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HOW IS EU AGRICULTURAL POLICY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION PERCEIVED BY YOUNG FARMERS IN GERMANY?

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---|
| CAP | Common Agricultural Policy |
| EU | European Union |
| R.C. A | Rational Choice Approach |
| BMEL | Bundesministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft (Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture) |

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Summary

This bachelor thesis examines the perceptions of young German farmers towards the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the European Union (EU) as an institution, with a particular focus on the CAP reform for 2023 – 2027. This reform aims to promote climate-friendly agricultural practices and has thereby provoked diverse reactions due to its complexity and the shift from traditional direct payments to sustainability-linked subsidies. The central research question addressed in this thesis is: How are the EU agricultural policy and the European Union perceived by young farmers in Germany?

Using the theories of rational choice and social constructivism, three sub-questions and hypotheses were formulated to explore this topic further. Additionally, the thesis investigates whether a negative attitude towards the CAP leads to a negative perception of the EU as a whole. This research highlights the social and scientific importance of understanding the perspectives of young farmers, given their generation's central role in the future of sustainability across EU agricultural policy.

Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted as the data collection method, allowing for a structured yet flexible dialogue to capture a range of opinions. The interviews targeted young farmers aged 25 – 40 who employ conventional or sustainable farming methods. The data was analyzed using a deductive coding method to reveal the relationship between personal motives, societal influences, and economic factors shaping young farmers' views on EU agricultural policy and its administration.

Introduction

In recent years, farmers in EU member states protested against changes in the agricultural policy at both European and national levels. As part of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform for 2023 – 2027, ten environmentally and climate-friendly measures to promote sustainability in agriculture were adopted (European Commission, 2023). To implement these changes into national law, EU member states were required to formulate their own national CAP strategy plans for the first time. This shift was made at the request of member states and agricultural associations, who criticized the EU's previous agricultural guidelines for being too general and not accommodating regional differences (European Commission, 2023). The strategy plans aim to provide member states with more flexibility in their national decision-making processes.

In addition to the CAP reform measures, member states have the option to introduce additional eco-schemes to financially reward farmers for adopting environmentally friendly practices (European Commission, 23 November 2023). Despite these efforts, European farmers remain dissatisfied, citing the time-consuming and complex nature of the new reform methods (Belousova, 2023). Furthermore, cuts in traditional direct payments have been introduced. European agricultural organizations argue that the new environmental incentives are insufficient to bring about fundamental changes in agriculture (Deutscher Bauernverband, 2023).

The implementation of the reforms objectives has caused great uncertainty for farmers at the national level. German farmers, in particular, face challenges in implementing the European regulations in an economically efficient manner. This is due to high bureaucratic hurdles imposed by the German government (Becker, Bissinger, & Teuber, 2022). The complex application procedures and regulatory requirements of the German administration are resulting in long waiting times and financial losses, especially for smaller agricultural enterprises (Deutscher Bauernverband, 2024).

Simultaneously, the EU's foreign trade policy, which includes free trade agreements with third countries, has paved the way for increased imports of cheap goods into the European market (Political Department for External Relations of the European Union, 2018). This trade policy exacerbates the already difficult situation in the agricultural

sector, as increased imports of cheap agricultural products intensify competition for European farmers. These foreign suppliers can produce under more favorable conditions without meeting the ecological and climate-friendly CAP requirements, forcing European producers to lower their prices to stay competitive (Spinnler, 2024).

German consumers, who are increasingly price-conscious, tend to favor cheaper imported products. This pricing pressure, combined with the long-term financial investments needed to comply with new EU agricultural regulations, can lead to existential challenges for young farmers. Although the EU claims to support young farmers through the new reform, this support appears more theoretical than practical. Therefore, this bachelor thesis aims to understand how young farmers in Germany perceive the CAP and the EU as an institution (Feindt, 2009).

Research Question

For these reasons, the research paper is dedicated to a central question:

How is EU agricultural policy and the European Union perceived by young farmers in Germany?

Based on this question, sub-questions are developed from the theoretical framework of Rational-Choice-Theory and social constructivism to analyze and answer individual areas of the research question in greater detail. On this basis, it will then be examined if the young farmers' perception of the common agricultural policy is directly related to a general dissatisfaction with the EU as an institution. Furthermore, this study investigates whether young farmers are primarily dissatisfied with the German implementation of the CAP or with European agricultural policy itself. These hypotheses are tested for validity in the analysis, aiding in a detailed response to answer the research question. Therefore, the following sub-questions of this research paper are:

- I. *What considerations – economic, ecological, political – are important in forming an opinion on CAP and the EU?*
 - i. *H1: Financial incentives are the primary factor influencing young farmers' opinions about the CAP.*

- II. *At which level of policy-making and implementation do farmers perceive problems?*
 - i. *H2: Farmers acknowledge the challenges of policymaking at the European level. However, they are more inclined to criticize the national level for the poor implementation of the CAP.*
- III. *Do perceptions about CAP translate into perceptions about the EU in general?*
 - i. *H3: Farmers' perception of the CAP influences their overall view of the EU.*

To collect relevant data, eleven semi-structured interviews are conducted. Afterwards, the data was categorized into codes using the category analysis method according to Mayring (Mayring, Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse, 2000). A coding scheme was developed before the interviews were conducted to enable a structured analysis in a scientific manner. Within the analysis section, the three sub-questions are answered based on these codes, and the hypotheses derived from the theoretical framework are either validated or falsified.

The research topic arises from the fact that there is little literature on this particular group of young farmers. Furthermore, in comparable scientific work, the focus is primarily on the latest CAP reform. However, the impact on the quality of the CAP reform implementation by the national strategy plans of the member states has so far only played a subordinate role. Moreover, its specific impact on the professional group of young farmers is not addressed in detail, even though there are many innovations in the latest CAP reform that were formulated specifically for the promotion of young farmers. This research is therefore the first attempt to close this research gap. Due to the scarcity of existing literature, an exploratory research design is used.

Scientific and societal relevance

The chosen research topic has both social and scientific relevance. In the social sphere, agriculture is not only an economic sector, but also an important part of the German food supply. The challenges and discontents faced by young farmers have potentially far-reaching implications for rural communities, food systems and the relationship between farmers and the broader society. Securing local and national supply chains is particularly important in times of conflict in Europe when international

supply chains may become less reliable. In this respect, the dissatisfaction of farmers has devastating consequences and has the potential to cause undesirable complications in German and European politics, as shown by the recent proposal by the European Commission to reintroduce import tariffs of agricultural products from Ukraine in reaction to farmer protests in Poland, France, and other EU member states (Liboreiro, 2024).

Furthermore, the research contributes to scientific relevance by focusing on a previously neglected dimension: the emphasis on age as a factor of dissatisfaction from farmers on European agricultural policy. Studying these aspects contributes to a better understanding of the complexity of the relationship between young farmers and EU agricultural policy. Furthermore, understanding the perceptions of younger farmers can assist in developing approaches that better address the needs of diverse interest groups while supporting the objectives of EU agricultural policy. For this reason, this paper contributes to a more comprehensive discussion of the social and scientific aspects of current perceptions of European agricultural policy and the general attitudes of young farmers towards the EU.

The European Agricultural Policy

The European agricultural policy, governed by the CAP, is a cornerstone of the European Union's efforts to manage agriculture and rural development across its member states. Initially, the main objectives of the CAP, set out in the 1957 Treaty of Rome, were formulated to increase agricultural productivity while ensuring a fair standard of living for the agricultural community. Moreover, income raises for European farmers, the protection from international competition and the support of internal prices were further objectives. Until today, the decisions of the CAP are characterized by economic principles, political considerations, and socio-environmental factors, aiming to balance various interests (Hill, 2011).

Objectives and Structure

The CAP is structured around two main pillars (Hill, 2011):

| Direct Payments and Market Support (Pillar 1) | Rural Development (Pillar 2) |
|---|--|
| <p>Direct Payments: These provide income support to farmers, stabilizing their revenue and ensuring a fair standard of living. Payments are often conditional on farmers meeting certain environmental and land management standards, promoting sustainable practices.</p> | <p>Competitiveness: Enhancing the competitiveness of the agricultural sector through modernization, innovation, and infrastructure development.</p> <p>Territorial Development: Support of the socio-economic viability of rural areas, addressing issues like rural depopulation and lack of infrastructure.</p> |
| <p>Market Measures: These include interventions like public storage, private storage aid, and crisis management tools to stabilize agricultural markets and prices, protecting farmers from severe price volatility.</p> | <p>Sustainable Management: Efforts to ensure the sustainable management of natural resources, addressing environmental concerns such as biodiversity, soil health, and water quality.</p> |

Table 1: The Two Main Pillars of the CAP – Own Representation based on Hill (2011)

The 2023 Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

The new CAP reform, effective from 2023, aims to construct the recent agricultural policy greener and fairer, aligning it with the European Green Deal’s objectives for environmental sustainability. This reform emerged from a provisional political agreement reached in June 2021 in response to a proposal by the European Commission in 2018 (European Commission, 2022). The CAP 2023 – 2027 framework focuses on addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and natural resource management while safeguarding fair distribution of income support and targeting the specific needs of the farming sector and rural areas. Since the reform, the CAP has been implemented for the first time through national strategies developed by the EU member states. Thereby, each state creates an individual plan tailored to its specific needs and circumstances. These strategy plans were requested by the member states and farmers’ associations (BMEL, 2024).

Reduction of Direct Payments and Introduction of Eco-Schemes

A key part of the CAP reform is the reduction of direct payments, which have traditionally been provided as basic income support for farmers and are now being restructured to incentivize more sustainable farming practices (European Commission, 2023). Historically, CAP direct payments were decoupled from production levels, providing farmers with income support based on land area. The 2023 reform introduces a mandatory redistribution of at least 10 – 15 % of direct payments (European Commission, 2022). Additionally, capping mechanisms reduce payments for large farms, ensuring a more equitable allocation of resources across the farming sector. Eco-schemes represent a novel element in the CAP, designed to promote voluntary adoption of environmentally beneficial farming practices. Member States are required to allocate at least 25 % of their direct payments budget to eco-schemes, supporting practices that go beyond mandatory environmental regulations (European Commission, 2022). These schemes reward a range of innovations, such as an improved nutrient management, agro-ecology, agro-forestry, carbon farming, and enhanced animal welfare (European Commission, 2022). Moreover, eco-schemes offer farmers financial incentives to implement sustainable practices, addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and natural resource management. The linkage of payments to specific environmental actions marks significant steps towards agricultural practices that contribute the broader EU sustainability goals outlined within EU Green Deal. This comprehensive deal seeks to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 through the promotion of sustainable practices in all economic sectors to prevent further environmentally damage (European Commission, 2023).

German CAP Strategic Plan for the 2023 Reform

Germany's strategic plan was developed under the leadership of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (Bundesministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft (BMEL)) and crafted between 2018 and 2022 in close collaboration with federal ministries, federal states (*Bundesländer*), and various stakeholders from the civil society. At the federal level, the EU requirements are formally translated into specific programs and regulations that establish the framework conditions for the promotion and regulation of agriculture (BMEL, 2024).

Germany declared a transfer of 10 % to 15 % funds from direct payments (Pillar 1) to rural development programs (Pillar 2) over the funding period, thereby enhancing the budget for sustainable agricultural practices by approximately €740 million annually by 2027. Moreover, a total of €6.2 billion annually is allocated for the execution of the entire strategic plan in Germany. Special emphasis is placed on supporting young farmers, with €147 million allocated annually to encourage new entrants into the farming sector and support their income (BMEL, 2024).

Impact and Future Directions

The reduction of direct payments and the introduction of eco-schemes reflect a paradigm shift in the CAP towards a more results-oriented and environmentally conscious agricultural policy. These reforms are expected to drive significant changes in farming practices across the EU in theory, fostering a more resilient and sustainable agricultural sector. Despite the reforms, there is considerable criticism from civil society in the agricultural sector. Especially farmers associations argue that the CAP represents a major step backwards. The reduction in direct payments and the introduction of the Eco Schemes are forcing farmers to undertake major investments to convert their farms. Although subsidies are theoretically provided, these are often insufficient to convert the business to profitability. Therefore, agricultural associations are warning of an unfair market situation in the EU, as national strategic plans could lead to different conditions and regulations (COPA-COGECA EU Farmers Association, 2022).

Theory

As previously stated, this study is dedicated to explore the perceptions of young farmers in Germany regarding EU agricultural policy and the European Union as an entity. The research topic is convenient for exploratory research, given the limited literature available on the specific age group of young farmers. This study therefore aims to address this research gap.

Rational Choice Approach

The rational choice theory (RCA) is an economic explanatory approach used in various social sciences to explain the behavior of abstract actors in social, political, or economic decision-making situations (Schubert & Klein, 2020). Rational choice theory operates on the principle of *homo oeconomicus*. This describes how individuals evaluate costs and benefits to conclude on rational decisions with the intention of maximizing their overall benefits (Schubert & Klein, 2020).

Moreover, the rational choice theory allows the logics of action of these actors to be analyzed in a context in which economic, social and political factors are intertwined but recognized as interdependent factors (Hill, 2002). In the context of EU agricultural policy, young farmers could therefore base their attitudes and actions on considerations of financial incentives, environmental requirements and policy developments. Economic incentives derived from rational choice theory suggest that young farmers will prioritize financial benefits when forming opinions about EU policies. A young farmer specializing in vegetable cultivation notices that the demand for organic produce in Germany is stagnating. While some consumers are willing to pay more for organic vegetables due to their commitment to sustainability, others prefer cheaper conventional options. The European agricultural policy provides area-based subsidies regardless of the cultivation method. After analyzing production costs and market prices, the farmer finds that profit margins for organic vegetables are similar to those for conventional produce due to higher production costs, even with additional subsidies. Therefore, he decides against converting to organic farming, as conventional farming allows him to maximize profits while still benefiting from existing subsidies.

Therefore, the following assumption can be formulated: *Financial incentives are the primary factor influencing young farmers' opinions about the CAP.*

Constructivism

An alternative theoretical approach under consideration is social constructivism. This theory does not view social realities as objective facts but as individually constructed phenomena shaped by social interactions, cultural norms, and ideals (Kleger & Knobloch, 2014). Constructivists argue that the meaning of concepts, identities, and

interests is not inherent but produced through social processes and discourses. They examine how ideas and norms influence the behavior of actors and the shaping of policy (Martinsen, 2014). In relation to the research question, constructivism is relevant as it suggests that young farmers in Germany construct their perceptions of EU agricultural policy and the EU based on their individual and collective experiences. These perceptions are influenced by social interactions, cultural norms, and political discourses (Kleger & Knobloch, 2014).

With a large majority of farmers inheriting their farms from their parents and only 7.3 % of agricultural business being organically managed, it is reasonable to assume that a majority of farmers were raised in conventionally managed agricultural environments (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024). Having been raised and socialized with their families' conventional values and norms, it could be assumed that these young farmers often see no compelling reason to integrate sustainable EU policy innovations into their farming practices (Umweltbundesamt, 2020). Consequently, it can be anticipated that ecological convictions only play a subordinate role among farmers. Especially if the switch to sustainable production reduces their profits through high investments. However, the adjustment of payments from direct payment, based on area, to eco-schemes provoked outrage among farmers, as they perceive it as a political restriction on their entrepreneurial freedom (COPA-COGECA EU Farmers Association, 2022).

However, the connection of this considerations helps to understand how economic factors, ecological considerations, and political beliefs, influence young farmers' opinions. Based on the two theories of RCA and constructivism, the first sub-question and the corresponding hypothesis were formulated:

- I. *What considerations – economic, ecological, political – are important in forming an opinion on CAP and the EU?*
 - i. *Financial incentives are the primary factor influencing young farmer' opinions about the CAP.*

The German Multi-Level Political System & the Implementation of the CAP Reform

Furthermore, the EU faces the challenge of developing a CAP that meets the diverse agricultural, ecological, and economic needs of all member states (European Commission, 2023). Therefore, the policy must be flexible enough to accommodate regional particularities while also establishing effective, uniform objectives across the EU. In Germany, however, young farmers are faced with the complexity of the German multi-level system administration. Within the implementation of the CAPs objective, three political levels are engaged. Firstly, the EU sets the agenda through the establishment of the latest CAP-Reform in which the objectives of agricultural policy are clearly defined. Afterwards, the practical implementation of agricultural policy is the responsibility of the federal states within the national strategic plan. At the same time, the 16 federal states are responsible for the practical implementation and adaptation of these requirements. This interference of political levels can lead to several issues: This policy process and distribution of responsibilities in German agricultural policy is not clearly defined, which results in major differences and inconsistencies in the implementation of agricultural policy in the various federal states. The interrelationship between the federal government and the states can also be complex and inefficient. Several political priorities and resource allocations between the federal states, especially between the “old and new” federal states in the east and west, further complicate the equal implementation. Added to these challenges is the fact that the actors at different levels (the federal government, federal states, interest groups) can act as veto players in the event of differences and block or delay the implementation of agricultural policies. This further complicates the coherent and efficient implementation process of policies. Additionally, the high level of bureaucracy at both federal and state levels places an extra burden on them, requiring extensive documentation and reporting (COPA-COGECA EU Farmers Association, 2022). With this in mind, it is of central importance to determine with which policy level young farmers are dissatisfied with. This leads to the second sub-question:

- II. At which level of policy-making and implementation do farmers perceive problems?*

- i. Farmers acknowledge the challenges of policymaking at the European level. However, they are more inclined to criticize the national level for the poor implementation of the CAP.*

Moreover, farmers may be dissatisfied with agricultural policy yet still value the EU, primarily due to economic benefits such as the single market or the EU's mobility concept, which allows German farmers to employ cheaper seasonal labor from Eastern European countries. In addition, another crucial aspect to examine is whether farmers can differentiate between agricultural policy and the political institution of the EU (polity). Within this context, the key question is whether farmers can view the political measures of the CAP in isolation, or if their dissatisfaction with these policies negatively influences their overall perception of the EU. This distinction between specific policy areas and the overarching political system is essential, as it helps to determine whether negative experiences with the CAP lead to a general rejection of the EU.

Based on this argument, the following 3rd sub-question and its associated hypothesis were formulated:

- III. Do perceptions about CAP translate into perceptions about the EU in general?*
 - i. Farmers' perception of the CAP influences their overall view of the EU.*

Methodology

Research Design

For this bachelor thesis, a combination of interpretative research design and a deductive approach is selected. The integration of a deductive approach is beneficial as it enables the testing and validation of theoretical concepts and the research hypotheses derived from it. The goal of deductive research is to evaluate these theoretical concepts using new empirical data (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The interpretative research approach enables a subjective interpretation of a social phenomenon from the perspective of the farmers involved. Moreover, it helps to capture the complex relationships of young farmers to EU agricultural policy on a political, economic and social level (Franke, 2020). This research therefore combines an interpretative

approach with a deductive approach to apply the theoretical concepts to the research topic. The interpretative approach is used both to interpret the theory and to derive results from the analysis of the interview data to validate or refute the theoretical propositions.

A deductive approach is used to systematically analyze the interview data and identify categories within it. A deductive approach is favored over an inductive one as it allows for the formulation of hypotheses about young farmer' opinions and behaviors derived from the theoretical framework of Ration Choice and social constructivism. Moreover, the interview questions as well as the coding scheme are based on the theoretical considerations. With a limited number of interviews, an inductive approach would not be suitable as it relies on observations to develop theories. Basing a theory solely on the eleven interview partners, in representation of a whole young generation of German farmers, would be insufficient and lack scientific rigor due to the limited data sample. Therefore, the deductive approach ensures effective and accurate results within a predefined theoretical framework (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

The application of inductive post-coding

Semi-structured interviews often elicit richer and more detailed responses from participants. While these responses may touch upon aspects central to addressing the research question, they might not align neatly with the predefined deductive codes. To safeguard the integrity of both data collection and analysis, maintaining the flexibility for inductive recoding proves beneficial for this research topic. This approach allows for the discovery of new codes and categories, which can be applied with the process of data analysis and evaluation. To ensure a transparent description of the coding process, the codes in the table are categorized as either inductive or deductive. The following table is an extract from the coding scheme used in this research, the full version of which can be found in the appendix.

| Category | Deductive Codes | Inductive Codes |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Perception towards the EU | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Perception towards EU • Negative Perception EU | |
| Perception towards German government | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of the national implementation of the CAP reform • National political situation with agricultural policy • Symbiosis of national and European directives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception at "Bundesland" level (Undercode) • Perception at federal state level • Negative perception on national agricultural policy administration • Subsidies at state/federal level (Undercode) |
| Perception towards CAP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Perception towards CAP • Negative Perception towards CAP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of young farmer support • Deterioration due to CAP • Improvement through CAP |
| Type of agriculture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable Agriculture • Conventional Agriculture • Agriculture in line with CAP Standards | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasons for conventional agriculture • Reasons for sustainable agriculture |

Table 2: The Listing and Categorization of Codes from the Coding Scheme

Method of Data Collection

In order to gain a profound understanding of young farmers' perception towards EU agricultural policy and the European Union in Germany, it is imperative to select a context-specific and detailed data collection method. Considering the complexity of the topic, semi-structured interviews present the most suitable data collection method. This decision was made for various reasons: Semi-structured interviews provide an

adaptable approach allowing the complexity of the interviewees' perspectives to be considered. Furthermore, an understanding of the interviewees' motivations for action can be gained by asking open questions that leave room for detailed and contextualized answers. Thirdly, semi-structured interviews can address unexpected findings that may arise spontaneously (Bhattacharjee, 2012). This accuracy of collecting context-specific data would not be possible with another form of data collection in this case.

For the interview to be classified as a method of data collection in the scientific sense, compliance with quality criteria is essential. The researcher gathering the data from the interviews must disclose and logically argue the analysis and interpretation to such an extent that external parties can understand the systematics of the research work. This concerns, for example, the disclosure of the criteria for selecting the interview partners, a catalogue of questions and the description of the interview setting. To avoid any errors that could negatively affect this research work, an interview schedule was drawn up in advance, as shown in the table below. Moreover, an interview questionnaire in which the sub-questions were converted into interview questions can be found in the appendix section (Kaiser, 2020). Due to the great size of the data sample, the interviews were not included in this research paper. However, all interviews have been transcribed and are available for review upon request.

Anonymization of the Interview Partners

In this research, the personal data of the interview partners will be fully anonymized in order to protect their privacy. For a correct and traceable citation in the analysis section, each interview partner will be assigned an individual number from 1 to 11. This numbering system assigns statements to specific interview partners without revealing their identity. The dates on which the interviews were conducted are provided to show the correlation between each interview and the assigned number for each interview partner. This allows the analysis of the interviews to be structured and clearly understood, while at the same time preserving the anonymity of the participants.

| Interview Participant | Date of the Interview | Type of Agriculture |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Participant 1 | 21.05.2024 | conventional |
| Participant 2 | 22.05.2024 | conventional |
| Participant 3 | 22.05.2024 | conventional |
| Participant 4 | 27.05.2024 | conventional |
| Participant 5 | 29.05.2024 | conventional |
| Participant 6 | 29.05.2024 | conventional |
| Participant 7 | 30.05.2024 | conventional |
| Participant 8 | 03.06.2024 | conventional |
| Participant 9 | 23.05.2024 | organic |
| Participant 10 | 28.05.2024 | organic |
| Participant 11 | 03.06.2024 | organic |

Table 2: Anonymous Assignment of Interview Partners for Scientific Citation

Description of the Interviews

The data collection involved interviews with eleven farmers, of whom eight practiced conventional farming and three practiced organic farming (All participants). The interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, each lasting around 45 minutes. Prior to the interviews, participants received the interview questions via email well in advance to allow sufficient preparation. Before starting the interviews, all participants were asked for their consent to have the sessions automatically transcribed using Microsoft transcription software. In addition to the automatic transcription, the interviews were also audio recorded to ensure accuracy. After the interviews, the automatic transcripts were manually and individually cross-checked with the audio recordings to correct any potential errors made by the transcription software. The verified transcripts were then sent to the participants within 24 hours after the interview, pending for the interviewee's approval. The transcripts were only used for analysis after the participants confirmed their consent. To maintain confidentiality, all personal information was removed from the transcripts before they were analyzed. The interviewees were informed before the interview that their statements would be analyzed anonymously as part of this research project. As young farmers are a special demographic group with distinct characteristics, a targeted sampling strategy is used. The aim of this selection was to find interviewees who can provide detailed explanations on criteria that are relevant to the research question and the associated

sub-questions (Mack, Guest & et al, 2005). The selection criterion for the interview participants is as follows:

| Criterion | Justification of Relevance |
|---|--|
| Age range from 25 – 40 | Specific limitation of young farmers. This information is important for the question of whether the interviewees received the young farmers' subsidy, which is an integral part of the new CAP reform. |
| Agriculture with conventional cultivation | Interview partners from conventional and organic farming are needed for this research work. The variation between the two types of cultivation provides information on the economical, political & egological considerations the young farmers use to formulate their opinion of CAP (Motives for action guided by the RCA and Constructivism). |
| Agriculture with sustainable cultivation | Interview partners from conventional and organic farming are needed for this research work. The variation between the two types of cultivation provides information on the considerations the young farmers use to formulate their opinion of CAP (Motives for action guided by the RCA and Constructivism). |
| Operating size | Before the CAP reform, payments were linked to the area of arable land in hectares (European Commission, 2023). The larger the farm, the more money farmers received, meaning larger farms are now facing greater financial cuts due to the reform. This criterion is essential for testing, according to the RCA theory, whether financial considerations are the primary factor shaping the perceptions of young German farmers. |

Table 3: The Selection Criterion for the Interview Participants

Method of Data Analysis

Deductive category application according to Mayring

The deductive category application was developed by Prof. Dr. Philipp Mayring and is particularly useful for systematically analyzing text data and the identification of patterns and categories. The deductive category application can be described in six steps (Mayring, 1991):

The initial phase involves **preparing and defining the categories**. Before commencing data analysis, a coding scheme with categories was established. Here, a coding unit determines the minimum text component assigned to a category, influencing the sensitivity of the analysis, while the context unit determines the material used for coding. The categories serve as a guide, based on the theories of the rational choice approach and constructivism. The initial draft of the coding scheme was reviewed with the supervisor before conducting the interviews. To ensure stability and transparency as scientific quality criteria, the coding scheme includes data examples and a comprehensive explanation of the coding rules. Additionally, the codes were tested for effectiveness using a sample interview. Afterwards, the scheme was adjusted accordingly. Such transparency is vital for scientifically validating interviews as a foundation for data analysis, thereby mitigating potential research errors or biases (Mayring, 1991).

Within the second stage, the **data undergoes the coding process**. The interview transcripts were meticulously reviewed, involving the identification of text segments relevant to the categories shown in the illustration below. The transcripts were coded in multiple rounds. This enables validity & transparency of the results. Semi-structured interviews typically elicit more expansive, detailed responses, allowing for the application of multiple codes to the same text excerpt. The software Atlas.ti was used for coding the data, chosen for its versatility and effectiveness. (Campbell, 2013).

During this phase, **coding rules** were implemented, confirming that text passages are systematically assigned to predefined categories based on clearly defined criteria. These rules are articulated transparently to promote an objective analysis (Mayring, 1991).

In the fourth step, the **coded text passages are systematically assigned to categories.**

Following the completion of coding all the data, the results undergo **analysis and interpretation.** At this stage, it becomes evident that employing a combination of deductive and interpretive research design is the most appropriate approach for addressing the research question. Given the research objective, a qualitative content analysis with categorization offers more structure and systematic compared to other qualitative text analysis approaches. Moreover, this system is particularly important for analyzing the similarities and peculiarities of the statements made by the interview participants, so that they can then be analyzed and contextualized. The analysis and interpretation are structured around three sub-questions. The code categories, as shown in the table, are assigned to these specific questions. This method ensures that all codes contribute to answering both the sub-questions and the overall research question.

In the final step, the results of the analysis are presented. This includes a **discussion of conclusions** based on the analyzed data. An answer to the research question can then be given within this discussion.

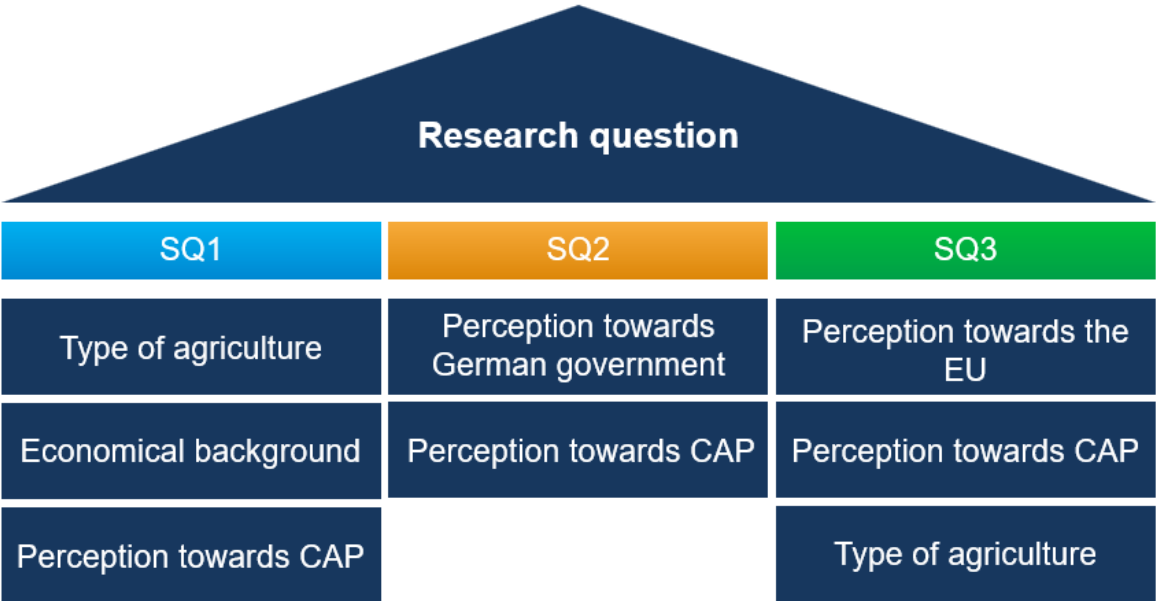


Figure 1: The Assignment of Code Categories to the Respective Sub-Questions

Limitations

The method of data collection involved interviews with only eleven young farmers, which may not be representative of the broader population of young farmers in Germany. This limited sample size constrains the generalizability of the findings, as the perspectives captured may reflect the specific experiences and contexts of the selected participants rather than a comprehensive view of the young farming community (Kaiser, 2020). Furthermore, the scope of this research is bounded by the constraints of a bachelor's thesis, including a maximum word count of 12,000 words. This restriction necessitated a focus on specific aspects of the CAP and the EU, potentially omitting other relevant factors or perspectives that could have been explored with a more extensive study. Despite this, the research methodology was designed to ensure depth and detail within the available scope. Yet this method also has its limitations. The subjective nature of interviews implies that responses can be influenced by the interviewee's constitution, the phrasing of questions, or the interviewer's approach / motivation, potentially introducing bias. Efforts were made to mitigate this by using a standardized interview guide and ensuring anonymity, but the inherent variability in qualitative research remains a factor to be mentioned (Diefenbach, 2008). Despite these limitations, this research serves as a valuable initial exploration into young farmers' views on the CAP and the EU. It highlights key areas of concern and satisfaction.

Analysis

This chapter focuses on the results of the study, which aimed to examine young German farmers' perceptions of the CAP reform and the EU in general. Further, it encompasses the presentation of results of the analysis based on the sub-questions and the validation or revision of the hypotheses. After analyzing each sub-question, a brief discussion was conducted. Therefore, the analysis and discussion are combined into a single chapter. The following codes were assigned numbers. The coding scheme and a table with the assignment of codes can be found in the appendix.

Findings

Sub-Question 1

- I. *What considerations – economic, ecological, political – are important in forming an opinion on CAP and the EU?*
 - i. *H1: Financial incentives are the primary factor influencing young farmers' opinions about the CAP.*

Codes 1, 2 & 3: Size of Farmland, Ownership, Tendency of Farmland

The interviewed farmers cultivate areas between 100 and 750 hectares, classifying them as medium-sized to large farms eligible for the CAP subsidies (Rizov, Pokrivcak et al., 2013). These subsidies were previously linked to the cultivated area. All interviewed farmers lease 20 to 50 percent of their land. The previous subsidies were granted to the landowner, not the land cultivator. As a result, farmers were required to transfer the subsidies for the leased land to the owner, even if they carried the costs of cultivation. The shift to eco-schemes aimed to provide fairer subsidy distribution, since subsidies are no longer tied exclusively to land ownership, but to the agricultural production method in line with CAP environmental standards. This is intended to encourage conventional farmers to convert their farms to organic farming. But conversion costs often outweigh the subsidies. These financial considerations, including lease arrangements and subsidy adjustments, complicated their economic situation. Therefore, Codes 1, 2, and 3 highlight the economic and political factors shaping young farmers' opinions. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of financial incentives as postulated in the hypothesis.

Codes 4 & 5: Reasons for Conventional Agriculture & (In-)Dependence on EU subsidies

The following factors were cited as the main reasons by the eight interview participants who engage in conventional farming.

1. Economic Security

Young farmers in Germany perceive the conventional market as both safer and larger than the organic one. Surprisingly, four farmers believe that the political incentives

provided by the CAP are theoretically sufficient, thereby expressing positive views on the existence of subsidy payments (Participant 2, 3, 4 & 7). Furthermore, farmers underscore the necessity of a shift in consumer preferences as a fundamental factor for considering the transition to organic farming. The young farmers interviewed expressed skepticism regarding the ability of political institutions, whether national or European, to effectively influence consumer preferences in a manner that would provide long-term benefits. Moreover, the four farmers are reporting about a specific phenomenon in Germany, where consumers tend to place less value on the quality of their food, in comparison with other European countries. Consequently, this process compels farmers to adapt to these market conditions in which consumers prefer low prices over a higher degree of quality (Participant 1, 4, 8 & 9). Following this argumentation, the primary reason for choosing conventional farming remains the greater financial security and stability it offers compared to the organic market. One farmer summarizes this argumentation aptly:

“I think that has less to do with legislation and more to do with pricing incentives, i.e. supply and demand.” (Participant 1)

Moreover, economic security is a significant concern not only in the market context but also in political terms. All interviewed farmers feel uncertain about the developments in EU agricultural policy and the fluctuations within the CAP reforms. As a result, they prefer not to rely on agricultural policy changes and the associated variations in subsidy payments (All participants). Young farmers believe it is too risky to depend on subsidy payments that have been consistently changing with the various CAP reforms over the past few decades. Apart from that, most interviewees (excluding participant 10) expressed skepticism about linking subsidies to sustainable measures. They criticized the portrayal of CAP implementation as straightforward, arguing that it is, in reality, a lengthy and costly process that exceeds the provided subsidies. Surprisingly, four farmers (Participant 2, 3, 4 & 7) had a proactive and positive attitude toward the reduction of area-based subsidies. This stance was not driven by a prioritization of sustainable measures, but rather by the view that reducing these subsidies serves as a warning to farmers who have become overly dependent on the EU. The young

farmers argued that this reduction in area payments was a wake-up call, encouraging them to reorganize their businesses to remain competitive and economically viable without relying on EU subsidies. A farmer summed up the argument of economic security concisely:

“There are simply too many things that are not thought through and where you should first consider what is renewed annually. Especially when investments are made in agriculture, we are talking about a period of over 10 years, especially for machinery, in which it can be written off for tax purposes, and for buildings it is over 20 years. As farmers, we simply need security to be able to make such investments. Which farmer can afford that otherwise?” (Participant 5)

2. Global Developments

The majority of interviewed farmers (7) cite external factors as additional uncertainties affecting the market for agricultural products (Participants 1 – 6 & 8). For instance, demand for organic products surged during the COVID-19 pandemic because German consumer had more disposable income (Participant 2, 3, 8 & 11). However, since the pandemic’s end, this demand has sharply declined. Additionally, five of the seven farmers report that the war in Ukraine and the conflict between Israel and Palestina have impacted the market by damaging supply chains, resulting in fewer conventional products from third countries being available in the EU market. This shortfall is being compensated by conventional goods from the internal European market, among the products from German farmers (1, 4, 5, 9 & 11). These observations align with the expectations of rational choice theory, which posits that farmers base their decisions on financial considerations.

3. Acquisition of Conventional Businesses from Parents

All interview participants have taken over or are in the process of taking over their parents’ conventional farms (Participants 1 – 11). Despite considering a switch to organic farming during their studies or with the guidance of external advisors, their

calculations revealed that the conversion would be prohibitively expensive. Furthermore, they are uncertain whether the investments required could be recovered through the sale of organic products. Farmers stated that they don't believe that the market for sustainable agricultural products is growing, even though they observed a change to sustainable consumption, especially within the same younger generation they belong to. However, the young farmers reported that due to their socialization within conventional businesses, young farmers still trust in the stability of conventional businesses, as it worked out for their recent generations (Participants 1 – 4). This process validates the constructivist assumption that environmental considerations play a subordinated role in the considerations of young farmers in Germany. Furthermore, the theoretical deduction that young German farmers are influenced by the cultural norms and values of the families in which they were raised is confirmed. Farmers do not tend to implement sustainable policy innovations into their farms even though political incentives are given. This assumption was revised by the data from the eleven interviews, in which all farmers – whether organic or conventional – prioritize economic considerations over environmentally friendly aspects.

“Our way of farming is simply historical. My great-grandfather started this way of farming and it has just continued over the years, so no further consideration has been given to changing it in my father's generation.” (Participant 2)

Code 6: Reasons for Ecological Agriculture

Even for organic farmers, ecological convictions play only a minor role. Three out of the eleven interviewees stated that they practice organic farming. Although these young farmers adhere to ecological principles, their primary motivations are local conditions and economic incentives rather than political or ecological beliefs (Participants 9 – 11). For the organic farmers interviewed, two factors are decisive:

The increased EU subsidies resulting from the CAP reform serve as a significant incentive for farmers. These financial incentives encourage farmers to maintain or expand their organic practices. Two of the three interviewed farmers reported that they

engage in organic farming only as a secondary business and are pleased with the increased subsidy payments. Despite this, they emphasized that their primary focus remains on their main business operations (Participant 10 & 11). Interestingly, when asked about the development of subsidies, organic farmers expressed satisfaction with the current levels of financial support they receive. However, they also pointed out that the subsidy payments would be insufficient if they were required to convert their farms to organic practices from scratch. This indicates that while existing organic farmers appreciate the financial incentives, they recognize the limitations of these subsidies in covering the substantial costs associated with transitioning to organic farming. Therefore, the current subsidy structure is more beneficial to those who have already made the transition, rather than those farmers who consider converting their conventional farms to organic ones (Participants 9 – 11).

Moreover, individual local conditions play a central role. One farmer reported about his Fodder and manure co-operation collaboration with other organic farms, which had a positive influence on his decision to switch to organic farming. The interviewee also reports that he is actively involved in the farmers' association. After talking to its members, he considers himself to be a "special case" and doubts that farmers will immediately switch to organic farming as a result of the subsidy adjustment. The other two farmers had already taken over their farms organically and found it economically inefficient to switch to conventional methods, especially considering the favorable subsidies (Participant 9 & 11). It is particularly notable that all three farmers emphasize that their engagement in ecological farming is driven not by ecological convictions, but by economic efficiency. This finding underscores the importance of the theoretical perspectives of the rational choice approach and constructivism.

Concluding from the Codes to Answer the First Sub-Question

The farmers' arguments show that economic factors are clearly the primary influence on young farmers' perceptions of the CAP. Even organic farmers appreciate the subsidies from Eco-Schemes but find them insufficient for profitable conversion to organic farming. Moreover, both economic security and market conditions play decisive roles in their decision-making. Political developments also significantly impact farmers, particularly when affecting their economic profitability. Farmers' skepticism

towards the CAP arises from mistrust of political changes and its errors within the practical implementation.

To answer the sub-question “What considerations – economic, ecological, political – are important in forming an opinion on CAP and the EU?”, the analysis shows that economic considerations are the primary factor influencing young farmers’ opinions on the CAP and the EU. The hypothesis that financial incentives are the main factor shaping their views was clearly confirmed by the data.

Sub-Question 2

- II. *At which level of policy-making and implementation do farmers perceive problems?*
 - i. *H2: Farmers acknowledge the challenges of policymaking at the European level. However, they are more inclined to criticize the national level for the poor implementation of the CAP.*

Code 7: National Political Situation with Agricultural Policy

Undercodes 8 & 9: Perception at federal state level (“Bundesland”) & Subsidies at Federal Level

As previously mentioned, agricultural policy in Germany is highly decentralized, with each of the 16 federal states exercising its own decision-making powers. 6 of the 11 farmers interviewed stated that they not only manage one farm, but that their arable land is in two different federal states. Two interviewees who cultivate land in both western and eastern Germany reported that the political requirements and scope of services are externally different (Participant 7 & 8). Since reunification, the eastern states have pursued different agricultural priorities, resulting in diverse subsidy structures and support programs. The eastern states offer far fewer subsidies, affecting the attractiveness of their arable land. One participant noted that, while there are many opportunities to take over farms in the east, these are often rejected in favor of better subsidy conditions available in the western states (Participant 4). Moreover, another interviewee provided a matching example for the variation in subsidy payments among federal states:

“Here at home in North Rhine-Westphalia, we fatten bulls, and they all stand on straw all year round and are bedded down in the mornings and evenings. In Brandenburg, we fatten cattle, the same species but female, and they also stand on straw all year round. In NRW, there is a premium for keeping them on straw, because 70 % of the beef you buy in the supermarket is from cattle that are not kept on straw, but on slatted floors, just like dairy cows. In Brandenburg, there are no such subsidies. In NRW, we receive a subsidy of €25,000 for keeping them on straw all year round. Here they have the same conditions. So there are such extreme differences at the state level that you have to ask yourself: Dear Germany, how can that be?” (Participant 7)

Due to the diversity of the federal states, farmers must take on a lot of additional bureaucratic work in order to comply with the regulations of both state governments. This leads to a feeling of unfair treatment due to these differences, as the variation in agricultural policies from state-to-state disadvantages those in regions with less effective implementation (Participants 2, 5 – 8 & 11).

Moreover, farmers are eager to implement innovative ideas in their operations (Participants 2 – 10). However, the varying regulations at the national level hinder their ability to plan long-term investments and achieve financial stability (All participants). This situation adversely affects their current economic conditions and future prospects. Consequently, young farmers frequently feel disadvantaged and demotivated, diminishing the appeal of the agricultural profession and exacerbating the succession problem in the sector (All participants).

Moreover, many farmers expressed specific dissatisfaction with Germany's national agricultural policy administration. They reported that conditions are increasingly deteriorating. In all 11 interviews, the high bureaucratic barriers in Germany were criticized massively. Therefore, the problem of Germany's bureaucracy can be pointed out as the greatest factor of dissatisfaction which influenced the perception of farmers towards the CAP-Reform (All participants).

One specific example mentioned by all young farmers is the application for agricultural funding. The criticism repeatedly mentioned that German bureaucracy does not have any digital offerings compared to other countries. The biggest problem in adjusting direct payments and introducing ecological measures is the surveying of the cultivated areas. These measurements are carried out digitally, for example using drones or other technical advances (Participant 4 & 5). However, the difficulty for German farmers is to present this digital data in a comprehensible analogue form so that they can demonstrate their fields and usage in accordance with the specified standards for the German authorities to receive subsidy payments in accordance with the relevant regulations. In other countries, digital concepts have already been implemented that facilitate the submission of applications for farmers. These digital solutions would be of considerable help to German farmers and significantly reduce bureaucracy (Participant 4 & 5). The negative perception of national agricultural policy is thus reinforced by the lack of digitization and the resulting bureaucratic hurdles, which leads to general dissatisfaction among farmers with the German agricultural administration.

Code 8: Perception of the National Implementation of CAP-Reform

The perception of the national implementation of the CAP reform was one of the most frequently discussed topics, with 25 quotes associated with this code. To begin with the fact that all respondents criticize the German implementation of the CAP, contrasting it with other EU states. The interviewed farmers already feel disadvantaged on the national level due to the previous outlined variations. This sense of unfairness is further amplified when they compare their situation to farmers in other EU countries, where national strategic plans are often implemented less stringently. Consequently, these farmers are required to meet less rigorous regulations to receive EU subsidies (All participants).

“It’s quite stupid that all EU countries have different laws, because in the end we all produce for the world market and the same standards must apply to things that come from the EU. But I think it’s incredibly unfair that Germany differs so much from other countries.” (Participant 1)

A noteworthy finding is, that five farmers empathize with the EU's collective challenges in creating a common agricultural policy that accommodates all member states. Despite being negatively affected; they recognize the difficulties in balancing the diverse needs of the EU's agricultural sector and its variety of regions (Participant 2, 3, 4, 7 & 9). Moreover, seven interviewees expressed approval to the EU of the freedom granted to individual states in submitting their national strategic plans, but they specifically criticized the stringent implementation of the German strategic plan (Participant 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 & 11).

Furthermore, four of the eleven farmers demonstrated significant reflective capacity. These farmers noted that agricultural associations had advocated for the implementation through national strategic plans during the CAP reform's legislative process in 2021, arguing that this approach would better address regional differences within the EU (2, 3, 6 & 7). However, the four farmers now find it unfair that these associations criticize the EU for the decision they advocated for. These farmers believe that the BMEL should be held accountable for the poorly formulated national strategic plan. All interviewed farmers had hoped that the new CAP reform would improve the implementation of EU agricultural policy in Germany but feel that this has not been the case (All participants).

"I understand that it is difficult for the EU to find a regulation that is feasible for everyone. But the CAP is really very difficult to implement. And then there are countries within the EU that allow themselves a lot of leeway. There should perhaps be more of this leeway in Germany, and I believe that the German situation for farmers is made considerably more complicated by this bureaucratic element, and thus unfair to us farmers in comparison with the rest of Europe." (Participant 6)

Another interesting aspect reported by five interview partners is their perception, that various political decision-makers at the national, federal, and EU levels frequently engage in blame-shifting to maintain favorable poll ratings within their perception (Participant 1, 5, 6, 9 & 10). Blame shifting is the practice of transferring responsibility

or blame for policy failures from one level of government to another, typically from higher to lower levels to avoid responsibility within their political area (Heinkelmann-Wild & Rittberger, 2024). This practice results in a lack of accountability and constructive collaboration among these levels of governance. Consequently, German agriculture suffers from the inefficiencies and incompetence arising from the flawed symbiosis between national and EU directives. The majority of interviewees feel that this dynamic hinders the development and implementation of coherent, effective agricultural policies, ultimately to the detriment of the agricultural sector (Participants 1 – 5, 7, 9 & 10).

“Our agriculture minister at the federal level, who is a member of the SPD, always blames everything on federal policy and says, ‘The federal government has told us to do it this way.’ And if you listen to Mr. Özdemir of the Green Party, he says, ‘No, that’s not true, the EU has told us to do it this way.’ I have the feeling that everyone is passing the buck a little, and then when you hear the European Commissioner for Agriculture say: ‘It’s not that bad, because the countries determine the implementation with the national strategy plan’: It is just damn difficult for us young farmers to get an insight into who should be the first to take the criticism and who to support in the future and who not.”
(Participant 1)

Concluding from the Codes to Answer the Second Sub-Question

Farmers find the decentralized nature of German agricultural policy, with its varying regulations across federal states, particularly problematic. This inconsistency leads to feelings of unfair treatment. Administrative challenges, such as high bureaucratic barriers and the lack of digital solutions, further exacerbate their dissatisfaction. The inconsistent implementation of the CAP in Germany, compared to other EU states, is a significant point of contention, leading to financial disparities and a sense of injustice among young farmers. Moreover, the perceived blame-shifting among national, federal, and EU political decision-makers undermines effective policy development and implementation. In response to Sub-Question 2, the interviews indicate that farmers

primarily perceive issues at the national level. While they acknowledge the complexities of European-level policymaking, their main criticisms are directed at how the CAP is implemented nationally. Thus, the hypothesis, “Farmers acknowledge the challenges of policymaking at the European level. However, they are more inclined to criticize the national level for the poor implementation of the CAP,” is validated.

Sub-Question 3

- III. *Do perceptions about CAP translate into perceptions about the EU in general?*
- i. *H3: Farmers’ perception of the CAP influences their overall view of the EU.*

Code 9: Positive Perception

The majority of interviewed farmers appreciate the flexibility granted to member states in implementing CAP reforms within their national strategy plans. This autonomy allows them to tailor the reforms into their national contexts (Participants 1 – 4, 6, 7, 10 & 11). Surprisingly, three farmers support the reduction of direct payments. Their rationale includes two main points: firstly, direct payments often benefit landowners rather than tenant farmers who cultivate the land. Secondly, these farmers believe that agriculture should not receive subsidies without corresponding efforts or improvements, suggesting that Eco-Schemes could serve as an incentive for farmers to remain competitive and innovative. This sentiment highlights the young farmers’ desire for modernization and improvement in agricultural practices (Participant 4, 6 & 7).

“I definitely want to move towards direct payments, so completely away from just money for performance. Because if I get money for it, then I either have to pass it on to the landowner, who is not a farmer, or I get it for doing nothing. That means there is no incentive to get better, but I just keep doing the same thing, and that’s complete nonsense.” (Participant 4)

Apart from that, all young farmers appreciate the “Young Farmers Premium” which was introduced by the latest CAP Reform as a major practical improvement (All

participants). These payments are made to farmers in the first five years after they open or take over their farm. The premium can amount to up to €16,000 per year, which can mean a total of over €80,000 in financial support over this period. (Hill B., 2011). Young farmers report that the premium cannot cover large investments, but it is still a valuable financial help. Furthermore, five interview participants stated that this premium often serves as an incentive for older farmers to hand over their farm to the younger generation. Thus, the young farmer premium is not only of great financial but also of great idealistic benefit (Participant 1, 2, 4, 6 & 8). Lastly, the reduction in direct payments is seen to reduce dependency on EU subsidies, particularly for small-scale farmers. This move is perceived to encourage self-sufficiency and resilience among the farming community.

Code 10: Negative Perception of CAP

All farmers express significant criticism regarding the uneven implementation of EU directives across member states (All participants). Most interview participants (9) specifically point to Eastern European countries like Poland and Romania, perceiving that these countries benefit more from EU subsidies while implementing CAP reforms less stringently (Participants 1 – 6, 9 & 11). This perceived leniency places German farmers at a competitive disadvantage within the European market, as they find it unfair that European policy allows for such variability. Additionally, they criticize the EU for not enforcing stricter controls on the often laissez-faire implementation of the CAP in these states, which continue to receive the same subsidy payments despite their more lenient practices. This discrepancy subjects' German farmers to stricter national requirements, exacerbating their competitive disadvantage.

“But if you look at Denmark, the Netherlands, France and Belgium, you see that the western states are always trying to fulfil the funding requirements of the European Union twice over, while the eastern states of the EU take a more laissez-faire approach, which of course leads to grossly distorted competitive conditions.” (Participant 5)

Another central criticism is that the environmental measures of the CAP are perceived as excessively stringent in comparison to other international standards outside of the European Union. Farmers argue that other countries do not address the global issue of climate change with the same seriousness. This leads to a competitive disadvantage for European farmers who adhere to stricter regulations. Additionally, farmers are frustrated by EU trade agreements with countries that have significantly lower production standards thereby flooding the European market with cheaper, less-regulated products. All of the interviewed young farmers pointed out that they feel pressured to invest heavily to meet high environmental standards while competing against cheaper imports produced under less stringent conditions (All Participants).

Another critical point is the perceived impracticality of many political measures. Farmers feel that their dependence on direct payments is increasingly exploited to enforce EU-imposed measures (Participants 1, 4 & 8 – 11). While this financial support is essential for the economic survival of many farms, young farmers find this dependency problematic. They feel compelled to comply with measures they find impractical or unnecessarily complex. This dependency on direct payments forces farmers to adjust their operations, often incurring additional costs and administrative burdens (Participants 1, 4 & 8 – 11). This not only impacts farm profitability but also diminishes the appeal of farming as a profession, as young farmers feel their ability to innovate and operate independently is compromised.

“I find many things to be very impractical. I have the feeling that there are many farmers who are already very dependent on direct payments and that this dependence is being exploited more and more to push through things that the EU considers to be right.” (Participant 3)

Code 11: Positive Perceptions of Young Farmers Towards the EU

Despite their criticisms of the CAP, nine out of eleven farmers manage to separate their dissatisfaction with the CAP from their general view of the EU (Participants 2, 3, 4 & 6 – 11). Hereby, they pointed out the following key benefits they associate with EU membership:

The interview participants appreciate the EU's economic union and the common market, which allow for the free movement of goods, capital and labor across member states. Especially labor mobility is a significant feature for the young farmers as they can hire seasonal workers from other EU countries without the bureaucratic hurdles that accompany international employment elsewhere (Participant 3, 4, 8 & 11). This flexibility is particularly beneficial during peak agricultural seasons when the demand for labor is high. Moreover, eight of the eleven farmers specifically noted the advantages of the common economic area, stating that it provides an important framework for their business operations (Participants 3, 4 & 6 – 11). The common market facilitates easier trade and reduces the complexity of cross-border transactions, thereby creating significant economic opportunities. Additionally, it enables farmers to access broader fairs and benefit from standardized regulations, which help streamline the process of exporting goods within the EU. This economic integration is seen as essential for maintaining competitiveness in a globalized market (Participants 3, 4 & 6 – 11).

Moreover, the young farmers also value the security and stability that the EU provides. Several interviewees expressed concerns about the potential challenges German farmers would face if they were outside the EU. They fear that, as an individual state, Germany might struggle to compete on the world stage (Participants 2, 3, 4 & 6 – 11). The EU's collective strength offers a buffer against the uncertainties of the global market, providing a sense of security that is especially appreciated in an increasingly interconnected world. Three farmers mentioned that their opinion of the EU has improved since Brexit (4, 7 & 10). Despite being occasionally frustrated with EU regulations; they recognize the value of staying within the union to avoid the negative consequences experienced by British farmers. These farmers also appreciate the EU's role in addressing global challenges. They cited the EU's collective unification and collective diplomatic efforts in external political issues, such as the Middle East conflict, the rise of China, and Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. Consequently, the sense of security provided by the EU in these uncertain times is highly valued by young farmers. The interviews also revealed that the sense of belonging to a larger community that shares common goals and values is an important positive factor in their

perception of the EU (Participants 2, 3, 4 & 6 – 11). A fitting quote from one of the farmers encapsulates this sentiment:

“I think the EU is very important and must continue to be a top priority. As Germans, we are not capable of acting alone when you look at the major players in the market. I believe the EU is a significant and vital element that we have created and learned from our history.”
(Participant 2)

Code 12: Negative Perceptions of Young Farmers Towards the EU

Young farmers argue that many EU regulations are impractical and counterproductive, ultimately harming the very groups they aim to benefit. They feel these laws are often made without adequate consideration of the realities faced by farmers (All participants). For instance, stringent environmental measures might require significant investments in new technologies or practices that many farmers, especially smaller ones, cannot afford (Participant 5). This results in increased administrative burdens as farmers must navigate complex compliance requirements, involving extensive paperwork and bureaucratic hurdles. A practical example is the mandate for advanced manure management systems, which, while environmentally beneficial, demand costly equipment that small farms struggle to finance, thereby placing them at a disadvantage (Participant 11). The disconnect between policy makers and the practical challenge of farming exacerbates this issue, making it difficult for farmers to implement necessary changes without compromising their productivity and profitability. Moreover, several interview participants believe that while the EU should unite on major issues, many competences should be returned to member states (Participants 1 – 5 & 11). Several young farmers (6) view the EU as an overregulating body that oversteps its bounds, making life more complicated for EU citizens rather than improving it (Participant 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 11). Moreover, they believe that while the EU should unite on major issues, many competences should be returned to member states. These sentiments are compounded by the belief that the EU is out of touch with practical realities, thereby formulating policies that do not align with the needs and conditions of the future generation of farmers.

“I also have a lot of criticism for the EU, especially when it comes to simplifying and improving life for citizens. I believe that the EU should stand together on major issues, but on minor issues the EU or Brussels should not patronize the citizens of individual nation states.”
(Participant 1)

Seven young farmers accuse the EU of applying double standards (Participants 1, 4, 5, 6 & 8 –11). They point out that the EU often enacts laws that conflict with each other, resulting in policies that ultimately benefit no one. At this point, the EU trade agreements were again addressed, in which the EU, for example, negotiates strict environmental regulations for European farmers, but at the same time trade agreements with countries that have much lower environmental standards (Participant 1 & 4). This allows cheaper, less regulated agricultural products to enter the European market, undermining the efforts and investments of local farmers who comply with stricter regulations. This perceived hypocrisy fuels discontent among the interviewed young farmers, who feel that the EU’s contradictory policies disadvantage them and fail to provide a coherent, supportive framework for sustainable agriculture.

Concluding from the Codes to Answer the Third Sub-Question

The analysis of the interviews confirms the hypothesis that farmers’ perceptions of the CAP significantly influence their overall view of the EU.

Several farmers appreciate the flexibility granted to member states in implementing CAP reforms through their national strategy plans in general. This autonomy allows them to tailor reforms to better fit their national contexts. Surprisingly, some farmers even support the reduction of direct payments, arguing that this shift encourages competitiveness and innovation to small farmers, which they need to gain independency from the EU subsidies. Additionally, the Young Farmers Premium, introduced by the latest CAP reform, is seen as a significant practical improvement.

Conversely, the data reveals substantial criticism regarding the CAP’s implementation and its broader implications. The disparities in how EU directives are enforced across

member states are a major point of contention. Farmers from stricter regulatory environments, like Germany, feel disadvantaged compared to other European member states, where implementations are perceived as more lenient. This perceived unfairness fuels a sense of frustration and resentment. This process is undermining the farmers' confidence in the EU's ability to function as a unified political institution that fairly addresses the needs of all member states without disadvantaging individual countries. Environmental regulations under the CAP are another critical issue. Farmers argue that these stringent measures, while well-intentioned, often lead to increased operational costs and administrative burdens. This criticism reveals a perceived disconnect between EU policymakers and the practical realities of farming. The frustration is further exacerbated by EU trade agreements with countries that do not adhere to the same environmental standards, which farmers view as hypocritical and detrimental to their competitive position.

Despite these criticisms, many farmers manage to separate their dissatisfaction with the CAP from their overall view of the EU. They recognize the benefits of the economic union and common market, such as the free movement of goods, capital, and labor, which are central for maintaining competitiveness in a globalized market. The EU's role in providing security and addressing global challenges is also highly valued, reinforcing a sense of unity and shared purpose.

The hypothesis that farmers' perceptions of the CAP influence their overall view of the EU is validated, but the relationship is complex. Positive elements like the Young Farmers Premium and the flexibility of national strategy plans are overshadowed by criticisms regarding the uneven implementation among member states and federal states, stringent environmental measures, and perceived bureaucratic inefficiencies. These factors collectively shape a nuanced and often contradictory perception of the EU among farmers. The varied and inconsistent views expressed by the interview partners highlight the need for responsive policy approaches to address their concerns effectively.

Conclusion

The purpose of this bachelor thesis served to explore how young German farmers perceive the EU's CAP and the EU as an institution. Through qualitative research involving semi-structured interviews and deductive content analysis, a diverse range of insights and opinions were obtained. By this process, a nuanced understanding of these perceptions can be formulated in the following:

Young German farmers exhibit a complex view of the CAP and the EU. To begin with, the interview participants recognize the economic benefits provided by the EU, such as the single market and the labor mobility framework. However, their perspectives on the latest CAP reform from 2023 are predominantly critical. While some appreciate the flexibility offered by national strategy plans and the Young Farmers Premium, the general sentiment is that financial incentives are insufficient to drive significant changes, particularly in transitioning to sustainable practices. Moreover, young farmers value the economic security provided by the demand for conventional products over sustainability aspects. They believe that a fundamental shift in consumer preferences is necessary, as they doubt that political institutions can effectively influence long-term demand.

As the analysis of the first sub question has shown, economic considerations are the main factor which influences the perceptions of young German farmers towards the CAP. Both conventional and organic farmers highlighted the inadequacy of subsidies to cover the substantial costs associated with environmentally friendly practices.

This financial strain is further compounded by the complexity of the German administration system with its multilevel political system. The decentralized approach, where each of the 16 federal states has its own set of regulations, causes massive bureaucratic burdens, and creates disparities in support programs. This inconsistency is a significant obstacle to effective and fair agricultural practices, causing high levels of frustration among young farmers. They also perceive that Germany's stringent implementation of the CAP places them at a competitive disadvantage compared to farmers in other EU countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, who implement the CAP less rigorously yet still receive the same subsidies.

The ability of young farmers to differentiate between the CAP and the EU as an institution varies. While most interview participants can separate their criticism of specific CAP measures from their overall perception of the EU, some cannot. This inability to distinguish between the levels of policy and polity often results in a generalized negative connotation of the EU when dissatisfaction with the CAP arises.

Moreover, EU's trade policies, which allow imports from countries with lower environmental standards, are seen as hypocritical and detrimental to European farmers. This not only undermines local farmers' efforts to comply with stringent regulations but also exacerbates their competitive disadvantage in the market. The increased competition from cheaper imports forces European producers to lower their prices, further straining their financial viability. Furthermore, the following practical conclusions can be drawn from this research: The findings suggest several actions that need to be taken for EU agricultural policy to be more effective and better received by young farmers.

A simplification and universal application of the regulatory framework concerning Germany's implementation of CAP measures would reduce the bureaucratic burdens and ensure fair treatment amongst all federal states in Germany. For this to happen, the BMEL must work together with each department of the federal states department for agriculture more closely. For this process to happen, the federal government must develop policies that are more attuned to the practical realities and challenges faced by farmers, incorporating more feedback from the younger generation into the policymaking process.

On the European level, the increase of financial incentives and support, particularly for smaller farms and those transitioning to sustainable practices must happen. Additionally, the perceptions of young farmers would fundamentally improve if the EU would offer non-material assistance to help small farms manage their businesses economically while incorporating sustainable practices. This support would be valuable across national borders, enabling young farmers from different countries to learn from one another. Such exchanges would foster mutual understanding and contribute to a common European identity. Given the recent European elections and the rise of right-wing nationalist forces, this measure would be particularly beneficial to the agricultural policy sector, making it both practical and timely. Furthermore, the EU should seriously

consider aligning its trade policies with third countries to the environmental standards expected of EU farmers. This alignment would ensure a level playing field for all.

This research contributes to the existing literature by filling a gap in understanding the specific perceptions of young German farmers towards the CAP and the EU. The issues highlighted in this study underscore the increasing unattractiveness of the agricultural profession for the younger generation. Additionally, farmers have indicated that entering the profession is nearly impossible without a family background in agriculture. Given external factors such as international conflicts, the importance of maintaining national supply through German agriculture becomes particularly important. Consequently, this research thesis advocates for greater attention and co-decision rights for the younger generation within the agricultural sector.

Future studies should expand the sample size to include a broader demographic of young farmers across Germany and even within different EU member states. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide a profound understanding of how perceptions change over time with the implementation of new policy measures and reforms. Moreover, a comparative research approach should be considered to provide young farmers more space to participate in decision-making processes at both the national and European levels, as this significantly affects their professional future. Furthermore, there is a much higher need for further research on evaluating the German implementation of the CAP to identify and address practical mistakes.

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Appendix

Appendix A: The Coding Scheme

| Category | Perception towards the EU | Perception towards German government | Perception towards CAP | Type of agriculture |
|------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Deductive Codes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Perception towards EU • Negative Perception towards EU | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of the national implementation of the CAP reform • National political situation with agricultural policy • Symbiosis of national and European directives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Perception towards CAP • Negative Perception towards CAP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable Agriculture • Conventional Agriculture • Agriculture in line with CAP Standards |
| Inductive Codes | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception at "Bundesland" level (Undercode) • Perception at federal state level • Negative perception on national agricultural policy administration • Subsidies at state/federal level (Undercode) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of young farmer support • Deterioration/Improvement due to CAP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasons for conventional agriculture • Reasons for sustainable agriculture |
| Data Ex-ampels | “My attitude towards the EU is not necessarily the best when it comes to the political situation in | “At federal level, we simply have the major problem that politicians find it very difficult to make decisions and when decisions are | “The approach was promising at the beginning. But the way it was implemented, hit farmers pretty hard in the end.” | “Since the conventional method is somewhat easier than the organic method, we simply decided in favor |

| | | | | |
|---------------------|--|---|--|--|
| | general” (Participant 5) | made, they are usually not really made for us farmers.” (Participant 2) | (Participant 6) | of it” (Participant 8) |
| Coding Rules | Assign codes within this category when the respondent discusses their views or opinions towards the EU, including its policies, governance, or overall impact. | Assign codes within this category when the respondent addresses their perceptions of the national government’s role, actions, and policies related to agriculture, including the implementation of the CAP and agricultural subsidies at various government levels. | Assign codes within this category when the respondent discusses their views and attitudes towards the CAP including its impacts, support mechanisms, and any desires for improvements. | Assign codes within this category when the respondent talks about the different types of agricultural practices they engage in and their reasons for choosing these practices. |

Appendix B: Numbering of Codes in the Analysis-Section

Code 1: Size of Farmland

Code 2: Ownership of Farmland

Code 3: Tendency of Farmland

Code 4: Reasons for Conventional Agriculture

Code 5: (In-)Dependence on EU subsidies

Code 6: Reasons for Ecological Agriculture

Code 7: National Political Situation with Agricultural Policy

Code 8: Perception at federal state level (“Bundesland”) (Undercode)

Code 9: & Subsidies at Federal Level (Undercode)

Code 10: Perception of the National Implementation of CAP-Reform

Code11: Positive Perception

Code 12: Negative Perception of CAP

Code 13: Positive Perceptions of Young Farmers Towards the EU

Code 14: Negative Perceptions of Young Farmers Towards the EU

Appendix C: The Interview-Guide

| Topic Guide (Topics and Subtopics) | Questions |
|--|--|
| Topic 1. Economic Indicators | |
| Size/ownership of the cultivated area (Important for the payment of subsidies) Helps to answer sub-question 1 | How large is your arable land? Do you own all part of your arable land, or do you lease some parts of it? |
| Type of cultivation (Important for the department from the rational choice or constructivism theory & payment of subsidies) Helps to answer sub-question 1 | Do you practice organic or conventional farming? What considerations led you to choose your method of cultivation? |
| Incentives for/against the subsidies of the CAP reform (Important for the department on rational choice or constructivism theory) Helps to answer sub-question 1 | What political incentives would encourage you to switch your business to organic farming? |
| Incentives for/against the subsidies of the CAP reform (Important for the department on rational choice or constructivism theory) Helps to answer sub-question 1 | If which political incentives were to be removed, would you switch your business back to conventional farming? |
| Topic 2. National and European Agricultural Policy Legislation | |
| Information on the impact of political legislation on the work of farmers Helps to answer sub-question 2 | To what extent did national and European legislation influence your decision to pursue conventional or organic farming? What is your opinion of national agricultural policy at the federal and cantonal level? |
| Helps to answer sub-question 2 | What is your opinion of the EU's common agricultural policy? |

| | |
|--|--|
| Helps to answer the 2nd & 3rd sub-questions | In your opinion, how are national and European agricultural policies linked? |
| Helps to answer the 2nd & 3rd sub-questions | At which political level (federal/EU) would you most likely criticize? |
| Topic 3: Perception of the CAP and the EU | |
| Perception of the CAP Helps to answer sub-questions 2 & 3 | What is your position on the latest reform of the EU's common agricultural policy (CAP)? |
| Helps to answer the research question and the 3 rd st sub-question | What is your attitude towards the EU? |
| Perception of the CAP Helps to answer sub-questions 2 & 3 | Has the CAP reform led to a general improvement or deterioration for German farmers? |
| Answer to the 3rd sub-question | Does the reform of the CAP have an impact on how you perceive the EU? |
| Topic 4: Personal Background | |
| Do farmers already have financial resources before taking over the farm? Helps to answer sub-question 1 | Did you take over your business from your family/parents? |
| How sustainable do farmers consider the CAP policy to be? | Are you planning to pass the business on to the next generation in your family? |

Appendix D: The Interview Timetable

| Interview Participant | Date of the Interview | Time of the Interview | Duration of the Interview | Type of Agriculture |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Participant 1 | 21.05.2024 | 21:00 | 40 min & 26 Sec. | conventional |
| Participant 2 | 22.05.2024 | 15:30 | 44 min & 38 Sec. | conventional |
| Participant 3 | 22.05.2024 | 18:00 | 39 min & 49 Sec. | conventional |
| Participant 4 | 27.05.2024 | 10:35 | 51 min & 02 Sec. | conventional |
| Participant 5 | 29.05.2024 | 10:07 | 49 min & 51 Sec. | conventional |
| Participant 6 | 29.05.2024 | 15:27 | 39 min & 11 Sec. | conventional |
| Participant 7 | 30.05.2024 | 18:00 | 55 min & 44 Sec. | conventional |
| Participant 8 | 03.06.2024 | 10:30 | 46 min & 34 Sec. | conventional |
| Participant 9 | 23.05.2024 | 10:15 | 45 min & 27 Sec. | organic |
| Participant 10 | 28.05.2024 | 10:15 | 38 min & 56 Sec. | organic |
| Participant 11 | 03.06.2024 | 20:00 | 37 min & 40 Sec. | organic |

Appendix E: Declaration of Data Storage

The data from the coded transcripts were not included in this research paper due to their size. However, the file is stored securely in a private data cloud and can be provided upon request. Only the author of this research paper has access to the coded transcripts, and they will be retained for the next five years.