

The importance of agriculture and rural areas for the future in the European Union: An exploration of public opinion

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Abstract: The last years have seen a momentous transformation in Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The focus of interventions has shifted from production toward rural development but recognising the role of farmers. Although the attitudes of farmers to CAP have long been previously studied, little attention has been focused on the views of citizens. Using data from the ‘Special Eurobarometer 520: Europeans, Agriculture and the CAP’, we sought to provide a clearer understanding of citizens’ opinions about the future of agriculture and rural areas in the European Union. In particular, we assessed rural-urban differences and examined disparities across countries, paying attention to the importance of rural development in the planned expenditure under CAP 2023–2027. The results showed that the perceived importance is higher for respondents living in rural areas and that there are disparities across countries. From a policy perspective, targeted efforts should be made in each country to address the specific challenges each country faces.

Keywords: citizens; Common Agricultural Policy; development; primary sector; survey

The issue of the future of agriculture has been capturing increasing attention from the media since the beginning of Russia’s war against Ukraine. At the same time, policymakers have recognised that the way in which rural areas adjust to changes depends not only on farmers’ attitudes but also on citizens’ attitudes. According to Eurostat (Eurostat 2023), more than 30% of the European Union (EU) population lives in rural areas. Agriculture is an important activity in predominantly rural regions: on average, it accounted for 11.6% of total employment in 2021. However, there are considerable differences across EU countries. Thus, the

share was in double digits in ten of the 27 member states, the most striking cases being Romania (32.2%), Bulgaria (30.7%) and Greece (22.5%) (Eurostat 2022).

Recently, important legislative changes have been made in agricultural and rural policies at the European level. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which was launched in 1962, has two main pillars: income support through direct payments and market measures (Pillar I) and rural development (Pillar II). The most recent reform of the CAP was proposed by the European Commission in 2018, and the new legislation was formally adopted in 2021. After the approv-

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al of all EU countries' Strategic Plans, the new CAP started on January 1, 2023. This new CAP has ten key objectives: supporting viable farm income; increasing competitiveness; improving farmers' position in the value chain; contributing to climate change mitigation; efficient natural resource management; halting and reversing biodiversity loss; generational renewal; jobs, growth and equality in rural areas; responding to societal demand on food and health; and fostering knowledge and innovation. Notably, three of its ten specific objectives concern environment and climate. In addition, Strategic Plans are aligned with the EU's environmental and climate ambitions such as the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Biodiversity Strategy (Wesseler 2022).

Regarding rural policy, in June 2021 the European Commission published 'A Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas—Towards Stronger, Connected, Resilient and Prosperous Rural Areas by 2040' (European Commission 2021). This communication proposed a rural action plan which was launched in December 2021. It sets out a framework for cooperation at the different territorial levels (European, national, regional and local) and works in coordination with other relevant initiatives for rural development, such as the CAP. In other words, CAP Strategic Plans support improved access to infrastructure and services to address challenges identified in the long-term vision.

In their review of the approaches of the literature on the CAP, Erjavec and Lovec (2017) highlighted that they have evolved over time from economics to political science and, over the last years, toward social sciences. The first studies on the CAP adopted an economic approach, analysing its effect on markets, welfare or international trade. The analyses founded in politics can be divided into two main groups: intergovernmentalism and explanations of the CAP reforms. More recently, new issues are being examined such as environmentally friendly farming or the livelihood of communities in rural areas.

Lillemets et al. (2022) conducted a review focused on the effect of the CAP on the socio-economic situation in rural areas. They differentiated nine main categories of effects: regional cohesion, rural development, generational change, civil participation, economic diversification, economic output, employment, population, and gender equality.

Despite the second pillar of the CAP being aimed at contributing to the development of rural areas, the number of studies that incorporate the rural dimension into the analysis of the distribution of CAP ex-

penditures is quite scarce (Camaioni et al. 2013, 2016, 2019; Bonfiglio et al. 2017; Kiryluk-Dryjska et al. 2020). Camaioni et al. (2013) computed an indicator of peripherality-rurality to examine the distribution of Pillar II expenditures during the period from 2007 to 2013 in the European Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics Level 3 (NUTS 3) regions. Despite expenditure intensity being higher in rural regions, they found a negative relationship between their peripherality-rurality indicator and expenditure. In a similar vein, Camaioni et al. (2016) divided the driving factors of the distribution of Pillar II expenditures into three components: country effect, rural effect and pure spatial effect. They concluded that more rural regions tended to show lower expenditure intensities. In a more recent analysis, Camaioni et al. (2019) found the existence of a 'rural-rural competition' and a 'rural-urban' complementarity in the expenditure mix. Focusing on knowledge transfer and innovation, Bonfiglio et al. (2017) found a lower expenditure intensity for remote and more agriculture-intensive regions. Taking Poland as an example, Kiryluk-Dryjska et al. (2020) showed that the funds for diversification were better absorbed in areas with more developed agricultural systems.

Concerning differences across countries and regions, Alfaro-Navarro and Andrés-Martínez (2021) pointed out the existence of notable differences between countries from Western and Eastern Europe, distribution of expenditure being more equitable among Western countries. Czyzewski and Smedzik-Ambrozy (2017), using data from farms, identified the existence of three clusters of European regions in terms of the effect of CAP subsidies on factor productivity. At the regional level, Bonfiglio et al. (2016) classified European NUTS 3 regions according to the unit payments under Pillar I and Pillar II during the period from 2007 to 2011. They found that the regions that received higher support for both pillars were mostly located in eastern Germany, southern Italy, Greece and Ireland. In contrast, most regions in Spain, Romania and Bulgaria were 'low-low' regions – that is, regions that received unit payments less than the average under both pillars.

Research on the attitudes and opinions of citizens on the importance of agriculture and rural areas is scarce. Several studies have used survey data to examine how agricultural policy reforms could affect farmers' attitude, willingness and behaviour. In recent reviews, Dessart et al. (2019), Brown et al. (2021), and Bartkowski et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of considering behavioural heterogeneity among farmers when designing and implementing agricultural

policy measures. The regional and institutional environment is relevant, but sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender or education also have an effect. For instance, Weltin et al. (2017) used survey data from 2 154 European farms to examine diversification choices regarding the CAP. They found household composition and farmer age to be determinant factors in diversification and in the adoption of environmental management practices. Focusing on rural Wales, Morris et al. (2017) showed that factors such as age or educational attainment influenced farms' strategies. Similarly, Graskemper et al. (2021) analysed the differences among German farmers in terms of policy design, identifying three main groups in which age and education were key explanatory variables. Citizens' attitudes and opinions are important because their inclusion in the design of agricultural policy can complement the deployment of performance indicators (Clifton and Díaz-Fuentes 2010). In addition, a positive perception can facilitate the introduction of further changes and reforms (Haverland et al. 2018).

To our knowledge, no previous study has examined the sociodemographic factors that influence opinion regarding the future of agriculture and rural areas while taking into consideration the heterogeneities across urban and rural areas and across countries. To address this research gap, we explored the following research questions:

- i) How do sociodemographic characteristics influence opinion on the future of agriculture and rural areas in rural and nonrural areas?
- ii) What are the key distinctions across countries?
- iii) Do citizens' views affect the planned expenditure under the CAP?

To explore these questions, we used data drawn from the 'Special Eurobarometer 520: Europeans, Agriculture and the CAP' (European Commission 2022). First, we analysed the main sociodemographic characteristics that influence EU citizens' views of agriculture and rural areas, differentiating between those living in rural areas and those living in nonrural areas. Second, we examined differences across countries. Third, we assessed the relationship between the importance of rural development in the planned expenditure under the CAP 2023-27 and the opinions of respondents from different countries. The structure of the article is as follows. We present the data and the methodology used, and then we describe the results obtained. Finally, we summarise the main conclusions reached, point out the limitations of the study and make some policy recommendations.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

As mentioned, data for this study come from the 'Special Eurobarometer 520: Europeans, Agriculture and the CAP' (European Commission 2022), conducted in EU countries between February and March 2022. The survey covers the population aged 15 years and older resident in the 27 EU countries. The sample design is multistage random probability, and it is representative of the whole territory of the EU countries in terms of metropolitan, urban and rural areas according to the Degree of urbanisation (DEGURBA) classification. This classification combines population size and population density thresholds to divide Local Administrative Units into three major categories: cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas. In our study, we focused on the differences in the perception of the importance of agriculture and rural areas for the future by differentiating between rural and nonrural respondents. We used information from all respondents who answered the following question: 'Do you think that, in the EU, agriculture and rural areas are very important/fairly important/not very important/not at all important for the future?' Those who answered 'don't know' were not included in the analysis. The sample size is 26 251 respondents.

We used Stata 15.1 software to analyse the data. To assess the existence of differences between rural and nonrural areas, we first compared the perception of persons living in rural areas with that of their nonrural counterparts by using χ^2 tests. Second, we estimated an ordered logit model (Galluzzo 2021) to assess the effect of different sociodemographic characteristics and of the country of residence. Our dependent variable ranged from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning not at all important and 4 meaning very important.

We estimated the model with the full sample and by rurality. As stated in the introduction, opinions and attitudes can be influenced by many factors. We focused on three sociodemographic characteristics—age, gender and occupation—and included the country of origin. We collapsed age into six groups: 15–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64 and 65 years and older. We distinguished eight types of occupation: self-employed, managers, other white-collar workers, manual workers, housepersons, unemployed, retired and students. The category of self-employed includes farmers, fishermen, professionals (such as lawyers), owners of shops, craftsmen and business proprietors.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, we examined the existence of differences in the perception of the importance of agriculture and rural areas. Table 1 shows the importance assigned to agriculture and rural areas for the total sample and by rurality. On average, 63.5% of Europeans believed that agriculture and rural areas are very important for the future, and 32.6% consider that they are fairly important. Overall, the importance assigned to agriculture and rural areas was higher for respondents living in rural areas than for respondents living in nonrural areas. Thus, the share of Europeans who believed that agriculture and rural areas are very important for the future was more than 5 percentage points higher for respondents living in rural areas. Meanwhile, the share of respondents who considered that agriculture and rural areas are fairly important for the future was more than 5 percentage points higher for respondents living in nonrural areas than for respondents living in rural areas.

Table 2 shows differences in the sociodemographic variables of the sample by rurality. The most frequent age group was the elderly (aged 65 years and older). In addition, rural respondents were more likely to be elderly than were nonrural residents (30.4% vs. 27.6% in nonrural areas and 28.6% in the total sample). As for gender, the percentage of women was slightly lower in rural areas (51.8%) than in nonrural areas (53.6%).

Regarding occupation, in line with the distribution of the sample by age, nearly 30% of respondents were retired. Nonetheless, we found significant differences between rural and nonrural respondents. Rural respondents were more likely to be retired (32.2%),

Table 1. Importance of agriculture and rural areas for the future by rurality (percentages)

Importance	Total	Rural	Non-rural	<i>P</i> -value*
Very important	63.5	66.9	61.8	0.000
Fairly important	32.6	28.9	34.4	0.000
Not very important	3.4	3.5	3.4	0.569
Not at all important	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.125
<i>N</i>	26 251	8 267	17 624	–

**P*-values are based on χ^2 tests

Source: Own elaboration from the Special Eurobarometer 520 (European Commission 2022)

manual workers (23.6%), self-employed (7.9%) and housepersons (5.8%) than were nonrural respondents. In contrast, nonrural respondents were more likely to be managers (13.8%), other white-collar workers (16%) and students (7.8%). The smallest difference was in the percentage of unemployed respondents: the percentage was only 0.7 percentage points higher in rural areas. In brief, there were significant differences between rural and nonrural areas in terms of sociodemographic characteristics in the sample.

Once we confirmed the existence of sociodemographic differences, we estimated ordered logistic regressions predicting the importance of agriculture and rural areas for the future by adjusting for the sociodemographic characteristics described earlier and for the country of residence. Table 3 shows the results: age was a significant determinant of the importance assigned to agriculture and rural areas. The higher the age of the respondent, the more likely is the respondent was

Table 2. Sample socio-demographic characteristics by rurality (percentages)

Variable	Total	Rural	Non-rural	<i>P</i> -value*
Age				
15–24	8.4	7.16	8.94	0.000
25–34	12.1	10.0	13.0	0.000
35–44	15.7	15.6	15.7	0.801
45–54	17.4	17.6	17.3	0.531
55–64	18.0	19.2	17.4	0.000
65+	28.6	30.4	27.6	0.000
Gender				
Male	47.0	48.2	46.4	0.006
Female	53.0	51.8	53.6	0.006
Occupation				
Self-employed	7.1	7.9	6.7	0.000
Managers	12.4	9.6	13.8	0.000
Other white collars	14.4	11.3	16.0	0.000
Manual workers	20.7	23.6	19.2	0.000
House persons	4.9	5.8	4.4	0.000
Unemployed	4.2	4.7	4.0	0.005
Retired	29.5	32.2	28.2	0.000
Students	6.8	4.8	7.8	0.000
<i>N</i>	26 251	8 627	17 624	–

**P*-values are based on χ^2 tests

Source: Own calculation based on the Special Eurobarometer 520 (European Commission 2022)

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Table 3. Ordered logit regression for the importance of agriculture and rural areas for the future

Variable	Total sample		Rural		Non-rural	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Age (reference: 15-24)						
25–34	1.34***	1.17–1.53	1.69***	1.31–2.18	1.24**	1.06–1.45
35–44	1.73***	1.50–1.98	2.02***	1.57–2.59	1.62***	1.38–1.91
45–54	1.73***	1.51–1.98	2.08***	1.63–2.66	1.61***	1.37–1.90
55–64	1.97***	1.71–2.26	2.21***	1.72–2.84	1.87***	1.58–2.21
65+	1.89***	1.62–2.21	2.03***	1.54–2.68	1.83***	1.52–2.21
Gender (reference: male)						
Female	1.12***	1.06–1.18	1.01	0.92–1.11	1.18***	1.10–1.25
Occupation (reference: self-employed)						
Managers	0.92	0.81–1.04	0.74**	0.58–0.94	1.06	0.91–1.23
Other white collars	0.76***	0.67–0.86	0.59***	0.47–0.75	0.89*	0.77–1.02
Manual workers	0.77***	0.68–0.86	0.65***	0.52–0.80	0.85**	0.74–0.97
House persons	0.66***	0.56–0.77	0.54***	0.41–0.71	0.75**	0.61–0.91
Unemployed	0.72***	0.61–0.84	0.65**	0.49–0.86	0.77**	0.63–0.93
Retired	0.94	0.82–1.07	0.76**	0.60–0.97	1.06	0.90–1.25
Students	0.76**	0.64–0.90	0.80	0.57–1.11	0.80**	0.66–0.98
Country (reference: France)						
Austria	0.47***	0.39–0.56	0.41***	0.30–0.58	0.51***	0.41–0.64
Belgium	0.56***	0.46–0.67	0.78	0.55–1.11	0.49***	0.40–0.60
Bulgaria	0.90	0.75–1.09	0.90	0.62–1.30	0.90	0.73–1.13
Croatia	0.64***	0.54–0.77	0.49***	0.35–0.70	0.72**	0.58–0.90
Cyprus	0.85	0.68–1.06	1.20	0.78–1.84	0.72**	0.55–0.94
Czech Republic	1.01	0.84–1.23	1.38	0.93–2.04	0.92	0.74–1.15
Denmark	0.66***	0.55–0.80	0.95	0.65–1.37	0.58***	0.47–0.72
Estonia	0.74**	0.61–0.89	0.99	0.67–1.46	0.67***	0.54–0.83
Finland	1.41**	1.15–1.72	2.63***	1.67–4.15	1.20	0.96–1.50
Germany West	0.73**	0.61–0.88	0.72*	0.51–1.01	0.74**	0.59–0.92
Germany East	0.89	0.71–1.12	0.89	0.56–1.42	0.89	0.68–1.16
Greece	1.28**	1.05–1.55	2.90***	1.86–4.53	1.02	0.82–1.27
Hungary	0.42***	0.35–0.50	0.67**	0.47–0.95	0.35***	0.28–0.43
Ireland	1.30**	1.07–1.58	1.57**	1.09–2.24	1.16	0.92–1.47
Italy	0.55***	0.46–0.66	0.45**	0.29–0.71	0.56***	0.46–0.69
Latvia	0.76**	0.63–0.92	0.64**	0.45–0.91	0.83	0.67–1.04
Lithuania	0.69***	0.57–0.83	0.86	0.61–1.23	0.62***	0.50–0.77
Luxembourg	0.93	0.74–1.17	1.00	0.66–1.53	0.88	0.67–1.16
Malta	1.27**	1.01–1.62	1.02	0.70–1.50	1.61**	1.16–2.23
Netherlands	0.64***	0.53–0.77	0.72	0.52–1.02	0.60***	0.48–0.75
Poland	0.51***	0.42–0.61	0.60**	0.43–0.83	0.45***	0.36–0.56
Portugal	1.46***	1.20–1.78	2.06***	1.44–2.96	1.17	0.92–1.48
Romania	0.31***	0.26–0.37	0.28***	0.20–0.39	0.34***	0.27–0.42
Slovakia	0.98	0.81–1.19	1.10	0.78–1.54	0.91	0.72–1.15
Slovenia	1.93***	1.57–2.38	2.20***	1.55–3.13	1.68***	1.28–2.21
Spain	0.83*	0.69–1.00	1.08	0.77–1.52	0.71**	0.57–0.89
Sweden	0.78**	0.65–0.94	0.81	0.54–1.21	0.77	0.62–0.95

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Table 3. to be continued

Variable	Total sample	Rural	Non-rural
<i>N</i>	26 251	8 627	17 624
Log-likelihood	–20 181.55	–6 347.27	–13 720.46
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.035	0.053	0.032

*, **, *** $P < 0.05$; $P < 0.01$; and $P < 0.001$ respectively; OR – odd ration; CI – confidence interval

Source: Own calculation based on the Special Eurobarometer 520 (European Comission 2022)

to consider agriculture and rural areas very important for the future. This association was stronger for those living in rural areas.

In the case of gender, overall, women were more likely to assign a high importance than were men. However, we found no significant difference in rural areas.

Concerning occupation, odds ratios were significant in most cases. The self-employed (which included farmers) were more likely than the rest of the occupations to consider agriculture and rural areas very important. In contrast, housepersons and the unemployed were the occupations least likely to assign a high importance.

Regarding the effect of the country of residence, there were substantial country differences in respondents' assessment of the importance of agriculture and rural areas. France, the country with the highest value added in agricultural industry in 2021 (Eurostat 2022), was taken as the reference country. On the one hand, we found that respondents in some countries were more likely to assign a high importance: Slovenia, Portugal, Finland, Ireland and Greece. Except for Finland, in all these countries the share of agriculture in total employment was greater than the EU average in 2021 (Eurostat 2022). In addition, most of these countries had a higher share of their population living in rural areas than the EU average (Eurostat 2023). For instance, 44.5% of the population in Slovenia lived in a rural area, and the percentage was more than 42% in Ireland and 30% in Greece. On the other hand, respondents in some countries were significantly less likely to consider agriculture and rural areas very important for the future: Romania, Hungary, Austria, Poland, Italy and Belgium. Curiously, we found no association between a lower share of employment in agriculture and a lower likelihood of considering it very important for the future. Thus, whereas in Hungary, Italy or Austria the share of agriculture in employment was somewhat less than the EU average, Romania and Poland were among the top five EU countries in terms of participation of agricultural employment in total employment (Eurostat 2022). The case of Romania deserves special mention: despite almost one-third of the

EU farms being in Romania and agriculture employing more than one in every five persons in 2021, the country has sustained a great decrease in agricultural employment over the last years (almost 12 percentage points during the period from 2005 to 2021). In addition, 90% of Romanian farms are small (less than 5 ha) and practice agriculture for their own consumption (Eurostat 2022). Similarly, Poland also experienced an important reduction in the share of agriculture in employment during the period from 2005 to 2021 (close to 8 percentage points), and there is an important income gap between small and medium-sized farms and larger agricultural holdings (Eurostat 2022).

As previously mentioned, CAP Strategic Plans support initiatives to address challenges identified in the long-term vision for rural areas. From a financial point of view, the three main CAP-funded instruments are direct payments, rural development funds and interventions specific to certain sectors.

Direct payments comprise Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS); Coupled Income Support (CIS); Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers (CIS-YF); Complementary Redistributive Income Support for Sustainability (CRISS); schemes for the climate, environment and animal welfare (Eco-Schemes); and the payment for cotton. Sectoral interventions are carried out by producer organisations or associations of producer organisations, except for the wine and apiculture sectors. These interventions are area-based and support environmental practices or contributing to better supply chain organisation and concentration of supply, among others.

Rural development funds comprise environmental, climate-related and other management commitments (Association for Emissions Control by Catalyst); funds for areas facing natural constrains (Areas of Natural Constraints); Natura 2000 and Water Framework Directive payments; investments; setting up of young farmers and new farmers and rural business start-up; risk management; and cooperation and knowledge exchange information.

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Table 4 shows the planned payments for the period from 2023 to 2027 as included in each national Strategic Plan, as well as the average importance of agriculture and rural areas for the future measured on a scale from 1 to 4. Overall, in countries that assigned an importance to agriculture and rural areas higher than the EU average, the percentage of expenditure devoted to rural development was higher than the EU average. The main exceptions were Austria and Croatia. The specific problems in the rural areas of each country can help to explain this fact. For instance, in Austria more than 40% of its population lives in rural areas (Eurostat 2023). In most of these areas, infrastructure and the

access to social services need to be improved. To address this problem, Austria will spend more than 60% of its CAP financial resources on rural development. Two key actions will be the improvement of broadband and mobile infrastructure and of childhood services (European Commission 2023a). The percentage of people living in rural areas in Croatia was slightly higher than in Austria at 42.5% (Eurostat 2023), and technical infrastructure and accessibility to basic services needs to be improved, too. In the coming years, the CAP will finance water infrastructure, roads and kindergartens in rural areas in this country (European Commission 2023b).

Table 4. Distribution of the planned expenditure by main CAP funded instruments, 2023–2027 (percentage)

Country	Distribution by instrument			Average importance
	direct payments	sectoral support	rural development	
Austria	38.81	1.18	60.00	3.42
Belgium	61.59	8.81	29.60	3.50
Bulgaria	53.31	1.62	45.07	3.60
Croatia	50.02	1.67	48.32	3.52
Cyprus	52.54	3.86	43.60	3.63
Czechia	51.39	1.61	47.01	3.65
Denmark	84.26	0.73	15.01	3.56
Estonia	61.64	0.09	38.27	3.57
Finland	38.99	0.37	60.64	3.75
France	68.58	2.77	28.65	3.66
Germany	64.42	0.93	34.65	3.60
Greece	67.28	1.75	30.96	3.72
Hungary	65.93	1.97	32.10	3.43
Ireland	60.31	0.46	39.23	3.72
Italy	48.09	8.90	43.01	3.50
Latvia	68.34	0.40	31.26	3.59
Lithuania	71.13	0.26	28.61	3.58
Luxembourg	35.19	0.08	64.73	3.64
Malta	26.27	0.09	73.64	3.70
Netherlands	60.65	8.85	30.50	3.58
Poland	68.78	0.38	30.83	3.49
Portugal	52.04	5.56	42.40	3.76
Romania	61.78	1.15	37.07	3.24
Slovakia	48.59	1.56	49.85	3.66
Slovenia	36.56	1.46	61.98	3.80
Spain	70.99	4.98	24.03	3.61
Sweden	56.60	0.52	42.88	3.59
EU-27	61.53	3.01	35.46	3.59

CAP – Common Agricultural Policy

Source: Own calculation based on data from CAP Strategic Plans and the Special Eurobarometer 520 (European Commission 2022)

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CONCLUSION

Conclusions and policy implications. Agriculture accounted for a relatively low share of value added in value chains (approximately 25%). Despite there having been a steady increase in agricultural income over the last years, income per worker was still approximately half of what could be earned in other jobs (Eurostat 2022).

The new CAP is aimed at being greener (as it supports agriculture in contributing to the European Green Deal), fairer (as it attempts to support those who need it most) and more competitive (as it tries to improve the position of farmers in the supply chain and fosters the competitiveness of the agrifood sector). For the first time, CAP Strategic Plans include all CAP-funded instruments and detail the plans of each country for enhancing agriculture and rural areas.

In this article, we assessed the differences in the opinion on the importance for the future of agriculture and rural areas of EU citizens from rural and nonrural areas. In addition, we have examined the disparities across the EU countries.

Given the current climatic and geopolitical uncertainties and challenges (Kelly and Adger 2000; Gambella et al. 2021; Tomao et al. 2021), most EU citizens consider agriculture and rural areas important for the future. As expected, rural respondents were more likely to consider them very important. In line with previous literature on the attitudes and behaviours of farmers (Dessart et al. 2019; Brown et al. 2021; Bartkowski et al. 2022), the results obtained show that respondent age, gender and occupation were significant explanatory factors for the differences in the importance assigned to agriculture and rural areas for the future. We also found disparities among the EU countries. The great destruction of employment in agriculture that has taken place in some countries over the last years and that has severely affected smaller farms can be a possible explanation for ‘pessimistic’ visions.

Disparities in income between smaller and bigger farms is a relevant problem, especially in some countries like Romania and Poland. To advance fairness of support, different actions will be taken under the new CAP to redistribute income support payments from large to smaller farms. For instance, in the case of Romania, 1 billion EUR from the direct payments will be allocated to farms of less than 50 ha (which account for 90% of farms in the country) (European Commission 2023d). In Poland, all farms up to 300 ha will benefit from additional redistributive payments (European Commission 2023c).

In addition to supporting viable farm income, CAP Strategic Plans are aimed at helping rural areas addressing challenges such as depopulation, ageing or unemployment. Ageing is among the major challenges faced by agriculture (only one in five farmers is younger than 44 years in the EU). Romania is a clear example: it is the country with the highest number of farmers in the EU, but it is also one of the countries with the highest share of farmers aged 65 years and older (Eurostat 2022). To address this problem, a mix of investment and income support interventions are planned to attract young farmers. Job creation is another key objective of local development strategies. It is necessary to promote entrepreneurship in rural areas, not only in agriculture but also in nonagricultural activities that, in some cases, can be directly or indirectly related to agriculture. In other words, we can affirm that, in addition to general problems, it is necessary to address the specific challenges in rural areas of each EU country. Public opinion can be a useful tool to identify what the major needs are.

Our study has limitations. Regarding sociodemographic differences in the opinion on the future of agriculture and rural areas, despite the sample being representative for all the factors examined, it is not representative for combinations of these factors. In addition, we cannot establish causality. Concerning differences across countries, to gain better knowledge of the explanatory factors for the disparities in the opinions of EU citizens, it could be interesting to go deeper into the differences in the internal distribution of CAP funding and national instruments active in rural areas across the EU countries. Furthermore, the results of the survey could be compared with future surveys on agriculture and the CAP commissioned by the European Commission.

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