

# Not just farmers' protests

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**European farmers are unhappy with low food prices, high production costs and market competition. Underlying these shared grievances are stark profile differences and interests that go well beyond the agricultural sector.**



**T**housands of farmers took to the streets in France, Belgium and Germany over the past few weeks. The ‘farmers’ protests’, as they’ve been presented to the public, were targeted at multiple factors – including subsidy cuts resulting from new rules of the European Union’s (EU’s) Green Deal and other policy reforms, high production costs (more recently amplified by the effect of wars on energy, fertilizer and fuel prices) and competition from cheap imports (expected to worsen if a trade deal between the EU and the Mercosur is finally brokered). Despite the media’s focus on the latest events, seeing these protests in isolation and considering farmers a single, homogeneous group might mask the complexity of the situation and hinder long-term solutions.

Discontent isn’t exactly new nor exclusive to European countries. Farmers all around the world have been battling with increasing production costs and market unpredictability. Many are still suffering the consequences of the economic slow-down and supply disruptions that followed the COVID-19 pandemic. The sector’s agitation reflects broader challenges that agriculture is faced with – and which motivates a lot of the food systems research we publish: the need to produce

enough food (as well as feed, fuel and fodder) in a sustainable, fair and inclusive way, at affordable prices, albeit increasing risks. In this context, farmers are expected to change the way they produce food to be more sustainable, competitive and resilient – and to comply with various new regulations.

Farmers’ demands vary widely from country to country depending on national legislation, politics, economic interests of specific groups, cultural identity, the importance attached to rural landscapes and many other factors that go way beyond the agricultural sector – and may even put European farmers on opposite sides. While much of this year’s revolt in **Germany** was caused by a plan to phase out tax breaks on agricultural diesel, the focus of **Dutch** protests was measures proposed by the government a few years ago to reduce agricultural nitrogen emissions. In **France**, farmers’ unions want less bureaucracy and protection from foreign competition. Notably, not all French farmers felt represented by the latest protests; farmer associations such as FNSEA, the Young Farmers and the Confédération Paysanne have considerably

different **agendas**. Arguably, a small French farmer might have more in common with a small farmer in Argentina than with another French farmer who is highly capitalized, highly technified and export oriented.

At the supra-regional level, a complex web of political and economic interests exists too. Environmental concerns and commercial strategies are intermingled in the talks about a potential EU–Mercosur trade deal, for example, which would not only involve agricultural product imports to Europe but also European exports of industrialized products in return. While some EU countries accuse others of unfair competition, many question the fairness of European subsidy programmes, which have been in place for decades and aren’t conditioned on such strict environmental standards.

Interests aside, the fact that food products are grossly undervalued and that prices do not reflect the true cost of food seems central to most of the issues described here. Besides perpetuating market distortions and generating a huge ecological burden, undervalued food makes it hard for farmers to improve the way they farm at the pace the planet needs. Food pricing adjustment will require coordinated action to ensure a level playing field and a package of accompanying measures, especially to ensure food affordability for the poor if food prices go up once hidden costs are internalized. It will also require a paradigm shift, as even well-off consumers – from Europe and elsewhere – aren’t always willing to pay more for their food.

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