandbouw Conferentie, aims for a holistic alternative to the industrially driven status quo.<sup>320</sup>

## Ideological roots: making local 'home' for global change

It is unclear how such movements discussed above will effect the overall shape of Dutch agriculture. However, there is hope in the powerful reality that relationships are being transformed. This report overall has formulated a relational approach on the fundamental ideological basis. In this case, the basis is theological and, more specifically, Judaeo-Christian, being based on the Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament. What has arisen at several points in the account of Dutch relational agriculture is the importance of the fundamental thinking that provides an orientation for agricultural practice. That this is often unspoken and deemed by some to be irrelevant is actually a product of a prevailing establishment that finds it

318 <https://www.voedsel-anders.be/>, accessed 1.12.25. See also Hassink et al., 'Mapping agroecology in the Netherlands', 195.

319 <https://agroecologie.nl/>, accessed 1.12.25

320 <https://www.groenboerenplan.nl/>, <https://www.federatieagroecologischeboeren.nl/category/boerenlandbouw-conferentie/0/>, both accessed 1.12.25

beneficial to leave implicit its modernist narrative of limitless economic expansion and market integration. By doing so, the fact is obscured that this is historically contingent and therefore capable of being chosen or rejected in favour of an alternative. We have witnessed too much large-scale socio-political change in the last while to fall for this cynical posturing.

Specifically, the alternative narrative given here is premised on the ontological reality of relatedness, rather than the modernist one that 'ontologically separates humans (and agriculture) from nature'.<sup>321</sup> Our vision is premised on a relational basis to all reality in the form of a God who is dynamic, intimate community and creates a world to be relationally integrated. This is the only way in which the world can be in relationship with God (as much as Christian behaviour and ideology has sometimes obscured this fact).

In fact, story of the Hebrew Bible is one of farming and relatedness to land being absolutely core to individual and collective human identity and key to a vision of its flourishing life. As with the recent concept of a 'keystone species', 'humans can even be understood as... an organism that holds the ecosystem together', a position of responsibility rather than domination.<sup>322</sup> This relational order disintegrated in the human fall from its original condition, with the abuse of power over other people and the rest of creation being a key effect. But the Greek New Testament affirms the restoration of this vision as part of the 'reconciliation of all things' in the person of Christ, challenging people to accept a better story and a brighter future.

As we have seen in this case study, and as is evident in countless examples across the world, one does not have to be Christian to affirm the basic priority of human-nature relatedness. Conversely, many churches and Christians do not recognise this priority, although this is certainly changing within the Protestant branch of the Dutch church.<sup>323</sup> Projects can be co-operated upon by people of all faiths or none, but ideological bases are important.

### **Relational connection: the key to Dutch (and European) agriculture**

There is a growing awareness that what is needed for real transformation is not this or that technical solution but relationships. It is encouraging to find this emphasis even at the forefront of academic agricultural research at Wageningen (as emphasised by Jan Hassink and Bettina Bok among others) as well as in projects

321 Leitheiser et al., 'Regeneration at a distance from the state', 702

322 Re-embedding and decommodifying food and agriculture 'marks a shift away from a system driven by atomisation and extracting profit at any cost and towards a relational system based on co-operative productive activity', for the flourishing of all (Leitheiser et al., 'Regeneration at a distance from the state', 709).

323 <https://bmgm-lchr.nl/article/view/13865/21173>, accessed 1.12.25

such as Mark Ainke's Regeneration Decade of Action project reflects this priority.<sup>324</sup> Relational thinking goes a step deeper and provides an account of the ontological premise for a worldview that does not set people in opposition to nature, as the prevailing narrative does. But there is a further step prioritisation of unique places, which we may call 'home'. Otherwise, the biblical picture could be made into cookie-cutter reality, which is just what industrial totalitarianism does. Therefore, for change to happen within Dutch agriculture and at a larger scale, people must see the agricultural development of their own local area as part of their 'home' and care for it accordingly. Paradoxically, global change can only come when people become increasingly local in their outlook. Various different pathways – innovations in land use, business models and social engagement, as well as movements for systemic change – take us in this direction. But it must be fired by a change of mindset and indeed a change of heart towards this alternative – and much better – relational vision.

### **Conclusion: Adopting a Relational Approach to EU Agriculture**

The primary ultimate purpose of this report is to contribute to readers' understanding of the situation in European agriculture and point towards a more relational approach that can be taken, especially in view of the contemporary crisis. There will be no attempt here to provide an exhaustive set of policy proposals to move in the direction of this vision. Instead, we will conclude with two steps to take in order to move the agenda for relational agriculture forward.

#### **1. *Two steps and three policy areas for more relational farming***

Firstly, this vision must be **developed through practice**. This report gives only an initial set of ideas regarding what a relational approach to agriculture looks like, with practical action the only way to deepen and refine it. There are already projects doing different elements of what has been set out here, but there is no reason why groups who already subscribe to the fundamental tenets of relational thinking (i.e. Christian communities) could not establish their own projects.

Starting from practice is not only important heuristically – since this is how knowledge is really built – but it is also crucial relationally. This is because the very

324 See the varied relational terminology in the description of Jan Hassink's **Scaling of resilient regional food systems** project (<https://www.nwo.nl/en/news/funding-for-sixty-innovative-projects-linked-to-nwa-routes>) as well as Bok's work (<https://research.wur.nl/en/publications/a-relational-approach-to-rural-development>) and Ainke's project <https://re-generation.cc/en/longread/mark-aink-decade-of-action/>, all accessed 1.12.25

problem we have focused on is people's relational disconnection from farmers and the corresponding tendency for farming to be dictated by policy makers and businesses from the top down rather than ground up. Responding solely in terms of policy change and does not actually get involved somehow in agriculture (even in a community or urban farm) perpetuates the very tendencies to which this report is trying to offer an alternative. Besides, people's imaginations need to be fired by an enlivened vision.

Secondly, we should **identify and support compatible policy directions**. It would be easy to develop a cynical view of EU policy because it does not address the most fundamental issues underlying the crisis in agriculture. One could conclude, for example, that

"EU policy does not offer real change since 'food sovereignty scholars' note that policy retains the view of food as a commodity with 'capital-intensive forms of innovation like digitalisation... prioritised, which will likely promote further dependency for farmers'.<sup>325</sup>

However, this would miss the opportunity to identify real consonance with a the relational vision for agriculture set out here. One paragraph in the new Vision gives hope for such consonance:

"Food connects people across territories and regions. It connects farmers with consumers and links urban centres with rural dwellers. Farmers, fishers and food production are the glue that keep rural and coastal communities strong and form the basis of further economic activity. Dynamic rural areas foster quality food production which in turn supports their economy. Reinvigorating these connections between food and territory and revitalising rural areas will be essential for the future of farming in Europe' (p. 20)."

Likewise a few pages later, which talks about the real value of food and how 're-establishing the link between food, territory, seasonality, cultures and local traditions is very important' (p. 22).

This is one very good example of an overall policy direction that is conceptually compatible with a relational vision for agriculture and is thus worth finding out more about, advocating for, and helping to bring into reality through supporting specific dependent policies. Because agriculture cuts across so many areas of economic, environmental and social policy, a full report would have to be dedicated to all the

<sup>325</sup> Leitheiser et al., 'Regeneration at a distance from the state', 706

particular policy developments needed to move towards the relational vision set out here. Therefore, three areas are selected here, which seem the most immediately important to the specific priority of developing a local food system that the EU already seems to recognise, and which can serve as starting examples for a fuller policy approach.

## Viability of local food markets

In order to promote 'local, seasonal products, and food produced with high environmental and social standards, including organic products and food originating from shorter supply chains' (p. 23), local markets must be viable. A prioritisation of urban farms will be a big part of achieving this objective. That the complex infrastructural and land-ownership challenges that this provides can be overcome is increasingly apparent from successful examples such as Detroit, Michigan.<sup>326</sup> Also key to this is enabling farms to develop stakeholder-friendly business models, which in turn operate with alternative modes of consumer engagement and facilitate shorter supply chains. Examples of these include direct selling and CSA schemes, which require a certain amount of support (whether through capital or expert advice) to establish. Moreover, farms can be aided in making decent income from what they sell further afield through an expansion of the Geographical indications (GIs) programme, which is currently quite limited in scope.

## Farms' public engagement through therapeutic intervention

The mention of CSAs above raises a second specific way in which connections between people and local farms can be enhanced. This is through community engagement that goes beyond food purchasing. Care farming is a good example of this, as it recognises the basic fact that there is a basic need for reconnection, such as GCA provides. This is not only a matter of helping 'clients' with specific needs, but of forging improved relationships between society as a whole and the farming community. Indeed, the fact that care farming is promoted by governments already presupposes a certain positive image of those involved in smaller-scale agriculture.

In Flanders, for example, the Ministry of Agriculture promoted care farming to 'enhance the social position and (self-) image of farmers'; a positive conception of them and their families as 'intrinsically good carers', both to nature (plants and animals) and humans, underlies their being entrusted with care farming.<sup>327</sup> There is an indirect acknowledgement of the benefit of family structures here, an aspect of

<sup>326</sup> <https://detroitmi.gov/government/mayors-office/office-sustainability/urban-agriculture>, accessed 1.12.25

<sup>327</sup> Dessein, Bock and de Krom, 'Investigating the limits of MFA', 55

the relational approach to agriculture less emphasised in this report.

Yet reconnection needs to be economically sustainable. In the Flanders example, farmers have remained in control of GCA, receiving very little public financial support because the government wanted to make sure it was seen as socially rather than economically motivated. But this also puts it in a vulnerable situation 'if the agricultural coalition no longer needs Green Care to gain public sympathy for their licence to produce'.<sup>328</sup>

## Developing non-technical agricultural education

Thirdly, and more radically, local food systems can be enhanced through incorporating education into the life of local farms. Everybody agrees that education is essential in any community. To quote Stefan Bătrîna's observation above, 'by integrating agricultural education into the national curriculum, [we] could bridge the gap between urban and rural communities, fostering an understanding and appreciation of the agricultural sector among all citizens'.

If education (from pre-elementary up to tertiary and community level, starting with the poorest) involves engagement with agriculture and understanding how it works in relation to the local place (even if not in technical level), farming will begin to regain the central value in society that it should never have lost. The report author is currently undergoing research on this area, which is terribly under-resourced in terms of evidence.<sup>329</sup> As a consequence, there are no strong policy moves in this direction, even though it is common sense that it is important. Exposing more children to farms, and incorporating agriculture within general education, will have to play a part in improving the relationship between farmers and the rest of society and ensuring that the occupation (even when seen as an 'industry') does not disappear from Europe altogether.

### 2. *Cultivating a shared home: a summary*

European agriculture is in crisis because of a crisis in key relationships. Relational problems at every level both cause and are exacerbated by the challenges faced in the farming sector. Economically, extractors are rewarded at the expense of cultivators; environmentally, many people are separated from the process of food production and have an unrealistic idea of 'nature', whilst all the time becoming removed from sources of their own physical and mental health; culturally, people aspire to a 'laptops & coffee shop' lifestyle removed from plants and animals; socio-politically, the urban – rural divide becomes bigger as a result of all these other

328 Desein, Bock and de Krom, 'Investigating the limits of MFA', 57

329 <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/centre-for-wellbeing-in-education/cultivating-connections.aspx>, accessed 1.12.25

trends. Only a relational vision of agriculture can address this, even if it must initially exist as a 'niche' alternative.

A relational vision for agriculture gives farming a role at the heart of society. Those who farm are not only producing food or managing land but are cultivating a shared home, local ecosystems in which people, animals and plants flourish. This is achieved through agricultural practice that is ecologically integrated and agricultural business that is well connected to local communities.

To address the European agricultural crisis and the wider challenges that it represents, we must learn to *cultivate a shared home*.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Romania Case Study Research Method

#### Dr Ștefan L. Bătrîna

A holistic approach was undertaken to assess the agricultural landscape in Romania. Data were sourced from diverse outlets, encompassing the Romanian Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development website, Eurostat, and the National Strategic Plan (NSP), with a specific focus on leveraging the SWOT analysis of the NSP. Additionally, primary data were gathered through interviews with five experienced farmers, all of whom are alumni of the University of Life Sciences "Regele Mihai I" in Timisoara, Romania.

The Romanian Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development website played a pivotal role in acquiring official statistics and information related to agriculture. Datasets, spanning crop yields, land use patterns, and agricultural policies, were systematically extracted and analysed to provide nuanced insights into the current status of Romanian agriculture. Eurostat, acting as the statistical office of the European Union, enriched the research by offering comparative data, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of Romania's agricultural performance within the European context.

The NSP emerged as a central pillar, guiding the direction of the study. An analysis of the NSP was undertaken, with the aim to discern the internal and external factors shaping the efficacy and challenges of the NSP, thereby contributing to a more informed perspective on Romania's agricultural policies.

To complement the quantitative data obtained from official sources, qualitative

insights were derived from in-depth interviews with five farmers. These individuals, selected based on their alumni status at the University of Life Sciences "Regele Mihai I" in Timisoara, brought invaluable practical experience to the study. The interviews, designed in a semi-structured format, delved into topics such as encountered challenges, perceptions regarding the effectiveness of agricultural policies outlined in the NSP and the relation between farming and Christian faith

Prior to initiating the interviews, ethical considerations were paramount. Informed consent was diligently obtained from each participant, ensuring voluntary participation and the confidentiality of their responses. The research adhered to ethical guidelines, prioritizing the well-being and privacy of the interviewed farmers.

Quantitative data from official sources underwent meticulous statistical analysis, encompassing descriptive statistics and trend analysis. Concurrently, qualitative data from the interviews underwent thematic analysis, unveiling recurring patterns and key themes embedded in the farmers' narratives. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics within the Romanian agricultural sector.

In conclusion, this research project adopted a multifaceted approach, intertwining data from official sources with insights derived from interviews with experienced farmers. The incorporation of the SWOT analysis of the NSP played a crucial role in shaping the study's perspective on the challenges and opportunities within the Romanian agricultural landscape.

## **Appendix 2: Romania Case Study Detailed Agricultural Data**

**Dr Ștefan L. Bătrîna**

### **Arable farming: Cereals, oilseeds and protein**

The objective of each agricultural producer is achieving a high yield, influenced by numerous agronomic factors. The increase in cereal yield is attributed to the use of increasingly efficient biological materials (varieties and hybrids), the adoption of modern production technologies, and the application of research results and innovations in agricultural production.

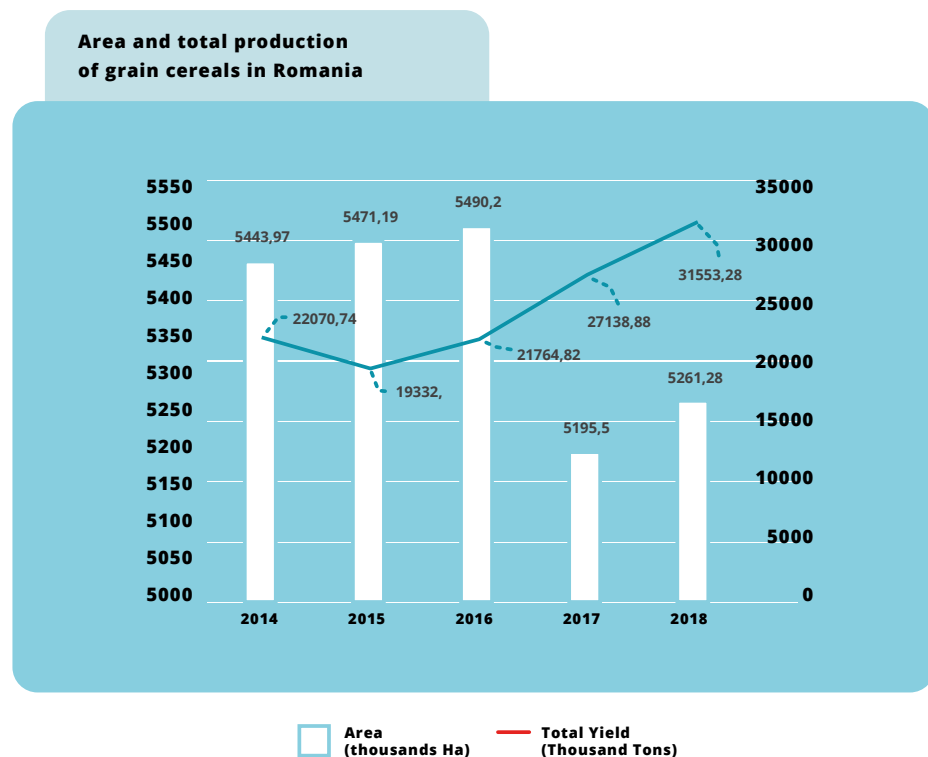
Modern production technologies have primarily focused on mechanization, with agricultural producers acquiring high-performance machinery and equipment in recent years. Additionally, they have adhered to technological links while using inputs appropriate for each type of crop, thereby adhering to good agricultural practices concerning the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, growth regulators, etc.

Boosting yields is seen as the key way to increase agricultural production, especially when compared to the limited options of expanding cultivated areas. The decline in cereal cultivation areas can be attributed to various factors such as crop rotation, using high-potential biological varieties and hybrids, changes in land use, leaving land fallow, and restrictions on plant protection substances.

Another influential factor is modern production technologies, including mechanization, chemicalisation, and automation. Improved progress in plant breeding and genetics also plays a role, aiding agricultural producers in cultivating varieties and hybrids with high biological potential. This includes exceptions granted for the use of substances like neonicotinoids, a practice that Romania has allowed and should continue. Failure to do so may result in significant reductions in the area dedicated to oilseeds.

## Cereals

The total area cultivated with cereals in Romania during 2013-2018 registered an increase between 2014-2016 and a decrease in 2017-2018, reaching in 2018 approximately 5.26 million ha. The total cereal production increased in 2018 by about 43% compared to 2014, from about 22 million tons to 31.6 mil tons.



**Figure 1 – Area and total production of grain cereals in Romania** (Source: Eurostat)

In Romania, the average pesticide use per hectare is only 0.6 kg, notably lower than the European average of 2.3 kg. It's essential to align with European strategies and restrictions to strike a balance in the Single Market.

Changes in crop structure are driven by various factors, including market demand for specific agricultural products, contractual agreements, and unforeseen events affecting crops. For instance, certain areas might need cultivation in the same year due to agricultural calamities or other circumstances.

From 2014 to 2018, maize and wheat collectively accounted for an average of 46.7% and 39.1%, respectively, of the total cereal cultivation area. On average, between 2015 and 2018, Romania's cereal cultivation area represented approximately 9.5% of the total cereal cultivation area in the EU 28, and the country's cereal production comprised around 8.2% of the EU 28's total cereal production.

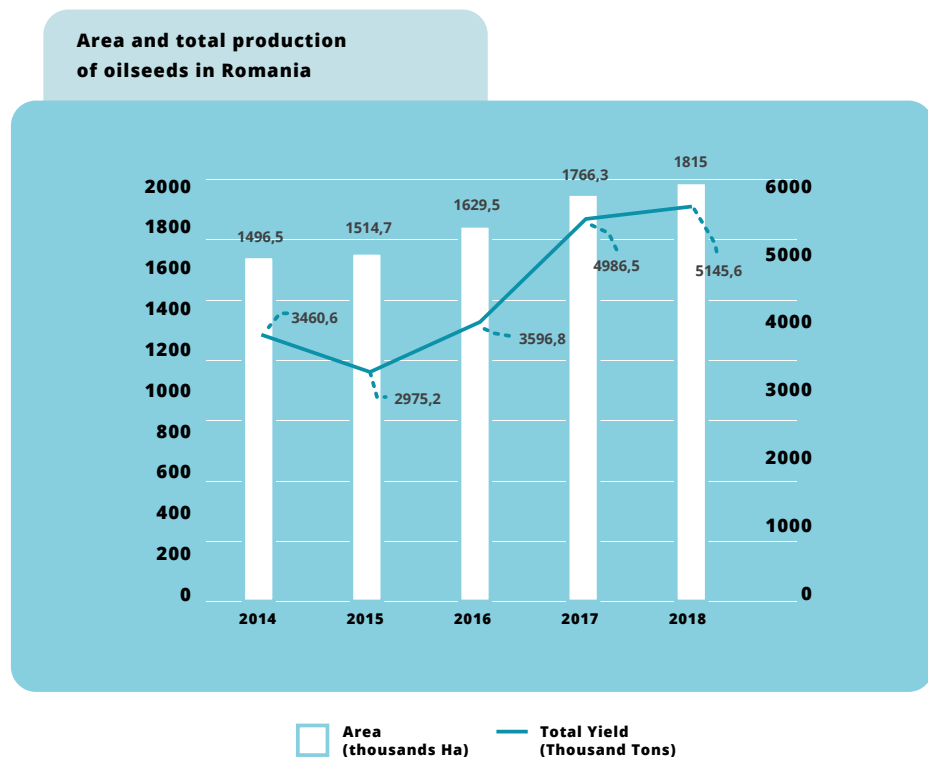
Over the five-year period, maize yielded an average of 5.2 tons/ha, constituting approximately 68% of the EU 28 average yield per hectare. Similarly, wheat produced an average yield of 4.2 tons/ha, representing about 73% of the EU 28 average yield per hectare.

In 2018, the combined area planted with barley and two-row barley reached 423.5 thousand hectares, accounting for approximately 3.4% of the EU28's total area. Despite a recent downward trend in cultivated areas, the total production of barley and two-row barley increased from 1,712.51 thousand tons in 2014 to 1,870.71 thousand tons in 2018. This was accompanied by an increase in average production from 3.32 tons/ha in 2014 to 4.60 tons/ha in 2018. The average production between 2013 and 2018 was 3.81 tons/ha, equivalent to about 78% of the EU yield during the same period. About 40% of the total area for barley and two-row barley in 2018 was cultivated with two-row barley.

The area dedicated to rice cultivation decreased from 12,720 hectares in 2014 to 8,250 hectares in 2018, accounting for only 1.9% of the EU's rice cultivation area. In 2018, rice production declined by 4% compared to 2014, reaching 42,860 tonnes due to reduced cultivated areas. The five-year average yield was 4.4 tons/ha, contrasting with the EU average of 6.7 tons/ha.

## Oilseeds

The total area planted with oilseeds (sunflower, rapeseed, soya) increased from 1.49 million hectares in 2014 to 1.81 million hectares in 2018.



**Figure 2 – Area and total production of oilseeds in Romania** (Source: Eurostat)

The annual sunflower cultivation areas from 2014 to 2018 were approximately 1 million hectares. The average sunflower production between 2014 and 2018 was 2.37 tonnes/ha, exceeding the EU 28 average of 2.22 tonnes/ha by 7%. Despite the national processing capacities being sufficient to cover the entire production, between 2014 and 2017, quantities ranging from 1.1 to 1.5 million tons were exported due to overproduction and domestic demand for sunflower oil.

Rapeseed cultivation areas generally experienced an upward trend during 2014-2018, except for 2015. High temperatures and atmospheric and pedological drought, varying in intensity across the country from April to September, led to significant

calamities affecting approximately 37 thousand hectares.

In 2018, the rapeseed cultivation area expanded to 632.68 thousand hectares, marking a 1.6-fold increase compared to 2014, while the total production reached 1.6 million tonnes in 2018, reflecting a 1.5-fold rise from 2014. The average production varied from year to year, averaging 2.66 tonnes/ha over the period 2014-2018, equivalent to 82.5% of the EU 28 average of 3.23 tonnes/ha. However, national processing capacities are limited to 450 thousand tons annually, not adapting to the domestic raw material production.

Soybean acreage witnessed a significant surge between 2014 and 2018 due to the introduction of coupled support. In 2018, the cultivated area for soybeans reached 169.4 thousand hectares, which is 2.1 times higher than in 2014.

Total soybean production notably increased in 2017 and 2018, reaching 416 thousand tonnes in 2017 and 492 thousand tonnes in 2018, respectively. The average production for the period 2014-2018 was 2.51 tonnes/ha, in comparison to the EU 28 average of 2.98 tonnes/ha.

Domestic demand for soybeans and soybean meal is supplemented by imports, which remain consistently high at around 500-550 thousand tons annually. These imports primarily originate from countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and the USA, accounting for over 90% of the total.

In 2018, approximately 45% of the soybean cultivation area was under irrigation, as soybeans require proper irrigation and disease and pest control for optimal development. Without adequate financial support ensuring farmers a minimum profit, they may shift to other more profitable crops less sensitive to environmental factors, diseases, and pests. It's essential to reconsider the legal framework to permit the use of modern and environmentally friendly technologies.

Romania exports substantial quantities of cereals and oilseeds as raw material rather than processing them domestically to obtain higher-value processed products.

As of 2018, there are 5,199 authorized warehouses for consumer seeds (cereals and oilseeds) with a total capacity of 25,705,918 tons, reflecting a 27% increase from 2013. Storage capacities should be evenly distributed throughout the territory based on areas with production potential.

## Proteins

The area cultivated with peas increased approximately 4.3 times from 27.25 thousand hectares to 118.1 thousand hectares from 2014 to 2018, mainly due to coupled support. During the same period, production rose from 50.8 thousand tons

in 2014 to 170.75 thousand tons. The average yield per hectare during the review period was around 1.96 tonnes/ha, compared to around 2.6 tonnes/ha for the EU28.

The area cultivated with beans slightly decreased from 12.07 thousand hectares to 11.39 thousand hectares between 2014 and 2018. During the same period, production decreased by about 12%, from 19.75 thousand tons in 2014 to 17.3 thousand tons in 2018. The average yield per hectare during the review period was around 1.5 tonnes/ha, compared to the EU-28 average of 2.2 tonnes/ha.

The area cultivated with alfalfa increased by about 11.5% from 361.57 thousand hectares to 408.68 hectares from 2014 to 2018. In the same period, production increased by about 15%, from 6,071.23 thousand tons to 6,971.52 thousand tons. The average production per hectare during the analyzed period was 15.83 tons.

Finally, the area cultivated with tobacco was 860 hectares in 2014 and 916 hectares in 2018. The total yields obtained were 1.41 thousand tons in 2014 and 1.26 thousand tons in 2018. The average production per hectare from 2014 to 2018 in Romania was about 1.56 tons, representing approximately 68% of the EU 28 average production of 2.29 tons.

## Vegetables

The total area cultivated with vegetables from 2014 to 2018 decreased from 239.5 thousand hectares to 226.3 thousand hectares. This decline in areas was accompanied by a decrease in total vegetable production. In 2014, the production was 3,802 million tonnes, which decreased to 3,358 million tonnes in 2016 and then reached 3,797 million tonnes in 2018. The primary vegetable species cultivated include tomatoes, onions, cabbage, peppers, eggplants, cucumbers, and garlic.

The reduction in the total area dedicated to vegetables was partly attributed to climate change, characterized by hot and dry summers, a shortage of irrigation water, the shift of these crops to protected areas, changes in rotations, and the utilization of varieties and hybrids with high biological potential, resulting in high yields per hectare.

In light of climate change and evolving forecasts for future agricultural policies, there should be consideration given to supporting the vegetable production sector in protected areas. This support aims to diversify production, capitalize on the market, and implement biological control of diseases and pests through the rational use of pesticides and innovative technologies.

In horticulture, the rational exploitation of land and soil necessitates the use of rotations. The physical-chemical and biological properties of the soil are easily degraded due to factors such as irrigation, improper mechanization, and the extensive use of fertilizers and pesticides. Consistent cultivation of the same vegetable species or botanically related species on the same land for years contributes to the multiplication and spread of diseases and pests specific to those crops.

There is also a slight decrease in the areas cultivated with field vegetables, from 136.8 thousand hectares in 2014 to 129.9 thousand hectares in 2018. The improvement in yield for crops like tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, and cucumbers can be attributed to the adoption of modern production technologies, including competitive biological materials (varieties and hybrids), high-performance agricultural machinery and equipment, and efficient plant protection methods.

Increasing yields is deemed crucial for expanding vegetable production, especially considering the limited possibilities of increasing yields by expanding cultivated areas (see graphic below).

### **Figure 3 – Total area and production of vegetables in Romania** (Source: NSI)

## Livestock

Livestock farming holds a longstanding tradition in Romania, as evidenced by the prevalence of livestock and mixed farms.

The livestock count decreased from 6.6 million livestock units (LU) in 2005 to 4.8 million LU in 2016.

According to data from the National Institute of Statistics (NIS/INS), the density of animals on agricultural land (LU/ha) in Romania remained relatively constant from 2013 to 2016, standing at 0.38 LU/ha in 2013 and 0.36 LU/ha in 2016. In comparison, the EU28 level for this indicator was 0.80 LU/ha in 2016.

The share of extensive grazing agricultural area (grazing with a load of less than 1 LU/ha) slightly increased from 38.9% of Utilized Agricultural Area (UAA) in 2010 to 39.1% in 2013, followed by a decrease to 37% of UAA in 2016.

In 2018, the value of animals reached EUR 1,680 million, and the value of their production was EUR 1,797 million. The total value amounted to EUR 3,477 million, constituting 23.5% of the total value of agricultural production and 2% of the value of agricultural production at the EU level. There were no significant changes in the

previously presented indicators between 2016 and 2018.

Cattle herds decreased to 1,587,790 livestock units (LU) in 2016 compared to 1,646,457.3 LU in 2013. In 2018, total milk production declined by 4.6% compared to 2013, reaching 40.65 million hectoliters. From 2013 to 2018, the dairy cow herd decreased from 1,193.8 thousand heads to 1,147.4 thousand heads in 2019, justifying the decrease in milk production.

The number of pigs decreased to 991,706,206 LU in 2016 compared to 1,015,550,782 LU in 2013.

In 2016, sheep populations were 910,650 LU, showing a slight increase compared to 2013 when there were 894,450 LU. A similar trend was observed in the goat population, which reached 137,280 UVM compared to 132,553 UVM in 2013. The total number of birds in 2016 was 908,840 LU, indicating an increase from 2013 when it was 902,800 LU.

Regarding livestock, expressed in heads, according to National Institute of Statistics (NIS) data presented in the table below, between 2013 and 2019, there was a decrease in cattle, pigs, and poultry, and an increase in sheep and goats.

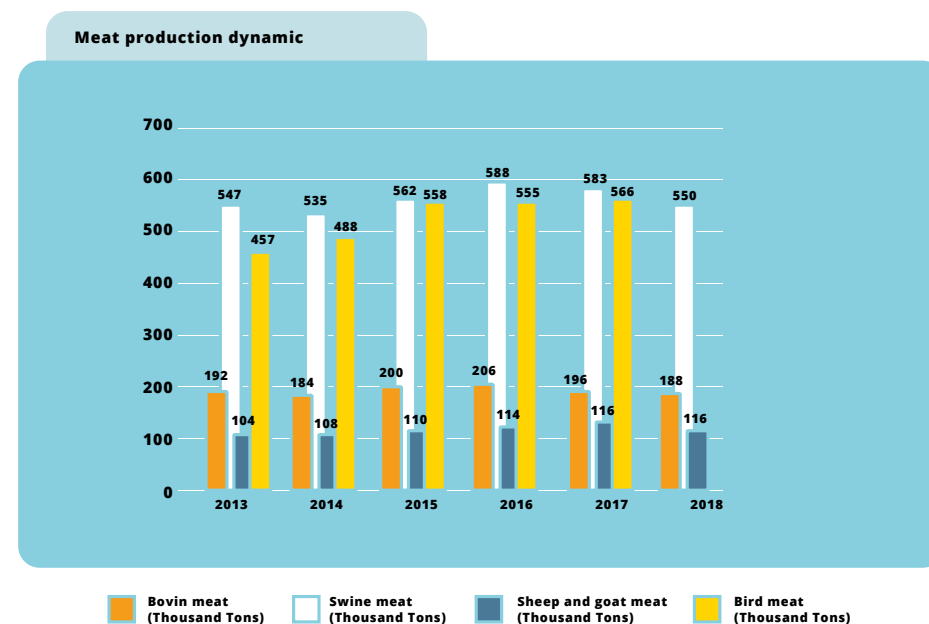
| Categories of animals | Livestock (heads) |            |            |            |            |            |            | Variation 2013 / 19 |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|---------------------|
|                       | 2013              | 2014       | 2015       | 2016       | 2017       | 2018       | 2019       |                     |
| Bovine                | 2.022.408         | 2.068.888  | 2.092.414  | 2.049.713  | 2.011.128  | 1.977.232  | 1.923.283  | -4,9%               |
| Buffaloes             | 19.593            | 19.486     | 17.084     | 17.914     | 17.766     | 18.579     | 18.881     | - 2,7%              |
| Swine                 | 5.180.173         | 5.041.788  | 4.926.928  | 4.707.719  | 4.406.014  | 3.925.283  | 3.834.136  | -26,0%              |
| Sheep                 | 9.135.678         | 9.518.225  | 9.809.512  | 9.875.483  | 9.981.859  | 10.176.400 | 10.358.699 | +13,4%              |
| Goats                 | 1.312.967         | 1.417.176  | 1.440.151  | 1.483.146  | 1.503.270  | 1.539.317  | 1.594.862  | +21,5%              |
| Birds                 | 79.440.251        | 75.446.750 | 78.648.098 | 75.689.854 | 73.288.712 | 73.993.010 | 75.364.575 | -5,1%               |

**Table 1 – Livestock (heads), evolution 2013-2019** (Source: INS TEMPO)

According to data from the National Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority (ANSVSA), the livestock in the mountain area represented approximately 30.82% cattle, 22.12% sheep, 12.78% goats, and 13.38% swine of national herds in 2019.

In 2018, compared to 2013, the weight of animals intended for slaughter for consumption increased by 11% in poultry, remained constant in sheep and goats, and decreased by 5.7% in pigs and 4.1% in cattle

Regarding meat production by animal species and production years, the graph below indicates a decrease in 2018 compared to 2013 for cattle and a significant increase for sheep, goats, and poultry, correlated with the evolution of the population of those species.



**Figure 4 – Meat production dynamic** (Source: INS)

### Farm workers. Labour productivity. Gross value added

In 2016, the labour force in Romanian holdings (3,422,030) was equivalent to 1.59 million Annual Work Units (AWU), constituting 17.43% of the total EU 28. Concerning the distribution of the labor force by gender, similar to the EU 28, men predominate in Romania (74.4% in Romania and 79% in the EU 28).

The majority of farmers work their land individually, accounting for 49.8% of the total AWU. The employed labour force represents only 4.5% of AWU, which is 12.2 percentage points less than in the EU28.

Compared to 2010, the ratio between the number of farm managers under 40 years

old returning to a manager over 55 years old decreased in Romania (11.2:100 in Romania compared to 18.3:100 in the EU 28). This reflects the aging of the workforce in the sector, which is more pronounced than at the EU28 level. This aging trend is further reflected in Romania's share of young farmers, accounting for 7.45% of all farm managers.

In Romania, in comparison to other EU28 countries, the agricultural workforce remains oversized. In 2018, over 19.1% of all employed persons worked in agriculture, with only 2.8% in the food industry due to the employment of peasant households. Only in the case of the food industry does Romania register values close to those of the EU; in other sectors, there are sometimes significant differences.

Employment in the primary sector, encompassing agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, has experienced a notable decrease of 6.3 percentage points in the last 5 years, dropping from 29.3% to 23%. This decline is significantly lower than the EU average, which saw a decrease of only 0.7 percentage points.

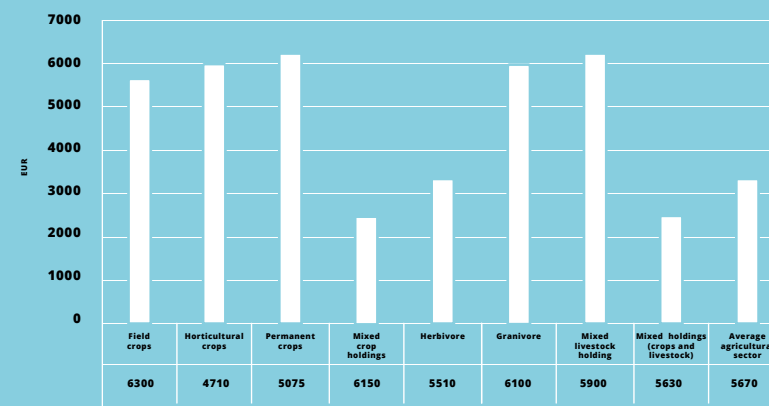
Regarding labor costs in agriculture, data from the Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN) for 2018 reveal the following at the farm level:

| Holdings of economic size given by:  | Average cost of work/worker/HOUR | Average labor cost/worker/year |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Field crops                          | 12,06 RON                        | 30.150 RON (approx. € 6.307)   |
| Horticultural crops                  | 9,01 RON                         | 22.525 RON (approx. € 4.712)   |
| Permanent Crops                      | 9,71 RON                         | 24.275 RON (approx. € 5.078)   |
| Mixed crop holdings                  | 11,76 RON                        | 29.400 RON (approx. € 6.150)   |
| Herbivore                            | 10,54 RON                        | 26.350 RON (approx. € 5.512)   |
| Granivore                            | 11,68 RON                        | 29.200 RON (approx. € 6.108)   |
| Mixed livestock holdings             | 11,29 RON                        | 28.225 RON (approx. € 5.904)   |
| Mixed holdings (crops and livestock) | 10,77 RON                        | 26.925 RON (approx. € 5.632)   |

**Table 2 - Labour cost in agriculture** (Source: Farm Accountancy Information Network - FADN)

At the level of the entire agricultural sector, the average labour cost was approximately RON 10.85 per hour, corresponding to RON 27,126 (approximately EUR 5,675) per year.

**Average labour cost by agricultural branches and average agricultural sector**



**Figure 05 - Average labour cost by agricultural branches and average agricultural sector** (Source: Farm Accountancy Information Network - FADN)

In 2016, only 2.8% of farm managers had completed agricultural education (0.4% with full education and 2.5% with basic education), showing a slight increase compared to 2010 when 2.5% of managers had basic and complete agricultural education. However, this percentage remains significantly lower than the EU 28 level, where 31.6% had basic and complete education. Notably, 96.7% of Romanian managers had only practical agricultural experience, in contrast to the EU-28 average of 68.3%. Regarding the training of young farm managers (under 35 years old) in 2016, after completing forms of agricultural education, 3.2% had basic education, 0.9% had complete education, and 89.6% had only practical agricultural experience. At the national level, the total productivity of agricultural factors of production showed an ascending trend from 2005 to 2015 but experienced a decrease of 1.4% in 2016.

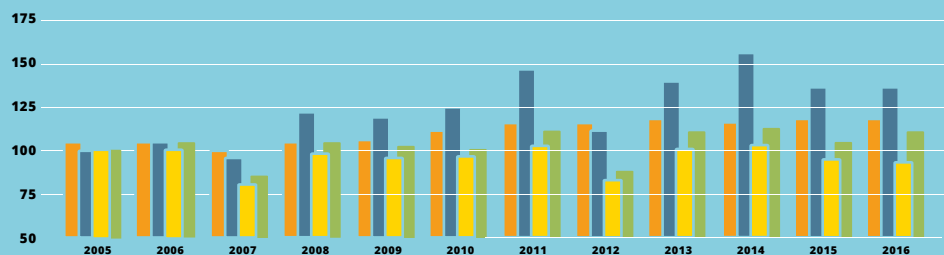
There are substantial disparities between Romania and the EU28, particularly in terms of labour productivity in the agricultural sector. The average value for 2015-

2017 was approximately 4 times lower in Romania compared to the EU28 (EUR 4,688.4/AWU, as opposed to EUR 18,490/AWU).

Between 2012 and 2017, the average annual labour productivity growth rate was 2.9%, a rate similar to that of the EU28 (2%), placing Romania at an average level compared to other Member States.

Notable differences with the EU are observed in the intensity of labour use on farms (AWU/holding) as an expression of productivity. In 2016, AWU/farm in Romania was approximately one-third of the EU28 average (0.46 AWU/farm compared to 1.3 AWU/holding).

Total factor productivity (Index 2005EU = 100)

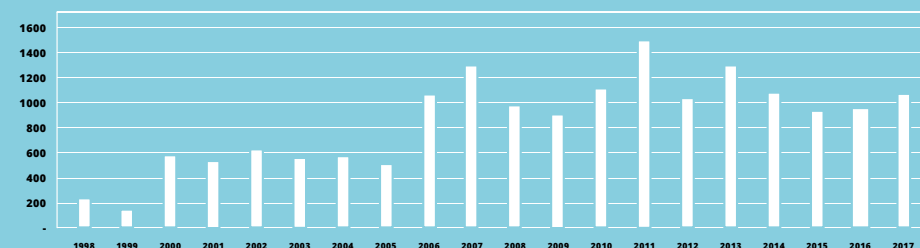


**Figure 6 - Total factor productivity (Index 2005EU = 100)** (Source: [ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-indicators/context/2018](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-indicators/context/2018))

In 2018, in Romania, the primary sector (including agriculture, forestry, and fisheries) generated EUR 8.793 billion in gross value added (GVA), constituting 4.8% of the country's total GVA. The share of the primary sector in Romania remains more than three times higher than its counterpart in the EU28, accounting for 1.60% in 2018. The relatively low level of GVA in agriculture has had an impact on the amounts allocated for investments.

In 2017, 12.4% of the agricultural GVA was reinvested in the sector, with gross fixed capital formation in agriculture (GFCF) totalling €1.071 billion, falling below the EU-28 average of €2.057 billion.

Gross fixed capital formation in agriculture in Romania



**Figure 7 -** (Source: [ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-indicators/context/2018](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-indicators/context/2018))

During the current programming period, sub-measure 4.1 – Investments in physical assets from PNDR 2014-2020 achieved an access rate of 260.8%, indicating increased interest in the support provided for this type of investment. The investments primarily aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of agricultural holdings through the acquisition of machinery and equipment aligned with the current agricultural structure, as well as modernizing farms, especially those of medium size and associations of small and medium farms.

A total of 1,721 projects were funded with an eligible value of EUR 1,063.33 million (EUR 856.27 million in public value), with 81% of the projects targeting the plant sector and 19% the livestock sector.

In the arable sector, 92% of the projects were related to the agricultural branch field crops (1,284 projects with a public value of EUR 430.62 million), focusing particularly on the purchase of agricultural machinery and equipment (94%).

In the livestock sector, 52% of the projects were related to the cattle – meat and milk sector (167 projects with a public value of EUR 159.15 million), with support mainly directed towards agricultural construction, including associated equipment.

Out of the total of 1,637 funded projects, 95% served farms with an economic size between EUR 12,000 – 250,000 SO. However, the number of holdings financed by the NRDP 2014-2020 represents approximately 2.4% of the total number of holdings in this economic size category, indicating the need to finance a larger number of beneficiaries.

In terms of the type of investment, it is noted that in the arable sector, 25% of

the projects are new investments, while 75% are extensions or modernizations. In the livestock sector, the percentage of new investments is higher compared to modernizations (61% versus 39%).

The family farm, a priority category for Romania, received separate allocation, with 13% of the total projects financed in this farm category.

Given the age structure, young farmers were prioritized, with 37% of the projects funded under sub-measure 4.1 of the NRDP 2014-2020 being submitted by them.

### **Appendix 3: Northern Ireland Case Study Research Method**

#### **Dr Rebecca Stevenson**

The main aim of the project is to establish a biblically informed relational vision for agriculture and how EU policy helps or hinders that vision for all farmers. There were two primary data sources for the case study: doctrinal or desk-based research, primarily government policy documents and blogs and empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews. Given the aim of the research, it was decided that the most appropriate interviewees should be farmers, ideally that would be Christian but this was not an essential criterion.

The researcher identified, two farmers that they knew in the locality, one in County Fermanagh and one in County Down. The researcher then approached the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) Rural Chaplin (Rev Kenny Hanna) who assisted them in identifying the remaining interviewees. This resulted in a sample size of 5 possible interviewees who were subsequently approached and invited to participate in the research. Following the initial approach 4 farmers were interviewed, the remaining farmer was willing to participate however, due to working fulltime to financially support the farm he had to cancel the interviewee 3 times. He did however answer some informal questions via whats app and conversation.

Prior to the interview, each interviewee was advised of the nature of the project, their role in this, their right to decide not to participate, not to answer any question within it, and their right to withdraw from the interview at any stage. All interviewees were happy for their names to be used in the study.

The use of semi-structured interviews was deemed to be the most appropriate method of data collection, as this form of qualitative research could be used to

'explore and understand a diversity of social and policy issues.'<sup>330</sup> Semi-structured interviews were more appropriate than structured interviews as they were flexible, and allowed the interviewer and interviewees to diverge in order to explore an idea or response in greater detail, based on the particular knowledge of an expert.<sup>331</sup>

The semi-structured interviews consisted of several key questions, which helped to define the area explored and provided the participants with some guidance on what to discuss, which was thought to be more helpful. These questions were developed in collaboration with the other researchers in the project.

After confirming (through oral consent), that the interviewees consented to record the interview, the recording equipment was turned on. The interviews facilitated an open and flowing conversation which enabled the researcher to ask follow-up questions, as appropriate and necessary. Despite the small sample size, the conversational nature of the interviews generated a rich data set. The qualitative data collected was subsequently transcribed and manually analysed using thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis moves beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes.<sup>332</sup> These themes were then used to inform and support the findings from the doctrinal research.

To maintain data security, all notes, transcripts, and recordings of interviews will remain solely in the researchers' secure possession.

330 Micheal Huberman and Matthew B Miles, *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion* (Sage Publications, 2002) 305.

331 Paul Gill, Kate Stewart, Elizabeth Treasure and Barbara Chadwick (2008), 'Methods of Data Collection in Qualitative Research: Interviews and Focus Groups', *British Dental Journal* 291, 204

332 Greg Guest, Kathleen M Macqueen and Emily E Namey, *Applied Thematic Analysis* (Sage Publications, 2012)

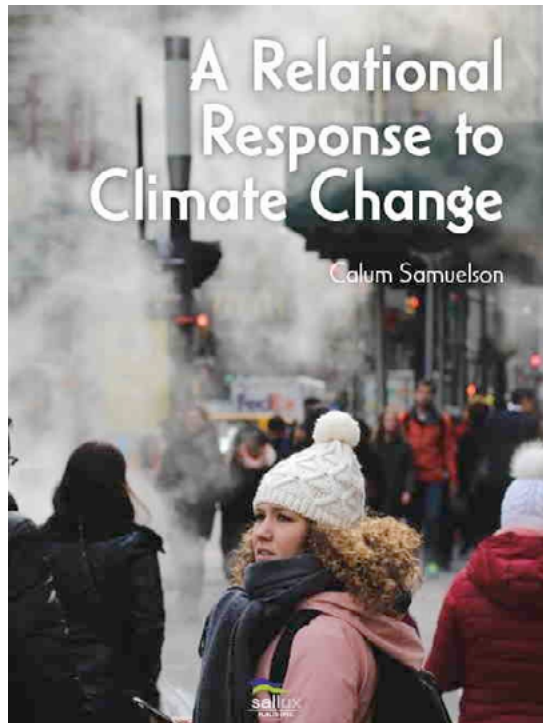
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## A Relational Response to Climate Change

The challenge of climate change is one of the defining issues the world is facing at the start of the 2020s. It has mobilised a whole new generation of social activists, some of whom are going to extreme lengths to confront the public and especially political leaders with the threat that climate change makes to their future and the planet as a whole.

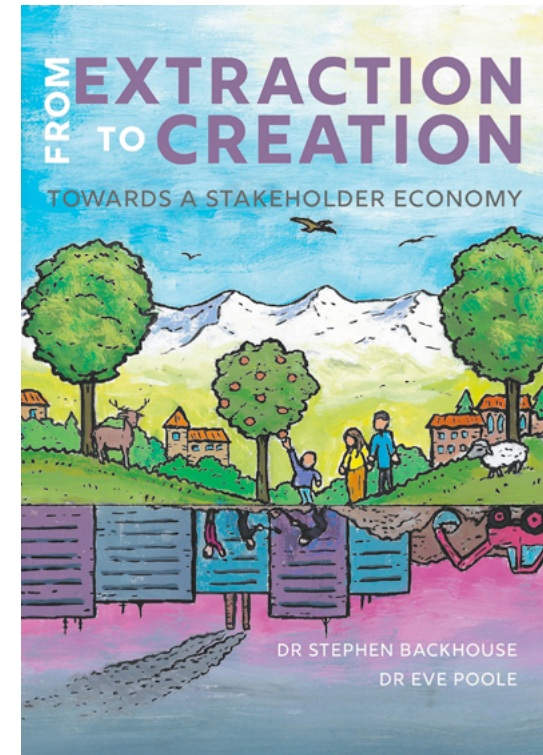
Arguments about the causes of climate change are usually underpinned by the assumption that more human beings living on the planet are inevitably bad for the environment and climate. However, a careful biblical reflection on these issues yields a more nuanced and hopeful view, and this report seeks to stimulate fresh conversations about how best to respond to Climate Change now and in the future..



## From Extraction to Creation

The aim of this report is to help us imagine a better common economic life, one which rewards all the stakeholders in business, rather than privileging the shareholding few. Such a move can and does benefit people, planet and profit, but it will only do so when we move from a story fuelled by extraction to one formed by creation.

The authors of this report work in politics, economics and management, but are also trained in theology. As such they are steeped in the deep stories that have shaped our economic, political and social life. A full consideration of these deeper ideas that underly our institutions (for good and for ill) is necessary if we are to truly imagine a better way to conduct our business and how we shape our economic policies..



*A relational vision for agriculture gives farming a role at the heart of society. Those who farm are not only producing food or managing land but are cultivating a shared home, local ecosystems in which people, animals and plants flourish. This is achieved through agricultural practice that is ecologically integrated and agricultural business that is well connected to local communities. We must learn to cultivate a shared home.*

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