



Position Paper on Generational Renewal

This paper presents Agroecology Europe's vision for generational renewal in agriculture. It identifies the systemic causes behind Europe's ageing farming population and sets out our priorities to build agroecological food systems that make room for everyone, young people included.



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One of the most pressing structural challenges facing EU agriculture

According to Eurostat, in 2023 only 10.7% of EU farm managers were under the age of 40, while 61% were aged 55 or older, and the average age of farm managers has risen to 57 years, up from 55 in 2010 (Eurostat, 2026a; European Commission 2025a). This ageing trend has accelerated over the past decade: the share of farmers under 35 fell from 7.5% in 2010 to just 5.6% in 2023, while roughly a third of all managers are now aged 65 or above (Eurostat, 2026a).

The pattern varies sharply across member states: young farmers account for under 5% of farm managers in Cyprus and Portugal, compared with over 20% in Austria, France and Luxembourg, pointing to significant regional disparities in generational turnover (Eurostat, 2026a). Gender imbalances exacerbate this picture, as women represent only around a quarter of farmers under 40, despite making up roughly 32% of all farm managers (European Parliament, 2025).

This demographic profile is one of the most pressing structural challenges facing EU agriculture.

With approximately 9.1 million farm managers currently active across the European Union, a majority is expected to retire within the next decade, raising the prospect of land concentration and a loss of rural vitality if generational renewal does not take place (Sajn, 2025).

The European Parliament has explicitly stated that "generational change in agriculture is necessary to preserve a high level of food quality and food safety within the EU," framing generational renewal as a key priority for long-term food security (Sajn, 2025). Younger farmers are also associated with faster modernization and more sustainable practices: EU data show they are nearly twice as likely as older farmers to run organic or converting holdings (4.7% versus 2.4%), and they invest 1.5 times more per hectare in fixed assets such as buildings, machinery and equipment (European Commission, 2025a).

Not only a matter of age

Beyond structural and demographic disparities, the social fabric of rural farming is deteriorating.

Unfair distribution of resources at EU level

In Europe, entry into farming is constrained by high costs (e.g. for purchasing of land and machinery) and an unfavourable financial environment. Although the CAP assigned about 3% of direct payments to young farmers in the 2023–2027 period, this support is insufficient to counter the concentration of land and capital in the hands of larger farms (European Parliament, 2023). **The structure of support continues to favour large landowners:** in 2022, small farms under 5 hectares, which make up nearly half of all CAP beneficiaries, received only 6% of direct payments (European Commission, 2023). Young people face a double barrier: on one hand, high start-up costs for land, equipment and infrastructure, while on the other hand, insufficiently calibrated public and market support.

Well-being, safety and livelihood in rural agricultural areas

Social well-being in rural farming communities is under serious assault. A 2024 report commissioned by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) finds that psychosocial risks in agriculture stem largely from poor working conditions (in job design, organisation, management and workplace social context) affecting both farm owners and farm workers, including the sector's substantial share of migrant and seasonal labour (EU-OSHA, 2024). **Up to half of farmers and farm workers work more than 48 hours per week**, and rates of stress, anxiety, burnout, depression and suicide are alarmingly high: one in four Irish farmers report burnout, and France records a farmer suicide every two days, with **agricultural suicide rates roughly 20% above the national average**. Agriculture is also one of Europe's most hazardous occupations, **ranking among the sectors with the highest number of fatal workplace accidents in 2021** (EU-OSHA, 2024).

Rural depopulation remains high, especially among younger people, as rural areas keep failing to offer a dignified level of services (such as transport, schools, health, community life).

An inconsistent representation of new entrants

With an ever more squeezed sector, the definition of new entrants needs to be broadened to really include all the diversity of potential new farmers, as it can no longer only depict a male heir inheriting land. **A growing number of newcomers with no farming background are choosing rural areas** to start a farm, yet face steeper barriers to knowledge, land and support than those born into the sector (Sutherland, 2023). Women and marginalised minorities are disproportionately not

taken into serious and constructive consideration (with specific supporting schemes) when developing policy on generational renewal (See also: [Agroecology Europe's Position Paper on Gender and Intersectionality in Agroecology](#)).

Migrant workers are indispensable for the functioning of the EU agricultural system: they make up roughly one in four workers and are usually younger than the average farmer. It is estimated that 2.4 million migrants harvest Europe's fruit and vegetables each year (Ruiz-Ramírez et al., 2024). Despite their essential economic contributions and their experience, skills, and knowledge that they bring to the European agriculture sector, **farm workers with a migratory background are rarely recognised as potential future farmers** (Agroecology Europe, 2025; Feller, 2026; Princeton et al., 2021; SWIFT Project, 2025). In addition, the exploitative conditions forced on them deepen social inequities and threaten rural cohesion.

Climate change and industrial agriculture

Climate change is profoundly affecting people's lives, agricultural workers, and the agriculture sector worldwide. **Drought, heavy rain, frost and hail now account for 80% of agricultural losses in the EU**, costing the sector an average of €28 billion a year, a figure the European Investment Bank projects could exceed €40 billion by 2050 (European Investment Bank & European Commission, 2025), with grave consequences for food security. **No generational renewal strategy can succeed** without an agricultural sector capable of adapting to, and mitigating, a crisis that industrial farming itself helped create (Nabuurs et al., 2022).

Market barriers and unfair competition

"Farming is relatively low paid. The average income, although increasing in the last few decades, was still only 58% of the average income in the rest of the economy in 2023." (Sajn, 2025)

Besides unfair distribution of support from EU funding, another cause of the economic insecurity in the farming sector can be identified in **distribution monopolies squeezing producers through unfair pricing and buying power**. Neoliberal trade models treat food as a commodity to be produced ever cheaper, rather than a public good to be produced sustainably. For new entrants and young farmers, this combination makes it impossible to invest in their farms without sacrificing either the environment, their rights and wellbeing, or their own economic stability.

Beyond generational renewal: Toward an agroecological systemic transformation

A narrow focus on generational renewal obscures the true barrier: **access to farming itself**. The sector is not only age-skewed but also misaligned in terms of gender, class, and ethnicity, **failing to reflect Europe's broader social diversity**. Entry is further hindered by **a lack of social protection, welfare support, and financial security** for those investing in the sector (Sutherland, 2023).

Small and family farms (often under 5 ha, comprising nearly two-thirds of EU holdings) are increasingly disappearing, while a small number of larger farms dominate production and land ownership (Boccaletti et al., 2024; Eurostat, 2026b). This concentration of land and capital reduces space for new, diverse entrants.

The need for generational renewal has thus become not just an ecological necessity, but a social one: revitalizing rural Europe through inclusive, agroecological transformation that values equity, well-being, rural health and justice for all who farm.

Agroecology offers a holistic response precisely because it does not treat generational renewal as an isolated demographic issue, but as one dimension of a broader systemic transformation (Agroecology Europe, nd).

Agroecology addresses the environmental, economic and social drivers that currently push young people and new entrants out of farming by integrating ecological practices with fair economic models, social justice and participatory governance.

Achieving generational renewal through agroecology requires a comprehensive overhaul of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) at every level. Power structures, knowledge systems and governance models need to be fundamentally rethought.



Agroecology Europe calls for

Pillars of an agroecological food system: The institutional level

- Recognise food as a common good which cannot be reduced to a commodity or product.
- Treat access to food as a human right, as recognised internationally since 1999 (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999).
- Respect and recognise agroecology, founded on 13 principles, institutionally. (Agroecology Europe, nd).

Pillars of an agroecological food system: Governance

- Treat Ecosystems and natural resources, including land, water and seeds as part of the Commons, and therefore accessible to everyone equitably.
- Govern food systems as a Common at the local and global levels where human beings' sovereignty is both overlapping and respecting the subsidiarity principle.
- Uphold food democracy at the citizen level (Hassanein, 2003) and food sovereignty at the system level (La Via Campesina, 2018) as pillars to a healthy, just and sustainable food system transition, where young people's voices are heard and taken into account.

The agroecological system in practice

A strategic approach to generational renewal in EU agriculture and rural areas must have future generations as its main objective, addressing not only young farmers and new entrants, but the enabling environment for rural populations as a whole. This requires a place-based and agroecological lens, bridging generations, sectors and actors at all governance levels and moving increasingly away from standardisation and toward diversification of agricultural production, distribution and consumption.

- 1. Redirect CAP direct payments away from favouring farm size and industrial scale, and towards systemic agroecological practices and approaches.** As long as 80% of direct payments continue to reward the largest 20% of farms regardless of their environmental or social performance, generational renewal will keep competing with a subsidy structure built for industrial-scale, capital-intensive agriculture. CAP funding (including eco-schemes and rural development pillars) must be reoriented to reward agroecological approaches, labour intensity and social outcomes rather than land area.
- 2. Facilitate access to land and agroecological land use** by implementing land mobility programs prioritizing young farmers and offering long-term leases or preferential land purchases.

- a. Boost the means and powers of the European public observatory on land and other natural resources (e.g. water quality, soil fertility).
- b. Better-designed subsidies which support new entrants, ensure long-term land access and create mentoring schemes. Such frameworks should include safety nets that encourage experimentation with agroecological farming systems to increase the attractiveness of such systems to young (or new) people interested in farming.

3. Ensure fair prices and equitable distribution of value along the food supply chain, so that the economic burden of the transition to agroecology does not fall disproportionately on producers or consumers. This includes strengthening enforcement against unfair trading practices, supporting cooperative and short supply chain models, and redirecting subsidies toward practices that internalize environmental and social costs rather than externalizing them onto farmers, workers, or nature. Without fair and stable returns, young people and new entrants will keep facing the same economic insecurity that already drives farmers out of the sector.

- a. Dismantling all free trade agreements that are harmful to a territory's economic, social and ecological harmony.
- b. True cost accounting and transparency for food products.
- c. Market regulations to ensure just remuneration for all producers, especially those that are engaged in the protection of ecosystem services
- d. Social policies to ensure dignified living conditions for producers and equal access to sustainable agroecological food for all. Policies should recognize and facilitate grassroots initiatives, such as social pricing, participatory guarantee systems, community-supported agriculture and food democracy initiatives.

4. Mobilise multiple EU and national funds to significantly improve rural housing conditions, affordability, and connectivity, ensuring dignified, affordable, and climate-resilient living spaces as a cornerstone of generational renewal in rural areas.

- a. **Improve rural infrastructure** by investing in rural assets and enhancing roads, broadband internet, and healthcare, to make living in the countryside and farming more attractive to young people. Expand affordable housing programs that are specifically directed at young farmers.
- b. **Enhance financial support by developing youth-focused financial products**, such as micro-loans, start-up grants, and low-interest credit. Offer financial incentives for rural businesses and non-profit organizations, especially in the fields of arts and civic engagement, as well as for farmers producing agroecological products and contributing to community well-being.

- 5. Invest in restoring degraded agricultural (and non-agricultural) ecosystems and biodiversity in line with the Nature Restoration Law,** and raise the ambition of the Habitats, Birds and Water Framework Directives. Without healthy and restored ecosystems, there is no viable future for those entering farming. Such pathways should move toward farming free from toxic pesticides, recognising that ecosystem health and generational renewal are inseparable.
- 6. Integrate the position and voices of minorities in scientific and agronomic discourses in future research.** Integrating the socio-economic, ecological and political dimensions into the agronomic debates and science through considering the position and voices of minoritised social categories in all future research.
 - a. Promoting open access and peer-to-peer research, as well as exchanges amongst farmers, scientists, policymakers and other actors.
- 7. Strengthen the offer and access to high-quality farm advisory and peer-to-peer networking.** Provide continuous professional development and mentorship programs to facilitate agroecology knowledge transfer between older and younger farmers.
 - a. **Establish peripheral resource hubs** where farmers can access and share seeds, machinery, land, knowledge and other agri-food assets.
 - b. **Empower youth and young farmers to benefit from and help steer the digitalisation** of agriculture in line with agroecological principles (*Reinmuth et al., 2024*), guided by effective, participatory and evidence-based assessments, with particular attention to ethics, equity, biodiversity, and access to natural resources (e.g., water, land).
- 8. Mainstream agroecology curricula into formal education,** spanning existing bachelor's and master's degrees, summer schools, vocational training and short courses, and expanding the EU's currently limited offer of agroecological capacity-building programmes.
 - a. Create the first Joint Agroecology Erasmus Mundus Programme, fully dedicated to, and built on, existing agroecology science, practices, and networks.
- 9. Guarantee dignified working conditions for all in the agri-food sector,** and reject policies of exclusion that undermine generational renewal.
 - a. Labour rights, fair wages and safety protections must be guaranteed to farmers and farm workers. Specific attention should be paid to seasonal and migrant workers, who remain essential to European farming yet are among its most exploited and least protected.
 - b. Extend labour protections, contracts and social security coverage to all farm workers regardless of migration status.

10. Ensure that MFF post-2027 budget priorities reinforce, rather than compete with, investment in generational renewal, rural welfare, and agroecological transition.

- a. Reject the ongoing militarization. Generational renewal cannot be achieved in a Europe that criminalises migration through forced-return policies or diverts public budgets away from rural livelihoods and ecological transition into rearmament. We call on the EU and Member States to reject the ongoing militarization of the European budget and to instead reinvest in social justice and welfare as foundations for a just agroecological transition.



This position paper builds on the [*Young Europeans' Manifesto for Agroecology*](#).

This position has been developed by the Agroecology Europe Youth Network after years of participatory work. We want to have a voice. We are the ones who need to take care of this and future generations, of our environments, and of revitalising rural areas. We refuse to continue with business as usual, putting competitiveness before livelihood and health. An agroecological transformation is the way to make us stay.

Let us stay.

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