

Strengthening Policy Strategies for Soil-Based Agroecological Farming Systems

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- Better targeting of EU and Türkiye environmental funding and strengthening monitoring systems to address sensitive regions.
- Encouraging the dissemination of successful policy initiatives led by local authorities across the EU and Türkiye.
- A comprehensive evaluation of soil management policies in seven participating countries reveals significant discrepancies in national and regional approaches.
- The absence of a cohesive EU policy framework for agricultural soil protection limits the advancement of agroecological policies.

INTRODUCTION

Integrating agroecological principles into contemporary discussions on agricultural soil health can support the development of a long-term vision for farming that is more responsive to both environmental and societal needs. The Into-DIALOGUE project has evaluated how recently designed and implemented policy instruments in the EU and Türkiye influence farmers' decisions to adopt management practices that promote healthy soils.

Over the course of the two-year project, research has identified both similarities and differences in soil health strategies and policy instruments across seven countries: Italy, Spain, the Czech Republic, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Türkiye. Researchers have also examined how various policy and governance factors might be further refined to more effectively address soil-related challenges across diverse contexts.

As a final outcome of this work, this policy brief provides a cross-cutting analysis and interpretation of the overall strategies implemented in the seven countries involved in the project. It also seeks to provide

insights and perspectives in order to enhance synergies between policies and stakeholders. Finally, key policy recommendations to foster agroecological practices are presented.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Agroecology (Agroecology Europe, 2020; HLPE, 2019) is gaining attention as a means of achieving several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as defined by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2015). Agroecology contributes to multiple SDGs, mainly: Zero hunger (SDG 2), Good health and well-being (SDG 3), Climate action (SDG 13), and Life on land (SDG 15) (Sethuraman et al., 2021) (Figure 1).

The EU has acknowledged agroecology and its principles in five key strategic documents: the European Green Deal 2019, the Circular Economy Action Plan 2020, the Farm to Fork Strategy 2020, the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, and the Organic Agriculture Action Plan 2021.

Notably, agroecology is explicitly mentioned in the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy as a viable pathway toward sustainable agri-food systems.

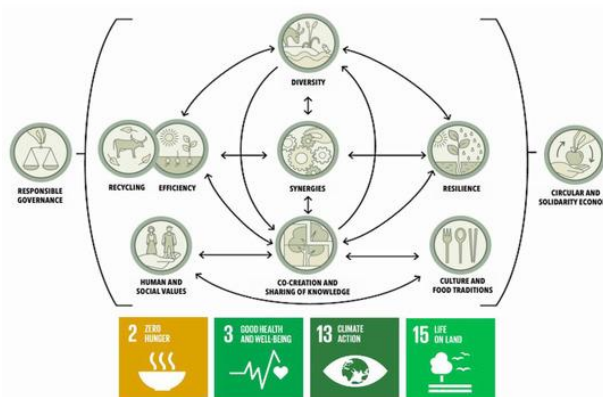


Figure 1 / The ten interlinked and interdependent elements of agroecology that guide countries to transform their agricultural systems and to achieve multiple (SDGs), notably SDG2, SDG3, SDG13, and SDG15 (Sethuraman et al., 2021).

During the debate on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023-2027, the importance of agroecology in promoting sustainability was highlighted, and it was suggested that more room be given to agroecology (e.g., within eco-schemes under the National CAP Strategic Plans).

However, an ongoing evaluation of the CAP 2023-2027 suggests that agroecology has not been widely implemented. With few exceptions, such as the CAP Strategic Plan of France, conservative forces have limited agroecology's role in the new CAP.

The debate on how agriculture and food systems can contribute to sustainability challenges remains highly contested, as it is influenced by economic, environmental, and social factors.

KEY RESULTS

The EU policy framework and national policies for agricultural soils represent a fragmented and complex policy landscape, comprising diverse strategies, targets, and instruments. This complexity is further

exacerbated by varying policy visions and goals across different domains and governance levels.

An effective representation of the complexity inherent in soil policy instruments is provided in Figure 2. This latter is adapted from the review by Domenech and Bahn-Walkowiak (2019) on EU and Member State policy frameworks for resource efficiency and the circular economy.

A key finding from the Into-DIALOGUE project is the absence of specific EU policies dedicated to promoting Sustainable Agroecological Farming Systems. Existing instruments often prove ineffective due to their complexity and misalignment with local priorities.

The research team has classified the various soil policy instruments into five main policy areas which could contribute to agricultural soil management through an agroecological lens:

1. Incentivising the adoption of sustainable practices;
2. Enabling participatory processes for sustainable development;
3. Regulating the protection of the environment and the landscape;
4. Co-creation and sharing of innovation and knowledge;
5. Triggering new market opportunities.

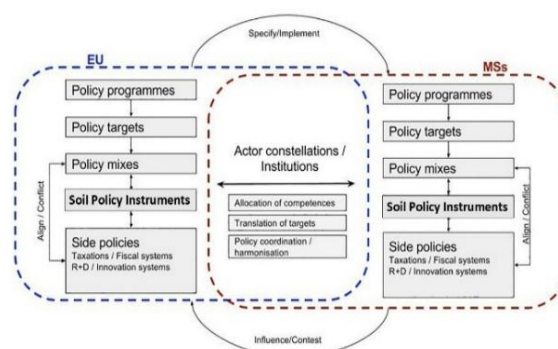


Figure 2 / Our adaptation on Domenech and Bahn-Walkowiak (2019).

The findings from the Into-DIALOGUE research activities underscore the urgent need for stronger, clearer, and more integrated policies to support soil-based agroecology. Despite holding environmental competence under Articles 191–193 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the EU still lacks a specific and coherent legal framework for the protection of agricultural soils. As a result, soil governance remains fragmented, and national implementation inconsistent, limiting the development of comprehensive agroecological policies.

A concerted effort is therefore required to integrate agroecological principles into soil management strategies across Europe and beyond. The project findings call for the EU to assume more explicit leadership in soil governance, grounded in its existing competences and the principle of subsidiarity, which invokes EU intervention when national action proves insufficient.

Regarding the allocation of current funds, it is highlighted that different countries prioritise different aspects: some focus primarily on investments, others on soil conservation practices, others on organic farming, and others on the legal empowerment of bottom-up initiatives. Coherent and robust conditionality requirements were found especially for soil health issues directly affecting soil productivity (i.e., soil erosion), whereas requirements for other soil health concerns appeared more uncertain and inconsistent. Furthermore, shortcomings in compliance with European environmental directives have undermined land management plans in protected areas and river basin management plans, including measures designed to safeguard soil and landscapes.

Many efforts to implement sustainable practices risk being nullified if governments, in line with the principle of subsidiarity, fail to effectively enforce the Polluter Pays Principle (PPP). This applies both to EU Member States and to Türkiye, a country which, as an EU candidate, has aligned much of its environmental legislation with the EU acquis, including elements of the PPP principle. Some Operational Groups of the EIP-Agri and Living Labs have recently started implementing pilot research and innovation actions in the field of sustainable agricultural soil management.

These initiatives demonstrate that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to agricultural soil challenges across diverse contexts. Consequently, a successful agroecological transition cannot take place without the bottom-up involvement of farmers, including new entrants (e.g., young farmers) to the sector.

The findings of Into-DIALOGUE project reinforce the importance of participatory policymaking in addressing soil health challenges. Effective agroecological policies should incorporate land use regulations, targeted public support for farms, environmental incentives, knowledge dissemination, and market-based mechanisms in order to foster resilient and sustainable farming systems. Future efforts should prioritise strengthening farmers' engagement in policy formulation to enhance soil health strategies across the EU and Türkiye.

The issues outlined above form the basis for the recommendations presented in the box "Key messages for policy makers".

KEY MESSAGES FOR POLICY MAKERS

RECOMMENDATION ONE: Strengthen EU Policy Frameworks.

Develop comprehensive policy frameworks that integrate soil health into broader sustainability strategies, ensuring alignment with agroecological principles. Specifically, policies should be designed and supported to: a) Empower local communities through targeted legislation (e.g., laws for eco-regions, policies promoting afforestation of abandoned land, support for the establishment and development of land associations, and initiatives fostering smart communities); b) Address land use planning and land market issues (e.g., measures to limit soil sealing, counteract land grabbing, and facilitate land access); c) Promote agricultural and agro-industrial policies grounded in circular economy principles.

Additionally, awareness campaigns should be launched to enhance farmers' and consumers' responsiveness to these initiatives.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: Support Research and Innovation Initiatives.

Strengthen advisory services, demonstration fields, Operational Groups (OGs), and Living Labs to advance agroecological practices through targeted funding and pilot programs.

Research and innovation play a crucial role in shaping farming systems, as policies are ultimately the instruments through which societies legitimize challenges and actions. It is therefore essential to actively engage young and small-scale farmers in participatory knowledge-sharing initiatives to foster agroecological innovation.

RECOMMENDATION THREE: Encourage Multi-Level Policy Coordination.

Facilitate dialogue between EU institutions, national and regional governments, and local stakeholders to enhance policy coherence, effectiveness, and relevance. Ensuring that financial resources and regulatory requirements are proportionate to the scale of the challenges is critical. Policymakers should base their decisions on real-world conditions, engaging farmers and other relevant stakeholders at all stages of policy design and implementation. This approach would lead to better-targeted interventions and improved policy outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR: Ensure Clear and Consistent Conditionality Requirements and Strengthen Compliance with Environmental Directives.

Standardise and reinforce soil health-related conditionality requirements within the framework of the CAP National Strategic Plans (or under IPARD III - Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for Rural Development in Türkiye). This would help reduce ambiguities and improve enforcement, ensuring greater policy effectiveness and compliance.

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