



AGRICULTURAL POLICY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE CITY-REGION FOOD SYSTEMS



[Fermes de Gally, Saint Denis, France.](#) Photo: Véronique Saint-Ges

INTRODUCTION

The policy environment for agriculture in Europe has been shaped to a very large extent at the EU level since the first enactment of the [Common Agricultural Policy](#) (CAP) in 1967, with national and regional governments' role largely confined to making decisions on its local implementation. The CAP, last reformed in 2021, continues to be the most impactful agricultural policy in Europe, with deep repercussions around the world. It is the single largest item in the EU budget, accounting for 33% of total spending (€ 55.71 billion) in 2021. In 2019, more than 80% of this (most of what is known as "the 1st pillar") was spent in direct payments to farmers, which are predominantly based on the size of their landholding or animal herd. This results in a heavily skewed distribution of the funds: the great majority (75%) of farms received €5,000 or less in direct payment in 2019, while the largest 1,93% of farms received more than € 50,000 each. Rural farmers with very small holdings, below the so-called "minimum requirement" (0.3 to 5 ha, depending on the country) and farms in urban areas are not eligible for any direct payments at all. Furthermore, the so-called 2nd pillar, containing [€95.5 billion or 24.7 % of CAP funds in 2019](#), is meant to support "a thriving rural economy" and a variety of measures to make agriculture more sustainable. However, [numerous evaluations of successive versions of the CAP](#) – most recently the [European Court of Auditors in May 2022](#) - have found that for all the rhetoric and dedicated funds, the desired effects on climate change mitigation, biodiversity, soil and water protection have not materialised, while both the overall number of farms and people making their living in agriculture has been falling for decades.

CHALLENGES

Current agricultural policy and support strictly separate rural areas (production) and urban areas (consumption)

The distribution mechanism for direct payments thus favours large, commodity-focused land holdings and factory farms whose production is oriented towards the global market and the food industry. On the other hand, the types of farms that benefit least are the smaller, more diversified operations that are actually the underpinning of a sustainable city-region food system: they are more likely to produce food for the local market, as regional marketing is more profitable for relatively small quantities of food meant for direct consumption than for large, specialised farms with high production volumes. Primary food producers in the urban centres are excluded from support altogether, both for their location and for their lack in size.

Current agricultural policy and support exacerbate disadvantages for small producers

Small farmers are doubly disadvantaged by the CAP and the market situation it has created – not only do they receive only minimal support, if any, but they also suffer from the market distortion that results from massive financial support exacerbating the existing economies of scale: in comparison to their product, industrial food becomes even cheaper and more difficult to compete with.

EXAMPLE OF CHALLENGE

The experience of the “[Jardins Inspirés](#)”, located in the “horticultural valley” (“La vallée maraîchère”) near Bordeaux, France is illustrative of many of the challenges small European peri-urban farmers face, and also of some of the emerging solutions through new forms of organisation, partnership and support. It is a very small operation (just 0,5 ha) but at the same time highly diverse in its products and services: they include biodynamic vegetable production for the market, but also educational activities for both adults and schools, and agrobiodiversity conservation through in-situ conservation and a seed bank of heirloom (“peasant”) varieties of tomato and other vegetables. While all their products and services are appreciated and in demand the owner has had difficulty in maintaining the farm due to insecure land tenure, which has led to several short-term moves. She has also had difficulty in finding a suitable organisational form to accommodate these very different types of economic and social activities. Ultimately, two kinds of legal entity were created – a “for-profit” farming operation for all commercial activities and a non-profit association for the educational services.

In order to ensure the long-term existence of the farm, three surrounding municipalities, Bordeaux, Eysines and Blanquefort are providing various kinds of support – funding the education programme, giving advice and administrative support for participating in public tenders, and setting up the infrastructure for the seed bank.

EMERGING INNOVATION

1. Shifts in public purchasing

Many cities are boosting demand for regional, sustainable food by focusing their public food purchasing accordingly – see e.g. the members of the [German Organic City Network](#) or of [ICLEI's Buy Better Food Campaign](#).

2. Land access and subsidies at city level

Cities can become strong partners in providing land access and subsidies for small-scale farming. For example, cities that own agricultural land increasingly decide to make it available specifically for small, agroecological producers (e.g. Sabadell, Madrid, Bordeaux Métropole). The municipality of Ljubljana pays a direct subsidy to small farmers in and around the city.

3. Municipalities as networking facilitators

Municipalities become facilitators by encouraging their citizens to take an interest in food production through networking and awareness-raising activities. This happens for example in Eysines, France, on the outskirts of Bordeaux, with the annual “Raid of the Vegetable Farmers” (“[Raid des Maraîchers](#)”), a programme of hikes, bike rides and organised visits to the farms. In Lansingerland, Netherlands, commercial greenhouse agriculture plays a strong role in the local economy and the municipality helps to set up partnerships between local farmers and schools for educational activities.

4. Urban agriculture departments at city level

The municipalities of Ljubljana and Bordeaux-Métropole have a dedicated department for agriculture, while the city of Hanover in Germany formulated an “[agriculture programme](#)” for the first time in 1994. While this remains the exception, many cities have formulated food strategies with a vision, goals and concrete measures for strengthening their local sustainable CRFS. Market places have existed in cities for centuries but recently, there has been renewed focus on providing spaces specifically to local producers (e.g. in Bologna).

5. Edible cities

The idea of the “edible city” has caught on in many places, and citizens are getting access to space for growing their own food all over cities, on the rooftops of public or private buildings, former car parks and wasteland or even in public parks (e.g. in Paris through the [Parisculteurs programme](#), in Cologne’s “[Garden Laboratories](#)” or in the “[edible city](#)” of [Andernach](#), Germany).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Facilitate access to funding and other support by reducing the bureaucratic hurdles and opening up programmes for very small, as well as urban-based operators.

2. Provide public support to small and highly diversified farms in dealing with bureaucratic hurdles related to taxes, access to funding and other issues.

3. Integrate the goals of transition towards more regional production and to sustainable production systems into policy-making on all levels. Strong regulations and standards are needed in combination with education, technical advice and financial support that enable producers to make the investments needed and convert to sustainable practices.

4. Focus agricultural subsidies on producers who are creating public goods in terms of environmental and social sustainability, rewarding e.g. ecological farming practices, fair employment and contributions to education rather than sheer size.

5. Ensure fair market conditions for European producers who conform to high environmental, social and animal welfare standards through supply chain legislation.