

Food system



BEYOND GROWTH



Colophon

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RESPONDING TO A FOOD SYSTEM IN CRISIS

The European food system is facing a multifaceted crisis. The environmental and climate emergencies, unfair incomes for producers, systematic worker exploitation and the extinction of small-scale farmers demand a radical shift in the EU approach to food provisioning. In 2024, a wave of farmer protests swept across Europe, triggered by price pressures, cheap imports, new EU environmental regulations and administrative burdens.¹ In response, EU decision-makers have expediently downscaled environmental protections, while ignoring the core of the protesters' demands, namely fair incomes.

In this primer 'Food System Beyond Growth', we debunk the political discourse that pits farmers against the transition to a sustainable and resilient food system. **Environmental protection does not need to be traded off for workers' protection.** We present our findings on best practices and European policies for organizing a just agricultural transition beyond growth: **a transition that ensures dignified livelihoods for farmers and secures the right to food for all, while averting ecological breakdown.**



Transition

Panel discussion on **‘A just agricultural transition beyond growth’**

This primer is part of a ‘Beyond Growth’ series published by Commons Network and Oxfam Novib. It follows from a panel discussion on post-growth agriculture co-hosted by Commons Network, Oxfam Novib, Wellbeing Economy Alliance, Friends of the Earth Europe and the European Environmental Bureau in July

2024. The panel comprised speakers from all over Europe, including farmers, green policymakers working at national and regional levels, European farmers’ movement coordinators, a farmers’ union representative and a researcher from a Slovenian think tank. We discussed the harmful growth imperative embedded in European agriculture, and explored what kind of food system practices, policies and strategies would enable a just agricultural transition beyond growth. A recording of the panel discussion is available on Commons Network’s website: [“A just agricultural transition beyond growth”: Recording and takeaways.](#)

GROWTH AND ACCUMULATION IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

The crisis of the current food system has its roots in an economic system which is organized around unbridled economic growth and capitalist markets. Research has shown that economic growth cannot be decoupled from material and energy use fast enough to avert the climate crisis.² **The economy cannot grow infinitely on a finite planet.**

In the industrial food system, the logics of growth and accumulation result in high energy and resource use, and the concentration of economic power.

Industrial agriculture is dominated by a small set of increasingly large agri-food corporations, whose goals are to maximize private profits through intensive monoculture for export. **Intensive agriculture relies on high use of external inputs, such as agrochemicals and fossil fuels, and an extractive approach to the natural environment.** In the EU, the agricultural sector is responsible for about 11% of total greenhouse gas emissions,³ and contributes to substantial water and soil pollution as well as biodiversity loss. Consequently, the increasing recurrence of climate disasters such as droughts and floods

threatens food security and the livelihoods of farmers in Europe and around the world. By contrast, small-scale food production feeds 70% of the world's population while using only 25% of agricultural resources.⁴

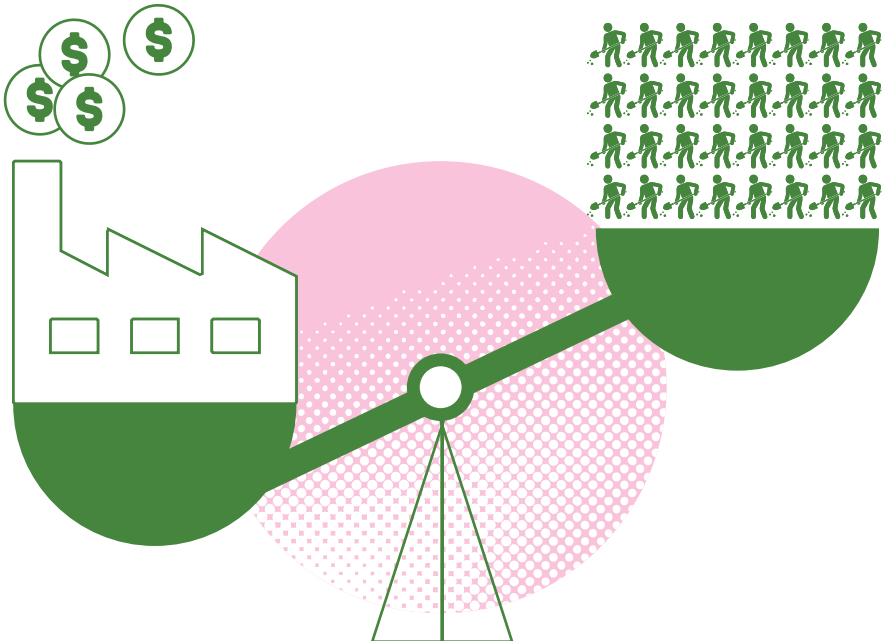
The concentration of market power, land ownership and biotechnologies in the hands of large agri-food corporations leads to their domination of global food markets, as well as their constant accumulation and further expansion.⁵ This results in unfair incomes for European farmers, as big food producers, retailers and manufacturers impose prices below production costs. Farm workers also face systematic exploitation; one in four workers are migrants, who are particularly vulnerable to workers' and human rights violations.⁶ Over the last 20 years, the number of European farms has been in steep decline while the amount of agricultural land has remained largely unchanged, indicating a trend of land concentration.⁷ Meanwhile, the increasing financialization of the agricultural sector exacerbates unequal access to land and leads to unchecked food speculation.⁸

European policies do not adequately tackle these power imbalances. EU agricultural subsidies are pocketed by big landowners, giving further advantage to large corporations. Additionally, Free Trade Agreements, such as the EU-Mercosur agreement, create unfair competition and are incompatible with the EU's social and ecological goals.⁹ This results in a **crisis of generational renewal**, as young people see farming as an undesirable livelihood.

At the other end of the food provisioning chain, consumers in Europe face increasing health problems related to poor diet and ultra-processed foods. Since 2022, food prices have dramatically increased while large agri-food corporations have seen their profits soar to record levels.¹⁰ Hunger and food insecurity in Europe are caused by unaffordability and unequal access, which result from

the combination of inequality and poverty, geopolitical conflicts and climate instability.¹¹

The industrialized food system creates huge profits for large agri-food corporations at the expense of small farmers, farm workers and rural communities. It also structurally harms the ecosystems on which all life depends, and is unable to provide healthy food for all. Food is commodified, despite being a basic need and a human right; and access to land is enclosed and financialized, despite being a common good of socio-economic and environmental value. Finally, large agri-food corporations make decisions that impact entire communities and ecosystems, and their lobby groups exert influence over decision-making in the EU and in global fora.¹² **The industrialized food system is therefore not only exploitative and extractive – it is also fundamentally undemocratic.**



POSTGROWTH FOOD SYSTEM PRACTICES

Which practices are in line with a just agricultural transition and post-growth economy? The essential practices shared by practitioners and experts relate to farming models, community economy schemes and decision-making processes in the food system. The European policy framework for the agricultural transition should support these existing practices and enable them to spread.

Farming model: Small-scale agroecological farming

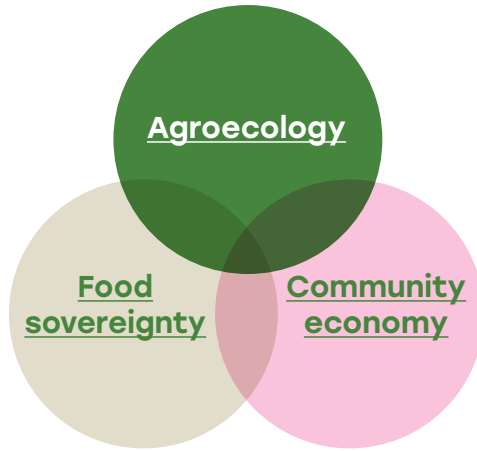
In contrast to industrial monoculture, small-scale agroecological farming works with – not against – ecosystems, uses less resources and supports dignified livelihoods in rural areas. Agroecological farming techniques range from crop rotation, crop-livestock integration, agroforestry and permaculture to natural pest control, to name a few. These methods all focus on enhancing ecosystem processes and biodiversity, as well as on regenerative and sustainable energy, land and water use. Agroecological food production is usually more labour intensive – it therefore tends to provide more rural jobs, with better working conditions – and is often rooted in local or territorial markets and communities, contributing directly to the welfare of these communities.¹³

Community economy schemes: Local farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture and cooperatives

Instead of the European food system being organized around global markets and big food retailers who scoop up the profits, it needs to support small-scale, local production and community economy models. Examples of such practices are local farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes and food cooperatives. Through these initiatives, (urban) communities can directly support small-scale food producers in their region and provide them with a stable income. Such practices build communities of producers and consumers, strengthening solidarity and cooperation.

Democratizing food systems: Food sovereignty

In a sovereign food system, communities have the opportunity to decide how food should be produced and distributed. Food sovereignty is defined by La Via Campesina as a collective right to *“healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods (...) It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.”*¹⁴ Such democratic practices politicize food systems, adapt to local issues and needs, and challenge neoliberal governance and the commodification of food.



Cooperative farms

Herenboeren in the Netherlands

Herenboeren is a citizen-led initiative – a network of cooperative farms enabling communities in the Netherlands to collectively reclaim their food production. Since 2016, it has established 23 farms and provided more than 9,000 people with food produced using agroecological methods. Each farm produces a diverse range of foods on approximately 20 hectares, and employs one to three professional farmers who receive a fair income. The households that collectively own the farm pay a fee to start the

cooperative, and monthly contributions thereafter. They share the harvests, and can participate in farm work as well as decision-making, which enables the community to take an active role in food production and the green transition. The enterprise is driven by cooperation, and there is no financial or profit incentive. The pillars of the Herenboeren project are: ecosystem-driven food production, socially connected farms, and embedded economy (i.e. the agricultural practices and economic activities of the farms are embedded in their natural and social environment).¹⁵

TRANSFORMING EUROPEAN POLICY FOR A JUST AGRICULTURAL TRANSITION

What agricultural policies and reforms are needed to tackle the social and ecological crisis in Europe? When it was introduced, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) entailed stronger market regulations, with tariffs on food imports and a subsidized price floor for farmers. Since the 1990s, EU decision-makers have introduced deregulation in the name of competitiveness. The EU must now reform the CAP to enable a just transition, implement market and trade regulations, and ensure access to land for agroecological projects. Lastly, we need proper environmental regulations instead of market-based solutions tied to net zero targets.

CAP reforms

Today, the CAP mostly consists of direct payments to producers following a hectare-based system: the larger the area of agricultural land they manage, the more they receive. This increases inequalities between small farmers and big landowners, with 20% of CAP beneficiaries receiving 80% of payments.¹⁶ This unfair distribution of subsidies is contributing to the extinction of small-scale farming. Subsidies need to be much **higher**

for the first hectares, and there needs to be a **ceiling on direct payments**, to ensure that European subsidies support those producers who need it most. Furthermore, the CAP fails to support social and ecological goals in the agricultural sector because subsidies are effectively not tied to labour standards and strong environmental protection. Since 2021, **social conditionality** has been introduced as a non-mandatory measure, advising that EU member states sanction subsidy recipients who do not meet minimum labour standards.¹⁷ This measure should be mandatory, and control mechanisms should be implemented at the EU level, to ensure that agricultural workers' rights are protected across member states. With regards to **environmental standards**, a non-mandatory pilot measure allocates a meagre 20% of subsidies to environmental schemes. The 2024 CAP reform removed requirements for farmers to respect EU standards on good agricultural and environmental conditions of land.¹⁸ **Subsidy recipients should meet stronger labour and environmental standards and be rewarded for having a positive social and ecological impact**, such as creating dignified employment in

rural areas and using agroecological farming techniques. If fair incomes for producers can be ensured through other policies, another approach would be to use the CAP budget to **provide paid training** in agroecology, enabling farmers to participate in the transition to a sustainable, resilient and equitable food system.

Stronger European market and trade regulations

Fair incomes for farmers and fair prices for consumers demand market regulations that limit the power of large agri-food corporations.

The prices paid to European farmers need to cover production costs and decent wages for workers, and the EU needs to make sure that retailers and manufacturers do not scoop up the profits. Furthermore, pursuing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and competitiveness on global markets suffocates small European farmers, as FTAs follow neoliberal market logics which serve the interests of large corporations. The EU needs to tax and regulate imports according to EU environmental and labour standards. In the longer term, **we need a new framework for international food trade – one that centres food sovereignty at both ends of trade agreements between the Global North and South.**

Regulations on access to land

Land not only has economic value, but also environmental, cultural and social value.

Access to land and the democratic use of agricultural resources are endangered by

trends of land concentration in Europe.¹⁹

Measures that could reverse this trend include EU regulations on the maximum surface of land ownership, and the creation of public land banks to reclaim control over land and allocate it to agroecological farms and cooperatives, among others.²⁰

Environmental regulations instead of emissions trading schemes

Emissions trading schemes (ETS) such as carbon farming are not a substitute for strong environmental regulations. These schemes are guided by the premise that market incentives are the right strategy for lowering greenhouse gas emissions and achieving a net zero economy. However, such market-based solutions yield limited and uncertain results while reinforcing the concentration of market power. Despite this, the European Commission has been investigating the possibility of introducing the Emissions Trading System for Agriculture,²¹ as well as developing a certification programme for carbon farming²² and promoting land use for carbon sequestration in soil or biomass. **ETS and carbon farming further advantage big landowners, enabling agri-food corporations to continue business as usual while implementing dubious sequestration practices.** Stronger European environmental regulations are needed, not only to curb emissions but also to halt environmental degradation. The EU should aim for structural transformation in the agricultural sector to enable small-scale agroecological farming.²³



Policy pilots

Social security for food in France

In France, a coalition of civil society organizations and trade unions are advocating for a social security food scheme²⁴ that ensures the universal right to food as well as protecting farmers' rights and the environment. In practice, this would extend the principles of social security to food and agriculture. All citizens make a solidarity contribution,

according to their financial means, and in return their food expenses are partially covered. Democratic governing bodies at the local level decide which products and farmers are subsidized through the scheme, based on the social and cultural preferences of consumers as well as social and ecological standards. Since 2022, pilots organized with local governments have taken place in about 10 cities. The project has gained widespread support, and is currently being discussed in the French National Assembly.²⁵

CONCLUSION

To ensure dignified livelihoods for farmers, secure the right to food for all and avert ecological breakdown, **European farming must transition to small-scale agroecological food production that is embedded in community economies.** Food producers, rural communities and European consumers must be engaged in decision-making and empowered to play an active role in the transition. Fair incomes and transition security schemes for European farmers are essential to enable a just agricultural transition with democratic support. Therefore, the EU urgently needs to reform the CAP to distribute subsidies fairly, reduce land concentration, and introduce strong labour and environmental standards in agricultural production. Public efforts should be directed at dismantling the agri-food oligopoly and freeing European producers from the dominance of global markets, which creates enormous pressure to intensify production. This can allow for agricultural practices based on social and environmental justice, rather than unbridled economic growth and competitiveness. In the longer run, **the EU should strive for democratization of the European food system, and food sovereignty as the basis for international trade.**

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