



From sustainability to competitiveness: What shifting narratives means for EU agricultural policy

This brief explores how shifting narratives in EU agricultural policy, from sustainability to competitiveness and simplification, contribute to shaping policy design, funding priorities, and governance. Through a discursive analysis of the Farm to Fork Strategy (2020) and the Vision for Agriculture and Food (2025), it shows how problem framing can influence which solutions are considered legitimate and appropriate. The brief finds that environmental and climate objectives are increasingly sidelined, with sustainability now conditional on delivering economic and strategic benefits following a “win-win-win” logic. This shift has material consequences for the future of EU farming, environmental legislation, and the sustainability transition.

Introduction

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Why should we care about words and narratives when we propose, debate, and contest agricultural policy for a sustainable future? Political priorities and the language we use to justify these are in constant change. Over the past two years, a general shift in tone has taken place in EU policy with priorities framed increasingly around **simplification, competitiveness, and security, displacing once central terms such as sustainability and just transition**, key pillars for reaching the objectives of the EU Green Deal. This is noticeable across all sectors and is particularly pronounced in the debate around agricultural policy.

What are the implications of this shift in EU policy language? How is the current rhetoric shaping the understanding of problems in EU agriculture and the solutions that are proposed?

Aim and scope

This brief explores how **shifting narratives in EU agricultural policy affect environmental and climate objectives, shape our understanding of social reality and what effects this can have on the solutions we deem adequate or feasible**. To achieve this, the piece analyses two key strategic policy documents from the first (2019-2024) and second (from 2024) terms of Ursula Von der Leyen's Commission presidency. It utilises the critical discursive policy analysis approach, *What's the Problem Represented to be* (WPR, see Box 1) (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016), to examine how problem definitions shape EU agricultural policy. It specifically investigates:

1. How problems and solutions are represented in the debate around EU agriculture.
2. How these representations have shifted between two key strategic documents envisioning the future of EU food and agricultural policy: the EU's [*Farm to Fork Strategy*](#), published in 2020, and the [*Vision for Agriculture and Food*](#) launched in 2025.
3. What implications these shifts have for farming policy and governance, and especially environmental and climate commitments.

By comparing these two strategies, this brief focuses on **the implications of problem framing for environmental legislation, sustainability transitions, and climate governance within EU agricultural policy**. Understanding these strategies in isolation, however, would miss the broader policy context in which they are embedded. Narratives do not exist in isolation, but are often attached to other policy priorities, agreements, or ideas to create a more coherent story, relevance, or to gain normative legitimacy (Marklund et al 2025). A part of this analysis thus consists of identifying what other key documents these strategies build on. Thus, these documents should be read as in conversation with other key strategy documents for the EU to see what initiatives are given preference as setting the agenda related to agriculture and, in turn, what role agriculture is given (or not given) to support other EU priorities. For this purpose, a cluster of EU documents belonging to the first and second terms of Von der Leyen's Commission presidency have been reviewed to contextualise the analysis (see Box 1).

The brief is structured in four parts: 1) an introduction to the discursive approach, 2) an examination of shifting narratives surrounding EU agricultural policy, 3) a critical reflection on the implications of these findings and 4) concluding thoughts.

Box 1. Methodology and data

Methodology

This analysis was conducted using the *What's the Problem Represented to be* (WPR) approach, a type of critical post-structural policy analysis methodology (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). The main and supplementary material was analysed according to the six structuring questions of the WPR approach, which includes a close qualitative reading and coding into categories by the first author. Quotes used in the text should be seen as illustrative of general tendencies across the documents.

Main materials

European Commission '[A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system](#)' (Communication) COM/2020/381 final.

European Commission '[A Vision for Agriculture and Food Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations](#)' (Communication) COM/2025/75 final.

Supplementary materials

European Commission '[The European Green Deal](#)' (Communication) COM/2019/640 final.

European Commission '[The Clean Industrial Deal: A joint roadmap for competitiveness and decarbonisation](#)' (Communication) COM/2025/85 final.

Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture '[A shared prospect for farming and food in Europe](#)' (Report).

European Commission '[The road to the next multiannual financial framework](#)' (Communication) COM/2025/46 final

What is a discursive approach and how is it useful?

We draw on three key concepts to help unpack how certain ideas come to shape EU agricultural policy: **discourse**, **hegemony**, and **discursive closure**.

Put simply, **discourse analysis** explores how language and practices influence the way we understand the world around us. In a policy context, this means looking at how we frame policy challenges and respond to them. A discursive perspective does not see policymaking as a clear process toward the most efficient or evidence-based solution (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016). Rather, policy debates are understood as spaces where different types of narratives battle with each other over what 'the problem' is and how it should be solved. The '**winning**' narratives **dominate the agenda setting, the formulation of policy problems, as well as responses** to these problems.

Some narratives can become so widely accepted that they become **hegemonic**, meaning that they are seen as representing 'common sense'. Thus, they may determine how environmental policy should, or could, be done (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). In turn, this can lead to **discursive closure** where there is no space in the public debate for alternative perspectives (Remling 2019).

Hence, **dominant narratives should not be taken for objective descriptions of reality but rather be seen as constructed “discursive truths”** (Griggs and Howarth, 2019). A way to interrogate these is to examine how policies reflect certain representations of different 'problems'. These problems rest on underlying assumptions that also have implications for what type of solutions can address these problems (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016). The discursive truths, therefore set the *“social and moral compass from which responses are deemed suitable, while defining others [responses] as ‘out of place’ or irrelevant.”* (Remling, 2019, p.32).

WPR is an established methodological approach (see Box 1) with an explicit purpose to critically examine discourse, and in this case narratives on climate, environment, and agriculture. Its limitations are that an interpretative approach cannot, and neither seeks to, account for everything and show absolute causality. It can, however, shed a light on things that other methods cannot do. For example, while dominant narratives are partly shaped by geopolitical events such as war, economic downturn, and in the case of agriculture, farmer's protests, choices are still made, both strategically and unintentionally to formulate a problem in a certain way. In turn, things that are often taken as self-evident or common sense also have material effects regarding what solutions are deemed acceptable (e.g. funding priorities, who should bear the responsibility for steering the green transition, or who is seen as a legitimate subject of 'just transition').

A discursive approach can help to critically reflect on these dynamics, 'expose' rehearsed positions that we take for granted and commonly held beliefs about how the world works. It offers a practical way to break down how policies frame problems and solutions, and encourages those engaged in policymaking to reflect on their own role in co-constructing problems and solutions (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016). **Ultimately, it opens space to ask: Could things be framed differently? And what would that mean for the kind of objectives we pursue?**

Narrative shifts in EU agricultural policy

The Farm to Fork Strategy (2020) and the Vision for Agriculture and Food (2025) – background

The EU's 2020 [Farm to Fork Strategy](#) and the 2025 [Vision for Agriculture and Food](#) have been two key strategic documents defining the direction of travel for EU agriculture and, by extension, environmental and climate policy over the past five years. When it was published in 2020, the Farm to Fork Strategy was widely welcomed as a first step towards a more sustainable and integrated EU food policy (e.g. Meredith et al, 2020). Developed in the wake of the COVID-

19 pandemic and amid growing concerns over climate change, biodiversity loss, and public health, it responded to calls for a more resilient and environmentally sound food system. As part of the [European Green Deal](#) (EGD), the strategy aimed to reshape food systems by addressing the entire food chain, from production to consumption, with ambitious environmental targets. Among its specific aims were the reduction in pesticide and fertiliser use, improvement of animal welfare, promotion of healthier diets, and strengthening supply chain resilience.

However, the Farm to Fork Strategy faced significant headwinds. The war in Ukraine disrupted global food supply chains and shifted political attention toward food security and economic stability. At the same time, farmers across Europe voiced growing discontent, protesting against low food prices, competition from cheap imports, and perceived strict environmental requirements and heavy administrative burden (Nagel et al. 2025). These pressures, together with a rightward political shift in the member states and the European Parliament hampered progress on several of the strategy's key legislative initiatives (Bradley, 2024; Candel and Daugbjerg, 2025).

In response to this increasingly complex and contested policy landscape, the European Commission launched the [Strategic Dialogue on the Future of Agriculture](#). Chaired by an independent academic and bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, the Dialogue marked a new approach in the evolution of the CAP. Although informal in the decision-making process, it laid the groundwork for the Commission's Vision for Agriculture and Food, published in February 2025. This Vision aims to set out a forward-looking agenda for an agri-food system that is competitive, resilient, fair, and aligned with environmental and climate goals.

The two analysed documents, the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Vision for Agriculture and Food, originated, therefore, from different contexts. The Farm to Fork Strategy was a central component of the EGD where a transition to sustainable food systems was seen as a key part in achieving joint goals of health, sustainability and social justice. While the Vision, published partially in response to the abovementioned pressures, also came after publication of key EU reference documents such as the [Draghi report on EU competitiveness](#) and the [Niinsitö report on civil and military preparedness](#). The Vision came out around the same time as the [Clean Industrial Deal](#), which can be understood as a new iteration of the EGD, but more focused on the objectives of decarbonisation, competitiveness and security. With the emphasis on a 'clean' rather than a 'green' transition, signalling a shifting narrative in what it means to transition.

Framing the problem: Climate change risks vs. competitiveness

How do the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Vision for Agriculture and Food frame the most pressing problems faced by agriculture in the EU? Comparing the opening paragraphs (see Figure 1), they appear quite different. By opening the strategy with "need for action", the Farm to Fork Strategy lays out the **main problem formulation as climate change and the need to become climate neutral**, thus clearly identifying food and farming as both a part of this problem, but also of the solutions. With a focus on the wider food system, including consumers, it implicitly recognises the need to enable consumers to make healthier and more sustainable

choices in their diets. The emphasis on climate neutrality suggests that emissions from agriculture are recognised as a major problem that needs to be addressed in order to achieve the objectives of the EGD. In comparison, the opening statement of the **Vision frames the need to secure the future of European agriculture as the key problem to tackle**. Farming is presented as a cultural heritage whose future, therefore, needs to be ensured by making it a more attractive occupation.

Figure 1. Comparison of opening statements of the Farm to Fork Strategy (2020) and the Vision for Agriculture and Food (2025)

2020	Farm to Fork Strategy

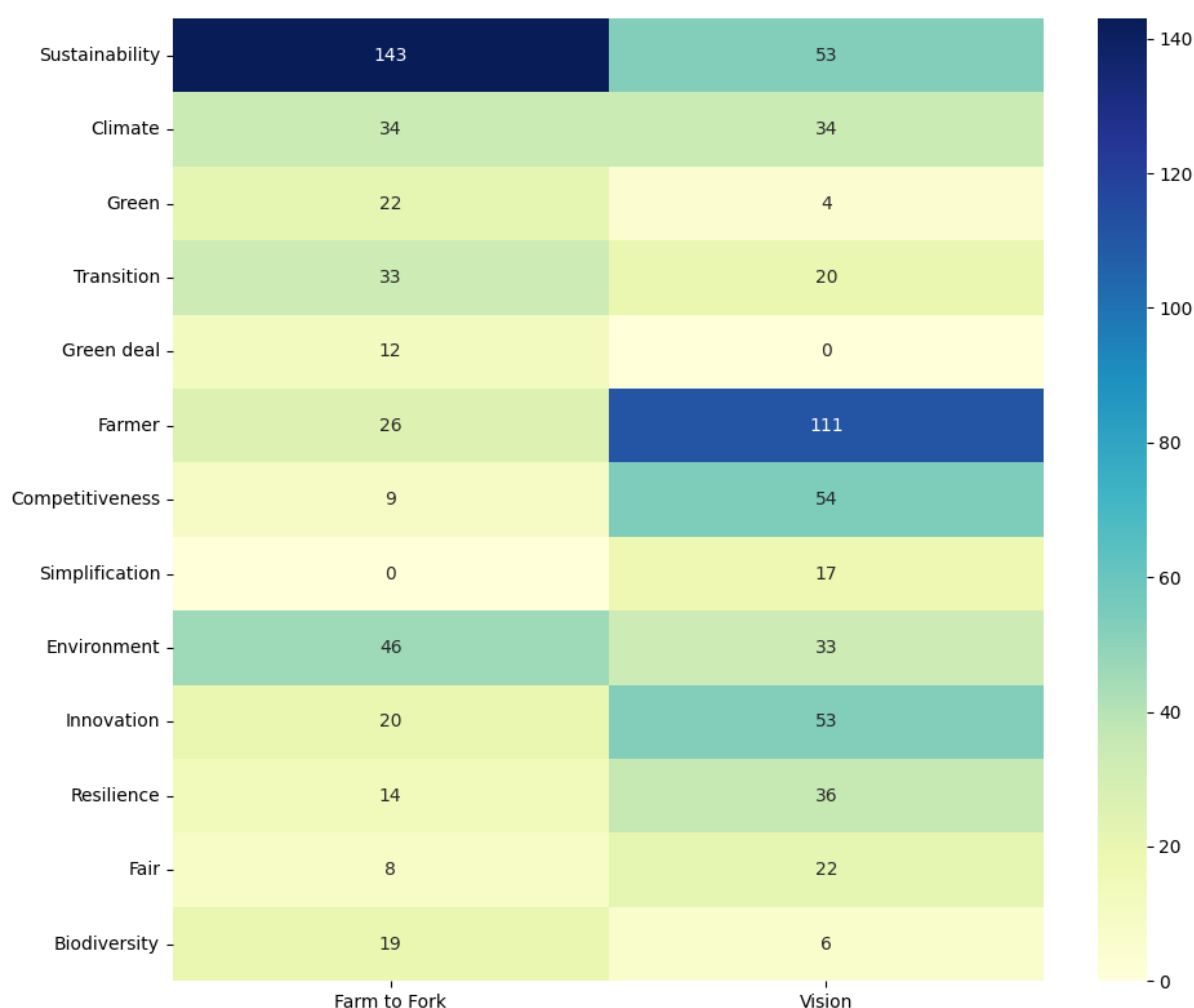
	<p>"NEED FOR ACTION</p> <p><i>The European Green Deal sets out how to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. It maps a new, sustainable and inclusive growth strategy to boost the economy, improve people's health and quality of life, care for nature, and leave no one behind".</i></p>
2025	Vision for Food and Agriculture

	<p>"SHAPING TOGETHER AN ATTRACTIVE EU FARMING AND FOOD SECTOR FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS</p> <p><i>Farming and food are core to the European way of life. Rooted in rich traditions, the ways we produce and enjoy food have shaped the communities, cultures, and landscapes that define Europe".</i></p>

Climate change does not appear in the opening statement of the Vision, although the term "climate" does appear throughout the document. A word count (see Table 1) shows that "climate" is mentioned as frequently in both documents, but it is done so in different ways which is better analysed with a qualitative reading. "Climate change" moves from centre stage in the Farm to Fork Strategy (first sentence) to being grouped with several other challenges facing farmers in the Vision's first page: *"Farming and fishing is about working with nature. Farmers and fishers are custodians of nature, the foundation of a resilient Europe, and they are a vital part of the solution to the protection and resilience of our nature, soils, water, air, biodiversity, oceans and climate."* (p.1). While the term "custodians" acknowledges the farmers' role, it emphasises their responsibility in protecting nature, without recognising that farming also contributes to environmental issues such as GHG emissions.

To shed more light on the changes in problem framing from the Farm to Fork Strategy to the Vision, it can be instructive to consider the frequency with which some other key terms appear in the documents. To this end, we analysed the frequency of 13 terms linked to environment and climate, based on commonly occurring words in environmental agricultural discourse in the time period. As shown in Figure 2, words such as "transition", "environment", and "biodiversity" are used less frequently in the Vision. Notably, the word count for "sustainability" is reduced from 143 mentions in the Farm to Fork Strategy, to only 53 in the Vision.

Figure 2. Frequency of key terms in the 'Farm to Fork Strategy' (2020) and the 'Vision for Agriculture' (2025)



*Words include variations, for example, sustainab(-le) (-ility); graph produced using Copilot based on dataset compiled by lead author.

On the other hand, there is a substantial increase in the use of terms like “competitiveness”, “and “farmer” in the vision (Figure 2). The term “simplification” did not feature in the Farm to Fork Strategy, and the Vision makes zero references to “Green Deal”. A close qualitative reading confirms this shift (see in Table 1), suggesting that **the Vision frames the main problem as a range of threats to Europe, and by extension, to farming**. This signals a reorientation of priorities: from transforming food systems to preserving and supporting agricultural production and farmers against perceived threats. Figure 2 further illustrates this change, with references to “farmer” increasing markedly from 26 to 111, a strong signal to those who felt that farmers were missing from the narrative in the Farm to Fork Strategy.

Table 1 provides an overview of the most prominent problem formulations we identify in both documents and supplementary materials. **If climate change and the sustainability transition are no longer the main identified problems in the Vision, then what is?** One factor depicted in the Vision as contributing to pressure on the farming sector is burdensome bureaucracy, which is seen as unnecessary and often linked to environmental obligations. Therefore, the environmental objectives which in Farm to Fork are seen as solutions to the identified problems of climate change and biodiversity loss, are in the Vision rendered as part of the problems facing the farming community.

Table 1. Prominent problem formulations

Farm to Fork Strategy	Vision for Agriculture and Food
Climate change mitigation	Ensuring food security
Unsustainable food systems	Income for farmers
Unhealthy diets	Unnecessary bureaucracy
Behavioural change	Competitiveness
Emissions from agriculture	Attractiveness of farming profession
Global leadership	Preserving European way of life
Fulfilling EU green deal	Strategic autonomy
Sustainability transition	Instability
	Market fairness

See Box 1 for methodology.

The view presented in the Vision rests on an assumption that environmental regulation hampers competitiveness. This is clearly emphasised in the document: *“in recent years European farms have seen a substantial multiplication of sustainability standards, certifications and reporting requirements, set by various actors, organisations and institutions, both public and private. These different methodologies and reporting requirements touch on a wide range of aspects related to sustainability and are resulting in a fragmented landscape, characterised by inconsistencies between standards, incomparability of initiatives, and misleading signals as to the direction to take. This creates high transaction costs and confusion for farmers and bears the risk of ‘greenwashing’ practices.”* (p.18). Another feature of this quote is that it mystifies the source of these standards, certifications, and reporting requirements, ignoring the fact that these came from the EU itself as a way to address sustainability concerns in agriculture.

Compare this to the underlying assumption in the Farm to Fork that sustainability enhances competitiveness: *“The transition to sustainable food systems is also a huge economic opportunity. Citizens’ expectations are evolving and driving significant change in the food market. This is an opportunity for farmers, fishers and aquaculture producers, as well as food processors and food services. This transition will allow them to make sustainability their trademark and to guarantee the future of the EU food chain before their competitors outside the EU do so. The transition to sustainability presents a ‘first mover’ opportunity for all actors in the EU food chain.”* (p.3). The change in problem formulation has led to previously implemented actions to support the transition being perceived as ‘unnecessary’, since they become misaligned with the new problem formulation of competitiveness and food security.

In the next paragraph of the Vision, the solution is presented as *"in addition to simplifying and streamlining EU requirements, the Commission will also develop and gradually phase in a voluntary benchmarking system for on-farm sustainability assessments, thus allowing simplification and benchmarking to go hand in hand."* (p.18). As a result, **simplification becomes (one of) the proposed solutions to the complexity introduced by earlier sustainability-focused policies.** Alongside it, a shift from legal requirements to voluntary measures is proposed.

This raises a critical question: **Is environmental legislation now seen as a problem or a solution?** The new problem formulation in the Vision undermines previous assumptions that higher environmental standards could enhance competitiveness. Furthermore, what is now seen as burdensome was originally put in place as a solution to support a transition to sustainable food systems. A disconnect appears here; although sustainability objectives are still present rhetorically, they are no longer central issues. Instead, sustainability outcomes are assumed to follow, as a kind of trickle-down effect, if competitiveness and food security are addressed: *"The Commission expects agriculture to achieve the emissions cuts in alignment with the EU climate target for 2030. Building on this, the Commission will consider pathways for the contribution of the agricultural sector to the EU's 2040 climate target, taking into account the specificities of the sector and focusing on its competitiveness, the need to ensure food security and to strengthen the bioeconomy, and in dialogue with the sector and the Member States."* (p.18). While the Vision does not reject sustainability outcomes, it reframes them as conditional. **It is embedded within a 'win-win-win' logic, where environmental goals are pursued only insofar as they align with economic viability and geopolitical stability.** This marks a clear departure from the Farm to Fork Strategy, where sustainability was the central challenge and environmental regulation was positioned as a necessary solution alongside others.

From this new problem formulation of how to preserve European farming follows a need to "future proof" the sector. However, **while the Farm to Fork Strategy sought a transformation of EU agriculture towards increased sustainability, futureproofing in the Vision appears to strive for preservation.** While environmental resilience is still mentioned in the Vision (see the relatively stable reference to "environment" and increased mentions of "resilience" in Figure 2), it is overshadowed by economic, geopolitical, and cultural concerns. Futureproofing, while acknowledging the need to stay within planetary boundaries, primarily translates into increasing the attractiveness of the farming profession to younger generations and women and improving income and competitiveness for farmers.

How is the role of the farmer understood in the different strategies? While the Farm to Fork Strategy offers a sustainability-focused vision, the implications for farmers and the role they are expected to play in this transition are less thoroughly explored. In the Farm to Fork, farming and farmers are seen as key contributors to the EU's overarching Green Deal objectives, as **agents of change in the sustainability transition.** A central part of this strategy was the transformation of their production methods. Among the proposed solutions were improved monitoring and reporting of sustainability indicators, implying that this would also make their products more attractive to consumers "by making sustainability their trademark" (p.3). However, what this would mean for farmers was left unexamined, resting on the assumption

that increased competitiveness would naturally follow from pursuing more sustainable practices and transition initiatives: *"A sustainable food system will be essential to achieve the climate and environmental objectives of the Green Deal, while improving the incomes of primary producers and reinforcing EU's competitiveness. This strategy supports the transition by putting the emphasis on new opportunities for citizens and food operators alike."* (p.4). This framing also supported the EU's ambition to act as a global frontrunner for sustainable farming.

In contrast, the **Vision reimagines the farmer as an entrepreneur**. *"Farmers, fishers and food businesses are innovators and entrepreneurs. Innovation opens new business models and rewards, making the transition a win-win for both farmers, fishers and nature, while supporting competitiveness."* (p.2). The underlying assumption is that, if farmers are given the right tools to become more competitive, they can compete with producers in other countries who benefit from lower standards and less bureaucracy, as opposed to the previous problem formulation, where increased environmental standards would provide an advantage on the market. Both of these strategies frame transition and competitiveness as correlating. But while in the Farm to Fork competitiveness is assumed to follow sustainability, in the Vision, sustainability outcomes are expected to follow from the pursuit of competitiveness.

Impacts on policy and governance

The point of this piece is not to say that a particular narrative or problem formulation is wrong or that it does not have merit, but to critically reflect on how certain narratives come with certain sets of solutions and underlying assumptions. The above analysis raises a number of questions and points for reflection.

From framing to action: The influence of problem definitions on EU Agricultural policy

Institutions such as the European Commission make conscious choices about which narratives to promote, and these choices have direct implications for policy design. A clear illustration of this is the final report from the [Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture](#) (see above). The Dialogue can be seen as a transitional moment, an 'in-between' phase. It is more pluralistic and retained many of the problem formulations of The Farm to Fork Strategy, but also responded to contentious issues by placing a greater focus on farmers and competitiveness. However, although the Vision was published shortly after the Strategic Dialogue, [some of the recommendations agreed by all Dialogue participants have not been carried forward in the Vision](#), such as demand-side policies, including supporting plant-based proteins, or increasing environmental payments. This sparked frustration among NGOs¹ and [food chain representatives](#). This could be interpreted as an indication that the discourse around competitiveness and food security has gained greater prominence, potentially overshadowing other narratives. For example, concerns around biodiversity loss and the need for sustainable consumption as part of a wider system of food transformations are marginal in the Vision.

¹ See reactions by [EEB](#), [Slow Food](#), [WWF](#) or [FERN](#)

IEEP's recent [review of the European Commission's proposals for the post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy \(CAP\) and Multiannual Financial Framework \(MFF\)](#) illustrates how **the narrative shift from sustainability to competitiveness and simplification is not only rhetorical but materially embedded in policy design**. The CAP proposal reflects a clear departure from the sustainability-oriented framing of the Farm to Fork Strategy. Environmental and climate objectives are notably absent from the five headline objectives of the new European Fund for economic, social and territorial cohesion, agriculture and rural, fisheries and maritime, prosperity and security (NRPF). Instead, these concerns are relegated to sub-objectives under "quality of life," alongside competitiveness and income support.

This aligns with our discursive analysis: the problem is no longer framed around climate change risks or unsustainable food systems, but rather as the need to secure European farming and enhance its competitiveness. The CAP proposal thus exemplifies how dominant narratives redefine what counts as a 'problem' and what solutions are deemed appropriate.

The CAP proposal operationalises the narrative of simplification by restructuring conditionality requirements (now termed "farm stewardship") and weakening environmental standards. For example, protective practices replace GAEC standards, offering Member States greater discretion and reducing regulatory burdens. This supports our observation that simplification is framed as a solution to competitiveness, even when it undermines environmental safeguards.

Moreover, the proposal's emphasis on voluntary incentives over regulation—while removing ring-fencing for environmental funding and requiring co-financing for eco-schemes—illustrates how arguments for simplification can serve as a vehicle for policy dismantling, as discussed in Förell and Fischer (2025). Member States are given flexibility, but without strong incentives or requirements, environmental ambition is likely to decline. The removal of ring-fencing and the expansion of mandatory measures (e.g., Coupled Income Support) further crowd out environmental schemes.

This supports our argument that **dominant narratives not only shape discourse but also limit the menu of policy options, making certain solutions (e.g., regulatory environmental measures) appear irrelevant or infeasible**. To gain traction and legitimacy, any policy solutions must be tied to a narrative about security and competitiveness. The sustainability transition is not 'cancelled' but it is conditioned on a win-win-win mentality, where security and competitiveness are compromised to reach sustainability.

Discrepancy between narrative shift and reality of farming

As the analysis suggests, the different strategies illustrate problem definitions based on an identification of different societal needs. The first one is about producing healthy food in a sustainable, economically viable and just manner. The second is about the need to make farming competitive to maintain food production for security and preservation of our cultural heritage. How can the societal need that was identified only five years ago have changed so much when the reality of climate change and environmental degradation has not changed? While the Vision still recognises these as problems that have not gone away, it is passive in

addressing them as immediate priorities. Implying that simplification and increased competitiveness will also result in increased sustainability does not make it happen, and should be critically interrogated.

Need for balanced governance arrangements

While it is to be expected that narratives shift due to changing contexts, we have seen a rather quick and drastic shift in the EU. The words we chose and how we frame problems have consequences on policymaking and conscious choices are made about what narratives to promote from multiple possible ones.

If a set of narratives are repeated enough and accepted widely, they create so called “discursive closure”, meaning: understanding the problem in one way sets the limits of how this ‘problem’ can be understood and addressed. A discursive closure of a need for preservation does not allow for alternative solutions, thus decreasing the available ‘menu’ of options. For example, increased environmental legislation is not seen as a solution to the immediate challenges of competitiveness and the preservation of farming. Instead, it is viewed as burdensome bureaucracy, especially since these types of measures are now framed within a problem narrative that seems them as hampering competitiveness. **If simplification is seen as the solution, new regulations and reporting duties do not have space as they are not addressing the problem posed.** In a context of simplification, the solutions on the table must not have an effect on competitiveness or bureaucratic burdens.

This raises the need for inclusive and balanced governance arrangements to resist discursive closure and ensure that we don’t just operate in a crisis mode or flip-flop between different positions at a time when we are facing long term existential challenges.

Final reflections

The Commission and political majorities have an agenda-setting role and are consequently central in shaping which narratives become dominant, but all actors involved in policy and politics have a choice in whether they accept these narratives or propose counter-narratives.

Today, it is difficult to find actors involved in policy on environment and agriculture who do not use the words competitiveness and simplification. To stay relevant, one naturally adapts to dominant narratives. However, one must be aware that when we adapt our own narratives, even if it is only to slightly change the words we use, from “just” to “fair” from “green” to “clean” from “sustainability” to “resilience”, to words that appear more politically attractive, we might also change the root problem we are talking about as well as the implied solutions and we might thus contribute to a sedimentation of a certain societal problem formulation that can become hegemonic. Without realising, **one might change their own narratives to agree with these problem formulations, but the consequences might be that the solution one argues for does not logically follow from the new problem formulation** (e.g., a systemic change o

uptake of agro ecological practices might not be the most suitable solution to address a problem formulation of immediate competitiveness). Further, by abandoning certain words or terms, one contributes to rendering these irrelevant.

Coming back to the current context, a word such as “simplification” carries a very strong narrative power. Who wants things to be difficult or complex? A danger with concepts like this is that they leave room for a lot of interpretation, which is also what makes them powerful. While one actor might pursue “simplification” to genuinely make it easier for either Member States or farmers to deliver on sustainability objectives, it can easily be used by other actors to legitimise environmental policy dismantling. The ambiguity of this concept can create a sort of confusion as to whether initiatives taken in the name of simplification will lead to more sustainability or not (Förell and Fischer 2025).

Adapting to new narratives can be attractive to gain political attention and legitimacy, to stay politically relevant. It is also a question of resources, who can ‘afford’ a counter discourse and not be cooperative? However, it is important to critically interrogate one’s own role in the battle over meaning in formulations of problems and solutions. This includes being mindful of the words we use and their implications to avoid losing track of the solutions we think are necessary for the future that we want and need. While critical interpretative policy analysis cannot explain everything, complex societal phenomena call for a plurality in methods and perspectives. Increasing our awareness of the relationship between narratives and policy changes can be useful to understand their material consequences for the future of EU farming, environmental legislation, and the sustainability transition.

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EU policy documents

European Commission '[A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system](#)' (Communication) COM/2020/381 final.

European Commission '[A Vision for Agriculture and Food Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations](#)' (Communication) COM/2025/75 final.

European Commission [Safer together: A path towards a fully prepared Union – Strengthening Europe's civilian and military preparedness and readiness](#) (Report by Special Adviser Sauli Niinistö).

European Commission '[The European Green Deal](#)' (Communication) COM/2019/640 final.

European Commission '[The Clean Industrial Deal: A joint roadmap for competitiveness and decarbonisation](#)' (Communication) COM/2025/85 final.

Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture '[A shared prospect for farming and food in Europe](#)' (Report).

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