

Where is the Italian agriculture heading?

A discussion in light of the prospects for the future CAP

F. Arfini^{1*}, F. Bartolini², A. Carbone³, T. Castellotti⁴, S. Coderoni⁵, R. Cortignani⁶, R. D'Annolfo⁴,
G. Dara Guccione⁴, M. Donati¹, F. Galli⁷, R. Henke⁴, G. Mazzocchi⁴, A. Monteleone⁴, M. Raggi⁸,
A. Pesce⁴, M.R. Pupo D'Andrea⁴, B. Rocchi⁹, D. Romano⁹, R. Sardone⁴, F. Sotte¹⁰, S. Targetti⁸, C.
Zumpano⁴

¹Università di Parma,

²Università di Ferrara,

³Unimerceurum,

⁴CREA – Centro di ricerca Politiche e bioeconomia,

⁵Università di Teramo,

⁶Università della Toscana,

⁷Università di Pisa,

⁸Università di Bologna,

⁹Università di Firenze,

¹⁰ Socio emerito AIEAA

*Corresponding author. E-mail: filippo.arfini@unipr.it

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Abstract: In early 2025, the European Union launched a new phase of dialogue on the future of agricultural and food policies, aiming to move beyond the sustainability-centred narratives of the Green Deal and Farm to Fork strategy. The initiative, grounded in the “*Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture*” and the Commission’s communication “*A Vision for Agriculture and Food*,” reframes the role of agriculture within a broader geopolitical and socio-economic context. The Italian Council for Agricultural Research and Analysis of the Agricultural Economy and the Italian Association of Agricultural and Applied Economics convened a study day to examine the relevance and the implications of the EU’s Vision for Italy. This paper presents a synthesis of the discussions

and reflections, structured along four thematic pillars: economic, environmental, social, and institutional sustainability. The analysis highlights the structural weaknesses of Italian agriculture, the need for circular and diversified agricultural systems, the integration of agroecological and climate resilience strategies with competitiveness, the need for generational and social renewal, and the necessity for political reflection on the adequacy of the Italian agricultural policy governance system. By capturing the perspectives of researchers and academics, the paper contributes to the national debate on reshaping EU agricultural policy beyond 2027.

Keywords: Italian agriculture, CAP reform, Sustainability, Multiannual Financial Framework

JEL codes: Q01, Q18

1. Introduction

Between the end of last year and the beginning of 2025, the European Union launched a new phase of debate around the future of policies for the agricultural and agri-food sectors. This latest phase aims to carry the strongly sustainability-focused approach - which had inspired the Green Deal and the Farm to Fork strategy - into a different perspective, in which the sectoral challenges are placed in a drastically changed global context and pursue the ambition of making the agricultural sector more attractive and responsive to the expectations of stakeholders.

The guidelines and recommendations for this new phase were outlined in the “*Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture*”, a document resulting from a working group comprising approximately 30 European stakeholders from the agri-food sector, civil society, rural communities, and academia. The requests that emerged were taken up by the EU Commission with the publication of a strategic document, “*A Vision for Agriculture and Food. Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations*”, which placed the issue of agricultural policy renewal within a more ambitious agenda for food and the future of rural areas. A renewal program, based on further in-depth papers related to many unresolved issues, will be introduced in the coming months of 2025, with new emerging themes added.

62 The strategic vision document closes with an exhortation from the EU Commission, which “...invites
63 the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee
64 of the Regions, the social partners and all stakeholders to actively contribute to the development and
65 delivery of the initiatives in this Communication.”. CREA – Research Centre for Agricultural Policies
66 and Bioeconomy and AIEAA (Associazione Italiana di Economia Agraria e Applicata) jointly took
67 up this idea and organised a study day, which took place in Rome on 3rd April 2025. More than twenty
68 researchers, both academic and non-academic, experts in the various topics at the centre of the recent
69 documents, actively participated in the event.

70 The work began with two general overview speeches: the first provided an in-depth analysis of the
71 specificities of the Italian production system, drawing on the detailed sectoral analysis carried out by
72 CREA PB in its Yearbook of Italian Agriculture (CREA, 2024); the second offered a reasoned
73 summary of the contents of the EU Strategic Vision document. Then, the discussion was organised
74 into four thematic tables, each focused on a dimension of sustainability — economic, environmental,
75 social, and institutional — with as many coordinators as needed to guide the participants through a
76 structured discussion on the issues of most significant relevance to Italy’s national context.

77 The results and reflections arising from the debate are briefly reported in the following Sections,
78 which represent a first contribution to the internal discussion on the future of agricultural and food
79 policies, by a component of the Italian research world.

80 **2. The CAP post-2027 in the Vision of the European Commission**

81 On February 19, 2025, the European Commission presented the Communication “*A Vision for*
82 *Agriculture and Food*,” outlining a roadmap to 2040 that ensures future policies align with this Vision
83 (European Commission, 2025a). The document sets the direction and outlines principles closely
84 aligned with the recommendations of the *Strategic Dialogue* (2024), while also being strongly
85 influenced by other strategic documents regarding the European Union’s (EU) competitiveness, its
86 repositioning in the changing global geo-economic and geopolitical context, and its capacity to

87 respond to crises (Draghi, 2024; Niinistö, 2024; Letta, 2023; Spain's National Office of Foresight and
88 Strategy, 2023).

89 The document was highly anticipated, as it traditionally outlines the Commission's orientations for
90 the future of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) at the mid-point of the programming period.
91 This was also the case in 2017, when the Communication (European Commission, 2017) paved the
92 way for the New Delivery Model and CAP National Strategic Plans (NSP). In that document, the
93 CAP was the focus, but agriculture and the broader agri-food system were largely absent from the
94 debate on the future of the EU, except in budgetary issues. In 2025, by contrast, agriculture and food
95 production are at the heart of the EU's political agenda, as they are considered strategic for
96 maintaining economic and social stability, ensuring food security in times of crisis, and guaranteeing
97 European food sovereignty. The Vision is therefore dedicated to securing their long-term
98 competitiveness and sustainability, with the CAP being just one of several policies contributing to
99 these goals, often not even the most important one.

100 The document focuses on four fundamental priority areas, which correspond to the three classic pillars
101 of sustainability – economic, environmental, and social (the latter enriched by the food component)
102 – alongside a fourth area focused on the sector's competitiveness and resilience. Generational renewal
103 and innovation are cross-cutting themes throughout the Communication, with the former being a
104 long-term priority due to the ageing farming population, and the latter a supporting element to
105 facilitate a sustainable transition. Regarding sustainability, the document emphasises the need to
106 integrate both economic challenges and ensure a socially just transition into the ecological transition,
107 highlighting the importance of circular sustainability. According to this approach, environmental and
108 economic sustainability enable the sector to remain competitive and meet society's expectations
109 regarding food safety, food security, quality, vitality of rural areas, preservation of local cultures and
110 traditions, animal welfare, and other related concerns.

111 In the priority area dedicated to economic sustainability, the most significant references to the CAP
112 can be found. The document confirms the need to continue providing farmers with income support
113 that should be more targeted and fairer, capable of attracting young and new farmers. Support should
114 be more focused on farmers actively engaged in food production (with priority given to the production
115 of agricultural products essential for the EU's strategic autonomy and resilience), on the economic
116 vitality of farms, and on environmental protection. Furthermore, the document emphasises the need
117 to streamline and simplify payments for ecosystem services, as well as to simplify conditionality by
118 shifting from conditions to incentives, rewarding farmers who exceed mandatory requirements.
119 However, there are not enough details to clarify how all this will impact the green architecture of the
120 current CAP (which is not even mentioned in the document) or the resources required to remunerate
121 farmers. The document also touches on the issue of flexibility – both for farmers, in defining practices
122 best suited to their farms and contexts, and for Member States, in achieving the objectives of the post-
123 2027 CAP.

124 The second priority area, focused on competitiveness, aims to ensure European food sovereignty by
125 reducing critical dependencies (such as proteins, raw materials, and fertilisers), promoting fairer
126 global competition, avoiding situations where European standards on food safety and sustainability
127 place the EU at a disadvantage and lead to a loss of competitiveness, and strengthening EU's ability
128 to respond to crises.

129 The priority area dedicated to environmental sustainability outlines the agricultural sector's
130 contribution to the EU's 2040 climate target, considering its specific characteristics and the need to
131 ensure both competitiveness and food security.

132 In the fourth priority area, focused on social sustainability, the document highlights the need to
133 strengthen synergies and complementarities between the CAP and other policies, including the
134 Cohesion policy, to provide adequate support and tangible impact in rural areas through integrated
135 planning and implementation efforts. This aspect becomes particularly relevant when considered in

light of the Communication on the future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (European Commission, 2025b). In that document, the current budget structure, based on spending programs rather than policies, is shown to cause delays in planning and expenditure, as well as overlaps and gaps due to the lack of coordinated strategies for cross-cutting priorities. Therefore, the MFF Communication proposes a country-level plan focused on common priorities, including promoting economic, social, and territorial cohesion, as well as implementing key reforms and investments. Reading the two documents together reveals a desire for greater integration between Rural Development Policy and Cohesion Policy, although the extent of such integration, particularly in terms of policy autonomy, funding, and the role of public administrations, remains to be determined. The Vision does not propose solutions but provides a broad overview of the transformations agriculture needs, promoting ongoing dialogue among stakeholders, institutions, and civil society, along with a combination of policies and institutional levels. It implicitly calls for the need, without explicitly naming it, for horizontal governance (among institutions at the same level with responsibilities over different policies) and vertical governance (among several institutions with responsibilities over the same policy) (Coderoni, 2023).

151 **3. *Points of view about economic sustainability***

The economic sustainability of the entire Italian agri-food system depends on both macro and micro aspects of the national system, including the structural characterisation of Italian agriculture and the strong trade interconnections within and outside Europe. These aspects depend on the ability to guarantee income, adequately remunerate production factors, ensure competitiveness, and employ workers. Among the various aspects that determine and influence economic sustainability, those relating to the international scenario and risk management are worth closer examination.

The economic sustainability of the entire Italian agri-food system strongly depends on the evolution of the international scenario in two interconnected aspects: one external and one internal to the Italian country system.

161 On the external side, Italian agriculture finds itself in the peculiar situation of being dependent on
162 foreign markets for specific strategic production inputs (such as chemical inputs, soy, etc.). At the
163 same time, the food industry exports high-quality, simple, and processed products, such as those with
164 geographical indications, whose production cannot be outsourced (CREA, 2024). This situation has
165 been achieved thanks to the advantages derived from the European Single Market, as well as a general
166 climate of institutional and market stability, with the world's leading countries considered Italy's
167 commercial partners. It is evident that situations of financial instability - linked to exchange rates -,
168 economic instability - linked to tariffs -, or institutional instability - tied to unclear or no longer
169 perceived as clear market governance rules - lead to repercussions that result in increased production
170 costs, strain on the domestic market, and a decrease in prices and agricultural incomes.

171 On the internal side, within the Italian country system, the economic variables of the primary sector
172 highlight that the profitability of land and labour has remained almost stable over the last decade,
173 with only slight increases during the post-COVID years. These weak increases are less significant,
174 especially on small-sized farms, due to the tensions recorded on international price markets,
175 confirming that, despite the national production model's backbone being found in small-sized farms,
176 the latter continue to be more vulnerable. The economic sustainability of the agricultural system,
177 therefore, is closely linked to the structural dimension of farm holders' companies. Addressing this
178 challenge also includes promoting generational turnover initiatives. In our country, the process of
179 ageing has not suffered any setbacks in recent years, with a group of entrepreneurs over 60 years of
180 age that largely exceeds that of entrepreneurs under 40 (CREA, 2024).

181 Considering these structural aspects of the agricultural production system, the organisational and
182 coordination capacity of value chains is becoming increasingly important not only to define
183 production quantities and selling prices, but especially to define quality levels aligned with the global
184 market and to bring in financial and human resources capable of supporting innovation processes and
185 the management of commercial strategies in both domestic and international markets (CREA, 2024).

186 From this perspective, the Italian agri-food system is highly complex, encompassing businesses that
187 vary in terms of ownership, corporate form, and strategy. Cooperative enterprises, family-owned
188 companies, and multinationals compete in national and international markets. These latter companies
189 have acquired all or part of the corporate structure of many Italian food companies, influencing the
190 behaviour of the value chains they are part of, including their internationalisation strategies.

191 The economic sustainability of the Italian agri-food system increasingly depends on developing an
192 efficient and modern industrial relations system, capable of providing timely guidance to supply
193 chains and their operators. In this regard, forms of supply chain management related to inter-
194 professional organisations would guarantee a management capacity suitable to face the economic
195 challenges stemming from market instability and those arising from climate change, which, in turn,
196 are embedded in international dynamics.

197 In a context marked by extreme weather events, market crises, and geopolitical instability,
198 strengthening the resilience of Italian farms has become a priority. Two strategic levers in this
199 direction are diversification and circularity. Diversification involves two main strategies. First,
200 expanding the range of cultivated crops, for example, by introducing legumes or oilseeds such as
201 sunflowers and rapeseed, can help better cope with the effects of climate change. Second, developing
202 alternative sources of income for farmers, such as renewable energy production, agritourism, and
203 direct sales, to help stabilise incomes during periods of market volatility. At the same time, promoting
204 nutrient circularity is essential to reduce farm costs and mitigate the environmental impact of
205 chemical fertilisers. Encouraging the reuse of nitrogen-rich livestock manure, adopting precision
206 agriculture techniques, and integrating agroecological practices into production cycles can enhance
207 farm sustainability and reduce reliance on imported fertilisers. Investing in diversification and
208 circularity means building a more resilient and sustainable agricultural system that cannot only cope
209 with external shocks but also adapt and evolve.

210 ***4. Points of view about environmental sustainability***

211 The environmental dimension of sustainability is, in some respects, the most delicate as it implies
212 negotiation and interaction between several actors (farmers and citizens) in managing different
213 aspects that impact the environment and society itself. Even though the CAP in the past has introduced
214 actions that go in the direction of creating a more environmentally sustainable production model,
215 there are still numerous areas of intervention that include the adoption of more sustainable agricultural
216 practices, the maintenance of high levels of biodiversity, the reduction of greenhouse gases, and the
217 maintenance of certain limiting production factors (i.e. water, soil, inputs). The *Vision* document
218 foresees achieving a higher level of environmental sustainability as a function of Science's ability to
219 provide answers and develop interventions in several areas, including technological innovation, the
220 evolution of agricultural production models, the development of supporting infrastructures, and
221 increased consumer awareness.

222 The ongoing decline in biodiversity and accelerating climate change constitute one of the most
223 pressing environmental challenges facing society. Despite significant financial resources allocated to
224 environmental objectives, the effectiveness of EU agri-environmental and climate schemes in
225 mitigating agriculture's impact on biodiversity remains questionable (Pe'er et al., 2022). In Italy, this
226 situation highlights the need for innovative contractual solutions to improve policy efficiency. Among
227 the most promising approaches are result-based schemes, in which farmers receive payments
228 contingent upon achieving environmental outcomes, and collective approaches, in which groups of
229 farmers commit to shared targets (Targetti et al., 2024). Nevertheless, key considerations include their
230 capacity to attract private investment, the availability of enabling technologies, and the complexity
231 they may entail.

232 In Italy, the agroecological transition requires a strong commitment from farmers, supported by robust
233 institutional frameworks. Beyond the mere adoption of agroecological practices at farm and food
234 system levels, it is essential to invest in training, advisory services, and knowledge exchange networks
235 (Wezel, 2015). Reinforcing territorial governance mechanisms, such as Bio-Districts, and integrating

236 local knowledge systems are also crucial (Dara Guccione et al., 2024). In light of the water crisis,
237 agroecology presents a pivotal strategy for enhancing climate resilience. Therefore, full integration
238 of agroecology within Italy's CAP NSP, with targeted support for Bio-districts and sustainable
239 resource management, is essential. Despite the great emphasis on agroecology and Bio-districts and
240 their potential contribution to a more sustainable agriculture, it must be admitted that this is a residual
241 system in the Italian agricultural landscape, still far from becoming a reference model for many Italian
242 farmers.

243 Although agricultural greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in Italy have declined by 19% since 1990
244 (CREA, 2024), this reduction is mainly attributable to decreased production levels (Baldoni et al.,
245 2017). Greater ambition in mitigation efforts is therefore required to attain climate neutrality without
246 compromising productivity (Coderoni, 2023). Beyond the CAP, innovative policy instruments are
247 being considered. The EU Regulation on carbon removals and carbon farming establishes quality
248 criteria for certifying carbon credits generated from agricultural soils and forests, potentially
249 stimulating voluntary carbon markets through private finance. Similarly, the introduction of an
250 agricultural Emission Trading System, although highly questioned (Copa-Cogeca, 2024), could apply
251 the polluter-pays principle within the sector, reducing emissions cost-effectively. In this context,
252 Italy's availability of farm-level GHG estimates from FADN data (Coderoni & Vanino, 2022) could
253 facilitate the identification of mitigation hot spots for targeted interventions, such as those supported
254 by the Agrifood Just Transition Fund.

255 Soil health, a long-standing concern, has recently regained prominence through the EU's Soil
256 Strategy, particularly via the Soil Deal and Soil Mission, which aims to reverse degradation currently
257 affecting approximately two-thirds of EU soils. In Italy, pressing concerns include soil erosion,
258 depletion of organic matter, biodiversity loss, and nutrient runoff. However, significant obstacles
259 persist, including the dispersion of incentives across CAP measures, structural transformations within
260 the sector, and institutional inadequacies (Winkler et al., 2025).

261 Dairy livestock farming represents a key sector in the decarbonisation agenda and is undergoing
262 substantial transformation due to evolving consumption patterns and growing demand for sustainable
263 dairy products (Coderoni, 2023). Although climate-smart innovations, such as robotic feeding
264 systems, are enhancing efficiency, challenges remain concerning production standards and reliance
265 on imported feed. Additionally, there is concern regarding the potential redistribution of costs along
266 the supply chain under emerging policy regimes (Huber, 2024).

267 Agriculture is inherently circular, traditionally reusing by-products such as manure to maintain and
268 enhance soil fertility. Beyond internal recycling, the sector holds significant potential to strengthen
269 circularity through cross-sectoral synergies. Fertiliser use remains a primary environmental concern,
270 accounting for approximately one-third of agriculture's CO₂ emissions and depending heavily on
271 scarce and unevenly distributed natural resources. In response, the EU Regulation 2019/1009, which
272 entered into force in 2022, promotes the use of organic and waste-derived fertilisers as part of a
273 broader strategy to support sustainable agriculture. Nevertheless, adopting such alternatives remains
274 limited, hindered by perceived high costs, concerns regarding potential contaminants, and cultural
275 resistance (Ronzon et al., 2024). Facilitating this transition requires the development of industrial
276 symbiosis initiatives, supported by policy instruments such as the EU's Integrated Nutrient
277 Management Action Plan (Abitabile et al., 2025). Strengthening Agricultural Knowledge and
278 Innovation Systems (AKIS) to enhance information dissemination and farmer skills, alongside
279 improved monitoring through tools such as the Farm Sustainability Data Network (FSDN), is crucial
280 for fostering a more circular and resilient agricultural sector.

281 **5. *Points of view about social sustainability***

282 Social sustainability lastly entered the debate on the European Union's agricultural policies. It is
283 encouraging that this issue is now being addressed more concretely. In the *Strategic Dialogue*, seven
284 principles address social sustainability, a significant step forward. Additionally, the Vision emphasises
285 the importance of this topic, particularly in the context of generational renewal, which is seen as

286 essential for the vitality of agriculture and rural areas. This is welcome news in Italy, where the issue
287 is particularly acute (Carbone et al., 2024). It is also promising that the focus shifts from young to
288 new entrants. Many young beneficiaries would likely enter farming anyway, while others seek to
289 enter later in life, bringing valuable skills, capital, and networks.

290 New entrants, regardless of age, face land access issues, especially in densely populated Italy.
291 Therefore, the mention of a European Observatory on Farmland is a positive development. Lack of
292 infrastructure and services also prevents entries; thus, the broader, non-sectoral approach is a
293 welcome development. We now await the *Generational Renewal Strategy*, as promised by 2025.

294 For Italy, promoting and enhancing social sustainability involves engaging with various aspects of
295 agriculture and the food chain. Knowledge and skills are among the challenges recognised in the
296 *Dialogue* as an opportunity to expand farmers' lifelong learning and revitalise extension services.
297 Moreover, another challenge in the *Vision* document concerns “*Building an attractive sector that*
298 *ensures a fair standard of living and leverages new income opportunities*”. A focus on generational
299 and entrepreneurial renewal should also consider the social diversity of the Italian agricultural system.

300 Farming income contributes to the welfare of diverse entrepreneurs to varying extents. Farmers
301 managing large holdings often belong to the highest income deciles. Small and medium farms,
302 conversely, typically represent only one among several income sources for farming families, rather
303 than being the primary one (Marino et al., 2024). Small and medium-sized activities still involve a
304 significant number of people. In some rural contexts, they play a relevant social role, providing
305 employment. Their support is likely to generate valuable social outcomes. However, the attractiveness
306 of agriculture for small and medium-sized farms, as well as for young people and new entrants,
307 strongly depends on the rural context in which they operate. More than direct farm income support,
308 these farmers would need measures targeted at promoting farm business diversification, enabling
309 household livelihood strategies based on «pluri-activity», simplifying bureaucracy in farm
310 management, and promoting horizontal cooperation in marketing farm produce.

311 Social sustainability in Italian agriculture also requires a critical acknowledgement and systematic
312 response to the economic and social inequalities embedded throughout the agri-food supply chain.
313 These disparities disproportionately affect women and migrant labourers and are often neglected or
314 tacitly accepted, despite constituting deep-rooted structural challenges (Zumpano,2020; Corrado and
315 Zumpano, 2021). Thus far, the CAP has largely overlooked the social dimension, offering only broad,
316 non-binding recommendations concerning gender equality, without establishing enforceable
317 commitments (Zumpano, 2021). In the domain of labour rights, intervention has been limited to
318 sanction-based mechanisms, which have proven insufficient and largely ineffective (Canfora &
319 Leccese, 2022). The analysis of recent EU policy documents reveals little progress on these issues,
320 particularly in terms of proposals. Persisting in this limited approach risks exacerbating rural decline,
321 as individuals increasingly disengage from agricultural work and abandon rural territories. Building
322 on the advances made in the CAP's environmental dimension, there is a need to support
323 methodological frameworks that embed social sustainability into agricultural policy through the
324 implementation of fairness schemes.

325 Another topic focused on the strategic dialogue is “*Making the healthy and sustainable choice the*
326 *easy one.*” This topic extends beyond the agricultural sector and encompasses the broader food
327 system, aligning with the European Commission's recommendations (SAPEA, 2023). Appealing to
328 consumers' rationality is not enough.

329 Different dimensions of the “*food environment*” need to be addressed to promote sustainable
330 consumption. From a systemic perspective, four key aspects are of central importance: nutrition and
331 diet, consumer information, public food procurement and the response to food poverty. Regarding the
332 first aspect, Italy can valorise the heritage value of the Mediterranean diet (Dernini & Capone, 2024).
333 However, it must deal with the decline in adherence and the rise in obesity, which raises the question
334 of who should lead the change and with what incentives. In terms of information, the main challenge
335 for sustainability labelling is to strike a balance between simplicity and comprehensiveness,

336 considering the various social dimensions of sustainability (ranging from nutritional value to supply
337 chain equity to animal welfare, etc.) (Sanye Mengual et al., 2024). Public procurement of food plays
338 a strategic role in education and market orientation; however, the key issue remains defining effective
339 sustainability criteria, which is the subject of ongoing debate (European Commission, 2024). Italy is
340 widely recognised for its excellence in this area through the CAM (Minimum Environmental
341 Criteria), which integrates environmental, territorial, and social sustainability criteria into public
342 catering tenders. A widely shared call is to strengthen food literacy, meaning navigating a highly
343 complex food environment. Finally, the importance of solidarity networks, such as food banks, is
344 recognised to actively support food systems in addressing emergency food insecurity situations,
345 provided that such networks are supported by appropriate policies (Galli et al., 2018).

346 However, the role of agriculture and rural areas is often nuanced or neglected (Mazzocchi et al.,
347 2023). The reference to food waste remains rather vague: in the *Vision*, it is mentioned only once,
348 without any specific target, merely as a general commitment to continue existing initiatives. This is
349 problematic because the commercial dynamics that drive food waste behaviours are not recognised.

350 The introduction of elements that lead to considering agriculture in its social aspects, along with
351 explicit measures, is a novelty that should be welcomed in the Italian agricultural landscape. However,
352 the concrete impact of these measures depends on elements that require an evident willingness on the
353 part of national policymakers to implement them.

354 **6. *Points of view about institutional sustainability***

355 Both the Strategic *Dialogue* and the *Vision* have highlighted some common elements that may
356 influence the future policy governance for the agricultural sector and rural areas. First, budget
357 simplification of the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) may require establishing a single
358 fund for development policies and a plan for each country, which would contain key reforms and
359 investments focused on common priorities.

360 Second, CAP is still a central tool for achieving the objectives of competitiveness and sustainability
361 of the agricultural sector and rural areas. However, it should improve coordination with other policies
362 to achieve a synergistic and more effective contribution (Coderoni, 2023).

363 Third, CAP's strategic approach to programming is still valid. However, some implementation
364 mechanisms need to be simplified, while at the same time strengthening a target approach and the
365 responsibility of Member States to ensure achievement of the set targets.

366 Finally, Cooperation with stakeholders needs to be improved at all stages of the programming cycle.
367 The discussion on institutional sustainability, however, must start with an analysis of the governance
368 of programming, management and evaluation of the three main policy instruments that directly or
369 indirectly affect the agricultural sector and rural areas in the 2023-2027 programming period: the
370 CAP NSP, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) and the Partnership Agreement for
371 Cohesion Policy.

372 The CAP NSP, which introduced unitary and national “program” for Pillar I and Pillar II and
373 influenced the way interventions are programmed, consulted and approved, opening a broad debate
374 on the role of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Regions and the paying agencies as Managing
375 Authorities and in monitoring and evaluation responsibilities, necessitating the setting up of new
376 coordinating “bodies”. At the same time, the new objectives introduced with the “Farm to Fork”
377 Strategy, new instruments (eco-schemes and social conditionality), the strengthening of bottom-up
378 approaches, and mechanisms for performance assessment have introduced new actors and new
379 “institutional” relationships.

380 The NRRP provided for “agricultural” interventions managed directly by the Ministry of Agriculture
381 and other National administrations, firmly integrated with the NSP, but with different implementation
382 and performance evaluation modalities and not always fully coordinated with CAP interventions.

383 Finally, the Partnership Agreement for Cohesion Policy provides for several national and regional
384 interventions complementary to the CAP, in particular with regard to the development of inner areas,

385 the promotion of human capital and environmental protection. Nevertheless, no formal coordination
386 mechanism has been foreseen to ensure effective integration at territorial level.

387 A crucial aspect highlighted by the documents under the scanner is the stakeholders' dialogue: a
388 process innovation tested for the first time in the CAP NSP through the Partnership Table (Henke et
389 al., 2024). Italy is rich in experiences in this regard, carried out by local administrations collaborating
390 with research institutions, the third sector, and private operators, through public participation
391 mechanisms such as Food Councils, explicitly mentioned in the *Vision*.

392 On all these aspects, the progress of these new programming tools, their coherence, and integration
393 capacity need to be monitored. A comparison at the EU level of the Member States' capacity to
394 respond to the unitary programming inherent in the PSP would also be valuable and desirable.

395 The thematic discussion on institutional sustainability highlighted some assessments for possible
396 Reform scenarios. A first element concerns the CAP's separation from other policies. From a strategic
397 point of view, the Single Fund hypothesised in the budget reform could make it possible to improve
398 the integration of the agricultural sector into the economic system on fundamental issues such as food,
399 environment, land, and food security, where the complementary action of policies could be
400 fundamental. The issue of the Single Fund is central, both because of the risks of resource loss for the
401 sector and due to its effects on delivery mechanisms and performance assessment, which are already
402 complex and impact policies in various ways. Participants in the discussion emphasised the need to
403 change the approach and orient the CAP and future policies towards: i) tailored and targeted policies,
404 given the heterogeneity of the recipients, with the need to accompany these processes with practical
405 tools for evaluating results rather than inputs and performance; and ii) forward-looking aid oriented
406 towards rewarding behaviour that can generate structural changes in the system, overcoming
407 backwards-looking payments that tend to sustain the status quo and widen inequalities.

408 The other evidence that emerges from the discussion is the gap between the vision of agriculture, the
409 relationship with traditional challenges (environmental sustainability, generational change,

410 innovation) and that with the new challenges (food, health, labour, trade) and the role of incentive
411 and regulation policies as opposed to “softer” forms of policies that are more suited to interventions
412 in the more downstream components of the food system (education, information, transparency,
413 addressing a proper food literacy, as advocated in *the Strategic Dialogue*). The tendency is to focus
414 solely on the CAP, but it is necessary to discuss policies more broadly, to consider possible new
415 beneficiaries, how to avoid conflicts between different objectives, and how to leverage synergies
416 between actors.

417 Given the above scenario, especially for Italy, it becomes crucial to discuss the role of institutional
418 actors involved and how these new processes can be governed within the already complex governance
419 of policies due to the requirement of the Italian Constitution, which considers the Administrative
420 Regions as responsible for setting up their regional policy for agriculture. Thus, in terms of
421 institutional sustainability, there emerges the need to question how the national system should
422 organise itself at the central level to interpret, measure and evaluate the system proposed to us by the
423 EU, in terms of: i) integration and coherence of policies, in particular by looking at the programming
424 tools that we have used in this programming, also with a comparison at the European level, and of
425 the possible tools that may be proposed; ii) analysis of the trade-offs between the different objectives
426 - inclusiveness, sustainability, productivity, resilience - and the visions of the different stakeholders;
427 and iii) systematic implementation of mechanisms for evaluating policies, to allow real learning on
428 the effectiveness and efficiency of the various interventions to achieve the set objectives.

429 The new European agricultural policy is undoubtedly more complex in terms of its political objectives
430 and the inclusion of new stakeholders in the decision-making process. This increases the complexity
431 of the governance process, requiring public decision-makers to have a greater capacity to understand
432 the diverse needs of various stakeholders and, consequently, to allocate funds effectively. Given the
433 current European context, which includes the prospect of a potential reduction in CAP funds, the

434 vision of the political re-evaluation of the entire governance structure of Italian agricultural policy
435 also becomes relevant.

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