

Farmers' Protests in Europe: Economic Disruptions and Agricultural Sector Challenges

Novadhea Salsabilla Putri

Jeonbuk National University - South Korea

novadheaa@jbnu.ac.kr

Abstract

Farmers' protests across Europe have emerged as a significant socio-economic phenomenon, raising questions about the sustainability and resilience of the agricultural sector amidst evolving economic and environmental policies. This article studies the economic disruptions and sectoral challenges linked to these protests, focusing on two critical research questions: (1) How do policy changes, such as environmental regulations and subsidy reforms, impact the economic stability of farmers? (2) What are the broader implications of these disruptions for food security and rural livelihoods? Employing a qualitative methodology through in-depth literature review analyses, this research synthesises findings from policy reports, academic studies, and industry publications to uncover the root causes and consequences of the protests. It examines the intersection of economic pressures, regulatory frameworks, and environmental challenges, shedding light on the tensions between sustainability goals and agricultural viability. Findings highlight the adverse effects of policy shifts, including rising production costs, reduced competitiveness, and socio-economic strain on farming communities. Additionally, the study identifies opportunities for adaptive strategies that balance environmental objectives with economic resilience. By addressing these complex dynamics, the article contributes actionable insights for policymakers, industry leaders, and stakeholders striving to foster a sustainable and equitable agricultural future. This research underscores the urgency of reconciling farmers' economic realities with broader sustainability agendas, offering a framework for collaborative and inclusive agricultural governance.

Keywords

Farmers' Protest, Agricultural Sector, Economic Disruptions, Food Security, Sustainability

Introduction

The rising frequency and intensity of farmers' protests across Europe have become a significant socio-economic phenomenon in recent years. These protests, driven by a range of factors, have brought to the forefront the challenges faced by the agricultural sector and the livelihoods of rural communities. (Kriesi and Oana, 2023)

Farmers' protests have been particularly prominent in countries like the Netherlands, where the government's efforts to address environmental concerns, such as the nitrogen crisis, have collided with the economic realities of the agricultural sector. Farmers have taken to the streets, blocking roads and disrupting supply chains, in a bid to voice their concerns and resist perceived unfair policies. (Coates, 2023)

The significance of these protests extends beyond the immediate economic impact. They are intrinsically linked to broader issues of environmental sustainability and food security, which are of paramount importance in the face of climate change and growing global demands. The agricultural sector plays a crucial role in addressing these challenges, and the tensions between evolving policy frameworks and farmers' economic realities have the potential to disrupt the delicate balance of food production and distribution. (Van der Ploeg, 2020)

The tensions between evolving policy frameworks, such as environmental regulations and subsidy reforms, and the economic realities faced by farmers have become a significant source of disruption in the agricultural sector. These tensions have the potential to undermine the viability of rural livelihoods and the overall sustainability of food production.

On one hand, governments across Europe have implemented various policies aimed at addressing environmental concerns, such as the reduction of nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands. These policies, while well-intentioned, often place additional financial and operational burdens on farmers, who are already grappling with the challenges of volatile commodity prices, rising production costs, and the impacts of climate change. (Heyl *et al.*, 2022)

On the other hand, the reform of agricultural subsidies, a key component of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), has also contributed to the tensions. While these reforms are intended to promote more sustainable and efficient farming practices, they have also led to a reduction in the financial support that many farmers have come to rely on, further exacerbating the economic pressures they face. (Alcock, 2024)

The purpose of this study is to examine the root causes and consequences of farmers' protests in Europe, with the aim of proposing actionable solutions for sustainable agricultural governance. The main research questions are: 1. How do policy changes, such as environmental regulations and subsidy reforms, impact the economic stability of farmers? 2. What are the broader implications of these disruptions for food security and rural livelihoods?

The impact of the protest resulted in disruptions on the agricultural sector, with farmers struggling to maintain their livelihoods and adapt to the changing policy landscape. This, in turn, has the potential to undermine food security, as the ability of the agricultural sector to meet the growing global demand for food may be compromised (Van der Ploeg, 2020). Also, the economic challenges faced by farmers can have broader societal implications, as the disruption of rural livelihoods can lead to the depopulation of rural areas, the loss of traditional farming communities, and the erosion of cultural heritage associated with agricultural practices. (Kriesi and Oana, 2023).

Literature review

The agricultural sector in Europe has faced significant economic challenges in recent years, which have contributed to the rise of farmers' protests across the continent. One of the primary issues is market volatility, which has led to fluctuations in commodity prices and made it difficult for farmers to plan and manage their operations effectively (Kriesi and Oana, 2023). For example, a study by Schoop (2024) on the experiences of Dutch dairy farmers during the nitrogen crisis found that the uncertainty surrounding future regulations and their potential impact on production costs was a major source of stress and anxiety for the farmers.

In addition to market volatility, farmers have also had to contend with rising production costs, particularly in areas such as energy, fertilisers, and labour (Alexoaei *et al.*, 2022). These increased costs have put significant financial strain on farmers, many of whom operate on narrow profit margins. According to a study by Rudnicki *et al.* (2023), the implementation of the European Green Deal and its associated policies, such as limits on the use of pesticides and fertilisers, have further exacerbated these economic challenges, as farmers have had to adapt their practices to comply with new regulations.

The reduction in agricultural subsidies has also been a significant factor in the economic pressures faced by European farmers. As governments have sought to reform the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to align with environmental and sustainability goals, the level of financial support provided to farmers has decreased (Alexoaei *et al.*, 2022). This has made it more difficult for farmers to maintain their operations and has contributed to the rise of protests as they seek to advocate for greater financial assistance and policy support.

The agricultural sector in Europe has also been significantly impacted by policy and regulatory changes, particularly those related to environmental protection and sustainability. The implementation of the European Green Deal and its associated policies, such as carbon taxes and limits on the use of fertilisers and pesticides, have had a significant impact on farming practices (Alexoaei *et al.*, 2022).

A study by van Diemen (2023) on the framing of the "nitrogen crisis" in the Netherlands found that the government's efforts to reduce nitrogen emissions from agriculture were a major source of tension and conflict between farmers and policymakers. Farmers argued that the proposed

regulations would make it difficult for them to maintain their operations, while the government maintained that these measures were necessary to address environmental concerns.

Similarly, a study by Rudnicki *et al.* (2023) on the impact of the CAP on the environmental performance of farms found that the shift towards more sustainable farming practices has been challenging for many farmers. The researchers noted that while the CAP has provided financial incentives for farmers to adopt more environmentally-friendly practices, the implementation of these policies has been uneven and has led to significant regional disparities.

The agricultural sector plays a crucial role in ensuring food security, both at the local and global levels. However, disruptions to agricultural production and supply chains can have significant implications for food security. A study by Alabi and Ngwenyama (2023) highlights the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global food supply chains, leading to shortages, price fluctuations, and reduced access to food for vulnerable populations. The researchers emphasise the need for building "smarter" food supply chains that are more resilient to future disruptions (Alabi and Ngwenyama, 2023).

Mishra *et al.* (2022) further explore the impact of disruptions in the agri-food supply chain, focusing on the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors propose a "contextualised resilience framework" to help organisations in the agri-food sector achieve operational excellence and mitigate the effects of such disruptions (Mishra *et al.*, 2022). This framework emphasises the importance of adaptability, flexibility, and collaboration within the supply chain to enhance resilience.

In the context of farmer protests, the disruptions to agricultural production and supply chains can have significant implications for food security. Narula (2022) examines the lessons learned from India's farmer protests, highlighting the need for policymakers to address the underlying issues that drive such protests, including concerns over livelihood, income, and access to resources. The author argues that addressing these concerns is crucial for ensuring the long-term sustainability and resilience of the agricultural sector (Narula, 2022).

While existing studies have explored the impact of disruptions on food security and the agricultural sector, there are still gaps in the research that need to be addressed. Baur (2022) notes that there is a need to better understand the institutional drivers that shape the priorities and decision-making processes of farmers, particularly in balancing food safety and environmental sustainability goals. The author's research in the context of California agriculture highlights the tensions and trade-offs that farmers face in navigating these competing priorities (Baur, 2022).

Furthermore, Bjork-James *et al.* (2022) emphasise the importance of understanding the broader social and environmental movements that intersect with farmer protests. The authors argue that these movements, which often include environmentalist and indigenous perspectives, can provide valuable insights into the challenges facing the agricultural sector and the potential for transformative change (Bjork-James *et al.*, 2022). However, existing research has not fully explored

the interconnections between these various social movements and their implications for the agricultural sector.

In summary, while existing studies have provided valuable insights into the impact of disruptions on food security and the agricultural sector, there are still gaps in the research that need to be addressed. Specifically, there is a need to better understand the institutional and social factors that shape the decision-making and priorities of farmers, as well as the broader social and environmental movements that intersect with farmer protests. Addressing these gaps can contribute to the development of more comprehensive and effective strategies for supporting the agricultural sector and ensuring long-term food security.

Methods

The methodology employed in this study is rooted in a qualitative approach, leveraging an in-depth literature review to explore the intricate socio-economic and environmental dynamics surrounding farmers' protests in Europe. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between policy changes, economic pressures, and the agricultural sector's resilience. The analysis synthesises a broad spectrum of secondary data, including policy reports, peer-reviewed academic studies, and industry publications, to identify patterns and trends that contribute to the root causes and consequences of these protests. By critically engaging with existing research, the study builds a robust foundation to address the research questions and illuminate key factors affecting farmers and broader rural livelihoods.

The literature review methodology facilitates a structured evaluation of various regulatory frameworks, economic policies, and environmental challenges. This includes examining the impacts of subsidy reforms, carbon emissions regulations, and other environmental policies on the economic stability of farming communities. The selection of data sources was guided by relevance to the research objectives, ensuring a diverse array of perspectives from policymakers, economists, and agricultural experts. This methodological approach allows for the identification of gaps in current practices and highlights opportunities for reconciling policy goals with agricultural viability.

Through this bibliographic review, the study achieves a multi-dimensional analysis of how farmers navigate economic disruptions and engage with adaptive strategies amidst evolving policies. The findings provide actionable insights into balancing sustainability goals with farmers' economic realities, offering a framework for collaborative agricultural governance that prioritises both environmental objectives and socio-economic resilience.

Analysis/Discussion

How Environmental Regulations Impact Agricultural Sectors

Environmental regulations, such as those aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions or protecting biodiversity, can have significant economic implications for farmers. A study by Yu et

al. (2023) found that increased environmental regulation can put pressure on economic growth, which in turn can hinder green technology innovation. This suggests that farmers may face additional costs in adapting to new environmental standards, potentially undermining their profitability and economic stability.

For example, the implementation of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has introduced stricter environmental requirements for farmers, such as the need to adopt sustainable farming practices and reduce the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides (Adam *et al.*, 2024). These changes have been met with resistance from some farmers who argue that they increase production costs and reduce their competitiveness. A survey of farmers in Flanders, Belgium, found that many felt that these policy changes had a negative impact on their wellbeing and led to collective grievances (Adam *et al.*, 2024).

In addition to environmental regulations, changes to agricultural subsidies can also have significant economic consequences for farmers. Subsidy reforms, such as the reduction or reallocation of direct payments, can disrupt the financial stability of farms and lead to protests.

For instance, the Irish government's decision to reduce subsidies for beef and dairy farmers has been met with widespread protests, as farmers argue that these changes threaten their livelihoods (Firnhaber *et al.*, 2024). A study by Firnhaber *et al.* (2024) found that uncertainty and socioeconomic change, including subsidy reforms, were significant occupational stressors for Irish farmers, contributing to their collective grievances.

The economic disruptions faced by farmers due to policy changes can have broader implications for food security and rural livelihoods. Reduced agricultural productivity and profitability can lead to a decline in food production, potentially impacting food prices and availability (Kokhaniuk, 2024). This, in turn, can threaten food security, particularly for vulnerable populations.

Moreover, the economic challenges faced by farmers can also have a ripple effect on rural communities, where agriculture is a significant source of employment and economic activity. The loss of farm income and the potential for farm closures can lead to job losses, reduced investment in rural infrastructure, and the erosion of social and cultural traditions (Kokhaniuk, 2024).

Farmers' Protest in the Europe: Challenges and Impact on Food Security of the Region

The recent wave of farmers' protests across Europe has highlighted the significant economic pressures and policy-driven disruptions faced by the agricultural sector. One of the primary drivers of these protests has been the rising input costs that farmers are grappling with. According to a study by Ait Sidhoum *et al.* (2023), the cost of essential agricultural inputs, such as fertilisers, feed, and energy, has increased substantially in recent years, putting a significant strain on farm profitability. This trend has been exacerbated by global supply chain disruptions and geopolitical tensions, which have further exacerbated the situation for European farmers (Oxford Analytica, 2024).

In addition to rising input costs, farmers have also been confronted with market inequities that have eroded their bargaining power and profitability. Cloos (2024) argues that the consolidation of power within the food supply chain, with large retailers and processors wielding significant influence, has led to a situation where farmers often receive a disproportionately small share of the final consumer price. This imbalance has fuelled resentment among farmers, who feel that their hard work and investments are not being adequately rewarded.

Furthermore, policy-driven disruptions, such as reforms to agricultural subsidies and the implementation of stricter environmental regulations, have also contributed to the farmers' grievances. Mennig (2024) highlights the ongoing challenges posed by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and its frequent reforms, which have often been perceived by farmers as undermining their livelihoods and financial stability. The need to adapt to changing environmental standards and sustainability requirements has also added to the burden on farmers, as they struggle to balance economic viability with environmental stewardship (Labarthe and Beck, 2022).

The farmers' protests have also shed light on the broader challenges facing the agricultural sector in Europe. One of the key issues is the lack of technological adoption, which has hindered the sector's ability to improve productivity and efficiency. Ait Sidhoum *et al.* (2023) note that many European farmers have been slow to embrace new technologies, such as precision farming techniques and digital tools, due to a range of barriers, including financial constraints, knowledge gaps, and cultural resistance to change.

Another significant challenge is the limited financial resilience of many farming operations. Matthews (2024) highlights the growing socio-economic inequalities within the agricultural sector, with larger, more commercially-oriented farms often thriving while smaller, family-run operations struggle to maintain profitability. This disparity has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted supply chains and exposed the vulnerabilities of certain farming systems (Oxford Analytica, 2024).

The protests have also underscored the need for greater investment in the agricultural sector to address these challenges. Labarthe and Beck (2022) argue that the provision of effective advisory services and innovation support can play a crucial role in helping farmers adopt new technologies, improve their management practices, and enhance their overall resilience. However, the authors note that the implementation of such support systems has been uneven across the EU, with some regions lagging behind in terms of the availability and quality of these services.

The disruptions caused by the farmers' protests have raised concerns about the potential impact on food security in Europe. Cloos (2024) suggests that the temporary blockades of key transportation routes and the disruption of agricultural production have the potential to disrupt supply chains and lead to shortages of certain food products. This, in turn, could result in price fluctuations and increased volatility in food markets, which could disproportionately affect vulnerable populations and low-income households.

Furthermore, the ongoing challenges facing the agricultural sector, such as the lack of technological adoption and the limited financial resilience of many farming operations, could have long-term implications for the sector's productivity and ability to meet the growing demand for food. Matthews (2024) highlights the need for policymakers to address these systemic issues to ensure the long-term sustainability and resilience of the European food system.

In this context, the role of the CAP and its ability to support the agricultural sector has come under increased scrutiny. Mennig (2024) argues that the CAP's complex and often contradictory policy objectives have contributed to the challenges faced by farmers, and that a more coherent and targeted approach is needed to address the sector's needs. This could involve, for example, greater investment in research and development, the promotion of sustainable farming practices, and the provision of targeted financial support to help farmers adapt to changing market and environmental conditions.

The Approach to Balancing Sustainability and Economic Resilience

One of the key challenges facing the European agricultural sector is the need to reconcile sustainability goals with the economic realities faced by farmers. On the one hand, there is a growing emphasis on environmental protection, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and promoting sustainable farming practices (Raman, 2024). On the other hand, farmers are under immense pressure to maintain their economic viability and ensure the profitability of their operations.

Phelan *et al.* (2024) highlight the emerging global agricultural soil carbon market as a potential avenue for addressing this challenge. By incentivising farmers to adopt practices that sequester carbon in the soil, such as reduced tillage or the use of cover crops, this market can provide an additional revenue stream for farmers while also contributing to climate change mitigation. However, the authors caution that reconciling farmers' expectations with the demands of the market is a delicate balance, as the financial incentives offered may not always align with the farmers' own priorities and decision-making processes.

Another potential solution lies in the diversification of income sources for farmers. By exploring alternative revenue streams, such as agritourism, value-added processing, or the production of renewable energy through agrivoltaism (Carrausse and Arnauld de Sartre, 2023), farmers can enhance their economic resilience while also contributing to the broader sustainability agenda. Public-private partnerships and collaborative initiatives between farmers, agribusinesses, and policymakers can also play a crucial role in fostering innovative approaches to balancing sustainability and economic viability (Bell *et al.*, 2023).

Furthermore, the adoption of precision agriculture technologies can help farmers optimise their resource use, reduce inputs, and improve their environmental performance while maintaining or even enhancing their productivity (Baráth *et al.*, 2024). By leveraging data-driven decision-making

and targeted interventions, farmers can find ways to reconcile their economic needs with the growing societal demand for sustainable food production.

Addressing the tensions and challenges faced by the European agricultural sector requires the active engagement and collaboration of various stakeholders, including governments, farmers, agribusinesses, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Governments play a crucial role in shaping the policy and regulatory environment that governs the agricultural sector. They can provide financial incentives, such as subsidies or tax breaks, to encourage farmers to adopt sustainable practices (Baráth *et al.*, 2024). Governments can also invest in research and development to support the development of innovative technologies and farming methods that enhance both productivity and environmental stewardship.

At the same time, governments must strike a delicate balance between supporting the economic interests of farmers and addressing the broader societal demands for sustainable food production. This can involve implementing policies that promote a just transition, ensuring that the costs and benefits of sustainability measures are equitably distributed among all stakeholders (Czyżewski and Guth, 2021).

Farmers, as the primary producers in the agricultural sector, are at the forefront of the challenges and tensions that arise from the need to balance economic viability and sustainability. They must navigate a complex web of market forces, regulatory requirements, and societal expectations. Farmers can play a proactive role by engaging with policymakers, agribusinesses, and NGOs to advocate for policies and initiatives that address their concerns and enable them to adopt sustainable practices without compromising their economic well-being (Bell *et al.*, 2023).

Agribusinesses, which include input suppliers, processors, and distributors, also have a significant role to play in mitigating the tensions within the agricultural sector. By collaborating with farmers and policymakers, agribusinesses can develop innovative business models, supply chain solutions, and market incentives that align with the goals of sustainability and economic resilience (Phelan *et al.*, 2024).

Finally, NGOs can serve as important intermediaries, bridging the gap between various stakeholders and advocating for balanced and inclusive solutions. These organisations can provide technical assistance, facilitate knowledge-sharing, and promote the adoption of sustainable practices through educational initiatives and community-based programmes (Raman, 2024).

By fostering effective collaboration and communication among these diverse stakeholders, the European agricultural sector can navigate the complex challenges it faces and develop sustainable, resilient, and economically viable solutions that benefit both farmers and the broader society. Innovative strategies, collaborative efforts, and a willingness to adapt to changing circumstances will be essential in navigating this complex landscape.

Conclusion

The recent surge in farmers' protests across Europe underscores the profound economic disruptions and multifaceted challenges confronting the agricultural sector. Central to these upheavals are policy reforms, notably environmental regulations and subsidy adjustments, which have significantly impacted farmers' economic stability. The European Green Deal, aiming for carbon neutrality by 2050, mandates that farmers allocate a portion of their arable land to non-productive uses and curtail fertiliser usage. While environmentally commendable, these policies have inadvertently escalated production costs and diminished the competitiveness of European farmers. Concurrently, the importation of agricultural products from non-EU countries, such as Ukraine, has saturated local markets, further straining farmers' livelihoods. This influx has led to an oversupply, driving down prices and making it increasingly challenging for local producers to sustain their operations.

The growing income disparity between Europe's largest and smallest farms exacerbates these challenges. Larger agricultural enterprises, equipped with advanced technologies and benefiting from economies of scale, have managed to capitalise on rising food prices, securing substantial profits. In contrast, smaller farms grapple with minimal margins, often leading to closures and contributing to rural depopulation. Over the past decade, the number of farms smaller than 30 hectares has decreased by a quarter, highlighting the systemic pressures faced by small-scale farmers. This trend not only threatens the socio-economic fabric of rural communities but also raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of diverse agricultural practices.

The policy implications of these developments are profound. There is an urgent need for a balanced approach that harmonises environmental objectives with the economic realities of the agricultural sector. Policymakers must consider revisiting and potentially recalibrating initiatives like the European Green Deal to ensure they do not disproportionately burden farmers. Moreover, the negotiation of trade agreements, such as the EU-Mercosur pact, necessitates careful deliberation. While such agreements aim to reduce tariffs and foster economic growth, they also pose significant challenges for European farmers who may struggle to compete with imports from regions with differing regulatory standards and production costs. The opposition from farmers, particularly in countries like France, underscores the need for trade policies that protect local agricultural interests and prevent market oversaturation.

Looking ahead, future strategies should prioritise the development of policies that support small and medium-sized farms, ensuring they remain viable amidst evolving economic and environmental landscapes. This includes providing targeted subsidies, facilitating access to technological advancements, and implementing training programs that enable farmers to adopt sustainable practices without compromising their economic stability. Additionally, fostering transparent dialogues between policymakers, industry stakeholders, and farming communities is crucial. Such engagement ensures that policies are informed by on-the-ground realities and that farmers have a platform to voice their concerns and contribute to decision-making processes.

Addressing the disproportionate influence of large agribusiness lobbying is also essential to prevent policies that favour industrial interests over those of ordinary farmers.

In conclusion, the wave of farmers' protests across Europe serves as a stark reminder of the delicate balance required between advancing environmental goals and safeguarding the economic well-being of the agricultural sector. Achieving this equilibrium demands nuanced, inclusive, and adaptive policy frameworks that recognise and address the diverse challenges faced by farmers. By aligning sustainability initiatives with the needs of the farming community, Europe can pave the way for a resilient agricultural future that supports both environmental integrity and socio-economic prosperity.

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