



COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF CAP STRATEGIC PLANS: IMPACT ON EU POLICY GOALS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for 2023–2027 introduces significant reforms, emphasizing fairness, greening, innovations and simplification through developing a Strategic Plan with a common performance framework. The aim of the study is to present a comparative assessment of the Strategic Plans of the EU Member States and overview the financial allocation and contribution of the plans to the ambitious CAP and Green Deal goals. The survey is based on a methodological framework proposed by Münch et al. (1), utilizing analyses of studies, reports, and expert reviews. The results indicate that while Member States implement different and diverse strategies, direct payments remain predominant. Key and straightened areas include environmental and climate actions, risk management, and the LEADER approach. The strategic plans align well with economic priorities but show lower relevance for rural development. The Strategic plan's links to the goals of the European Green Deal are mentioned but remain mainly unquantified and unclear. Eco-schemes and conditionality measures are expected to lead to an environmental impact. However, their ambitions differ significantly across Member States, potentially undermining the impact of sustainability efforts. Therefore, more ambitious actions towards greening and targeted allocation are needed.

Keywords: agricultural policy, greening, local approach

INTRODUCTION

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), established in 1962, remains one of the most important and complex European Union (EU) policies. The 2023–2027 reforms aimed to deliver a transformative shift and ensure environmental and economic sustainability, climate resilience, and social fairness. Aligned with the priorities of the European Green Deal, and associated Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies, the new CAP introduced several innovative elements related to a performance-based model, coherence and climate ambitions. However, the targets and goals of the national strategic plans raise discussions, and there is a critique related to the lack of sufficient environmental commitments and governance issues linked with the administrative capacity and the process of decentralisation (2, 3).

Therefore, the comparative analysis of CAP Strategic Plans is relevant to address questions

about effectiveness, fairness, and environmental ambition in EU agriculture.

The study aims to present a comparative assessment of the Strategic Plans of the EU Member States and provide an overview of the financial allocation and contribution of the plans to the ambitious CAP and Green Deal goals.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The survey is based on the methodological framework proposed by Münch et al. (1), which provides a structured approach to evaluating and comparing the ambition, coherence, and implementation potential of CAP Strategic Plans across EU Member States. It includes document analysis and is based on the official CAP Strategic Plans submitted by Member States to the European Commission, accompanying regulatory texts, annexes and evaluation reports. This methodological approach allows policy-relevant evaluation of the CAP Strategic Plans, recognising national diversity while identifying common patterns, weaknesses, opportunities and prospects.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The CAP was established in 1962, and its initial goals were to ensure food security, stabilize markets and support farm incomes (4, 5). It transformed significantly as an answer to the changing conditions and emerging challenges (6-8).

The MacSharry Reform of 1992 marked a shift from market price support to direct payments, while also presenting agri-environmental measures (9). Agenda 2000 further consolidated rural development by establishing the second pillar of the CAP (10). The 2003 Mid-Term Review introduced the decoupling of payments

by implementing the Single Payment Scheme (11). In addition, the 2008 Health Check adjusted market support mechanisms and increased funding for measures related to climate and biodiversity (12). The 2013 reform was related to "greening", which supports environmentally beneficial practices and introduces the principle of subsidiarity and flexibility (13).

The CAP 2023–2027 presents a new framework aiming to transition towards new governance, results-based models and increased climate ambition (14).

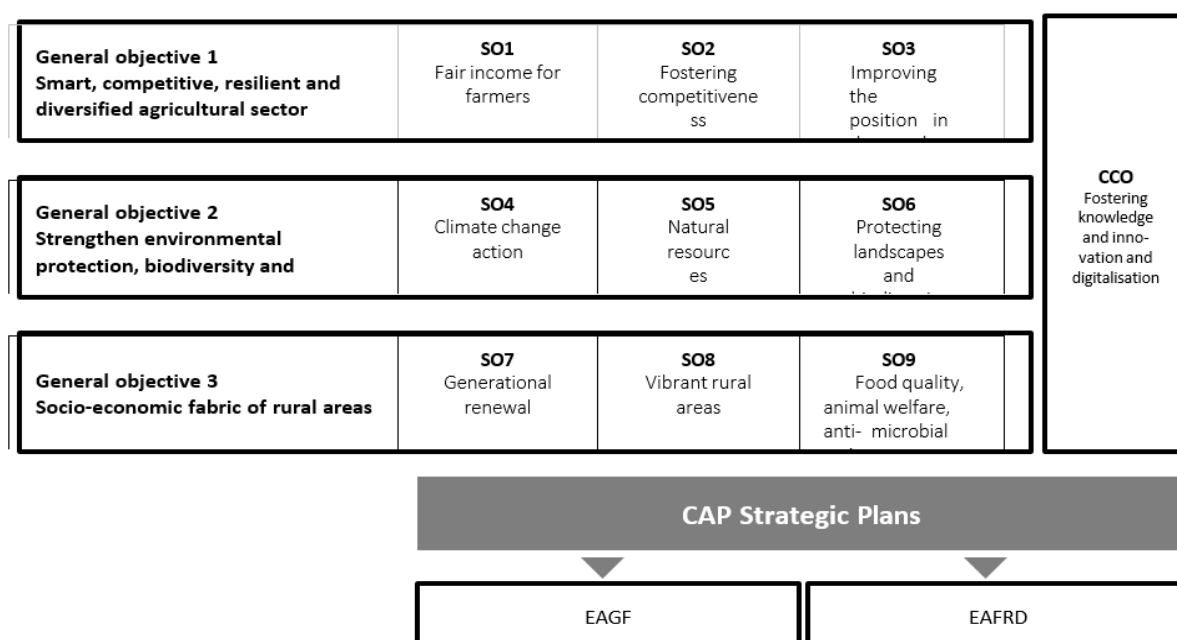


Figure 1. Intervention logic of the CAP 2023-2027 framework

Its core elements include: (1) the common framework of national strategic plans. The needs and interventions are aligned with the regional features. The goal of the new approach is related to subsidiarity, requiring a link with EU-wide objectives such as climate, biodiversity, and generational renewal (3); (2) a new delivery model focusing on result and impact Indicators. (15). The aim is to lower bureaucracy and increase effectiveness. However, it raises concerns about administrative capacity and capabilities of each Member State (16); (3) new Environmental Architecture that includes Eco-schemes under Pillar I (25% of direct payments) (17). In addition, agri-environment-climate measures (AECMs) are part of Pillar II, with greater emphasis on biodiversity, water, and soil (18); (4) Social and economic goals that are related to social conditionality, young farmer support, redistributive income support (19).

The scientific literature widely discusses the new approach and logic of the CAP. Some authors outlined the improved integration and the empowerment of Member States to implement regional and specific solutions (15, 20). By contrast, other surveys evaluated the alignment with the European Green Deal. They marked on a lack of sufficient biodiversity maintenance ambitions (21) and issues between flexibility and accountability (2).

The CAP 2023–2027 financial allocation represents an important dimension of comparative analysis, as it directly reflects each Member State's policy priorities, commitment to sustainability goals, and is related to support targeting. The redistributive choices and budgetary weight of specific interventions (eco-schemes, young farmers, and coupled support) reveal whether Member States are using their

financial flexibility to meet the objectives of the European Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy. Most CAP funds are distributed to Direct Payments, followed by Rural Development. According to EU data, the share of direct payments in total public expenditure (CAP and the national co-financing) is above 70% for Denmark, Spain, Lithuania and Belgium. On the other hand, less than 40% of financial aid is allocated in direct payments in Austria, Finland, Luxembourg, Malta, and Slovenia. According to EU data (1), Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS) represents the largest share of direct payments funding (51.5%). In addition, redistributive support increased to almost 11% compared to 2014-2020, while income support for young farmers is less than 2%. Eco-schemes are a new moment for the 2023-2027 period CAP and account for 23.8% of direct payments.

Another important feature is the transfer between Pillar I and Pillar II. Eleven Member States have chosen to transfer funds from Direct Payments to Rural Development (Slovakia, Belgium-Flanders, Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, France, Italy, Latvia, the

Netherlands, and Romania). The Netherlands, Germany and Belgium-Flanders are transferring 21%, 12% and 11% respectively, representing the highest share. On the opposite direction, six Member States transferred from Rural Development to Direct Payments. Poland (29%), Hungary (23%), and Malta (21%) are the Member States with the most significant share (1).

Sectoral support interventions represent a share of 4.5% of total financial support, with the highest share for wine (46.5%), fruits, and vegetables (46.5%) (22).

The role of sectoral interventions differs across Member States and is based on the natural conditions. The highest share is recorded in Belgium (24%), Italy (15%) and the Netherlands (12.7%). By contrast, in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania and Malta, the share is less than 1% of the funding (1).

Regarding Pillar II, the distribution of financial support is associated with the Member States' special needs and presents diverse approaches.

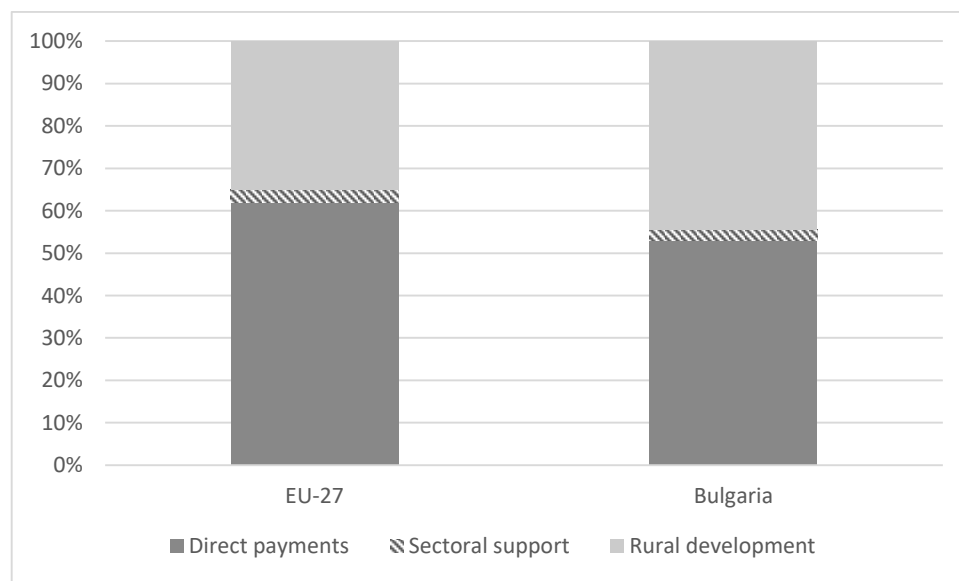


Figure 2. Distribution of the planned financial allocations under the CAP in total public expenditure 2023-2027, (%)
Source: Based on Münch et al. (1) and approved strategic plans

The interventions under Pillar II for the 2023–2027 programming period display considerable variation among Member States regarding budgetary priorities and thematic allocations. Environmental, climate-related, and other management commitments are mandatory and represent the largest share of rural development funding, with a notable increase of 31% compared to the previous period. Significant

disparities exist among Member States- Malta, Portugal, Greece, and France have distributed less than 20% of their rural development funds to this measure, while Hungary, Ireland, and Austria devote over 45%. Compensation for natural or other area-specific constraints remains relatively stable, accounting for 17.6% of rural development funding. It is included in all Strategic plans except for those of Belgium-

Flanders, Estonia, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Latvia. Investments in agriculture, forestry, environment, and rural development represent the second-largest component of rural development expenditure. The investments represent over 45% of rural development funding in Spain, Denmark, Bulgaria, Estonia, Portugal, and Belgium -Flanders, and reach 64% in Malta. Approximately 60% of investments target competitiveness, 25% environmental goals, and 15% rural development. Denmark, Ireland, and Spain prioritise environmental investments, while Malta, Bulgaria, and Finland are distinguished by their investment in broader rural development.

Support for young and new farmers and rural business start-ups is 4.8% in the current period. The intervention is included in all Member States plans except Ireland (1).

Risk management tools are optional and account for 4.3% of rural development funding. Fourteen Member States have included such tools in their Strategic Plans with substantial variation. Italy, France, and the Netherlands commit the highest share. Cooperation interventions, primarily implemented through the LEADER account for 10.4% of rural development funding. Twelve Member States allocate more than 7% to LEADER, exceeding the 5% minimum. The Netherlands has the highest commitment, with 29.4% of its rural development funding to cooperation, although only 4.6% is designated for LEADER (1).

This analysis shows that the diverse strategic priorities under the CAP Strategic Plans are related to national specifics and local needs. While environmental and area-based interventions dominate, investment, risk management, and cooperation remain critical pillars of rural development support.

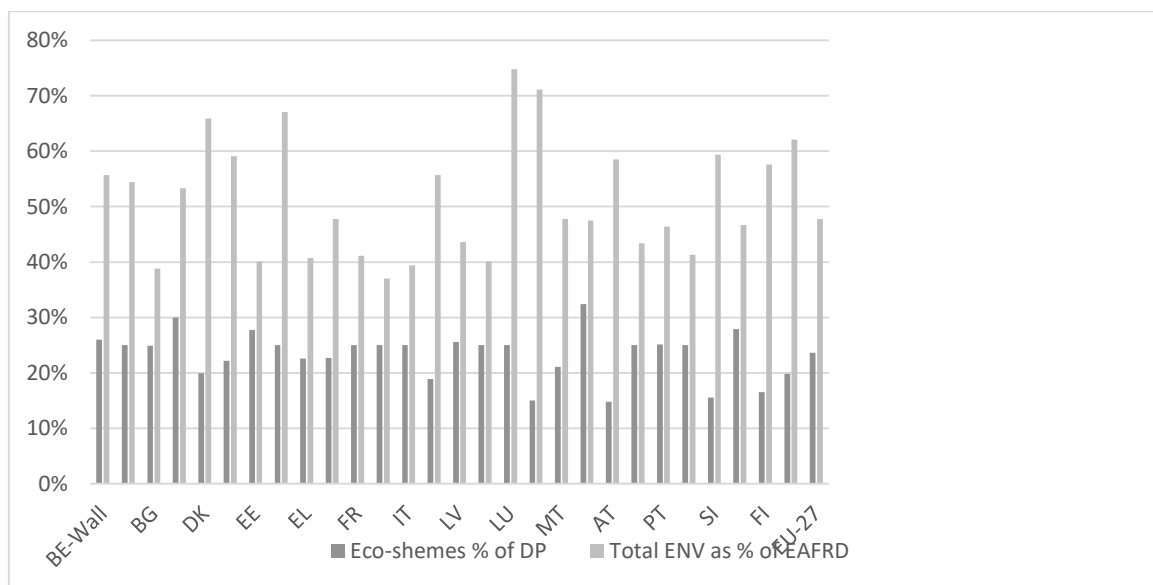


Figure 3. Share of Member States financial allocation in eco-schemes and Environmental, Climate and Animal Welfare/AMR actions in EAFRD, 2023-2027 (%)

Source: Based on Münch et al. (1) and approved strategic plans

The data reveals a wide range of uneven commitments across Member States to addressing climate change through direct payments and rural development interventions. Climate action is primarily pursued through eco-schemes and agri-environmental-climate measures, complemented by targeted investments.

All Member States have incorporated climate change adaptation objectives within their eco-schemes, with 27 Strategic plans explicitly addressing adaptation and 22 focusing on

mitigation. In addition, several agri-environment-climate management commitments also contribute to climate goals. Despite these efforts, less than one-quarter of the total financial envelope for direct payments across the European Union has been allocated to eco-schemes. In contrast, a significantly larger share 48% funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) has been allocated for environmental protection, climate action, and animal welfare, well exceeding the regulatory minimum threshold of 35%.

However, there are differences between Member States in terms of eco-scheme funding. Hungary, Austria, Slovenia, and Finland allocated approximately 15% of their direct payment to eco-schemes. In contrast, the Netherlands, the Czechia, Estonia, and Slovakia have allocated around 30%, demonstrating a higher degree of prioritisation.

Regarding the EAFRD funding, most Member States have committed more than 55% of their rural development envelopes to environmental,

climate, and animal welfare objectives. Only Bulgaria, Croatia, and Italy fall significantly below, having allocated less than 40% of their EAFRD budgets to these areas.

While the European Union's CAP Strategic Plans demonstrate a general alignment with climate and environmental goals, the extent and intensity of commitments vary considerably among Member States in terms of the use of eco-schemes under direct payments and the allocation of rural development funding.

Table 1. Selected indicators and the Green Deal contributions

Result indicator	EU-average target value	Above average target setting	Below average target setting
R.22 Share of UAA under supported commitments related to improved nutrient management	15.2%	CSP: 18/28 AT, BE-FL, CY, CZ, DK, EE, FI, DE, HU, IE, LV, LI, LU, NL, PL, SK, SI, SE	CSP: 10/28 BE-WA, BG, HR, FR, EL, IT, MT, PT, RO, ES
R.24 Share of UAA under supported specific commitments which lead to a sustainable use of pesticides	26.6%	CSP: 13/28 AT, BE-WA, CY, EE, FR, DE, EL, IT, LV, LU, PT, SK, SI	CSP: 15/28 BE-FL, BG, HR, CZ, DK, FI, HU, IE, LI, MT, NL, PL, RO, ES, SE
R.29 Share of UAA in organic farming	10%	CSP: 18/28 AT, BE-WA, HR, CZ, DK, EE, FI, FR, DE, EL, IT, LV, LI, LU, PT, SK, SI, SE	CSP: 10/28 BE-FL, BG, CY, HU, IE, MT, NL, PL, RO, ES
R.31 Share of UAA under supported commitments for biodiversity conservation or restoration	30.6%	CSP: 9/28 CZ, EE, FI, FR, DE, IE, LU, NL, SK	CSP: 19/28 AT, BE-FL, BE-WA, BG, HR, CY, DK, EL, HU, IT, LV, LI, MT, PL, PT, RO, SI, ES, SE

The CAP in 2023-2027 is directed towards transitioning to more sustainable agricultural and food systems. According to the European Commission (23), the CAP aims to contribute by promoting agricultural practices that preserve and restore natural ecosystems, ensure the sustainable use of resources, and improve human health.

Given the interdependence of agriculture, climate, and biodiversity in the European Union, the CAP is uniquely positioned to support Green Deal objectives. Nevertheless, some survey (18, 24) argue that the CAP's framework lacks sufficient ambition and transformative potential even with its new tools. The CAP 2023–2027 focus predominantly on securing farmers' income, with many Member

States failing to implement necessary structural shifts. Concerns have also been raised regarding the limited scope and ambition of national targets outlined in the CAP Strategic Plans, especially about organic farming (25, 26), despite the potential to support this sector through a range of instruments such as investment support, training, advisory services, and innovation partnerships.

In terms of carbon farming, while the European Union agricultural systems show high potential for carbon sequestration (27), actual implementation remains limited and largely dependent on voluntary schemes.

Most Member States reference the Green Deal in their Strategic plans, but the data highlight

shortcomings. They include : (1) Absence of quantified national values (2) Low ambition of national targets: Across nearly all Member States (Belgium – Flanders, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, France, Hungary, Croatia, Italy, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia), at least one Green Deal related target reflects a low level of ambition; (3) Weak implementation quality and feasibility; (4) Financial allocations not aligned with Green Deal goals.

Organic farming is widely considered as a priority. Ambitious targets are seen in Belgium – Wallonia, Estonia, Italy, and Malta, though financial allocations in Estonia and Poland remain insufficient (1). Countries such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Ireland, Romania, and Slovakia have low targets, and others (the Netherlands, Greece, Croatia, Romania) have not established any.

Despite these efforts, the linkage between CAP result indicators and Green Pact goals remains inconsistent.

The diverse conditions across the Member States require tailored approaches. An analysis of the 28 Strategic plans highlighted the most emerging needs, reinforcing the necessity of differentiated, better-targeted, funded and ambitious interventions to realise the Green Deal objectives through the CAP fully.

In summary, the comparative analysis of CAP Strategic plans reveals the following:

(1) Strategic Plans and Delivery Model are core innovations of the CAP 2023–2027 (23). While they potentially allow more specific and targeted interventions, concerns are related to the risk of uneven ambition levels and fragmented implementation prospects (2, 28). Louhichi et al. (15) noted that the variance in national eco-scheme designs creates uncertainty regarding their contribution to EU-wide environmental targets.

(2) The CAP 2023–2027 increased the green ambitions. Despite the changes, some surveys highlighted that environmental ambition has been reduced during the negotiations (21, 29). Pe'er et al. (29) show that many national eco-schemes focus on low-impact practices rather than agroecological actions with a transformative effect.

(3) The CAP 2023–2027 introduces several measures to improve fairness and social sustainability (redistributive income support, social conditionality linking payments to labour standards, support for young farmers). While these interventions are important, their implementation varies widely across Member States, and their budgetary share remains lower than direct payments (16).

(4) Although the CAP reform tend to reduce administrative burden, the shift to performance-based governance increased complexity, especially for Member States with limited institutional capacity (30). In addition, frequent policy changes reduce predictability and investment planning.

CONCLUSIONS

The new CAP framework introduced changes and opportunities through the new delivery model and the eco-schemes. The analysis of the Strategic Plans indicates considerable diversity among EU Member States in their approaches based on the specific needs. However, direct payments remain the dominant mechanism. Key changes from the previous programming period include: A notable increase in redistributive income support, driven by legal obligations; The introduction of new, voluntary climate and environmental schemes, varying widely in scope and ambition.

Regarding Pillar II, funding patterns also reflect heterogeneity. Although support for the agricultural sector is still dominant, food security and resilience are part of the broader rural development needs. Measures supporting the environment, climate, risk management, and LEADER have been strengthened.

For young farmers, support has shifted from rural development to direct payments, with a new requirement for all Member States to implement specific interventions. LEADER has become the primary measure for rural revitalisation, although relatively less funding is allocated in this direction.

The 28 Strategic plans generally focus on economic and environmental needs, but environmental ambition is uneven. Many Member States strongly emphasise supporting the agricultural holdings, sometimes underfunding rural development and environmental goals.

While references to the European Green Deal are common in Strategic plans, they often lack quantifiable targets. The main contributions to Green Pact objectives are expected from eco-schemes, agri-environmental-climate measures, and conditionality. However, many eco-schemes lack sufficient ambition in most of the Member States.

The Strategic plans demonstrate strong alignment with economic needs and agricultural resilience but show limited ambition and coherence in addressing environmental and rural development goals, especially related to social sustainability. While eco-schemes are innovative, their design varies significantly, potentially limiting their impact.

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