Towards Agrarian Justice: A Distributive Justice Framework for the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy

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Abstract

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) represents one of the European Union's oldest and most significant policy frameworks. However, over the years it has been criticised for not adequately addressing questions of equity, sustainability, and justice. This thesis critically examines the distributional patterns of CAP subsidies, situating the analysis within the broader context of the debates on distributive justice and degrowth. While the CAP aims to promote environmental sustainability and social equity, its current distribution of subsidies disproportionately benefits large farms, to the detriment of small-scale farmers. Drawing on normative principles of distributive justice—including prioritarianism, sufficientarianism, and limitarianism—this thesis proposes an alternative framework for subsidy allocation that prioritises equity and long-term sustainability. In doing so, it critiques utilitarian assumptions underpinning the current subsidy system and argues for a paradigm shift toward a degrowth framework. The findings suggest that a degrowth, justice-oriented distribution scheme could better align CAP subsidies with environmental and social goals while addressing structural inequities. The thesis offers policy recommendations for reforming CAP subsidies and emphasises the need for fairer allocation mechanisms and stronger support for small-scale, sustainable agriculture.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contributing to over 10 per cent of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the European Union (EU), the agricultural sector is considered the third largest source of emissions after the energy and transport sectors (European Commission, 2023; Friends of the Earth Europe, 2023). A significant proportion of these emissions stem from conventional and large-scale farming practices, which dominate the agricultural landscape. While food production is essential to sustain human life, current farming practices have become increasingly damaging to the environment and have moved beyond their original purpose of feeding Europe's population to becoming a tool for profit maximisation (Fritz, 2011, pp. 15-16). Consequently, large-scale agriculture has accelerated soil depletion, water pollution and biodiversity loss, thereby accelerating climate change (Dudley & Alexander, 2017, p. 45; Horrigan et al., 2002, p. 445).

Another detrimental aspect of agriculture is its relationship to social and economic justice, particularly in the context of smallholder farming. In Europe, small farmers with less than 10 hectares account for approximately 80 per cent of farms, yet they earn on average 50 per cent less than the EU median income (Chemnitz & Rehmer, 2019, p. 28; Friends of the Earth Europe, 2022). These farmers, many of whom use sustainable, low-impact farming practices, are crucial to transitioning towards a sustainable future, which is not reflected in their treatment by the current system (Boix-Fayos & De Vente, 2022, p. 2). Ultimately, the inequitable distribution of subsidies and the environmental consequences of climate change will likely make these farmers bear the brunt of the environmental and socio-economic consequences. Given these dynamics, there is an urgent need for a fundamental shift in agricultural practices.

In the EU, the main policy framework for agricultural practices is the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which is a crucial tool for promoting both environmental and social objectives. Originally developed as part of European integration after World War II, the aim was to ensure food security and stabilise economies and farm incomes following the destruction caused by war. The CAP has since aimed to shift its mandate to support sustainable agricultural practices, in line with the EU's climate change mitigation objectives and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Scown et al., 2020, p. 237). Despite this shift, CAP subsidies continue to benefit large industrial producers with high emissions, raising questions about the effectiveness and fairness of the system (FragDenStaat, 2022).

The CAP's current subsidy allocation methods largely reflect a utilitarian distribution scheme, where subsidies are allocated by amount of land area. While this system focuses on profit maximisation, it disproportionately favours farmers with larger land holdings, as they

receive more financial support than small farmers (FragDenStaat, 2022; Fritz, 2011, pp. 26-31). Larger agribusinesses with lower production costs, benefit more, while small farms - the backbone of sustainable agriculture - receive insufficient support (Scown et al. 2020, p. 238). This imbalance in the distribution of CAP subsidies raises fundamental questions of distributive justice.

In addressing these distributional challenges, this research is situated within the broader framework of degrowth. Degrowth challenges the prevailing growth-driven economic system by calling for a transition towards environmental justice by reducing energy and resource consumption (Gomiero, 2018, p. 1824; Guerrero Lara et al., 2023, p. 1579). While proponents of economic growth have seen growth as essential for distributive justice and the maintenance of a high quality of life, the degrowth framework offers an alternative to better address societal objectives (Muraca, 2012, p. 535).

Ultimately, previous research has quantitively and qualitatively assessed the distribution of CAP subsidies, but with limited discussion of how the subsidy distribution fits into the broader framework of distributive justice. Consequently, the central question that this thesis seeks to answer is: "How should agricultural subsidies in the Common Agricultural Policy be distributed?" It aims to bridge the gap by critically analysing the EU policy framework to identify the underlying distributive justice patterns in the CAP subsidy allocation. Specifically, it focuses on the normative dimensions of how subsidies are distributed between large-scale industrial farms and small-scale sustainable farmers. It proposes a combined approach that draws on prioritarian, sufficientarian and limitarian accounts of distributive justice, framed within the degrowth paradigm. By introducing a distributive justice framework rooted in degrowth, this thesis seeks to offer a more environmentally just distribution scheme.

This thesis begins with a review of relevant literature to contextualise the argument. The paper proceeds with a critical normative analysis of insights from various empirical and philosophical debates, while providing an overview of the most prominent principles of distributive justice. This is followed by a critique of the current subsidy distribution patterns and concludes with the proposal of an alternative distribution model grounded in degrowth.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS AND JUSTICE IN EU AGRICULTURAL POLICY

This chapter aims to provide an overview of key concepts, debates and literature surrounding agriculture in the EU. In this context, several assumptions and concepts are clarified, including the role of agriculture in climate change and an overview of the current CAP

framework. By contextualising EU agricultural subsidies, this chapter aims to contribute to a better understanding of the normative concerns related to their implementation.

2.1 Agriculture and Climate Change: An Overview

In the transition to a low-carbon and resilient future, academic research has largely focused on the coal and mining industry. However, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) focussing on agricultural transition towards a low-carbon production is equally relevant (Blattner, 2020, p. 53). Considering agriculture's contribution to a significant portion of GHG emissions, to soil nutrient depletion, increased water consumption and biodiversity loss, rethinking agricultural practices and transitioning towards sustainable agriculture is essential (Stoate et al., 2001, p. 338; Tan et al., 2005, p. 124).

Three main GHGs are associated with agricultural activities: carbon dioxide (CO2), methane (CH4), and nitrous oxide (N2O), each with different sources and impacts on climate change (Smith et al., 2007, p. 501). For instance, CO2 emissions are released through land-use changes like deforestation, which are often done to expand farmland, microbial decay or burning of plant litter and soil organics (Goh, 2011, p. 207; Smith et al., 2007, p. 501). Meanwhile, CH4, is largely emitted from livestock digestion and manure management, while N2O, an even more potent GHG, is produced through the application of synthetic fertilizers and organic manures on croplands (Mosier et al., 2000, pp. 23, 30, 40; Smith et al., 2021, pp. 1-2).

Beyond GHG emissions, agriculture is a leading driver of biodiversity loss globally (Chemnitz & Rehmer, 2019, p. 38). Agriculture is the sector with the largest impact on biodiversity, primarily due to the conversion of diverse ecosystems into monoculture farms and habitat destruction leading to significant reduction in species variety. Moreover, high input farming methods, including the widespread use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, harm pollinators and other essential species, disrupt ecological balances, and contribute to the deterioration of natural landscapes (Dudley & Alexander, 2017, pp. 45-46).

Finally, agriculture also has an impact on soil health, water quality, and resource use (European Environmental Bureau, 2022). Current agricultural practices lead to soil erosion, degradation, and the loss of essential soil nutrients, which are critical for maintaining long-term agricultural productivity. Soil erosion is exacerbated by intensive tillage, which breaks down soil structure, increases runoff, and contributes to the pollution of water bodies with sediments and chemicals (Emmerson et al., 2016, pp. 52-54, 72-73). In addition, water pollution and waste are significant concerns within the sector. Nutrient runoff from fertilizers can lead to eutrophication of water bodies, while excessive water usage in irrigation strains local water

supplies and reduces the availability of this vital resource for other sectors and ecosystems (Horrigan et al., 2002, pp. 446-448).

Summing up, agriculture has multiple and profound impacts on the environment, from GHG emissions to biodiversity loss to soil erosion. It is important to note that not all farming practices have the same impact on the environment. For the purposes of this research, it is important to understand the distinct environmental impacts of large-scale and small-scale farming practices.

2.2 Small-Scale vs. Large-Scale Farming

As has been demonstrated, agricultural practices have a considerable impact on the environment. However, the effects are contingent on the size of the farm; therefore, a distinction between small-scale and large-scale farming is crucial. Smallholder farms with less than 10 ha represent about 80 per cent of Europe's agricultural landscape (Chemnitz & Rehmer, 2019, pp. 28-29). These farms are typically more diverse in their crop and livestock production and tend to use fewer chemical inputs per hectare, which accordingly result in a lower impact on the environment. Moreover, smallholders are often family-operated and play a significant role in providing workplaces for rural communities. Finally, the literature suggests that smallholders tend to harbour greater biodiversity and practice more sustainably (Touch et al, 2024, p. 2). The increase in biodiversity is twofold: on the one hand, small farms have greater crop diversity than large farms; on the other hand, they have greater non-crop biodiversity due to organic management practices and wider field margins, which provide breeding sites and refuges for insects, arthropods, caterpillars and pollinators (Ricciardi et al., 2021, p. 651).

In contrast, large-scale farming has been characterized by high capital investment, extensive use of mechanization, and greater reliance on chemical inputs which have led to significant impacts on the environment (Chemnitz & Rehmer, 2019, pp. 28-29). The economies of scale in large-scale farming can lead to lower costs per unit, but they also encourage intensive resource use and a focus on single-crop monocultures, both of which exacerbate environmental degradation. The environmental impacts of large-scale farms are often magnified by their scale, as nutrient runoff, pesticide pollution, and soil depletion occur over vast tracts of land, contributing significantly to environmental issues such as water scarcity and biodiversity loss.

2.3 CAP Subsidies and Injustices

Subsidies play a significant role in the income of European farmers. However, the extent to which these subsidies affect the overall income of farmers varies considerably. Smaller farmers are often almost entirely dependent on subsidies, while subsidies for larger farmers,

who have much higher incomes, represent only a small proportion of their total income (Chemnitz & Rehmer, 2019, p. 21; FragDenStaat, 2022). Despite attempts to respond to the needs of small farmers through new distribution schemes, which will be discussed in more detail later, the subsidy system continues to disproportionately benefit large, industrial farms. (Chemnitz & Rehmer, 2019, p. 16; Scown et al., 2020, pp. 240–244). This is because direct payments are based on the size of agricultural landholdings, meaning that farmers with more hectares of land receive larger subsidies. For example, in 2019, 80 per cent of CAP subsidies went to just 20 per cent of farms, reflecting the skewed distribution of agricultural subsidies (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2022, p. 4; Slow Food, 2024). This distribution exacerbates social injustices, as these large farms, which receive the highest subsidies, contribute proportionally the least to rural employment, as they use more machinery, indicating a poor return on public investment in terms of job creation (Scown et al., 2020, p. 241).

Subsidy shortcomings go beyond social injustices, as they are also linked to the limited attention paid to environmental objectives. Only a small part of the CAP is focused on rural development to adequately support and promote objectives such as biodiversity conservation, environmental protection and improved food quality (Scown et al., 2020, p. 240). These environmental measures are often voluntary or poorly enforced, exacerbating these problems (European Environmental Bureau, 2024; Scown et al., 2020, pp. 244-246).

While the European Commission (EC) has attempted to cap payments to farms at 300000 euros, large farmers have been able to circumvent the cap by deducting costs such as hired labour and family labour from the total subsidy, thus continuing to receive substantial support. Similarly, attempts to redistribute funds to smaller farmers have failed because payments are still tied to the area of land owned (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2022, p. 4; Scown et al., 2020, pp. 244–246). Thus, this system overwhelmingly favours wealthier landowners and industrial agribusinesses. Meanwhile, small-scale and organic farmers who contribute significantly more to sustainable practices and depend on subsidies —are disadvantaged.

As such, critics argue that this rewards landownership, a private good, rather than public goods like climate mitigation, biodiversity preservation, and landscape conservation, which benefit society as a whole (Scown et al., 2020, p. 246). Public goods, such as environmental protection, while they impose costs on individuals and countries, benefit all and need to be prioritised (Hasson et al., 2010, p. 331; Kaul et al., 1999, p. 10). However, by prioritising economic objectives over environmental and social goals, CAP policies reinforce systemic hierarchies that prioritise market efficiency at the expense of equity (Rac et al., 2020, p. 6)

Another aspect of the distorted distribution is that it fosters overproduction. Large farms,

benefiting from economies of scale and consistent subsidies, can maintain fixed costs and bypass market risks, leading to increased output (Fritz, 2011, p. 26). This overproduction not only burdens EU markets but also impacts global markets. This is because recipients of the largest share of CAP subsidies are large export-oriented food companies that can make use of the CAP funds to dominate markets in the Global South, which often results in the displacement of local producers (Bruvoll et al., 2011, p. 55; Fritz, 2011, p. 28).

In this context, it is important to note that the assessments of subsidy inequality have relied heavily on quantitative tools, such as the Lorenz curve[1], or mixed and qualitative methods (Terluin & Verhoog, 2018; Khan, 2021; Heyl et al., 2022). But why are economic models that identify skewed distributions perceived as unjust? What moral principles guide our perception of injustices? These ethical evaluations remain underexplored, representing a significant gap in the literature on the distribution of the CAP subsidies. An ethical evaluation of the allocation of CAP subsidies is highly relevant, as questions of their distribution are deeply intertwined with principles of distributive justice, which imply how societal resources and responsibilities should be allocated (Fleischer, 2009, p. 537). In the context of agricultural subsidies, this entails determining which groups or practices deserve support, how much they should receive, and the underlying principles guiding these allocations. Accordingly, the research question guiding this paper is: "How should agricultural subsidies in the Common Agricultural Policy be distributed?". This paper seeks to answer this question through the lens of distributive justice, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

3. DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE AND CAP SUBSIDIES

Having offered an overview of the relationship between agriculture, the environment and CAP subsidies, this chapter will introduce different distributive justice principles and explore how these can be applied to CAP subsidies. Distributive justice scholarship has been marked by various debates, with no consensus on what a just distribution requires. It is therefore essential to revisit these debates.

The CAP consists of two Pillars. While Pillar 1 consists of so-called direct payments to farmers, Pillar 2 is allocated to national governments to promote environmentally friendly farming practices, cooperation between producers and climate resilience. As the focus of this

[1] The Lorenz curve is a tool that shows the distribution of total income received by different parts of society, in this case farmers, when ordered by the size of their income (Gastwirth, 1971, p. 1037).

research is on addressing issues of distributive justice for farmers, the analysis focuses on the distribution of Pillar 1 subsidies.

3.1 Distributive Justice

Distributive justice addresses the question of how resources, benefits, and burdens should be allocated in a manner that is fair, equitable, and just (Merayo et al., 2019, p. 12). It offers various principles and frameworks to guide decision-making in social, political and economic contexts. While the literature has extensively debated what constitutes a fair and just distribution, there is no universal consensus, as interpretations are shaped by differing moral and ethical considerations (Doorn, 2019, p. 110). Consequently, five prominent perspectives on distributive justice, namely utilitarianism, egalitarianism, prioritarianism, sufficientarianism, and limitarianism will be presented.

One of the most prominent distributive justice principles used in policymaking is utilitarianism (Lamont, 2004, p. 224). Utilitarianism, a welfare-based principle, asserts that material goods and services have no intrinsic value but derive their worth from their ability to increase overall welfare (Doorn, 2019, p. 110; Lamont, 2004, p. 223). According to this perspective, the fair distribution of resources maximises total utility or so-called societal well-being (Lamont, 2004, p. 224). Thus, a defining feature of utilitarianism is its focus on the aggregation of utility. For utilitarians, however, it is irrelevant how the costs and benefits are then distributed across society to arrive at the increase of total utility. For instance, utilitarianism may justify sacrificing the welfare of a minority if it results in a net gain for society (Baujard, 2013, p. 12). Utilitarianism sees justice in attributing an equal value to each individual's happiness in the aggregated sum of total happiness. Critics argue that this non-comparative – or non-relational -- view of justice overlooks individual rights and fairness, as it permits unequal treatment if it contributes to the maximisation of utility (Doorn, 2019, p. 110).

This critique has spurred the development of alternative theories that prioritise comparative aspects of justice and address the moral limits of sacrificing individual well-being for collective gain. Comparative theories, such as egalitarianism, assess justice by comparing individuals' relative well-being. In contrast, non-comparative theories, like utilitarianism, prioritarianism, limitarianism and sufficientarianism, focus on absolute levels of well-being or meeting specific thresholds, independent of others' circumstances (Doorn, 2019, pp. 110-111). As such egalitarianism evolved as a response to utilitarianism.

Egalitarianism advocates for the equal distribution of resources (Lamont, 2017). It therefore emphasises the minimisation of relative differences in well-being among individuals.

Grounded in the idea that all human beings possess equal moral worth, egalitarianism seeks to reduce disparities and promote equality in opportunities and outcomes (Doorn, 2019, p. 111). It is important to note that Rawls (1971, p. 13) refined this approach, by arguing that inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the least well-off members of society. Egalitarianism faces two main criticisms: The levelling-down objection and the responsibility objection. The levelling-down objection contends that achieving equality can be wasteful, as it may require reducing the well-being of the better-off without necessarily improving the condition of the worst-off (Christiano & Braynen, 2008, p. 396). On the other hand, the responsibility objections highlight the challenges of compensating individuals for disadvantages stemming from their own choices, such as residing in flood-prone areas or neglecting employment opportunities (Dworkin, 2000, as cited in Moss, 2007, p. 309).

In response to these criticisms, other theories have been developed, such as prioritarianism and sufficientarianism. Prioritarianism assigns greater moral weight to improving the well-being of those who are worst off. Therefore, unlike egalitarianism, which emphasises relative levels of well-being, prioritarianism is concerned with absolute levels, arguing that helping those at lower absolute levels is more morally significant than improving the lives of those who are better off (McKerlie, 1994, p. 26). This approach avoids the levelling-down objection by focusing on improving the conditions of the worst-off rather than reducing disparities per se (Otsuka & Voorhoeve, 2018, p. 5). However, critics argue that prioritising the worst-off can lead to inefficient allocation of resources, particularly when small gains for the worst-off come at a significant cost to society as a whole (Doorn, 2019, p. 112).

The second response to the criticisms is sufficientarianism. Sufficientarianism aims to shift the focus from equality or priority to sufficiency, asserting that justice is achieved when everyone has enough resources to lead a dignified life (Huseby, 2019; Shields, 2020, p. 2). This perspective prioritises meeting a basic threshold of well-being over reducing disparities, prioritising the worst-off or maximising welfare. Proponents argue that sufficiency principles avoid the levelling-down and prioritisation objections, as they focus on ensuring that no one falls below a certain standard (Doorn, 2019, p. 112). However, this approach faces its challenges, particularly in scenarios where resource allocation beyond sufficiency remains undefined and might therefore be indifferent to consequent inequalities or be overdemanding (Robeyns, 2022, p. 190; Shields, 2012, pp. 104-105).

Finally, limitarianism introduces the concept of setting an upper limit on the accumulation of resources, arguing that no one should possess more than a certain threshold of wealth or goods. A second aspect of limitarianism is that an excess of resources over a threshold

should be reallocated below the set threshold (Robeyns, 2022, pp. 180-181). This perspective emphasizes the social harms associated with extreme wealth concentration, including the erosion of democratic processes and the exacerbation of inequality. While limitarianism is less concerned with achieving equality or sufficiency, it seeks to prevent the negative consequences of excessive wealth, advocating for redistribution to address systemic imbalances and promote societal well-being (p. 194). Similar to sufficientarianism, it has been criticized for not accounting for inequalities below the threshold (Halldenius, 2022, p. 777). However, it should be noted that limitarianism, according to its main proponent Robeyns (2022, p. 195) is a partial distributive justice rule and could therefore be combined with other theories to address patterns below the threshold.

To sum up, distributive justice encompasses a diverse array of principles, each offering insights into how resources should be allocated fairly. Utilitarianism prioritises maximising overall welfare, egalitarianism seeks to minimise disparities, prioritarianism focuses on aiding the worst-off, sufficientarianism emphasises ensuring a basic standard of living, and limitarianism advocates for capping excess. The identified frameworks provide valuable tools for analysing distributive policies and can help to analyse the distribution of agricultural subsidies under the CAP based on its fairness. In the following sections, these principles will be applied to assess the fairness of CAP subsidy allocations, with a focus on their environmental and social implications.

3.2 Applying Distributive Justice Principles to Agricultural Subsidies

Having introduced the different distributive justice principles, this chapter evaluates the CAP subsidy distribution based on these principles. According to the European Parliament (2024, p. 1), 72 per cent of the CAP funds, 270 billion euros, are allocated through direct payments to farmers. Its primary aim is to offer a safety net to farmers, compensating for low incomes, market uncertainties, and external risks such as extreme weather and pests. Moreover, the EC has committed itself to implementing the SDG's and developing a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system. However, as has been outlined, the subsidy distribution still disproportionally benefits large farmers: 86 per cent of EU farmers receive only 20 per cent of payments, while a small fraction of large farms receives the majority (Terluin & Verhoog, 2018, p. 22). According to Terluin and Verhoog (2018, p. 22), given the current system, if the EU were to make the distribution of payments more equal, this would only be possible if every farm in the EU would cover the same surface. This imbalance in subsidy distribution stems from the current hectare-based allocation model, which ties the payments to land size. It should

be noted that while states receive payments according to their respective agricultural land masses, they can redistribute them to some extent according to local conditions (European Parliament, 2024, pp. 3-4). However, for the purpose of this research, the focus will be on the initial EU distribution scheme (Pillar 1).

Although the system of area payments may appear egalitarian, since each hectare is valued equally, it reflects a predominantly utilitarian framework, with small elements of prioritarianism, limitarianism, and sufficientarianism. This is because the size of the payment increases with the size of the cultivated area (European Parliament, 2024, p. 3). An egalitarian framework would prioritise equal support for all farms regardless of size, treating the farm itself as the basis for distribution rather than the size of the area under cultivation. However, subsidies increase with farm size, which is consistent with utilitarian principles of maximising aggregate utility, as larger farms are assumed to contribute more to total welfare through greater output. This is because larger farms are assumed to use subsidies more efficiently to expand production. As such, it reflects the core utilitarian principle of prioritising policies that maximise aggregate welfare through economic and productive gains. However, a minimum area is required to qualify for direct payments. This excludes certain farmers who do not fall below the minimum threshold set, thus marginalising those with limited land resources.

Almost all payments, namely the basic income support for sustainability, the complementary redistributive income support for sustainability, complementary income support for young farmers, and eco-schemes follow this logic (European Parliament, 2024, pp. 2-3). The coupled income support, crop-specific payments, in addition to per hectare payments, reward subsidies based on production output. While the utilitarian focus on maximising agricultural output may seem pragmatic, it overlooks broader justice concerns. It reinforces systemic inequities by channelling more resources to larger farms, that are already economically advantaged. This has led to small farmers shutting down their operations (Chemnitz & Rehmer, 2019, p. 28-29). Beyond the socio-economic implications, the approach also undermines environmental sustainability by incentivising expansive land use rather than regenerative farming practices as it appears to be more profitable.

As noted above, the CAP includes redistributive income, and support aimed at small and medium-sized farms, requiring at least 10 per cent of direct payments to be allocated to this scheme (European Parliament, 2024, p. 2). This approach represents an attempt to rectify disparities between large and small farmers based on prioritarian principles, namely, to improve the well-being of the worst-off farmers. While this may represent a step toward addressing inequalities, the redistributive payments remain tied to land size, which perpetuates the focus

on cultivated areas rather than the needs and well-being of smallholders, which are the target of this distribution scheme. Similarly, complementary income support is an annual payment for young farmers that aims to attract new entrants by providing additional payments per hectare. However, this scheme again incentivises land accumulation of newcomers by tying it to hectare payments, rather than focusing on existing smallholders or providing sustainability payments.

In terms of limitarian approaches to distribution, the newest CAP attempts to embody this through a ceiling on direct payments at 300,000 euros per farm (Scown et al., 2020, p. 253). While this measure prevents large farms from receiving disproportionately high subsidies, its effectiveness is undermined by loopholes. For instance, deductions for labour costs, such as for hired labour and family labour, allow large farms to bypass the cap which contributes to the perpetuation of inequalities. This is further amplified through historical legacy entitlements tied to previous CAP allocations.

Measures like the small farmer payment which provides up to 1250 euros per farm, reflect sufficientarian principles as it focuses on ensuring that individual small farmers receive enough resources to meet basic needs (European Union, 2024, p. 2). While the EU initiative aims to promote a more balanced distribution and to contribute to rural areas through this payment, it falls far short of its objective. This payment replaces other forms of direct aid and is insufficient to ensure the economic viability and livelihood of small farmers (FragDenStaat, 2022).

To sum up, the application of distributive justice principles to CAP subsidies has shown an overwhelmingly utilitarian distribution scheme guiding the subsidy distribution. While it might appear pragmatic and efficient in maximising agricultural output, it has significant justice and environmental implications which underscores the need for a paradigm shift in EU agricultural policy. The following chapter will offer an overview as to why these principles conflict with justice concerns.

3.3 The Critique

As outlined above, most subsidies are based on payments per hectare, showing that the EU has an overwhelmingly utilitarian approach to subsidy distribution. This has far-reaching consequences, from environmental to socio-economic. Given that previous research has identified the quantitative and qualitative shortcomings of CAP distribution, three of the problems associated with utilitarian subsidy distribution are presented and discussed below.

3.3.1 Instrumentalising Distribution as a Tool for Utility Maximisation

One of the core principles of utilitarianism is the maximisation of aggregate utility, which is often at the expense of distributive considerations (Baujard, 2013, p. 11). In the context of CAP subsidies, this principle is manifested in the policy's emphasis on allocating funds based on land size and production output (European Parliament, 2024, pp. 2-3). This approach favours larger farms, which are presumed to make a greater contribution to overall productivity and economic growth, to the detriment of smaller farms struggling to make a living.

This mirrors a fundamental issue in utilitarian reasoning: distribution only matters if it contributes to aggregate utility. Consequently, inequalities are deemed acceptable, even morally valuable, if they increase the aggregate sum of utility (Baujard, 2013, pp. 11-12). Under the utilitarian framework, distributive concerns are treated instrumentally - smaller farms are supported only to the extent that their contributions align with the broader goal of maximising utility, rather than as part of an intrinsic commitment to a just distribution.

The following thought experiment will serve to illustrate this point. Imagine two individuals, one with an income of 20 euros and the other with an income of 100 euros. A state decides to reward one of these individuals with 10 euros. Utilitarians may favour distributing the financial aid to the individual earning 20 euros, as this would benefit the person with the lower income relatively more than the individual with the higher income. This idea refers to the concept of marginal utility, where the utility of consuming one more unit of a good decreases as the quantity consumed increases. In simpler terms, the more of something you have, the less useful each additional unit becomes to you (Greene & Baron, 2001, pp. 243-244). However, if the distribution to a wealthy individual is deemed to increase the aggregate sum of utilities more than distributing it to a poor individual, for example, if the wealthy individual could invest the money in social housing for the poor, then the choice may be to distribute the money to the wealthy individual (Baujard, 2013, p. 12). However, this assumption is arguably flawed, as it assumes that the rich person will redistribute to increase the welfare of other people, which is not self-evident. In conclusion, utilitarianism does not intrinsically value distribution; it only values it to the extent that it contributes to aggregate utility.

In the context of CAP subsidies, the utilitarian approach justifies allocating subsidies to larger farms by assuming that larger farmers are better able to maximise agricultural output and benefits. As a result, larger, more economically efficient farms are prioritised over smaller, struggling farms because increased output is seen as more important for economic growth (Muraca, 2012, p. 540; Raworth, 2017, p. 2017). However, research has shown that in the absence of institutional redistribution, economic growth increases inequalities and does not lead to the assumed 'trickle-down' effect, where the worst-off benefit from the increase in wealth of

the better off (Muraca, 2012, p. 541). The resulting inequalities can influence social dynamics and lead to unrest, further affecting the functioning of the EU agricultural system (Chemnitz & Rehmer, 2019, pp. 10-11).

Thus, the utilitarian permissiveness towards equitable distribution becomes particularly problematic when applied to the CAP. By applying a utilitarian distribution and tying subsidies to land size and productivity, the policy implicitly endorses systemic inequalities that favour wealthier, larger farms to the detriment of smaller, less privileged farms. As such, advocates of the policy implicitly argue that the contribution of larger farms to economic growth and presumed food security justifies the disparities because they are in line with broader productivity goals (Rizov et al., 2013, p. 554). However, this overlooks the detrimental consequences of unequal distribution, especially for smaller farmers, where social and economic vulnerabilities are exacerbated. By assessing inequalities through a utility lens, it assumes an increase in welfare for all by maximising utility-maximising agricultural production - but the welfare resulting from the policy remains in favour of the already well-off large farmers, which in turn does not result in an increase in welfare for all.

3.3.2 Collective Interest Over Individual Rights

Second, utilitarianism justifies sacrificing minorities for the benefit of maximising utility (Baujard, 2013, p. 12). By assuming a utility-maximising act to be one incorporating the maximum utility, utilitarianism undermines the value and moral standing of individuals. It can justify the sacrifice of minorities for the benefit of the majority if it enhances aggregate utility. As an example, one could imagine a factory that generates significant profits for a large community while also creating pollution that harms another smaller nearby community. From a utilitarian perspective, the factory's operation would be justified if the economic benefits to the majority outweighed the health costs borne by the smaller population. It would therefore prioritise aggregate utility of the majority while neglecting the harms imposed on the minority.

While a utilitarian approach to CAP subsidies maximises economic output by channelling resources to farmers with higher productive capacities, it sacrifices the well-being of smallholders who cannot compete with larger industrial farms and are required to shut down their operations (Chemnitz & Rehmer, 2019, p. 11). Small farms often play a critical role in rural communities by maintaining local economies, preserving cultural traditions, and fostering biodiversity which are essential to the well-being of humans whose satisfaction in turn is reflected during for example elections (pp. 58-59). However, under the CAP's utilitarian framework, the contributions to rural communities are undervalued because they do not align

with the policy's primary focus on maximising aggregate output. For instance, a smallholder in a less fertile region might lose access to adequate subsidies because their contributions to total agricultural productivity are perceived as negligible. Consequently, small farmers are 'sacrificed' for the perceived greater good of enhancing overall utility through large-scale farming.

In addition, this can lead to violations of liberal rights. For example, according to Amartya Sen's (1970) "Paretian Liberal" theorem, it is impossible to simultaneously prioritise utility maximisation and uphold individual freedoms or specific rights (pp. 155-157). Imagine a situation where there are two farmers: Farmer A, who runs a small, sustainable farm, and Farmer B, who operates a large industrial farm. The government is considering the distribution of subsidies, with the goal of maximising overall agricultural output (i.e., utility) by providing larger subsidies to the large farm. The policy would favour Farmer B because larger farms are presumed to contribute more to the economy, thus maximising collective utility. However, according to the principles of liberalism, individual rights and freedoms should also be respected. In this case, the rights of Farmer A—who may face financial difficulties due to the inequitable subsidy distribution—should be upheld. If the subsidies are distributed based solely on farm size (maximising utility), it could result in Farmer A's livelihood being significantly limited as it would limit their economic freedom and violate their right to fair treatment.

This critique highlights the problems of combining the maximisation of utility with respect for the rights of small farmers to fair treatment and equitable distribution of resources. The CAP's subsidy system, by prioritising land size and output, restricts the agency of small farmers to operate competitively within the agricultural sector. Therefore, through the current policy framework, structural barriers due to the lack of economic resources are created that undermine the rights of smallholders. For example, small farms lack the financial resources to sustain their living and must shut down their operations. However, the EU system that is based on liberal rights would argue that small farmers have the right to sustain their living as they are of equal worth as larger farmers (Scown et al., 2020, p. 247). By distributing subsidies in a manner that benefits large farms, the CAP effectively perpetuates this structural disadvantage, limiting the freedom of small farmers to thrive within the system. To put the matter simply, utilitarianism offers no cohesive way to discern between the various factions competing against one another by prioritising an ideal. Thus, it fails to provide a fair distribution system that values the rights of individuals.

3.3.3 Economic Growth as a Tool for Utility Maximisation

Third, utilitarian principles raise significant normative concerns by relying on economic growth as a mechanism for maximising utility. In the context of CAP subsidies, this perspective legitimises the allocation of resources to large-scale, high-output farms to maximise food production and economic returns. However, this approach has profound ethical and environmental implications.

As has been elaborated, utilitarians aim to maximise the amount of well-being in society, in other words, to maximise aggregate utility. This implies to ensure that gains outweigh losses. Applying this to economics, it demands to account for gains and losses in a very rigorous way. Mainstream economics is thought to have solved this problem of calculating societal welfare with the GDP and therefore equate economic growth with maximising aggregate utility (Branco, 2013, p. 3). However, by focusing solely on aggregate utility through economic growth, utilitarianism justifies an indifference to other societal values. It has overwhelmingly failed as the calculation has failed to account for the ecological and social costs of economic growth.

In the context of agricultural subsidies, the growth-oriented subsidy model assumes that increasing agricultural output and economic activity leads to greater societal welfare. However, this approach overlooks the consequences of economic growth and maximised production. For example, large-scale agriculture while boosting GDP growth, generates significant externalities such as GHG emissions, soil degradation, and water pollution that are not captured by the GDP measure (Chemnitz & Rehmer, 2019, p. 38). These externalities disproportionately affect vulnerable populations and future generations, while economic gains are concentrated among large agribusinesses and wealthier states. While the policy results in short-term economic growth through the focus on larger farmers, in the long run, the consequences of large-scale farming reduce agricultural output due to climate change-related consequences. This imbalance highlights how the operationalisation of utilitarianism in economics falls short on addressing other essential variables.

One might argue that the maximisation of food production is desirable because it lowers food prices and increases utility for consumers. While this may be true for the present, given agriculture's dependence on finite natural resources, it may not be true for the future (Navarre et al., 2023). It is important to conduct agricultural activities in a way that secures long-term availability. By prioritising short-term utility maximisation, the framework risks long-term utility deficits, as it depletes the very ecosystems upon which agricultural productivity depends. Thus, this short-sighted approach undermines the resilience of the agricultural sector in the long run. Economically speaking, this could even lead to high food prices due to limited supply but

continued high demand (Gale, 1955, p. 155). Thus, the assumption that maximising production leads to cheaper food might seem very intuitive, it lacks as it fails to consider long-term consequences of utilitarian policies.

Moreover, by distributing agricultural subsidies to maximise economic output, it instrumentalises food as a market commodity (Branco, 2013, p. 6; Vivero Pol, 2013, pp. 2-3). Consequently, reducing it to a mere economic good, while depriving it of its non-economic functions as a human right and part of culture. Agriculture is deeply tied to cultural practices and traditions. Commodification erodes these connections by standardising food systems to maximise profitability at the expense of diversity and tradition. As a consequence, large farms, are favoured for their capacity to produce food more efficiently in monetary terms. Yet, this emphasis on commodification marginalises smaller farming practices, which undermines rural livelihoods essential to human well-being.

In conclusion, the utilitarian approach to agricultural subsidies, characterised by the commodification of food and reliance on economic growth, raises pressing normative concerns. While it seeks to maximize societal utility, it often does so at the expense of equity, sustainability, and long-term well-being. Addressing these shortcomings requires a reorientation of subsidy distribution that incorporates broader ethical principles such as fairness, ecological integrity, and respect for human rights.

4. DEGROWTH

The social and environmental implications of the overwhelmingly utilitarian distribution scheme call for a fundamental need to rethink the underlying principles guiding the distribution of agricultural subsidies. This chapter offers an alternative framework to the utilitarian distribution of agricultural subsidies within the EU. In doing so, it will offer a framework grounded within degrowth and apply distributive justice principles to the subsidy distribution. Degrowth as an emerging school of thought rejects the idea of utility maximisation as a driving force of human behaviour, a societal desire and a happiness maximiser (Demaria et al., 2016, p. 392; Romano, 2015, p. 23). Through the lens of degrowth, I propose a distributive justice framework that integrates principles of sufficiency, priority, and limitation to address the dual challenges of social justice and ecological boundaries in agricultural policy.

4.1 What is “Degrowth”?

Degrowth is both a critique of the growth paradigm and a proposition for societal transformation (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 3). The term “décroissance” was first popularised by

André Gorz (1972, as cited in Demaria et al., 2016, p. 37), who asked whether a sustainable balance between society and the planet could ever be compatible with capitalism's inherent demand for growth. Degrowth challenges the notion that GDP growth equates to collective well-being. Moreover, it critiques the colonisation of the public discourse by the language of economism (Guerrero Lara, 2023, p. 1579). Instead of growth, degrowth advocates for a society that prioritises human flourishing within the limits of planetary boundaries (Hodaly, 2022, p. 3). Accordingly, human flourishing relates to the actualisation of human potential (p. 23). Furthermore, degrowth critiques the ecological and social destruction wrought by the growth ideology, from overexploitation of natural resources to widening inequalities (Guerrero Lara, 2022, p. 1579). Instead, it envisions a society oriented toward sufficiency, solidarity, and ecological sustainability (Muraca, 2012, p. 543). In agriculture, degrowth offers valuable insights into how to restructure inequitable and ecologically harmful subsidies. By shifting the focus away from maximising yields and profits, degrowth opens the door to alternative distribution models that prioritise equity and ecological integrity. As an emerging discipline, limited attention has been given to distributional questions in a degrowth society. In the following, I will attempt to offer a distributive framework for degrowth in the European agri-food system.

4.2. Distributive Justice in the European Agri-food System in a Degrowth Society

One of the main principles guiding degrowth is the assertion that each person should have enough to meet their basic needs (Raworth, 2017, p. 219). Degrowth, or doughnut economics as defined by Raworth (2017), rejects aggregate utility as an indicator of societal well-being and progress by arguing that well-being can only be identified through the provision of basic needs. This perspective is consistent with the principles of sufficientarianism, which calls for everyone's basic needs to be met (Shields, 2020, p. 2). Applying this to the distribution of subsidies in the CAP, sufficiency requires that all farmers receive a sufficient level of subsidy to have the resources they need to sustain their livelihoods. For example, instead of focusing on per hectare valuations, subsidies could be distributed based on farmers' economic needs. More specifically, it could take into account the respective income gaps between farmers' expenditure and income and provide support where income is insufficient. While assessing farmers' individual circumstances may seem like a large investment, in the long run it would promote social and environmental justice. Moreover, by shifting the focus to farmers' well-being rather than economic output, subsidies would be more equitable and responsive to the diverse challenges farmers face.

Utilitarian critics may argue that a sufficiency-based subsidy model, by focusing on farmers, could reduce agricultural output and harm consumers. They may claim that the current hectare-based payments maximise utility by benefiting both producers and consumers. However, this criticism is flawed because it assumes that maximising food production is inherently linked to food availability for consumers. This simplistic assumption ignores the complexity of food systems. Research suggests that addressing inefficiencies throughout the food chain could ensure sufficient food availability for Europe's population without requiring excessive production (IFOAM Organics Europe, n.d., pp. 7-8). First, rethinking food consumption patterns plays an important role. For example, the high consumption of meat, fats and sugars results in the loss of valuable plant-based nutrients that could otherwise meet nutritional needs. Livestock production, in particular, uses a disproportionate amount of land and feed that could be redirected to produce more nutritious plant-based foods (Navarre et al., 2023, pp. 34-36). Second, around 20 per cent of food is wasted due to inefficiencies along the supply chain. Reducing this waste would significantly improve food availability. In contrast, a sufficiency-based approach, complemented by measures to improve food systems through education and research, would ensure the well-being of both consumers and producers.

Some may wonder what happens after farmers reach the sufficiency threshold. Once a basic level of sufficiency is ensured, prioritarian principles could guide the allocation of resources beyond the threshold. As we have seen, prioritisation focuses on benefiting the most disadvantaged (McKerlie, 1994, p. 26). In the context of the CAP, farmers who are particularly vulnerable to climate change, have low incomes, experience resource scarcity and are under economic pressure could be identified as the worst-off and receive additional support above the threshold. This would ensure that their needs are met before others receive additional benefits. More specifically, it would help farmers not only to achieve sufficiency, but also to sustain a livelihood beyond the minimum. This is in line with the degrowth literature, which argues that freedom from deprivation goes beyond meeting a certain threshold (Parrique, 2019, p. 262).

In further exploring this alternative framework, one might ask how long a farmer might be eligible for redistribution. Degrowth offers a compelling proposal, arguing that human social foundations should be secured without breaching ecological limits (Raworth, 2017, p. 219). In line with degrowth, limitarianism, as articulated by Robeyns (2022, pp. 180-181), argues that no one should exceed a certain threshold of wealth or resource consumption. This framework would complement the minimum threshold set by sufficiency and the prioritisation of the most disadvantaged farmers after the sufficiency threshold by denying subsidies to those farmers who exceed wealth or environmental limits.

For example, a farm's continued eligibility could depend on its adherence to agro-ecological practices that mitigate climate change and support biodiversity. Farms that cause environmental damage, such as excessive GHG emissions, would lose eligibility. In addition, the CAP could set strict limits on subsidies to large agribusinesses by declaring a certain area of land ineligible for subsidies. By targeting both social and environmental excesses, limitarianism would ensure that the distribution of subsidies is consistent with the degrowth objective of living within planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2017, p. 219). As such, it would address the ecological and social harms of excessive accumulation, such as environmental degradation and political inequality, in line with degrowth principles.

While the current subsidy cap aims to address the level of subsidies received by large farmers, it has not achieved its goals. This is because the initial distribution is still based on payments per hectare, and the ceiling is set too low and allows too many exceptions (Scown et al., 2020, p. 253). However, in the proposed case, if subsidies are initially distributed on the basis of need and priority, limitarianism only prevents certain economically well-positioned farmers from receiving subsidies when they are already economically well-positioned, as opposed to the current system which only caps a utilitarian distribution.

Critics may argue that the concept of environmental limits, as used in limitarianism, is inherently flawed. By setting thresholds for acceptable levels of pollution or biodiversity loss, this approach may implicitly normalise environmental damage and create the perception that certain levels of degradation are tolerable. This could be seen as a contradiction, since it treats environmental damage not as something to be eliminated, but as something to be managed within arbitrary human-defined limits. Furthermore, such thresholds are anthropocentric - they prioritise human needs and interests rather than the intrinsic value or rights of nature itself. This focus may neglect the moral obligation to protect ecosystems for their own sake, regardless of their benefits to humans.

While ecological thresholds may appear anthropocentric, they serve as tools for reconciling human development with environmental sustainability. Without such thresholds, resource use and environmental degradation could escalate uncontrollably, with disastrous consequences for both humans and ecosystems. Ecological thresholds therefore help to mitigate damage rather than legitimise it. Moreover, the criticism assumes that environmental damage must be eliminated, which may be an unrealistic standard in the short term. Limitarianism recognises that while complete elimination is ideal, the immediate priority is to reduce damage to a level that ecosystems can withstand. As a consequence, this approach allows for progress while building momentum towards more ambitious environmental goals.

One might wonder why egalitarianism was excluded from the framework. The reason is the responsibility objection. Egalitarianism would argue that every farmer should receive the same amount of subsidy. This would therefore legitimise larger, environmentally and socially harmful farmers to receive benefits despite their own choice to engage in these harmful practices (Dworkin, 2000, as cited in Moss, 2007, p. 309). Since degrowth requires a fundamental change in the socio-economic metabolism, such harmful practices should be excluded from receiving subsidies. Egalitarians might object to this idea by arguing that the complete exclusion of larger farmers from subsidies because of their responsibility for harmful agricultural practices could ignore more systemic constraints, such as historical inequalities or the lack of alternatives that have led to current practices. However, this assumption ignores that large farmers have been substantially supported and that these hold the financial means to transition (Scown et al., 2020, p. 253).

Ultimately, the combination of the three principles leads to a scenario where all basic needs are met, while supporting the most disadvantaged farmers and setting limits to financial support for larger, environmentally harmful farms. This subsidy distribution is consistent with the degrowth objective and provides a fairer distribution that is in line with broader social objectives.

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the distributional challenges within CAP subsidies. While the EU has sought to promote a more environmentally just system, large farms continue to benefit disproportionately, while smallholders are marginalised. This approach exacerbates systemic inequalities and undermines smallholders' contribution to biodiversity conservation and local food security. The central research question - "How should agricultural subsidies in the Common Agricultural Policy be distributed?" - was addressed through a normative analysis based on distributive justice principles. Current allocation patterns reflect utilitarian principles that prioritise productivity and economic efficiency over equity and long-term sustainability.

The research identified key shortcomings of the utilitarian framework underpinning CAP subsidies. While utilitarianism focuses on maximising total utility, it often neglects equity concerns and unquantifiable values. Moreover, by commodifying food and emphasising the economic role of agriculture, the current system perpetuates environmental degradation and social inequalities. The thesis proposes an alternative framework based on prioritarianism, sufficientarianism and limitarianism within a degrowth context. By focusing on equity, sustainability and ecological integrity, this model is consistent with degrowth ethics and

challenges the growth-oriented paradigm.

A major strength of this research is its interdisciplinary approach, combining distributive justice theory, degrowth scholarship and policy analysis. This integration offers a holistic critique of CAP subsidies, addressing ethical and environmental dimensions that are often overlooked in policy debates. The use of a normative framework further distinguishes this thesis, shifting the focus from conventional evaluations to the ethical principles underlying subsidy distribution. In addition, the research contributes to the emerging discourse on degrowth by applying principles of distributive justice to agri-food systems - a timely intervention given the growing need for sustainable transitions.

Despite its contributions, the thesis has limitations. It does not fully explore the political and institutional barriers to implementing a degrowth-oriented subsidy model. Resistance from vested interests, such as large agribusinesses and growth-oriented policymakers, may remain a significant obstacle. Addressing these challenges would enhance the practical relevance of the findings. Furthermore, the analysis focused primarily on the first pillar of the CAP. Future research should explore the second pillar to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Several directions for future research emerge from this study. Empirical testing of the proposed subsidy model using real-world data could assess its impact on farm incomes, food security and environmental outcomes. Moreover, investigating the political and institutional dynamics that shape subsidy allocation, including lobbying, power asymmetries and public opinion, is critical for designing strategies to build support for degrowth-oriented policies. Furthermore, the degrowth principles outlined in this paper could be applied to other policy areas, such as sanitation, as well as the energy and transport sectors. Expanding these applications would provide a more comprehensive framework for the transition to sustainable and equitable food systems. Building on this, the framework could benefit from future research on other continents.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to the debate on agricultural subsidies by challenging the utilitarian, growth-oriented assumptions of CAP distribution patterns and proposing a justice-oriented alternative. By situating the analysis within the degrowth paradigm, it envisions a more equitable and sustainable agricultural system that prioritises ecological integrity and social well-being over utilitarian induced economic growth.

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