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To cite this article: Clara Lina Bader, Nina Isabella Moeller, Baptiste Grard, Alexander Wezel, Samuel Féret, Federico Andreotti & Perrine Vandenbroucke (29 Apr 2025): Philanthropic Funding for Agroecology in Europe – Opening the (black) box of sustainable food system actors, *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, DOI: [10.1080/21683565.2025.2489416](https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2025.2489416)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2025.2489416>



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Published online: 29 Apr 2025.



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Philanthropic Funding for Agroecology in Europe – Opening the (black) box of sustainable food system actors

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ABSTRACT

The global food system has severe environmental and health repercussions. Thus, calls for transforming food systems are becoming increasingly louder. However, this requires a significant financial overhaul. Financing an agroecological transition is critical and has received little academic attention so far. Specifically, philanthropic and non-philanthropic foundations as essential actors in private funding for food system transformation are hardly investigated due to their organizational nature. This study is the first to aim to understand the landscape of foundations supporting an agroecological transition in Europe and opening the “black box” through desk research ($n = 100$), an online questionnaire ($n = 23$) and semi-structured interviews ($n = 15$). We analyzed the context, the organizational characteristics and their strategies by adapting an international integrative framework of foundation types to find (i) a Western European prominence of places of origin and resources, (ii) a few vital financial players responsible for a significant amount of the annual funding and (iii) a rising interest to support agroecology and the transformation to a more sustainable food system. In discussing these results, the article touches upon questions of legitimacy and democratic aspirations, which are recommended for further research.

KEYWORDS

Food system transformation; agroecology; food systems; philanthropy; private funding; mapping


SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

SDG 2: Zero hunger; SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure; SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production; SDG 13: Climate action; SDG 15: Life on land

Introduction

The current global food system has severely detrimental effects on planetary health, directly impacting food production and the state of food and nutrition security (Campbell et al. 2017; FAO 2023; HLPE 2019; IPBES 2019). The climate crisis exacerbates these challenges. Simultaneously, the industrial food system is responsible for one-third of greenhouse gas emissions

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2025.2489416>.

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(Crippa et al. 2021). Thoroughgoing change is needed to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris climate targets and food and nutrition security for all. However, the transformation requires a major increase in funds. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) highlights that investments of US\$ 400 billion by governments, the private sector and development partners are needed annually until 2030 to transform global food systems (IFAD 2023). Earlier estimates range from US\$ 33 billion to US\$ 350 billion, depending on the scope and objectives, thereby suggesting an increase over time (Chichaibelu et al. 2021; FOLU 2019; Laborde, Parent, and Smaller 2020). To put this into perspective: according to the latest United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation periodic report *The State of Food and Agriculture* the hidden health and environmental costs of the industrial food system are at least US\$10 trillion a year – dwarfing the needed investments for transformation by orders of magnitude (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2023). However, the pathways to a more sustainable agri-food system are contested and diverse (FAO 2018; HLPE 2019; Vermeulen et al. 2019). Agroecology emerges as a promising pathway based on ecological and social principles (FAO 2018; Wezel et al. 2020). For this paper, we base our understanding on the 13 agroecological principles consolidated by the High Level Panel of Experts of the Commission on World Food Security (HLPE 2019).

While agroecology is increasingly receiving scientific recognition at international and EU levels and has been supported by high-level policymakers since 2014, including Member States of the European Union (Wezel and David 2020), this, in turn, has not fully translated into financial commitments to match political ambitions. A growing number of studies show that financial contributions of key public institutions to agroecology are only a fraction of money invested toward agricultural development in general (Achterberg and Quiroz 2021; Anderson et al. 2019; Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development & IPES-Food 2020; BothEnds 2022; Botreau, Brochard, and Verrière 2021; DanChurchAid 2020; DeLonge, Miles, and Carlisle 2016; GAFF 2022; Greenberg and Muchero 2024; Moeller 2020; NEF & Croatan Institute 2021; Olivera and Popusoi 2021; Pimbert and Moeller 2018; Vermeulen and Schutter 2020). Other studies highlight the limited commitment to agroecology both in the Common Agricultural Policy 2014–2020 (CAP) (Langlais 2023; Linares Quero et al. 2022) as well as in national policies on agroforestry and mixed farming (Buratti-Donham et al. 2023), with direct consequences on finance available for agroecology. Achieving the sum of US\$ 400 billion requires political will and strong financial commitments (IFAD 2023). Due to their positioning in the agri-food system, key actors such as banks, investors and insurers are required to redesign their financial practices, thereby contributing to the transformation (Nature Food 2023). However, climate-related risks, insecure financial transactions and high financial

transaction costs are considered hampering factors for shifting private finance (IFPRI 2022). A financially powerful, recently emerging group of actors in financing the transformation of the food system are philanthropists and philanthropic foundations. Considered to be “among the freest institutions of modern society,” they are equipped to “take risks and consider approaches others cannot” (Anheier and Daly 2007b, 4). Since the United Nations Food Summit in 2021, several large foundations have made considerable financial commitments toward diverse versions of a “future for food,” namely the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Bezos Earth Fund and the Global Alliance for the Future of Food (BMGF 2021; Earth Fund 2023; GAFF 2023). Against this backdrop, the most prominent European actors came together in 2016 to form the network “European Foundations for Sustainable Agriculture and Food” (EFSAF), aiming to promote a more sustainable, overarching food policy in Europe encompassing policies on agriculture, rural areas, food and health (Philea 2023). However, the increasingly prominent and dominant role of private finance, specifically philanthropists, has also been critiqued by scholars, echoing concerns by many within civil society. Those concerns relate to a promotion of market-oriented and technocratic agendas for a more sustainable food system, to unequal power dynamics and limited transparency (Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development & IPES-Food 2020; Canfield, Anderson, and McMichael 2021; Montenegro de Wit et al. 2021). For a democratic transformation, learning more about philanthropic foundations as actors and taking the first step of opening the “black box” is essential.

The word *philanthropy* is defined as “goodwill to fellow members of the human race” (Merriam-Webster 2024). Academic literature on the nature of philanthropy, its roots, its demographic and geographic reach and its institutionalization in the forms of foundations is plentiful, especially for the geographic scale of the US and the UK (Anheier and Daly 2007c; Frumkin 2006; Jung, Phillips, and Harrow 2016). However, in-depth analyses of actors, areas of support and funding flows are primarily published from within the sector. Literature on flows and funding on the European scale dedicated to agriculture and the food sector is also scarce. In the UK, one foundation’s network has initiated and regularly updated a reporting exercise on grants of the environmental funders network (EFN) (Cremona et al. 2021). This has similarly been done for European foundations funding environmental and climate change mitigation (EFC 2021; Roeyer, Desanlis, and Cracknell 2021). In both, agriculture was solely one facet of the analysis. Academic literature on (philanthropic) foundations supporting an agroecological transition in Europe is non-existent. In this paper, we develop an initial understanding of private funding for agroecology and sustainable food systems by foundations in Europe. Beyond the quantification of funding and other financial support invested by foundations in the agroecological arena in Europe, this paper explores foundations’ specific context, their organizational characteristics, as

well as their strategies to build an understanding of their way of operating and managing money flows, answering the question: who is funding what and how? Specifically, this study investigates

- (i) the critical contextual and organizational characteristics of foundations supporting an agroecological transformation in Europe; and
- (ii) the predominant strategic approaches of foundations for an agroecological transformation in Europe.

Methodology

Approaching a framework to map foundations

Categorising and mapping characteristics of foundations require thorough and iterative analysis due to terminological confusion and imprecision, differences in social and legal settings, and the diversity of foundation roles. Foundations are characterized “as one of the most unrestricted contemporary organisational forms” (Jung, Harrow, and Leat 2018, 4), and even from within the sector, it is recognized that “the term foundation has no precise meaning” (Council on Foundations 2024). However, a few attempts at defining the term have been made, mainly from within the philanthropic sector (Council on Foundations 2024; EFC 2019), and thus, gray literature has been considered in the present work. Scholarly literature is scarce, and in recognition of that, Jung, Harrow, and Leat (2018) have developed an integrative framework of foundation types (Jung, Harrow, and Leat 2018), which serves as the basis of exploration for our study.

To develop an initial understanding of philanthropic funding for agroecology and sustainable food systems in Europe, we categorized and characterized 100/23/15 foundations, respectively, depending on the sample. Context, organizational characteristics, and strategy, the three “essential aspects in developing a theory of the organisation” (Jung, Harrow, and Leat 2018, 13), constituted the organizing elements for our research process. Within the frame of our research, we selected the relevant categories from Jung, Harrow, and Leat (2018) and designed an adapted framework (see Table 1). Our study being at the European scale, we adapted the rubric “*geographic location*” to European countries. For the “*Organisational*” category, we adapted the rubric “*size of resources*” by establishing an appropriate split based on expert feedback. Under this category, we also adapted the type of measurements for the rubrics “*organisational size*” (number of staff) and “*life stage*” (founding year). In addition, we adapted the rubric “*beneficiaries*” for our context. In connection with the main focus of our analysis, we added a fourth critical category: “*Agroecology and sustainable food systems*”. This fourth category

supports our specific analysis with respect to organisational and strategic aspects. Here, we added rubrics of “*organisational size*” and “*life stage*” with a specific focus on agroecology, as well as rubrics on “*Strategy for agroecology*” and on “*Funding topics in relation to the 13 principles of agroecology*.” It is essential to recognize that legal and socio-political characteristics are included neither in the original framework by Jung, Harrow, and Leat (2018) nor in our adapted version. According to Jung, Harrow, and Leat (2018, 13) socio-political (i.e. externally perceived role) and legal characteristics (i.e. legal forms) are “fluid” and do not seem to offer “much conceptual utility,” especially in the United States, where a specific legal form does not and never has existed. Thus, the framework would lose its integrative character, in which it holds its strength. However, in practice, these may reveal important differences and implications in context, approach and strategy of and for foundations.

Selection of foundations

The selection of respondents is based on three non-probability sampling methods, starting with convenience sampling, then snowball sampling of respondents, while conducting purposive sampling simultaneously (Ayhan 2011). The main entry points for this sample were the existing network of Agroecology for Europe (AE4EU) partners and the working group of European Foundations for Sustainable Food and Agriculture (EFSAF) within the Philanthropy Europe Association (Philea). This qualifies as a convenience sample and is characterized by the easy accessibility of individuals/respondents to the researcher. Several foundations also recommended further possible respondents throughout the research, which were added to the continuously growing list of stakeholders in a snowball approach. Observing that there were few Eastern European foundations or foundations from Balkan states in our sample, we increased our efforts to include these purposefully. Furthermore, multiple foundations were selected through desk research by being referenced on already selected foundations’ homepages and joint initiatives. Overall, 100 foundations active in the research field of supporting agroecology and sustainable food systems were identified. It is essential to add that the explicit use of the term *agroecology* was not a criterion.

Data collection

All data was collected via (1) desktop research of foundation homepages, (2) an online questionnaire, and (3) in-depth interviews, allowing us to triangulate findings through “method triangulation” (Carter et al. 2014; Denzin 2007). In this way, the methods informed one another on the one hand, and on the other

Table 1. Adapted framework with relevant categories for our research frame, adapted from Jung, Harrow, and Leat (2018).

<i>Contextual</i>	Geographic location	Europe (respective country)	North America (USA)										
	Organisational root	Third Sector Body	Governmental & Public Sector Body	Corporate	Independent	Hybrid							
	Nature of resources	Fully endowed	Fundraising	Donations	Allocation	Others							
	Size of resources for agroecological purposes	0 € - 9 999 €	10 000 € - 49 999 €	50 000 € - 99 999 €	100 000 € - 499 999 €	500 000 € - 1 million €	1 million € - 10 million €						
	Organisational size	Nr. of staff											
	Life stage	Founding year											
	Approach	Grantmaking	Hybrid	Operating	Other								
	Geography	Sub-national	National	European	International								
	Theme	Single theme	Multiple themes										
	Beneficiaries	NGO	Research institute/ university	Agricultural organisation/ farmers network	Cooperatives	Local authorities	Other foundations/ trusts	Others					
	Organisational size – Agroecology	Nr. of staff											
	Life stage – Agroecology	Year											
	Strategy for Agroecology	Yes	No										
	Funding topics in the form of 13 principles of Agroecology	1. Recycling	2. Input reduction	3. Soil health	4. Animal health	5. Biodiversity	6. Synergy	7. Economic diversification					
		8. Co-creation of knowledge	9. Social values and diets	10. Fairness	11. Connectivity	12. Land and natural resource governance	13. Participation						

hand, validated data collected, as illustrated in Figure 1. As part of the AE4EU project, a participatory stakeholder workshop was conducted after the main data collection. This paper builds on the workshop's reflections. All participants in this study have given informed consent to participate in the research, and the ethical committee of the research committee of ISARA has approved all ethics aspects.

Through desktop research, data from 100 foundations was collected on the geographic location and the organizational root for contextual characteristics (all characteristics collected through desktop research are summarized in Table 2). The term *organisational root* refers to the foundations' organizational origin. While the organizational origin is fixed, the links to it can change. For organizational characteristics, data was collected on the nature of resources, the size of resources and the size and life stage of the foundation. For the strategic characteristics, data was collected on supported themes and strategic

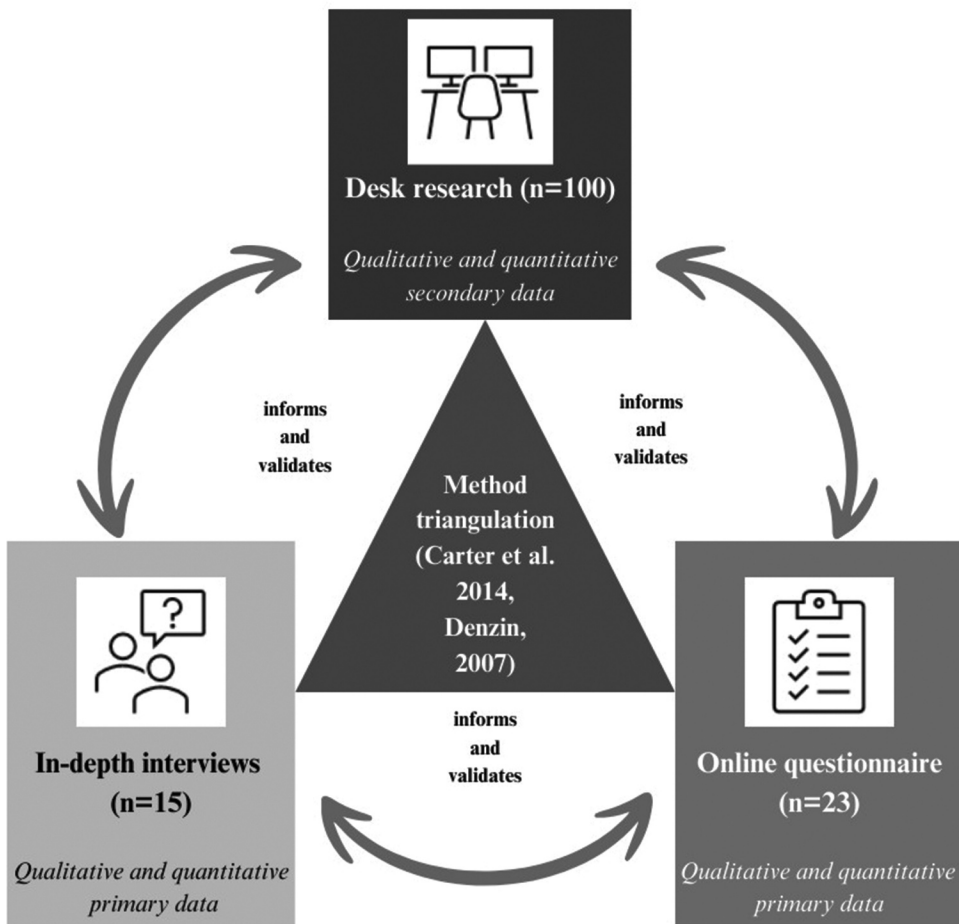


Figure 1. Data collection - method triangulation of desk research ($n = 100$ foundations), online questionnaire ($n = 23$ foundations) and in-depth interviews ($n = 15$ foundations).

Table 2. Data collection: sample sizes, types of data collected within the samples.

	Category according to the adapted version of Jung et al. (2018)	Desk research (n=100 foundations) <i>Hereafter referred to as desk sample</i>	Online questionnaire (n=23 foundations) <i>Hereafter referred to as questionnaire sample</i>	In-depth interviews (n=14 foundations) <i>Hereafter referred to as interview sample</i>
Type of data collected	<i>Contextual</i>	Geographic location		
		Organisational root		Organisational root
	<i>Organisational</i>	Nature of resources		Nature of resources
		Size of resources (annual)	Size of resources	Size of resources
		Size of foundation (nr. of staff)		
		Maturity (founding year)		
			Starting year of engagement with agroecology and sustainable food systems	
		Themes (single/multiple themes)		
	<i>Strategic</i>	Geography	Geography	Geography
		Approach	Approach	Approach
Beneficiaries		Beneficiaries	Beneficiaries	
<i>Strategic: Agroecology</i>	Strategy on Agroecology	Strategy on Agroecology	Strategy and rationale on agroecological (Understanding of an agroecological transformation)	
	Topics of funding (strategic axes)	Topics of funding and concerning the 13 principles of agroecology	Topics of funding	

axes, on the foundations' strategy for agroecology and sustainable food systems, if obtainable, on their geographic scope of involvement and their approach. Desktop research was also used to verify data collected through the online questionnaire or in-depth interviews.

The online questionnaire was designed on *qualtrix*®. It was distributed to all 100 identified foundations, receiving 23 responses. The online questionnaire collected data on (i) funding for agroecology and (ii) their organizational strategy (see [Table 2](#)). The latter category encompasses their engagement with agroecology specifically, their starting year of involvement, their three main areas of support, their intended beneficiaries, the geographic areas of involvement, their link with other foundations in agriculture and food issues and the definition and strategy on agroecology and topics of funding. The 13 principles of agroecology (HLPE 2019) were also considered, as well as the programme level and the relation to their topics of funding. Furthermore, we investigated the number of annual grants, the annual money flow for agroecological purposes and their funding mechanisms. The online questionnaire can be found in the annex 1.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were held with 15 representatives of 14 foundations. Those were recruited via the online questionnaire, where they were able to indicate their interest in participating in an in-depth interview. A semi-structured interview grid can be found in annex 2. The interviews focused on two main topics:

- (i) Context and organizational characteristics: The first topic aimed to provide the missing categories of Jung et al.'s framework (2018) and data to draft the current landscape of foundations through a mapping exercise.
- (ii) Strategy and rationale: The second topic aimed to further investigate the foundation's strategy and rationale around agroecology and sustainable food systems by deepening the understanding of funding topics, areas of support, and beneficiaries, as well as strategic alterations in recent years, evaluation processes, and the future of funding agroecology and sustainable food systems.

[Table 2](#) summarizes the data collected according to the methodology used and the respective sample sizes.

Results

Funding the agroecological transformation in Europe: the landscape of foundations

Based on our adapted version of Jung, Harrow, and Leat (2018) framework, the present section lays out the specific contexts (geographical location; organizational root) and organizational diversity (nature of resources; size of resources; size of foundations; life stage of foundation; starting year of engagement for agroecology) of our three different samples. Table 3 provides an overview of the contextual and organizational characteristics.

- Geographic location

The mapping of the foundations that were gathered for the initial desk research sample ($n = 100$) demonstrates a clear Western European prominence, mainly Germany ($n = 23$), France ($n = 19$) and Switzerland ($n = 17$). For Scandinavian countries fewer foundations ($n = 3$) supporting agroecological transformation could be located (Annex 3). Notably, foundations in the United States were part of the selection ($n = 7$) as they are also engaged in funding agroecological initiatives on the European and global scale and are interested in “*learning from European foundations and their actions on the European scale*” to build proof and enhance understanding that can serve as an example for the United States and its policymakers according to an expert who has worked in Brussels for over 20 years.

- Organisational root

Four organizational roots were identified (corporate, independent, governmental & public sector body and third-sector body) through desk research for the questionnaire sample ($n = 23$). Hybrid versions are also present with one foundation. Within the questionnaire sample, 57% (13 out of 23) have their organizational root in the private sphere, meaning an independent or corporate root, 26% (6 out of 23) in the third sector and 17% (4 out of 23) are rooted in the public sector. It is important to note that an independent foundation created by an individual or family signifies that the foundation’s financial resources are derived from private capital. Conversely, this does not mean that foundations rooted in the public sphere derive their budget solely from public funds.

- Nature of resources and size of resources

Table 3. Overview of contextual and organizational characteristics of foundations ($n = 23$ foundations) – except for the size of resources as specified in the table.

Contextual		Organisational									
Foundation	Geographic location	Organisational root	Nature of resources	Size of resources (questionnaire sample) (€)	Size of resources (in-depth interview sample) (€)	Size of foundation (number of staff)	Life stage of the foundation	Starting year of engagement in agroecology and sustainable food systems			
Foundation 1	France	Governmental & public sector body	<i>n.a.</i>	100 000 - 499 999	Not specified	13	2007	2015			
Foundation 2	Switzerland	Independent	<i>n.a.</i>	1 million - 10 million	Not specified	50	1998	1998			
Foundation 3	France	Independent	Philanthropic endowment fund	1 million - 10 million	1.2 million	10	2020	2022			
Foundation 4	France	Corporate	<i>n.a.</i>	100 000 - 499 999	Not specified	<i>n.a.</i>	2018	2018			
Foundation 5	Germany	Corporate	10% of corporations' profit	100 000 - 499 999	225 000	<i>n.a.</i>	2016	2017			
Foundation 6	Netherlands	Third sector body	Pool funds by other foundations	1 million - 10 million	6.1 million	281	2008	2021			
Foundation 7	Germany	Independent	Philanthropic endowment fund	100 000 - 499 999	461 000	6	2018	2020			
Foundation 8	France & Spain	Independent	Philanthropic endowment fund	1 million - 10 million	5.7 million	54	2010	2012			
Foundation 9	France	Governmental & public sector body	Private donations from individuals & corporations with specified cause	1 million - 10 million	2.5 million	226	1969	2010			
Foundation 10	France	Corporate	<i>n.a.</i>	50 000 - 99 999	Not specified	<i>n.a.</i>	1990	2000			
Foundation 11	Italy	Corporate	Invested capital by former bank	1 million - 10 million	4.5 million	91	1991	2008			
Foundation 12	Germany	Governmental & public sector body	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>	Not specified	<i>n.a.</i>	1997	<i>n.a.</i>			
Foundation 13	Netherlands	Corporate	Dividends from corporation	1 million - 10 million	35 million	13	2009	2018			
Foundation 14	Bulgaria	Third sector body	<i>n.a.</i>	0 - 9 999	Not specified	19	2003	2014			

Foundation 15	Netherlands	Independent	Philanthropic endowment fund	1 million - 10 million	4 million	8	1995	2020
Foundation 16	Romania	Governmental and public sector body	<i>n.a.</i>	100 000 - 499 999	Not specified	29	2009	2011
Foundation 17	Switzerland	Independent	Philanthropic endowment fund & blended finance projects with public authorities	500 000 - 1 million	1.7 million	24	1990	2010
Foundation 18	Germany	Third sector body	Income from compensatory measures, interest income from the endowment capital, private donations from individuals and corporations, specific project sponsors & fundraising	500 000 - 1 million	Not specified	33	2003	2003
Foundation 19	France	Corporate	Private donations from companies	100 000 - 499 999 Euro	Not specified	<i>n.a.</i>	2008	2013
Foundation 20	UK	Independent	<i>n.a.</i>	100 000 - 499 999	Not specified	5	1999	2009
Foundation 21	Germany	Independent		100 000 - 499 999	1.2 million	14	1993	2016
Foundation 22	Germany	Third-sector body	Private donations by individuals and corporations with specific cause & business corporations & fundraising	500 000 - 1 million	Not specified	<i>n.a.</i>	1972	<i>n.a.</i>
Foundation 23	Germany	Third sector-body, independent and corporation	<i>n.a.</i>	500 000 - 1 million	Not specified	<i>n.a.</i>	2000	2002

Overall, the nature of the resources of the set of respondents can be divided into four main categories and linked to their organizational roots. Often, the foundations derive their resources from more than one of the following categories:

- (1) Fully endowed assets of families or individuals ($n = 6$)
- (2) Dividends or profit percentages by an associated corporation ($n = 3$). In most cases, the corporation is name-giving to the foundation connected to it.
- (3) Donations by individuals, companies and associations ($n = 3$)
- (4) Fundraising ($n = 2$)

Less usual, and therefore hardly discussed in current academic literature, are funds by other foundations, revenues from asset management, business cooperation and impact investment, an investment strategy that includes financial return and simultaneously aims to generate positive environmental and social impact. In one case, a foundation continuously invests its capital, which originates from when it held the legal status of a bank. This dates to 1991 when legislation in Italy changed and enabled so-called “Saving Banks”¹ to switch to the legal status of a foundation under the “Amato-Carli” law. In addition, and partially falling outside the realm of private funding, foundations are adapting blended-finance approaches with public authorities.

Between EUR 10.85 million and EUR 88.11 million are spent annually on agroecology and sustainable food systems by the foundations. Interviews narrowed this diversity to between EUR 65.6 million and EUR 78.2 million. These figures were calculated by summing all indicated lower amounts of the given ranges in the questionnaire (see [Table 1](#)) ($n = 22$, 1 n.a.), totaling EUR 10.85 million, and summing all indicated higher amounts of the given ranges, totaling EUR 88.11 million. Most respondents were willing to concretize their annual contributions for 2021/2022 during the in-depth interviews ($n = 12$; 3 n.a.), which led to the narrowed range indicated above. Most foundations have resources between EUR 1 to 10 million ($n = 8$) and EUR 100k to 500k ($n = 8$; see [Table 3](#)). One-third of the foundations are responsible for about 85% to 87% of the total funding. That refers to seven foundations that are funding with at least 1.5 million € annually. Regardless of our data collection method, the overall estimation of the funding dedicated to agroecology exhibits a very large diversity.

- Size and life stage of foundation

The questionnaire sample’s organizational size ranges from 2 to 300 staff members. Data were obtainable for 16 out of 23 foundations through desk research. The share of staff working on the topic of food and agriculture ranges

from 15% to 100% of the total staff ($n = 11$; 12 n.a.), depending on the foundation's overall focus.

Our desk sample of foundations ($n = 100$) throughout Europe and the 7 in the US are primarily founded in the late 20th century and early 21st century (70% between 1986 and 2016) (Figure 3). For all foundations, the range of founding years is 1936–20212 (1996 ± 18 years), while more than half (55%) were founded between 1990 and 2009.

For the 23 foundations that answered the online questionnaire, the range of founding years is 1969 and 2020 (2000 ± 13). The starting point of engagement for foundations with sustainable food systems ($n = 23$) lies between 1998 and 2022 (2012 ± 7 years), with a distinct increase between 2010 and 2019 (annex 4). More than half of the foundations (52%) indicated that timeframe as their starting era. The majority of foundations that participated in the online questionnaire did not commence their support for agroecology and sustainable food systems at the outset of the foundation ($n = 2$) but rather did so over time ($n = 19$). The foundations' increasing interest is underlined by the fact that ten of the 23 foundations started engaging after 2014, often under the umbrella of climate action. The three most important financial players in Europe commenced their support in 2018, however, that is the only commonality all of them share within the framework's characteristics. From the in-depth interviews, we learned that reducing greenhouse gas emissions and thus reaching net-positivity by 2030 are declared to be their visions. Foundations have identified the need to work on issues surrounding agriculture and food to tackle the poly crises – growing inequality, the climate crises and collapsing biodiversity.

Type and mode of funding

- Themes of foundations' action and support

Jung et al.'s framework suggests differentiating foundations into whether they act on a single theme or multiple. In this regard, our desk sample ($n = 100$) includes 33% single-themed foundations, solely working on the considered broad theme of food and agriculture, and 67% multiple-themed foundations, working on additional themes, such as policy, education, democracy, etc., simultaneously. Annex 5 gives a precise overview of all supported themes supported by the questionnaire sample of foundations. Some themes are targeted explicitly under the primary purpose of climate action, such as transport transition, energy transition, while others have a specific geographic focus, such as the Middle East, Africa, Latin America. When zooming into our questionnaire sample, there is a more evenly split division, with eleven

foundations supporting the single theme and the other twelve working on multiple themes. The foundations which work singularly on the theme of food and agriculture, can be split into two foci areas according to the themes communicated on their website: sustainable development and ecology/biodiversity. The seven key financial players all work on multiple themes, while five of them are rooted in the private sphere. One strategy reflects explicitly the development of interdisciplinary approaches integrating health and the environment in a single-themed agriculture-oriented foundation. Two single-themed foundations mainly focus on high-quality nature conservation in development and implementation with farmers. However, this does not mean that all singularly oriented, operating foundations cannot have broad and integrative strategies.

- Topics of funding

To gain a closer look at what is funded under the theme of food and agriculture, we asked the respondents to indicate three to five main funding topics, resulting in 94 topics from the questionnaire sample. To categorize and summarize them, we chose to distribute 85 of them into six different categories: climate change; mitigation and adaptation; biodiversity and nature conservation and restoration; responsible consumption and healthy diets; sustainable farming practices; policy change and advocacy; territorial food systems and inclusive and fair value chains. Nine topics did not fit into the scope; these were categorized as “Outside of scope.” Themes that include enabling elements, such as knowledge sharing and research, were not included in the categories if they did not mention the explicit category (e.g., fostering science and knowledge on food systems). Themes which explicitly mentioned geographical areas outside Europe were also considered out of scope. All categories and linked topics are listed in annex 6. The most prevalent category of funding is “Sustainable Farming practices” ($n = 33$), supported by 19 out of 23 foundations, followed by “Territorial food systems and inclusive and fair value chains” ($n = 17$), supported by 14 foundations and “Policy change and advocacy” ($n = 15$) supported by eight foundations. The other three categories are mentioned less than ten times with “Responsible consumption and healthy diets” ($n = 8$), “Biodiversity and nature conservation & restoration” ($n = 7$) and “Climate change: mitigation and adaptation” ($n = 4$). While 10 foundations communicate and indicate a wide range of topics, meaning that their funding topics are present in at least three categories, one foundation is exclusively solely dedicated to the category of policy work, suggesting a more restrictive approach. In most of our categories, one finds both single-themes and multiple-themed foundations to be fairly balanced. However, for the categories of “Climate change: adaptation and mitigation” and “Policy change and advocacy,” there is a clear majority of multiple-themed foundations (75%

respectively), as well as for “Territorial food systems and inclusive and fair value chains” (71%). Foundations fund analyses and reports based on scientific and empirical knowledge conducted by think tanks, such as *Agora Agrar* in Germany, and research institutes, such as *IDDRI* in France. One specific example is “The Politics of Knowledge: Understanding the Evidence for Agroecology, Regenerative Approaches and Indigenous Foodways,” published by the Global Alliance for the Future of Food (GAFF 2021). Such reports and analyses are also intended for political agenda setting, explicitly mentioned in three in-depth interviews with foundations that are part of the seven financial key players, responsible for 85% to 87% of the annual total funding made available by our sample. The policy change and advocacy category also features five of those seven foundations, suggesting a solid financial power with specific interests in food system governance, and the foundation solely working within that category claims the second largest annual funds.

- Scale of funding

Foundations implement their strategies at different scales. Our online questionnaire offered four categories of the geographic scale of involvement: sub-national, national, European and international. Multiple answers were possible, resulting in 38 answers overall, indicating that foundations act on more than one scale.

The results of the online questionnaire, clearly show that the majority of foundations are engaged at the national level, with 14 of 23 foundations (61%) identified as such. This figure is even more pronounced when desktop research insights are considered, which brings the involvement on the national scale up to 91%. Sub-national and international involvement are each mentioned by the same number of foundations (39% of questionnaire sample foundations respectively), but only once mentioned by the same actor, meaning they are generally not focused on simultaneously. Less attention is paid to European engagement (25%). However, multiple respondents expressed the need and ambition for an accelerated European focus. This scale is rarely the single scale of action and is usually associated with another scale of action. So far, involvement at the European level is focused on public policy change and advocacy and building alliances amongst foundations. Five of the 23 respondents to the online questionnaire (22%) also support specific projects and initiatives in the Global South. Those foundations that focus specifically on the Global South stressed the importance of involvement and potentially driving policy change on the European scale, thereby acknowledging the interconnectedness of many food systems and the global implications of changing European food system(s). Findings from the scale and size of resources show that Central and Eastern Europe do not profit nearly as much as Western European countries. Furthermore, three of the eight foundations, which

indicate that they annually dedicate more than 1 million Euros to agroecological purposes, communicate their focus regions to be in the Global South.

- Approaches to implement the strategy and grant distribution

Foundations use different approaches to implement their strategy, which results from their vision, mission, and values. In light of the framework by Jung, Harrow, and Leat (2018), we have categorized the foundations' approaches as either grant-making, operating or a hybrid of both approaches. By operating their own projects, we also understand a project undertaken with several other partners, whether other foundations or institutions. For the category of a hybrid approach, we also consider a stated strong involvement in the development of projects as an operation, therefore hybridizing the foundations' approach and widening their scope beyond pure grant-making.

Grant-making foundations comprise 44% of our questionnaire sample, while 39% have decided to use a hybrid approach of grant-making and operating their own projects, not necessarily being the project leader. Only 4 out of 23 foundations (17%) operate their own projects, partially with several other partners, inter alia public institutions, and thus also receive public funds for their actions. Insights from in-depth interviews disclose that one mechanism to distribute grants is, besides others, the call for proposals. Many work through such calls, while some operating foundations are applying to such calls. The call for proposal is considered a valuable mechanism by foundations' representatives for getting acquainted and understanding the landscape of actors within the food and agriculture realm. However, once that understanding has grown, the call for proposal is considered to lack transformative potential due to its limited flexibility. Ways to distribute grants that do not rely on calls for proposals include, for example, active scoping for the right grantees to fulfil the foundations' strategy or through relationships based on trust and "long-term alliances." However, grant-giving can also be based on the foundation staff's "*gut instinct*," raising potential questions about legitimacy and transparent decision-making processes. Operating foundations in our sample focus on developing and implementing high-quality nature conservation and the communication of such measures in collaboration with farmers and other organizations.

Overall, the spectrum of practices of grant distribution is diverse, as is the relationship between granters and grantees. This is also related to their scale of engagement, i.e. foundations that are mainly engaged on a subnational level have relationships with their grantees, which are based on trust and are aware of the actors in the field of agroecology and sustainable food systems due to their proximity. Seven out of nine foundations with a hybrid approach show direct involvement in participatory research projects with a territorial approach as a stakeholder and resource giver. During the aforementioned

AE4EU workshop organized with 12 foundations, one of the key reflections was that some foundations have or are planning to shift from grant-making to a more active approach by directly building programmes and establishing long-term partnerships with organizations aiming to increase control as to how the funding is spent and increase the intended impact. This may indicate that there could be a trend to move from purely grant-making to a more hybrid approach in the near future. Additionally, foundations support the cause of sustainable food systems and agroecology by building networks, facilitating dialogue, and building organizational capacity via and with non-profit institutions. Foundations with hybrid and operating approaches are partaking in such activities. Interestingly, solely grant-making foundations also indulge in such activities, not via grants but on their own accord, raising questions about Jung's categorization that we will address in the discussion.

Discussion

Western prominence and private roots in funding

The number of foundations in Europe has grown rapidly over the last decades, depending on the historical and cultural context. In line with other studies, we found a disparity of places of origin (FdF & CerPhi 2015). Our study shows a clear Western European prominence of foundations (Germany, France, Netherlands and the UK) regarding their place of origin. In line with the report of FdF and CerPhi (2015), issued by experts on the philanthropic sector in Europe, Germany exhibits the most significant number of foundations supporting and acting for more sustainable food systems. Due to the national focus of most foundations, there is also an advantage of resource distribution within the countries of origin and, therefore, more support for an agroecological transformation.

According to our results, Central and Eastern Europe stands in contrast to that. The philanthropic sector has experienced different developments than in Western Europe, and the existing engagement is hardly focused on agroecology and food system issues. Two factors play into that. First, the functions of foundations in Central and Eastern Europe as complementary to the state and to building democracy via foreign-funded foundations (Anheier and Daly 2007a), and second, on the one hand the high rate of intensification in agriculture since the 1990s and on the other the close link between agroecology and organic farming in the Central and Eastern European countries, which makes it inconspicuous and more difficult to detect (Moudrý et al. 2018). However, there are exceptions. According to the above-mentioned report, Poland is considered to be a “significant philanthropic force,” with the second-largest number of foundations located in Poland (FdF & CerPhi 2015, p. 33). This suggests a high potential for philanthropic involvement when stressing

the systemic nature of agroecology. According to one interviewee, the first steps are being taken to introduce private funding for an agroecological transformation in Poland by engaging with local actors.

More than half of the foundations of our sample are either independently rooted or set up by a corporation, while 84% of the calculated financial resources come from independent/corporate foundations. This excludes pool-funding initiatives, which those foundations largely fund. This clearly shows the weight of private and corporate assets within (philanthropic) foundations supporting the transformation to a sustainable food system. The motivations and their implications as to why foundations are created are manifold, and literature suggests different interpretations of independent and corporate philanthropy. The reason why individuals or families decide to give their resources to the public good is embedded in the social, cultural and historical context and multi-faceted (Pharoah 2016). In contrast, concepts of corporate philanthropy and corporate social responsibility are closely linked. The reasons corporations decide to invest their profits or use their dividends to set up a foundation, often with a similar name to the corporation, can be analyzed with different theoretical lenses. For example, the rationale of corporate citizenship views corporate philanthropy as a means to strengthen business contribution to society. At the same time, the critical theory lens explains corporate philanthropic action as a means to maintain business as usual and preserve profit-gaining structures and ideas (Moran and Branigan 2016). Questions remain regarding the type of root of funding. What does that mean for their investment and funding strategies for agroecology? And what implications does that have on deciding who will be funded and who will not?

Our study shows a clear trend that foundations' engagement in agroecology and sustainable food systems has been increasing continuously for over a decade, specifically under the umbrella of climate action. This finding aligns with recent academic literature and funding flow analyses from gray literature (Desanlis et al. 2022; EFC 2021; Ni et al. 2023). However, the mentioned studies do not explicitly refer to agroecology and sustainable agriculture but to the food and agriculture sector. In this regard, our study is the first to investigate such funding flows. Financing the transformation to sustainable food systems is an essential part of combatting the climate crises but has yet to be brought up to speed from public and private funders alike, since food system transformation is only receiving 3% of public climate finance (GAFF 2022). Our study, in line with other funding flow analyses (Cremona et al. 2021), additionally shows the existence of a few financial key players, raising the question of power imbalances and limited democratic food system(s) governance.

Another factor that ought to be discussed regarding the role of foundations in financing an agroecological transformation is limited transparency. This entails transparency on account reporting, on reporting their success and,

more importantly, failures, how and if that is evaluated and transparency on governance structures, including the decision-making process on who is granted, who is not and why. In the Netherlands, foundations are especially loosely regulated (Philea 2022). Lacking transparency and accountability contradict the PANTHER3 principles, a human-rights-based framework (HLPE 2019) that serves as a basis to ensure sustainable food systems. (Philanthropic) foundations may want to recognize such and strive for compliance, especially in the light of using private assets for the public good and supporting a just and equitable transformation to a sustainable food system.

Funding alignment with the 13 principles of agroecology

With its transformative ambition to address the root causes of problems, agroecology must take a systemic approach on several levels during its implementation pathway, including the field, farm, and food system. More than half of the sample indicates a wide range of funding topics, suggesting the systemic approach, also often mentioned in their declared vision. We have found the main topics of funding to be sustainable farming practices, territorial approaches, policy change, and advocacy. The policy and advocacy funding areas are especially funded by key financial players, and multiple-themed foundations are specifically involved. However, we have also found four areas to have limited support: namely (i) *grassroots organisation support* (ii) *support for cooperatives and associations*, (iii) *gender sensitivity* and (iv) *animal health*, the latter playing a key role in greenhouse gas emissions of food system(s) (Xu et al. 2021). The strategy for the foundation's funding could, in this respect, develop criteria based on the 13 principles of agroecology to enhance further the foundation actions' impact and evaluation of supporting the transformation in line with these principles (Wezel et al. 2020). Reflecting on the analysis process, categorization poses the threat of overlooking convergences. For example, "biodiversity and nature conservation and restoration" and "sustainable farming practices" are closely interlinked, while "Climate Change: mitigation and adaptation" could also serve as an umbrella for the remaining categories. The categories are not defined by clear boundaries, and in multiple cases, one topic could fit into more than one category. An analysis based on the 13 principles (Moeller et al. 2023) on the project level could provide more clarity and insights and are suggested for further research.

Foundation's transformative potential for funding agroecology

The way foundations work to achieve their goal can be distinguished between operating and grant-making foundations. Scholarly literature on operating foundations is relatively scarce, partially due to their rareness in the anglo-sphere. Operating foundations have a strong tradition in mainland Europe

(Leat 2016). Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages, both from the foundations' perspective and the perspective of supporting an agroecological transformation. More control and support for unusual actions are advantages that characterize operating foundations. However, for operations, knowledgeable staff and other issue-related resources are needed. Operating also allows for direct engagement with and of farmers instead of funding a nonprofit organization, where the farmer is the intended final recipient. For example, operating foundations provide advisory services for agroecological practices. Grant-making foundations have more flexibility and can support various actors and actions. However, they are restricted by available grantees and projects. In recent years, foundations have started to operate their programmes and practice grant-making simultaneously, mixing both approaches for more significant impact. Foundations are bound to hand out grants to nonprofit organizations, making it challenging to reach farmers with financial support directly. It raises the question of the suitability of grants for direct practical support. Additionally, to retain some control, grant-making foundations often ask for reports on outcomes and achievements of projects, which often proves difficult for grassroots initiatives. One key principle of agroecology is participation to *“encourage social organisation and greater participation in decision-making by food producers and consumers to support decentralized governance and local adaptive management of agricultural and food systems”* (Wezel et al. 2020). This principle should also be recognized by grant-making foundations regarding the interaction between grantees and grant-givers, in order to ensure a sustainable relationship and projects. Participatory grant-making has gained recognition for a more just and equitable process (Voss et al. 2022). The EFSAF network laid the foundations for collaboration and further development for more engagement on the European scale. The clearly expressed motivation for more European involvement, also by newcomers, reflects the momentum for a shift in financing the agroecological transformation. However, national legal differences and restrictions for cross-border support (Philea 2022) could harm that momentum. Additionally, agroecology's context-dependency might create difficulties in engaging in a European context, especially for operating foundations.

Understanding how many people are responsible for distributing grants, especially concerning the grant size, has important implications for the type of recipients that foundations could reach and, more generally, how the foundations' goals are implemented. The small size of staff, on the one hand, and the large size of resources, on the other, allows some foundations to make only relatively large grants. We illustrate that claim with an example of publicly accessible grant sizes and their recipients of one specific foundation that explicitly mentioned that dilemma in the in-depth interview. Since the starting year of their engagement (2018) in funding agroecology and sustainable food systems, they have granted a value of 162.3 million € in the form of

46 grants. While eight listed grants were below the value of 1 million €, adding up to 4.51 million €, only four were below 500k, adding up to 1.39 million €. Some foundations – able to distribute only large grants – provide funds to re-granting organizations, such as the Agroecology Fund or the European Climate Foundation (ECF), to support smaller, on-the-ground initiatives understood to be crucial for strengthening the agroecological movement.

Enlarging the theoretical framework

The framework of Jung, Harrow, and Leat (2018) provides a good basis for gaining insights into the critical aspects of philanthropic foundations and comparing them based on the essential categories: context, organization and strategy. However, our study lays out two shortcomings of the framework. First, our results question the category of approaches, divided initially into pure grant-making, hybrid (grant-making +/-operating +/-), pure operating and others, suggesting that foundations with a pure grant-making approach are limited to grants to implement their strategy. Our results show that a fourth main category emerges: non-financial engagement. During in-depth interviews, foundations stressed their “*broker position*” between progressive and conservative forces and their importance for creating spaces for dialogue as a self-perceived “*non-political actor*.” Another non-financial mechanism that emerged was the importance of building networks. In favor of that approach for enabling a social-ecological transformation, a recent study by the Stockholm Resilience Centre shows that networking is the most important factor for transformative potential (Tuckey et al. 2023). Second, the framework is not equipped to provide the same quality of insights if a theme-specific analysis is intended; in this case, the analysis of supporting the agroecological transformation and sustainable food systems in Europe. Besides the added categories “*Organisational and Strategic: Agroecology – organisational size, life stage, strategy for agroecology, funding topics regarding the 13 principles of agroecology*” in our methodology, inductive analysis of interviews suggests two more strategic categories: motivations and drivers to support the agroecological transformation and narratives around agroecology and sustainable food system(s). Analysing motivations and drivers is crucial in understanding the supported and implemented actions and the foundation’s role in the transformation. Recent literature has described competing narratives around agroecology (Rivera-Ferre 2018) and lingering possible co-optation of the term through simplification, false equivalence, and confusion (Walthall et al. 2024), and thereby losing its intrinsic systemic and transformational potential. Therefore, it is essential to analyze the motivations, values and narratives of private funders for agroecology and sustainable food systems. The framework could profit from a theme-specific category to be able to provide valuable

insights depending on the focus of a mapping exercise of foundations in future research.

Limitations

This study is explorative and does not claim to be exhaustive, neither on the identified foundations nor, especially, on the quantitative aspect of funds for the transformation toward agroecology and an overall sustainable food system. Other foundations probably exist that claim to fund agroecology, the transformation to a sustainable food system and/or related themes (organic agriculture, permaculture, etc.) that were not included amongst the 100 foundations we initially approached. Additionally, due to the systemic character of transforming the food system, we might have overlooked foundations that are funding, for example, sustainable diets and/or education of such, under the overall topic of health and social welfare. This implies that the overall funding amount could be higher. However, we have received consistent feedback from well-known actors with considerable assets within the sphere of foundations in Europe. We are therefore confident that we have captured the most significant part of the private funding of foundations.

During data collection, three constraints were identified. Firstly, as articulated in a dedicated feedback space, questionnaire questions were not always easy to answer for all foundations, specifically operating foundations. Secondly, different scales of data coverage on categories such as the nr. of staff, the nr. of staff working on the relevant theme, the size of annual resources could not always be provided. And third, the level of transparency, especially regarding the amount of their funds, who is funded and how that is decided, is in some cases low. Fourth, there are limitations with respect to the quantification for funding flows with five issues identified during the analysis of the data:

- (1) Due to privacy concerns, we chose funding ranges over asking for a specific amount. The ranges used for the annual funding flow could be narrower to get a more detailed picture. In particular, in the highest range, this might obscure some essential differences between foundations.
- (2) We did not determine the financial year of the annual funding flow, but the average of a ten-year period. Thus, stronger differences between years could appear without becoming visible.
- (3) Responses given in the in-depth interviews suggested that few foundations included funding with a scope extending beyond Europe, including financial flows toward the Global South. This can provide some inaccuracies in the quantitative data for funding flows for Europe.

- (4) The desk research findings show that some foundations that responded to the online questionnaire are funding other foundations also included in our set of respondents. In some cases, this might have led to double-counting of funds.
- (5) Differing understandings of agroecology might influence what is included in the requested annual money flow. The data must be interpreted differently depending on what is understood as agroecological/agroecology. When reflecting on answers from the in-depth interviews, it became clear that the respondents' understanding of agroecology differed. The differing comprehensions of agroecology could have implications for the comparability of the data.

Our main findings show a Western European prominence of foundations concerning places of origin and resources made available by foundations. They are mainly rooted in the private sector, including five of the seven key financial players. One-third of the sample is responsible for 85%–87% of the annual agroecology and sustainable food systems funding, while only one foundation made more than 10 million Euros available. Foundations are diverse in size, yet there is a growing interest in supporting and investing in sustainable food systems across this diversity under the frame of countering the biodiversity and climate crises. Foundations' actions claim to drive the implementation of agroecological farming practices, territorial approaches, policy and advocacy change, and support knowledge creation, exchange, and sharing. They show engagement predominantly on the national scale and a clear ambition to work more on a European scale, focusing on advocacy and political change by the key financial players. However, in most countries, foundations are rendered apolitical. That must be put into question due to their declared engagement in policy and advocacy as well as, for the foundations with corporate roots, and thus their entanglement with corporate-capitalist institutions. After all foundations' transformative potential cannot be discussed without considering the source of their financial resource and the link to their organizational origin. While they may have differing understandings of agroecology, private foundations show potential to support the transformation of the food system; however, barriers such as limited grassroots organization support, limited participatory grant-making and limited transparency may hinder their transformational potential. In conclusion, the current financing landscape, both public and private, is not sufficient to support the transformation to a sustainable agrifood system. This is due, on the one hand, to the staggering financing difference between the money flowing into a sustainable food system in comparison to the unsustainable status quo and, on the other hand, to the difference between public and private funding. Further research is needed to follow the money and understand

funding flows in terms of direction, recipient(s), size, project and duration, and a grantee analysis to deepen the understanding of the impact of investments made and actions implemented. In addition, a critical analysis of the foundations' understanding of agroecology, their funded projects and agendas is required to further analyze foundations' transformative potential.

Notes

1. "Saving banks" originated in the 18th century and their main objective was to facilitate and encourage saving to a broad group of people including people with modest means through gathering those savings and paying interests or dividends of funding dominated by a few foundations.
2. The origins of the so-called banking foundations date back to the mid-16th century. The *Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo* was founded in 1563 in Turin. For clarification, we chose 1991, the year the "Amato-Carli" law entered into force, for analytical purposes.
3. PANTHER: participation, accountability, nondiscrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment and rule of law (<https://www.fao.org/right-to-food/areas-of-work/en/>.)

Disclosure statement

Clara Lina Bader, Nina Isabella Moeller, Baptiste Grard, Federico Andreotti, and Perrine Vandenbroucke report no competing interests to declare. Alexander Wezel holds a position in the executive committee of Agroecology Europe. In addition, two of the participating foundations partially funded Agroecology Europe. However, no financial support was given towards conducting this study. After this research concluded, Samuel Féret started working for I4CE (Institute for Climate Economics), partially funded by one of the foundations that participated in this study.

Funding

This study was part of the Agroecology for Europe Project (www.ae4eu.eu) funded by the European Union from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101000478. This publication reflects the views and opinions of the author(s) only. The European Union cannot be held responsible for them or any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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