

On policies and protests



Reforming interventions to achieve progress for all is a tough call. Success hinges on adopting a systems-based approach.

The recent demonstrations of farmers across Europe have revamped discussions about the costs of transforming agriculture into a more sustainable system, while remaining fair to both producers and consumers. With queues of tractors lining up on highways and in capital cities of France first, and then Germany, the Netherlands and other European Union (EU) nations, causing a great deal of disruption, farmers have been protesting certain recent EU policy moves. This is far from being unprecedented and is likely because the EU agricultural policy remains contentious. Securing food to a large market like the European one and doing so while demanding that high health and environmental standards are met, and that products remain affordable and farmers' livelihoods are protected, is a challenging task.

Concerns that the increased competition in the market¹, resulting from free trade agreements with non-EU members, could eventually drive most EU farmers out of business are growing. Free trade agreements are set up to exchange products with little or no trade barriers, ultimately to help meet domestic demands. But farmers contend that the effects of these agreements are detrimental to domestic EU agriculture as imported food products come from countries where production costs are lower, at a time when EU farmers face rising costs due to the strengthening of environmental regulation and the push to adopt more sustainable practices. In addition to that, there are also the climate change commitments. For example, in Germany, the government announced late in 2023 cuts to agricultural diesel subsidies², due to an emergency budget reshuffle to unlock funds to support climate change projects, leading to farmers' protests across the country.

The EU needs to ensure food security, food must be produced sustainably, and it must be safe and accessible to all. Farmers are central to this, but at the same time they represent only one interest group in a large market where



Farmers' protests have blocked the A63 highway in France at the Bayonne interchanges.

other producers will likely benefit from the EU trade, and other, policies. What is the EU doing to address farmers' concerns? The European Commission is proposing some measures³ that will need to be approved by the Parliament, for example curbing imports of agricultural products from Ukraine, introducing an emergency brake on sensitive products like poultry, eggs and sugar, allowing tariffs on imports back in, if imports exceed the average levels of 2022 and 2023. But all of this might not be enough to alleviate farmers' anger and could also have other political and economic knock-on effects.

Designing or reforming policies is difficult because more often than not they have systemic ramifications. Food-related policies are a prime example. For such policies to be viable, fair and effective, policymakers need to embed a long-term vision into short-term actions; it sounds complicated, and it certainly is, but it's not impossible if the mindset is one of preventing and anticipating rather than reacting. They must leverage synergies, minimize trade-offs and build in buffers when negative impacts cannot be avoided; this requires adequate planning informed by robust evidence. They also need to factor in coordination and cooperation across different policy settings and beyond them, and ultimately evaluate success and failure to improve efforts. How many administrations, whether local or national, embed 'learning' efforts into their workflows? This way of operating has been largely recognized by policy experts and decision-makers as necessary, yet it is not mainstream. Instead, we still hear of last-minute reshuffles, balancing between winners and losers, reactive decisions and

the like. And these are the ways of policy-making around the world. It's no surprise that once interventions are announced, even just the perception of negative consequences turns anxiety into protests and public oppositions. But policymakers can, and must, do better.

A transition to a more sustainable food system cannot wait⁴, implementing more sustainable agricultural practices cannot wait and developing more sustainable consumption habits cannot wait, but the core players – producers and consumers – need to be part of the planning process. Interventions to turn the food chains into more sustainable systems are part of one big plan, move humanity on a sustainable development path. Cooperation is key, including in the form of trade agreements if properly designed and implemented. The transition requires sacrifices, but these must be shared carefully and fairly, as only in this way will the costs be bearable, and will those affected embrace them. But most importantly, there are no independent goals that can be pursued in parallel to deliver sustainable development. There are systemic interdependencies to work with. It's time policymakers accept that and get on with it.

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