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Farmers' Opinions on the European Green Deal: A Focus Group Approach †

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Abstract

The need for a green, clean, and sustainable economy has pushed Western societies to create a new economic system to help local economies achieve their primary targets. Many scholars claim that the uncertainty of climate change and the contemporary necessity for environmental protection have led most advanced countries to reconsider and redesign their economies, adding environmental management into every reference system. The European Union's response to that need is the European Green Deal (EGD). The EGD represents one of the European Union's major strategies to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 and resets the Commission's commitment to tackling climate and environmental-related challenges. Creating a fair, healthy, and environmentally friendly food system is essential for that effort toward sustainability, which is why agriculture and farmers play an important role in this transition. Understanding farmers' perspectives on the EGD is essential for successfully implementing its policies. The EU has already launched a strategic dialogue on the future of EU agriculture. This research investigates farmers' views on the EGD through a focus group approach, providing a qualitative understanding of their perceptions, concerns, and suggestions for policy improvements. In addition, this research will try to present recommendations for future research.

Keywords: European Green Deal; sustainability; farmers' opinion; focus group; agricultural policy

1. Introduction

The European Union's response to that need is the European Green Deal (EGD). The EGD represents one of the European Union's major strategies to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 and resets the Commission's commitment to tackling climate and environmental-related challenges [1]. The European Green Deal sets ambitious targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, promoting biodiversity, and ensuring sustainable food systems through initiatives such as the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategy [2,3]. These strategies aim to transform Europe's economy and society for a sustainable future, making agriculture a key sector for intervention.

Agriculture and agribusiness are considered pillars of the economy, influencing most sectors with their contribution to employment, trade, and sustainable development [4].

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Moreover, farmers play a key role in preserving biodiversity through sustainable agriculture, and at the same time, biodiversity improves agricultural productivity, providing safe, sustainable, nutritious, and affordable food [3,5]. On the other hand, agriculture is a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions and a major user of natural resources. Recent studies have systematically reviewed the impact of greenhouse gas and air pollutant emissions from agri-food systems and their contribution to global climate change and air pollution [6]. Further, agriculture faces pressure to adopt more sustainable practices without losing productivity and economic viability. At the same time, Schunz [7] mentions that the EGD proposes, prima facie, a fundamental modification of earlier strategies, aiming to transform the EU's economy and society to reach enhanced environmental sustainability. The success of the Green Deal largely depends on the active participation and acceptance of farmers, who are tasked with implementing many of the proposed changes at ground level. Recently, farmers across Europe reacted to central European policies regarding agriculture through a series of protests. Farmers face uncertainties regarding the green transition's financial, technical, and regulatory aspects [8].

The present research paper investigates farmers' views on the EGD through a focus group methodology. By capturing diverse experiences, attitudes, and expectations, the study aims to understand the barriers and factors that could shape the agricultural sector's response to the European Green Deal.

2. Methods

Thirty farmers in the Region of Thessaly, Greece, participated in focus group discussions. The methodology aimed to provide in-depth qualitative insights on farmers' awareness of the EGD, its impacts, strategies, and recommendations for policymakers. These thirty farmers were divided into three focus groups, each of which was formed by a maximum of ten farmers representing different types of farming (livestock, arable, mixed).

The focus groups were conducted from March 2024 to September 2024, for approximately nine months, in various locations in Thessaly, to make it more accessible for the participants. Each focus group session lasted approximately two hours. At the beginning of each focus group session, an introduction to new EU policies, such as the Green Deal and Green Transition, was made. After that, the discussions were structured on key themes like the current challenges they are facing, exploring their perception of the EGD, examining how they balance traditional methods and innovative solutions, discussing their attitude towards the development of an ecosystem based on collaboration, and exploring further their opinion about partnerships and government policies. Finally, at every focus group session, participants were asked to express their vision of their activity's future and their operating sector. This resulted in many opinions regarding the issues explored in the present research paper.

All focus group sessions were recorded, and participants' consent and additional notes were obtained. The data collected from the focus groups were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis, following three steps. The first was to code and categorize the entire data set. The second was to identify patterns and themes, and the third step was to interpret and present the findings.

3. Results and Discussion

Thirty farmers were carefully selected for the present research, covering the geographical borders of the region of Thessaly. More precisely, the chosen farmers were located in the four major cities of Thessaly, Larissa, Volos, Trikala, and Karditsa. Some selected farmers were young, e.g., 19 years old, and some have been in the sector for many years, e.g., 65 years old (Table 1). The focus groups revealed critical insights into the farmers'

perceptions of the EGD. Despite a high general awareness of EDG, there was a significant gap in the detailed understanding of specific policy measures. In addition, concerns were raised about the EGD's financial burden and competitiveness implications, mainly for small- and medium-sized farmers. The criterion for the definition of small, medium, and large stands for the economic size of the farms. It is worth mentioning that, despite the various problems, a strong willingness to adopt sustainable practices was more than clear. In addition, a primary concern about those deciding the various policies was raised, and they made clear in all ways that a participatory policy design process is more than a necessity. Finally, the farmers claimed that each part's different geography should be considered when creating a more personalized financial policy, and not a one-size-fits-all policy. In addition, they underlined that a better communication strategy should be implemented regarding the policy and the various trends.

Table 1. Farmers who participated in the focus group discussion (related to the terms of GDPR; farmers who participated in the study are coded as F1, F2, . . . F30—F stands for Farmer).

Farmer	Age	Type of Farming	Size
F1	24	arable	Small
F2	41	livestock	Small
F3	38	arable	Medium
F4	27	livestock	Small
F5	29	arable	Medium
F6	53	mixed	Large
F7	62	mixed	Small
F8	48	mixed	Small
F9	23	livestock	Medium
F10	19	livestock	Small
F11	25	mixed	Small
F12	25	mixed	Small
F13	35	arable	Large
F14	49	mixed	Medium
F15	44	mixed	Small
F16	53	mixed	Small
F17	48	arable	Small
F18	44	arable	Large
F19	37	mixed	Medium
F20	22	mixed	Small
F21	29	mixed	Small
F22	31	mixed	Medium
F23	38	livestock	Small
F24	51	livestock	Small
F25	64	livestock	Medium
F26	47	livestock	Medium
F27	65	mixed	Large
F28	59	mixed	Medium
F29	53	mixed	Small
F30	55	arable	Small

Reference: own elaboration.

4. Conclusions

The transition to a green, clean, and sustainable agricultural sector requires farmers' active participation and cooperation with policymakers and the EU. The present study used a focus group approach to identify farmers' opinions on the European Green Deal. In addition, the present study highlighted the farmers' willingness to adapt to new ways of production and adopt environmental guides, but there are still various issues. According

to the farmers, there is not a well-made communication strategy; several parts of the EGD, mainly regarding the financial implications, are still unclear. This has, as a result, raised various concerns regarding financial viability, and there is also market disorientation.

Nevertheless, the discussions reveal a critical opportunity. With the appropriate support and several financial incentives, technical assistance, and a well-made communication plan based on participatory policymaking, farmers can become enthusiastic partners in the green transition. Hearing and facing the different realities of European agriculture while providing farmers with the tools and resources to innovate will be essential for aligning environmental and economic objectives. The success of the European Green Deal in the agricultural sector will be due to teamwork, with farmers at the core of its planning and implementation. The implications of the present research will be presented in future research.

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