

Pathways to Better Dialogue on Sustainable Food Systems

REPORT

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This report presents the outcomes of the Stakeholder Advisory Group on Decoding Polarisation in Debates on Sustainable Food Systems, convened by Re-Imagine Europa (RIE) and The European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities (ALLEA).

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Introduction

The agricultural debate in Europe is a very polarised one. Over years of farmers' protests, stances on different sides of the debate have hardened, and the general trust between the different stakeholders is low. In a healthy democracy, a certain degree of polarisation is inevitable, as dissent is essential to a vibrant political system. However, in recent years, the polarisation of the agricultural debate has intensified, increasingly leading to **deadlocks on important policy initiatives**.

This polarisation is particularly evident in discussions surrounding the **future of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**, where extensive dialogue and numerous recommendations have emerged, yet a clear and shared vision remains absent. Forward-thinking action is crucial, especially given the vulnerable position of farmers within the value chain, the ongoing difficulty of accessing land, and the pressing struggle for generational renewal and rural development. Moreover, climate change and environmental degradation are adding further strain on food sovereignty across Europe, making it imperative to reconcile environmental objectives with the need for competitiveness, productivity, and fair livelihoods. To ensure a sustainable and resilient agricultural sector, policies must strike a balance between ecological responsibility and economic viability, fostering a system that supports both farmers and rural communities while addressing the broader challenges of sustainability and food security. **We need a new approach** that is able to breach traditional divides and offer visions of a shared future.

To tackle these issues, Re-Imagine Europa (RIE) and All European Academies (ALLEA) have established a **Stakeholder Advisory Group** on *Decoding Polarisation in Debates on Sustainable Food Systems*. This group has hosted three workshops, bringing together diverse stakeholders to examine the different actors and interests, the root causes of polarisation and possible solutions in different contexts.

Building on this work, this report will provide **insights into how to foster trust and dialogue across the entire value chain**. To achieve this, the report will explore the key stances that govern the debates around the future of CAP, looking at the challenges and barriers that hinder open dialogue, such as conflicting interests, misinformation, and structural imbalances in decision-making power. We show how these general stances are connected to the concerns and interests of different players in the European food system and how they influence our understanding of the future of agriculture in Europe. By identifying these obstacles, we can propose targeted recommendations to facilitate constructive exchanges, encourage transparent communication, and create spaces for meaningful collaboration. By drawing on real-world examples and lessons learnt from our consultations with the Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG) and insights from the workshop series, we will offer a roadmap for stakeholders to engage more constructively and collaboratively in shaping the future of European agriculture.

1. Differing views on the future of CAP governing the debate

In this part, we identify key stances that govern the debates around the future of CAP. Each of these issues may be viewed as a general “megatrend” consisting of both objective factors and subjective interpretations held by different communities. We show how these general stances are connected to the concerns and interests of different players in the European food system and how they influence our understanding of the future of agriculture in Europe. Given the complexity of CAP as a multi-stakeholder policy affecting farmers, consumers, environmentalists, policymakers, and agribusinesses, this analysis is particularly relevant in light of ongoing negotiations for the post-2027 vision. Additionally, different stakeholder groups within the European food system tend to align with specific narratives, or tropes, based on their economic, environmental, and social interests, further influencing the discourse on CAP.

In short: 8 perspectives

1. Environmental perspective (mainly NGOs, agroecological farmers and citizens)
2. Financial sustainability perspective (mainly farmers, citizens and policymakers)
3. Trust deficit perspective (mainly policymakers and citizens)
4. Fighting greed perspective (mainly citizens and farmers)
5. Security perspective (mainly citizens and policymakers)
6. Accountability perspective (mainly citizens and policymakers)
7. Health perspective (mainly NGOs and citizens)
8. Intergenerational perspective (mainly farmers)

Environmental perspective

A recurring and highly contentious stance in EU CAP discussions is the environmental one. Environmentalists focus on the interaction between farmers, nature and the global economic system. They argue that the CAP is primarily designed to support industrial-scale farming, which they claim has devastating consequences for the environment, including high greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, and pollution of water, soil, and air. They believe that CAP continues to prioritise productivity over truly sustainable farming practices, such as regenerative practices and organic farming, creating long-term risks for both the environment and the future of European agriculture.

From this perspective, the current model of agricultural production is not viable in the long run. Without stronger environmental commitments, environmentalists warn that inaction against climate change will lead to severe financial and ecological costs in the future. They advocate for a shift in CAP funding mechanisms, including making eco-schemes mandatory rather than voluntary and transitioning direct payments from an area-based system to a performance-based model tied to environmental criteria.

A key concern is that CAP is not aligned with broader EU environmental legislation, particularly the European Green Deal. Environmental groups criticise the CAP National Strategic Plans (NSPs) for their low environmental ambitions and call for stronger commitments to climate and biodiversity targets. They are also wary of efforts to simplify CAP rules, fearing that deregulation could further weaken environmental safeguards. For them, any CAP reform should fully integrate environmental objectives, ensuring that financial support is directly linked to sustainable farming practices rather than merely maintaining agricultural output.

Financial sustainability perspective

The farming community feels increasingly neglected and unfairly blamed by both European and national policies. In a rapidly changing world with competing priorities, agriculture appears to be falling behind, receiving less attention and support compared to other sectors. There is increasing friction between environmental conservation efforts and the demands of agricultural production. Opinions diverge on the best path to sustainable agriculture, with ongoing debates over the role of technology—such as new genomic techniques—and the trade-off between intensive and extensive farming practices. The enforcement of environmental regulations, including those aimed at biodiversity protection and climate change mitigation, is often seen by farmers as excessively restrictive and a threat to their livelihoods. Farmers argue that they are bearing a disproportionate share of the costs of climate action while industries face fewer constraints or receive greater financial backing. This perceived imbalance fuels resentment, as they feel unfairly accused of environmental harm without adequate recognition of their role in food security and rural economies. As a result, the debate over agricultural policy becomes increasingly polarised, deepening divisions between farmers, policymakers, and environmental advocates.

At the heart of this perspective is a feeling of **injustice and frustration**—farmers see themselves as stewards of the land who are willing to adapt but are instead portrayed as obstacles to climate progress. The financial and regulatory pressures they face are perceived as disproportionate compared to those imposed on larger industries, deepening a sense of **resentment and distrust** toward policymakers and environmental advocates. As a result, agricultural policy debates become more **polarised**, reinforcing an “us vs. them” dynamic where farmers feel unheard and misunderstood, further entrenching divisions across different stakeholder groups.

The distribution of MFF funds has become a contentious issue, with critics arguing that larger agribusinesses and wealthier EU member states receive a disproportionate share of financial support. This uneven allocation of resources has led to growing frustration among small-scale farmers, who feel overlooked and marginalised within the EU's agricultural framework. Rural communities, too, are at risk of being adversely affected, potentially exacerbating existing socio-economic disparities.

Concerns over unfair competition from lower-cost imports, particularly under trade agreements like the EU-Mercosur deal, heighten economic uncertainty among European farmers. Many contend that agricultural products from non-EU countries are produced under looser environmental, labour, and animal welfare regulations, creating an uneven competitive landscape. With lower production costs in nations such as Brazil and Argentina, these imports are often priced more competitively, putting pressure on European farmers who must adhere to stricter standards and higher operational expenses.

Trust deficit perspective

The CAP is increasingly shaped by a deep trust deficit and growing polarisation among key stakeholders. Farmers, feeling neglected and unfairly targeted, are reluctant to share data with policymakers. They fear that increased transparency on emissions and environmental impact will lead to higher taxes or stricter regulations, further burdening them rather than providing support for sustainable transitions.

At the same time, environmentalists also distrust policymakers. They worry that flexibility and deregulation in CAP reforms will weaken environmental commitments rather than enhance their

effectiveness. Instead of fostering bold and results-oriented policies, they see a risk of watered-down measures that prioritise short-term political gains over long-term sustainability.

Policymakers, in turn, are sceptical of farmers' willingness to adopt greener practices without regulatory pressure. Believing that voluntary approaches may lead to a continuation of business-as-usual, they tend to impose new rules and restrictions, favouring a 'stick' approach over incentives that could drive behavioural change more effectively.

Finally, member states do not trust each other. While the CAP's flexibility was intended to tailor national strategic plans to specific regional contexts, it has instead led to a race to the bottom. Countries fear that setting higher environmental standards will put their farmers at a competitive disadvantage compared to member states with less ambitious targets. This dynamic has ultimately weakened the overall environmental ambition of CAP, as national governments prioritise domestic economic concerns over collective EU-wide sustainability goals.

Fighting greed perspective

One of the most prominent narratives in CAP discussions revolves around social fairness. Critics argue that the CAP disproportionately benefits large agribusinesses while leaving small and vulnerable farmers struggling to survive. This narrative highlights the unequal distribution of subsidies, where a significant share of direct payments flows to the largest landowners and corporations, while small and medium-sized farms, often the backbone of rural communities, receive comparatively little support. Rather than upholding the European model of small family farms, CAP's funding structure is seen as encouraging market concentration, pushing the sector towards an "American-style" agricultural system dominated by large-scale industrial farming. Supporters of this narrative argue that such an approach not only weakens rural economies but also deepens existing inequalities, making it harder for small farms to compete, invest in sustainability, and withstand economic pressures.

Security perspective

Global geopolitical tensions in recent years have given rise to a strong narrative centred on the independence and security of food supply chains, competitiveness of EU agriculture, and simplification of CAP. Key events such as the war in Ukraine, disruptions in global trade, and the introduction of tariffs, particularly under the new Trump administration, have intensified concerns about Europe's reliance on external markets and critical raw materials for agriculture.

The new EU mandate has placed a strong emphasis on competitiveness and simplification, reflecting broader concerns about Europe's ability to maintain its role in the global agricultural market. Recent years have seen large-scale farmer protests across Europe, with calls for CAP to be less bureaucratic and more responsive to economic realities. Farmers argue that excessive red tape limits their ability to compete, especially at a time when global agricultural players, such as the US, Brazil, and China, are pursuing aggressive trade policies and intensifying agricultural production. In this context, many stakeholders push for CAP reforms that enable European farmers to operate on a level playing field, ensuring they can remain competitive without being weighed down by complex regulations.

A central theme of this narrative is reducing strategic dependencies, particularly on imports of essential agricultural inputs like fertilisers. The European Commission has recently imposed sanctions on Russian fertilisers as part of broader efforts to support internal production and strengthen the EU's agricultural autonomy. Proponents argue that such measures are crucial for shielding European farmers from supply shocks and price volatility, ensuring greater self-sufficiency in food production, and competitiveness.

At the same time, the need for diversification is shaping the EU's trade policy. The recent push for agreements such as the Mercosur deal is framed as a response to shifting global alliances, aiming to secure new markets for European agricultural products while mitigating the risks posed by sanctions on Russia and potential US tariffs. This geopolitical narrative underscores the growing link between CAP, trade policy, and broader security considerations, positioning agricultural resilience as a key component of the EU's strategic autonomy agenda.

This perspective focuses on security as a central value. Strongly interconnected with geopolitical and economic perspectives, it revolves around issues such as stability and resilience. These categories are applied both to natural reality (biological resilience, climate change etc.) and political reality (political stability, economy etc.).

Accountability perspective

The Polluter Pays Principle is a key trope in CAP discussions. Many individuals and organisations argue that sustainability should be incentivised, while environmentally harmful practices should face financial consequences. A narrative traditionally being used by environmental groups and left-wing political parties is particularly prominent in discussions on direct payments, with proponents advocating for a shift away from the current model—where subsidies are allocated based on land area—towards a system that rewards farmers implementing sustainable practices.

Beyond subsidy reform, this narrative extends to the potential integration of the agricultural sector into the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS). Supporters argue that including agriculture in the ETS would ensure that those contributing most to emissions bear a greater share of the climate burden. The revenues generated from such a system could then be reinvested into promoting sustainable farming practices, further aligning CAP with the EU's broader climate goals.

At its core, this narrative reflects a push to make CAP more performance-based and environmentally accountable, ensuring that agricultural subsidies actively contribute to the EU's Green Deal ambitions rather than simply maintaining the status quo.

This is a justice-oriented perspective that revolves around individual and collective responsibility and accountability. Fairness is a central value for different actors adopting this perspective.

Health perspective

Many environmental and public health groups advocate for a shift towards more sustainable and health-conscious diets, particularly by reducing reliance on red meat. This argument is built on two key pillars.

First, from a health perspective, diets high in red meat are linked to increased risks of cardiovascular diseases and certain cancers. Public health advocates stress that transitioning to more plant-based diets would improve overall well-being and reduce the strain on healthcare systems. Second, from an environmental standpoint, red meat production, particularly from intensive livestock farming, contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. Environmentalists argue that reducing both meat production and consumption is essential to mitigating climate change and protecting ecosystems.

Within the CAP framework, proponents of this narrative call for stricter regulations on livestock farming, which remains one of the primary recipients of CAP subsidies. At the same time, they advocate for increased financial support for plant-based food production to make sustainable diets more

accessible and affordable for consumers. They argue that CAP should move away from disproportionately supporting livestock farming and instead facilitate a transition to a more sustainable food system aligned with the EU's climate and public health goals.

This trope may be further extended to include three additional pillars: human and public health, animal welfare, and plant protection.

The first pillar focuses on human and public health. Supporters argue that agri-food regulations and CAP policies should uphold the EU's strict food safety standards, which ensure high-quality, safe, and sustainable food production. They emphasise the importance of maintaining and strengthening these standards rather than diluting them in the name of competitiveness or deregulation. This perspective advocates for greater support towards sustainable farming practices, such as organic agriculture, which minimises the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers. Additionally, these groups call for stricter regulations on imported food products, fertilisers, and pesticides, ensuring that they align fully with EU-approved substances to prevent lower-quality imports from undermining European food safety.

The second pillar concerns animal welfare, which has gained increased attention, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Advocates argue that stronger protections for livestock, covering aspects such as animal rights, living conditions, transportation, and feeding, are crucial not only for ethical reasons but also to prevent the spread of zoonotic diseases. The push for higher welfare standards aligns with broader health protection measures, as improving monitoring and conditions in livestock farming helps mitigate risks associated with diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans.

The third pillar centres on plant health and environmental protection. Proponents support sustainable farming methods, such as regenerative agriculture, which enhances soil fertility, preserves biodiversity, and safeguards water and air quality. They emphasise the need to reduce dependency on synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, as excessive use of these chemicals depletes natural resources and disrupts ecosystems.

Since these three pillars are deeply interconnected, this narrative presents a holistic vision of agricultural policy—one that seeks to align CAP with environmental sustainability, public health, and ethical considerations. Supporters argue that CAP should not only ensure food security but also promote practices that benefit human, animal, and planetary health in the long term. This is an ethical stance grouping narratives that adopt an ethical perspective, focusing on health and wellbeing as primary values and sources of good and happiness.

Intergenerational Perspective

Intergenerational justice is a key concept in environmental politics, frequently championed by civil society organisations, particularly environmental, social, and youth groups, as well as left-wing and green political parties. This perspective, in the context of the CAP, can be divided into two main pillars.

The first pillar centres on future generations, arguing that agricultural policies must prioritise environmental protection to ensure the sustainability of farming for years to come. Advocates emphasise that current agricultural practices should align with environmental conservation, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and the protection of natural resources such as soil, air, and water. Given that CAP is the EU's primary financial instrument for agriculture, this perspective calls for a fundamental shift in funding priorities, directing subsidies towards sustainable farming practices and away from environmentally harmful industrial agriculture.

The second pillar focuses on the generational divide between older and younger farmers. At present, only a small proportion of EU farmers are young, while the vast majority of agricultural holdings remain in the hands of older generations. Due to the CAP's area-based financial allocation system, these established farmers receive the bulk of subsidies, leaving young farmers with limited financial support. This narrative pushes for greater assistance for young farmers, including improved access to funding and loans to acquire farmland, increased direct payments, and targeted incentives to encourage new entrants into the agricultural sector. Advocates argue that without such measures, generational renewal in farming will remain stagnant, threatening both the resilience of EU agriculture and the vitality of rural communities.

Similarly to the health-oriented stance, this perspective adopts an ethical approach, whereby continuity, tradition and inter-generational responsibility are put in centre instead of individual health and wellbeing.

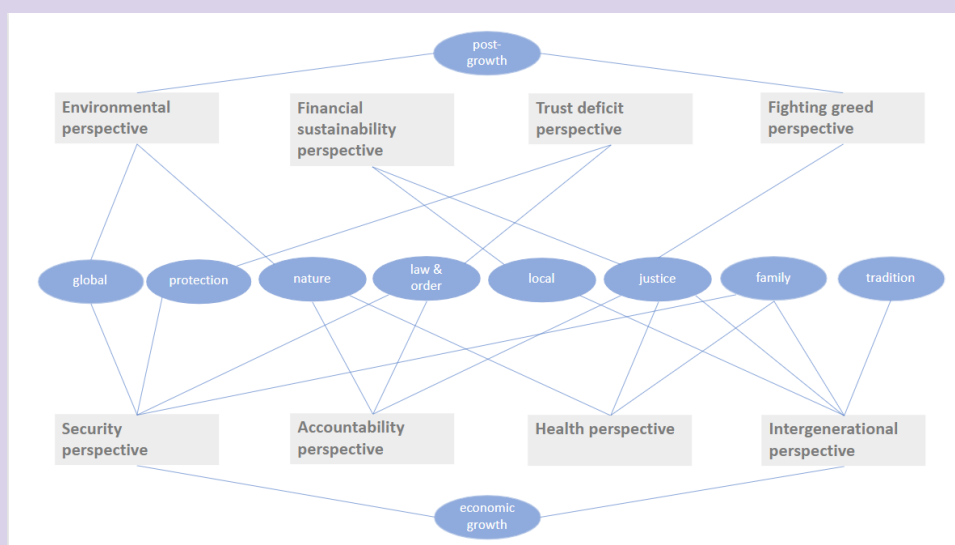


Figure 1: The linkages and shared values between different perspectives.

2. Understanding the challenges

In this section, we will identify the root causes of the current polarisation of the agricultural debate. A sound understanding of these underlying problems is fundamental to the development of structural and transformative visions for the future.

Root Cause 1: Different linguistic and conceptual frameworks

One of the fundamental drivers of polarisation is the fact that different stakeholder communities operate within **distinct linguistic and conceptual frameworks**. Each group—whether policymakers, scientists, farmers, or the broader public—communicates fluently within its own discourse, relying on specific jargon, assumptions, and priorities. However, these frameworks are often not easily translatable across different communities, leading to not only contrasting viewpoints but also deep-seated misunderstandings. Rather than engaging in direct ideological opposition, stakeholders frequently talk past one another, reinforcing cycles of miscommunication and distrust.

This challenge is further compounded by the fact that professional backgrounds, lived experiences, and social networks shape the way individuals interpret information and define priorities. For instance, policymakers may frame agricultural challenges in terms of regulatory frameworks and economic incentives, while farmers prioritise hands-on experience, practical feasibility, and long-term land stewardship. Scientists, on the other hand, often emphasise empirical evidence and data-driven solutions, which may not always align with the everyday realities of those directly impacted. Because these points of view develop within relatively closed networks and use different narratives, breaking out of these silos requires intentional efforts to foster cross-sector dialogue. Analysing different narratives that are used to frame and express crucial issues may be an important element of this process, enabling us to trace shared values and goals hidden behind different rhetorics.

One of the most prominent areas where this issue manifests is in the **relationship between policymakers and the farming community**. Trust is a fundamental prerequisite for effective communication—without it, messages risk being dismissed outright, regardless of their content. However, public communication often fails to establish and maintain trust in institutions at both the national and EU levels, largely due to its approach and style. Policymakers frequently overlook the importance of active listening and adopting a stance of curiosity rather than persuasion. Effective engagement requires not only delivering messages but also demonstrating genuine interest in stakeholders' concerns. For example, during the previous mandate, ecological measures were introduced without taking into account the concerns of farmers, leading to incompatibility of the new measures with farming practices (such as the obligation to harvest before a set date to allow for the sowing of so-called “catch crops” to reduce nitrogen emissions, regardless of meteorological factors), and leading to high administrative burden. Even these policies that were potentially very beneficial to individual farmers were widely perceived with distrust because they were identified as something “foreign” and introduced in a “top-down” manner. Fostering trust and ensuring two-way communication are critical to achieving meaningful policy outcomes. Fostering trust and ensuring two-way communication are critical to achieving meaningful policy outcomes.

A second realm where the different linguistic and conceptual frameworks can be observed is between **scientists and farming communities**. The failure to effectively communicate scientific insights to farmers, combined with the limited involvement of these communities in the scientific process, has contributed to a deep-seated mistrust of science. For example, medical scientists have on many

occasions expressed concerns about the overuse of antibiotics in animal agriculture, which can lead to antibiotic-resistant bacteria. This is often met with resistance from farmers who have a mindset that if you remove antibiotics, your animals will get sick and profits will go down, even if science shows that excessive use has no health benefits for the animals. The issue of misunderstanding between scientists and farmers is particularly pressing in an era where the relevance and even the truthfulness of scientific knowledge are frequently called into question. Many scientists struggle to convey their valuable findings in a way that bridges this divide, often unintentionally reinforcing scepticism among those who advocate for alternative narratives. A key factor in this challenge is the need for a more open and collaborative approach to communication. Scientific discussions often focus on validating findings rather than fostering a two-way exchange of knowledge, which can unintentionally reinforce scepticism. By creating spaces for meaningful discussion and mutual learning, the scientific community can better integrate its insights into agricultural practices while also addressing the perspectives and concerns of farmers.

Root cause 2: Cultural and emotional aspects often get overlooked

A second root cause of polarisation is that **cultural and emotional aspects**, integral to every debate but especially to debates around food, **often get overlooked**. Not only do opinions matter, but also the underlying values and emotions that inform these opinions. The failure to take emotions into account could aptly be observed in Spain in the aftermath of the floods at the beginning of this year, where the technical discussion by politicians of who was responsible completely disregarded the emotional experience of the affected people. Given the importance of these emotional aspects, it is a pity that public communication often fails to communicate at the time when people care about certain topics, rather communicating when it fits the institutional agenda. Resulting from the power of these cultural and emotive aspects, the importance of precise positions in a certain debate is often secondary to the feeling of group identity certain stakeholder groups experience. One of the essential factors deciding about emotional reactions in the debate is the feeling of being respected. Stakeholder groups often hold negative views of other groups, leading to e.g. different groups no longer wanting to talk to each other. The same reality is viewed differently by the different sides, and the knowledge of which opinion the other groups hold is often flawed, relying on caricature and misrepresentation. Especially in the debate around NGTs, these conflicting group identities inform many discussions.

Many topics in EU agriculture are especially sensitive. First, the taboo around the mental health of farmers and farmers' suicides stays strong, although, for example, in France, suicide rates in the farming community are 20% higher than in the national average ([source](#)). Second, the lack of generational renewal is sensitive to many family farmers. The feelings that surround having created farms that cannot be passed on and having work lives that are very unattractive should be acknowledged. Lastly, many emotions arise around the forced closing of farms. Besides the need for financial compensation, the emotional toll on affected farmers should not be underestimated.

Root cause 3: The persistence of misinformation

A third root cause of polarisation is the **persistence of misinformation** in the agricultural debate. Sadly, certain politicians benefit from the spread of misinformation and the connected societal polarisation, and work actively to create the conditions in which polarisation can flourish.

Some recent examples show that the spreading of misinformation has large effects on the European agricultural debate and policy. In December 2024, Arla Foods announced a trial of Bovaer, a feed additive proven to reduce cow methane emissions by up to 45%. Despite regulatory approvals and extensive testing, conspiracy theories falsely claimed the product was unsafe and part of a "depopulation" scheme. These unfounded allegations, amplified online, forced Arla Foods and the

additive's manufacturer, DSM-Firmenich, into damage control, illustrating how misinformation can hinder environmental innovations. Also, during the 2024 EU elections, far-right parties leveraged false narratives related to food and farming to sway voters. One prevalent conspiracy theory claimed that the EU intended to force citizens to consume insects as part of climate initiatives. This narrative, lacking a factual basis, was propagated to evoke fear and resistance against environmental policies, demonstrating how misinformation can be weaponised in political contexts.

Root Cause 4: The inherent complexity of the global food system

A fourth root cause of polarisation is the general **complexity of the food system**. The agri-food system can be described as a wicked problem: because of complex interdependencies, the effort to solve one aspect of the polycrisis may reveal or create other problems. A difficult balance between environmental, social, competitiveness, and production objectives has to be found time and time again. Adding to this, the global context of the food system is constantly changing due to geopolitical conflicts, e.g. in Ukraine, the effects and mitigation demands of climate change and environmental degradation, rising anti-globalism articulated by the VS and populist voices in the EU... Agricultural labour policies and farmers' identities are also an important part of the ardent migration debate in most European countries. Complex systemic thinking and future studies remain essential cognitive frameworks to advance structural and transformative solutions.

The influence of non-European actors on the European agricultural debate remains large. Investigations revealed that the U.S. administration under Donald Trump conducted covert campaigns to undermine the EU's "Farm to Fork" strategy, aimed at promoting sustainable agriculture and reducing pesticide use. By enlisting public relations firms to spread misinformation, these efforts sought to protect U.S. agricultural exports but also deepened divisions over environmental policies within the EU.

Root Cause 5: The diversity of farming practices and local food systems in Europe

A fifth root cause of polarisation is the great **diversity of farming practices and local food systems in Europe**. As a result, generally applicable statements have to resort to abstraction, which, in turn, proves hard to relate back to actual problems and concerns within communities. Here we give some examples of the abstractions commonly used to talk and think about agriculture and cases in which the interpretation of these abstractions in the local context proves difficult:

- “sustainable agriculture”: In a small-scale organic farm in Italy, "sustainable agriculture" may focus on biodiversity and traditional methods, whereas in a large Dutch greenhouse operation, sustainability might emphasise high-tech efficiency and reduced resource use. These interpretations can clash when forming policies or engaging in public debate.
- “yield efficiency”: A high-yield corn farm in Hungary using precision farming technology might be seen as more "efficient" than a diversified farm in Portugal with lower per-hectare output but higher resilience to climate shocks. Comparing efficiency across such different contexts often leads to misleading conclusions.
- “organic vs. conventional farming”: In some regions, small conventional farmers using minimal chemical inputs may feel unfairly categorised as "unsustainable," even if their practices are closer to organic standards than industrial-scale organic farms that rely heavily on imported organic fertilisers and large monocultures.
- “intensive vs. extensive farming”: In some regions of Spain, extensive grazing of sheep and goats on large, dry pastures is a well-adapted traditional practice. However, in policymaking, extensive farming might be perceived as inefficient compared to intensive dairy farms in e.g. the Netherlands, even though extensive farming plays a crucial role in preserving landscapes and biodiversity.

Root Cause 6: Unequal power dynamics in the agricultural debate

A last root cause of polarisation is the unequal **power dynamics** in the agricultural debate, reflecting the unequal power dynamics in the larger value chain. Farmers face increasing pressure from market concentration, with large retailers wielding significant power over pricing. This leads to lower incomes and financial instability for many farmers. Due to this, the agricultural debate is not a level playing field, leading to distrust between certain stakeholders.

The role of farmers' unions, both on national and European levels, is central to this question. These organisations claim to speak for all farmers, but critiques that they only represent large enterprises remain prevalent (see for example, [this POLITICO article](#) from 2023). On a European level, Copa and Cogeca, the farmers' and cooperatives' movement respectively, have joined forces since the 60's. Historically, this lobby powerhouse has represented one certain type of agriculture: big farms. "Outside of Brussels, Copa-Cogeca's promotion of high-tech, industrial agriculture is alienating many of the farmers it claims to represent", the POLITICO article states. Smaller farmers and family farms have a hard time claiming their space at the table against large, professionalised and money-intensive unions. Over many decades, Copa-Cogeca has solidified its power in the EU agricultural debate, working closely with European institutions and effectively influencing major regulatory changes.

3. Where narratives converge and collide

Insights gathered from the [ALLEA-RIE workshop series on decoding depolarisation](#) and accompanying survey show that polarisation in CAP debates does not primarily stem from incompatible visions for the future of European agriculture. Rather, it arises from the way shared challenges are interpreted through different roles, identities, conceptual understanding, and lived realities, combined with low levels of institutional trust and unequal influence over decision-making.

Areas of convergence

Across the workshops and survey responses, several avenues for agreement emerged that cut across otherwise diverging narratives.

A shared sense of fragility and urgency

Stakeholders from across the value chain recognise that the European food system is under increasing strain – from climate change, economic and geopolitical volatility, to generational decline in farming. Farmers who participated in the workshops emphasised that food security and system fragility are often only taken seriously once crises occur, while other survey respondents stressed that agriculture is “real life” and insufficiently reflected in abstract policy debates. This shared perception of the vulnerability of European food systems offers a strong entry point for depolarising CAP narratives by emphasising the need to move towards solutions grounded in resilience and risk management rather than determining blame.

A shared frustration with process-heavy, impact-light governance

A consistent finding among participants from Workshop 1 was that there is *no shortage of dialogue*, but a widespread sense that consultations rarely translate into meaningful action. This contributes to participation fatigue, cynicism, and declining trust. Survey responses echoed this frustration, pointing to regulatory complexity and limited policy follow-through as drivers of polarisation. Importantly, this dissatisfaction is shared across stakeholder groups, creating potential common ground for reforming how CAP debates and decisions are structured.

A shared concern about trust and information integrity

Both workshops and survey respondents highlighted that trust is a prerequisite for meaningful dialogue. Without it, even robust scientific evidence is dismissed or reinterpreted through suspicion. Participants agreed that misinformation thrives in the absence of credible, timely, and relatable communication, particularly in online environments where extreme views are amplified. This convergence on the *problem* (rather than the different approaches to solving it) suggests scope for joint efforts to strengthen credibility and shared understanding.

A shared recognition of Europe’s diversity

There was broad agreement that agricultural realities differ widely across regions, farming systems, and socio-economic contexts. Sustainability, efficiency, and feasibility cannot be reduced to uniform standards without losing legitimacy. Both workshops and survey responses therefore support a CAP

framing that combines common objectives with locally adapted pathways, provided that flexibility does not undermine collective ambition.

Points of collision

At the same time, the workshops identified several recurring fault lines where narratives collide and polarisation intensifies.

Means replace ends as markers of identity

Debates around specific instruments, such as new genomic techniques (NGTs), pesticides, livestock production, eco-schemes, or CAP simplification, often become symbolic, and therefore, highly contested battlegrounds. Rather than discussing goals, stakeholders defend or reject tools as proxies for broader identities (“pro-” or “anti-” technology, “industrial” v. “agroecological”). This shift from issue-based disagreement to “affective polarisation”¹ makes compromise difficult and fuels mistrust.

Competing lenses on what counts as “success”

The workshops revealed a fundamental tension between yield- and production-focused lenses and nutrition- or health-oriented lenses. These perspectives lead to different conclusions about land use, livestock, and consumption patterns, even when grounded in similar concerns for sustainability. Survey respondents similarly noted that feasibility and market realities are often overlooked when debates are framed in highly abstract terms, reinforcing the sense that stakeholders are “talking past each other.”

Persistent trust asymmetries

Farmers expressed resentment toward administrative burden and control-oriented governance; environmental actors fear that flexibility and simplification will weaken ambition; policymakers doubt the effectiveness of voluntary approaches. Survey responses confirmed that CAP’s regulatory density and perceived hidden agendas exacerbate suspicion. These asymmetries mean that identical policy proposals are interpreted very differently depending on position and experience.

Disputes over power and representation

Participants repeatedly highlighted unequal power relations within the agri-food system and within policy debates themselves. Well-resourced actors shape agendas more easily, while those most affected, small farmers, rural communities, citizens, often lack time, resources, or access. When these imbalances remain implicit, dialogue risks being perceived as performative rather than productive, further eroding trust.

¹ Duffy, B., Hewlett, K. A., McCrae, J., & Hall, J. (2019). *Divided Britain? Polarisation and fragmentation trends in the UK* (The Policy Institute at King’s College London). King’s College London. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/divided-britain.pdf>

4. Strategies for depolarisation and trust building

Taken together, the workshop discussions and survey findings indicate that depolarisation in CAP debates requires institutional, communicative, and narrative shifts. More dialogue alone is insufficient; what matters is *how* dialogue is structured, *who* it empowers, and *when* and *why* communication takes place.

I. Anchor debates in shared goals, not contested instruments

Polarisation intensifies when CAP discussions are framed as binary choices between farming models or technologies. A depolarising approach is to start from shared objectives, such as food availability, resilience, fair livelihoods, environmental protection, and then explore plural pathways for achieving them in different contexts. This allows disagreement over means without undermining mutual legitimacy. Survey respondents reinforced this approach by calling for common metrics and clearer distinctions between realistic constraints and aspirational goals, suggesting that debates become less polarised when trade-offs are made explicit rather than moralised.

Implication: CAP debates should prioritise goal alignment and transparent trade-off discussion, making clear that “healthy consensus” does not require unanimity but agreement on direction and process.

II. Rebuild trust through experience-based, compensated engagement

The workshops consistently showed that trust grows through listening, shared experience, and long-term interaction, not persuasion. Formats that reduce defensiveness—such as “listening mode,” joint curiosity, and on-farm encounters—allow participants to step out of adversarial roles. Survey respondents strongly supported this experiential approach, highlighting storytelling and exposure to everyday farming realities as powerful depolarising tools.

Equally important is addressing participation fatigue and inequality. If engagement relies on unpaid time, it reproduces power imbalances and undermines legitimacy.

Implication: CAP-related dialogues should combine field-based engagement with fair compensation for participation and explicit recognition of positionality (“which hat am I wearing?”), reinforcing dignity and mutual respect.

III. Protect the information space and pre-empt misinformation

Both workshops and survey responses identified misinformation as a key accelerant of polarisation, particularly in emotionally charged debates around food. Workshop 3 highlighted inoculation methods—warning audiences about manipulation and showing how it works—as an effective way to build resilience against both issue-based and affective polarisation.

Survey respondents added that misinformation thrives because food is intimate, identity-linked, and highly visible, and because subjective claims often gain equal footing with evidence in public debate.

Implication: CAP communication should move from reactive rebuttal to proactive resilience-building, using accessible formats (infographics, short explainers) and targeting the persuadable middle at moments of high public salience.

IV. Make power dynamics explicit and procedurally visible

Finally, the workshops stressed that depolarisation cannot succeed if structural power imbalances remain unaddressed. Dialogue that ignores who sets agendas, who benefits from the status quo, and whose voices are marginalised risks deepening cynicism. Survey responses similarly emphasised the importance of listening to individual stories and ensuring that affected actors are treated as co-creators rather than policy targets.

Implication: Trust-building in CAP debates requires transparency about representation, decision-making, and follow-through; this includes showing how inputs are used and why certain trade-offs are chosen.

5. Conclusion: a vision into the future

Our analysis shows that polarisation in CAP debates is not simply a clash of interests, but a clash of narratives, lenses, and institutional relationships. While the identified strategies can reduce mistrust and create space for more constructive exchange, they do not by themselves offer a unifying direction. Depolarisation is a necessary condition for progress, but it is not an end in itself.

To move beyond managed disagreement toward forward-looking policy coherence, CAP debates require shared reference points, i.e., values, goals, and imaginaries that different stakeholders can recognise as legitimate, even when they disagree on implementation. The workshop series revealed that such reference points already exist beneath the surface of polarised debates: concerns for dignity and fairness, the resilience of land and livelihoods, healthy and affordable food, and responsibility toward future generations.

By articulating both shared values and new imaginaries for European agriculture, we could reconnect policy discussions with a sense of common purpose—one that acknowledges diversity, embraces complexity, and restores agency to those who produce, govern, and depend on Europe’s food systems.

Annex

RIE-ALLEA Workshop Series: “Decoding Polarisation in Debates on Sustainable Food Systems”

Addressing the complexities of sustainable food systems requires a nuanced understanding of the diverse actors, competing interests, and underlying sources of polarisation that shape policy debates. To explore these dynamics and foster evidence-based, inclusive policy making, a **three-part online workshop series** was organised by **ALLEA and Re-Imagine Europa**, between October, November and December 2024.

Methodological Approach

The workshops employed **Re-Imagine Europa’s depolarisation methodology**, structured into three phases:

- I. **Listen** – Engaging with diverse stakeholders to capture a wide range of perspectives and uncover shared aspirations.
- II. **Bridge** – Facilitating dialogue that shifts the focus from polarised debates to common objectives and opportunities for collaboration.
- III. **Act** – Translating discussions into actionable policy recommendations grounded in inclusivity and consensus-building.

Each workshop was meticulously co-designed by experts from Re-Imagine Europa (RIE) and ALLEA, ensuring an interactive and participatory format that fostered meaningful engagement. The sessions were structured to not only address specific challenges associated with sustainable food systems but also to facilitate **knowledge exchange, interdisciplinary dialogue, and cross-sectoral collaboration**. By integrating diverse perspectives, the workshops promoted **mutual learning and the co-construction of insights**, enhancing participants’ understanding of complex issues while encouraging innovative, inclusive approaches to policymaking:

- **Workshop 1: Actors and Agendas** (18 October 2024, 11:00 – 13:00 CET)
Participants identified key stakeholders and their respective interests, contributing to a comprehensive mapping of the policy landscape. The workshop sought to define “sustainability” in a way that accounts for diverse perspectives while highlighting points of convergence and divergence among actors.
- **Workshop 2: Roots of Polarisation** (15 November 2024, 14:00 – 16:00 CET)
Discussions focused on the sociopolitical and psychological drivers of polarisation, including misinformation, trust deficits, and the role of identity in shaping narratives around food system reforms.
- **Workshop 3: Depolarisation Tools and Solutions** (3 December 2024, 12:00 – 14:00 CET)
Participants applied insights from the previous sessions to develop methodologies and tools aimed at fostering more constructive and solution-oriented discussions. This final session involved interactive exercises, including simulations, to test the efficacy of proposed strategies.

Participation

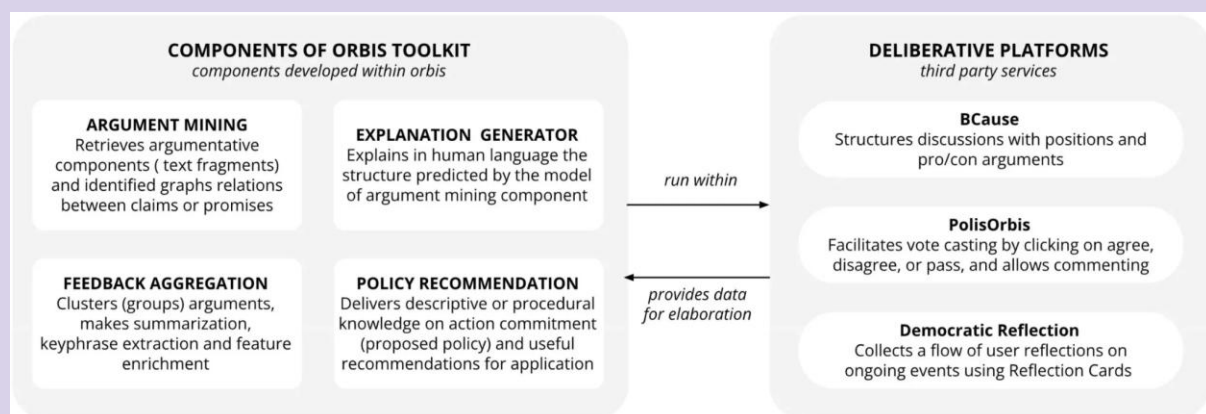
Participation in the Expert Dialogue was offered by RIE, in collaboration with ALLEA, through the **Stakeholder Advisory Group** on *Decoding Polarisation in Debates on Sustainable Food Systems*. The Advisory Group brings together a diverse range of perspectives, including representatives from farming and agri-food value chains, environmental and consumer organisations, academia and research, advisory services, and policy and civil society actors, ensuring a broad and balanced exchange across sectors traditionally positioned on different sides of the debate.

ORBIS Integration

ORBIS is a research and innovation project funded under the European Union's *Horizon Europe Framework Programme*, focused on advancing deliberative democracy through the integration of socio-technical solutions that enable digitally enhanced participation at scale. The project integrates interdisciplinary research across political science, social innovation, argumentation theory, and computational linguistics to explore and prototype new models of democratic engagement through novel participatory processes and practices.

The **ORBIS toolkit** consists of a set of modular, AI-supported tools designed to facilitate the **analysis and synthesis of deliberative content**. These tools draw on natural language processing (NLP), argument mining, and semantic clustering techniques to process unstructured textual data—such as transcripts of discussions—and produce structured representations of argumentation. Specifically, the toolkit enables the identification of:

- Key claims and positions,
- Recurring argumentative structures,
- Points of convergence and divergence,
- Clusters of thematically related content.



Annexe - Figure 1. Infographics of the ORBIS integration of Toolkit Components and Deliberative Platforms

Further technical details about the toolkit are available on the ORBIS website (<https://orbis-project.eu/technology/>).

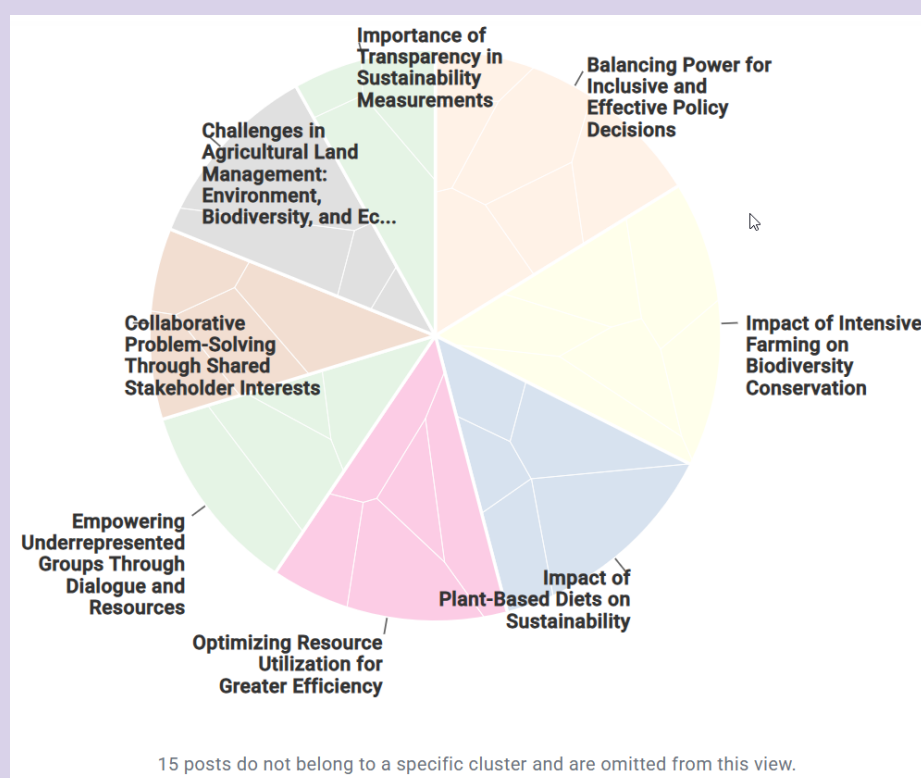
In the context of this workshop series, the ORBIS technology was **experimentally applied** to the **pseudonymised transcripts** of the three sessions. Rather than functioning as a stand-alone analysis engine, the toolkit was used as a **complementary aid to qualitative research**. Its **AI-enhanced components** supported the structuring and interpretation of complex discursive content generated during the expert dialogues, with the aim of assessing the toolkit's potential to identify key themes, argumentative patterns, and areas of consensus or contention.

Visual Results from the ORBIS Toolkit

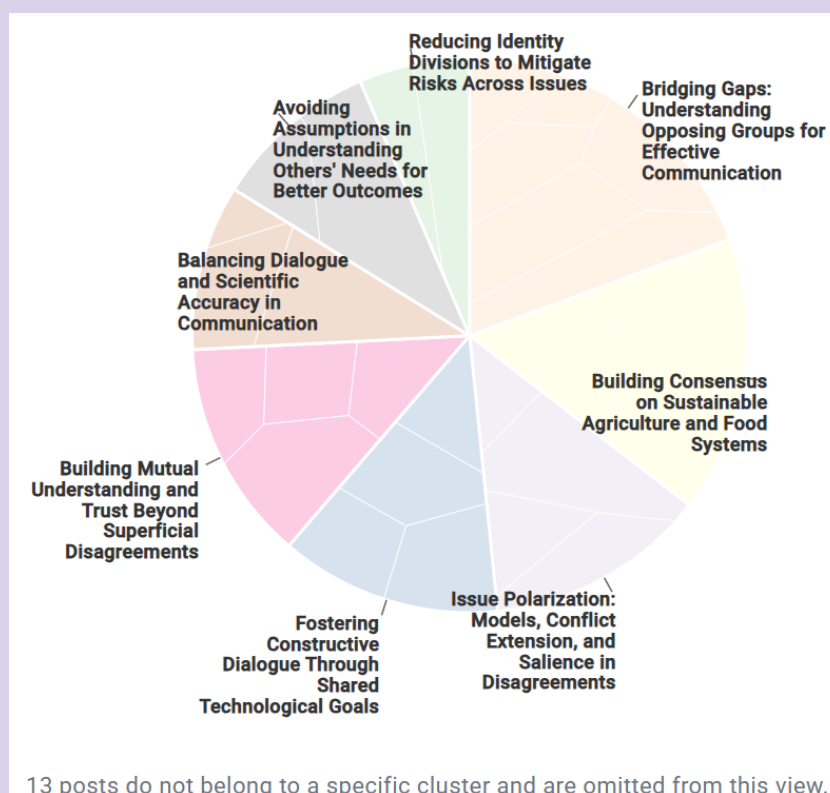
The results of the ORBIS analysis were used **internally** by the expert team at RIE to support the **manual interpretation** of the workshop data. This approach contributed to the thematic coding process, guided the identification of emerging discussion clusters, and informed the structuring of the key findings.

The following section presents examples of visual analytics produced using the ORBIS Toolkit.

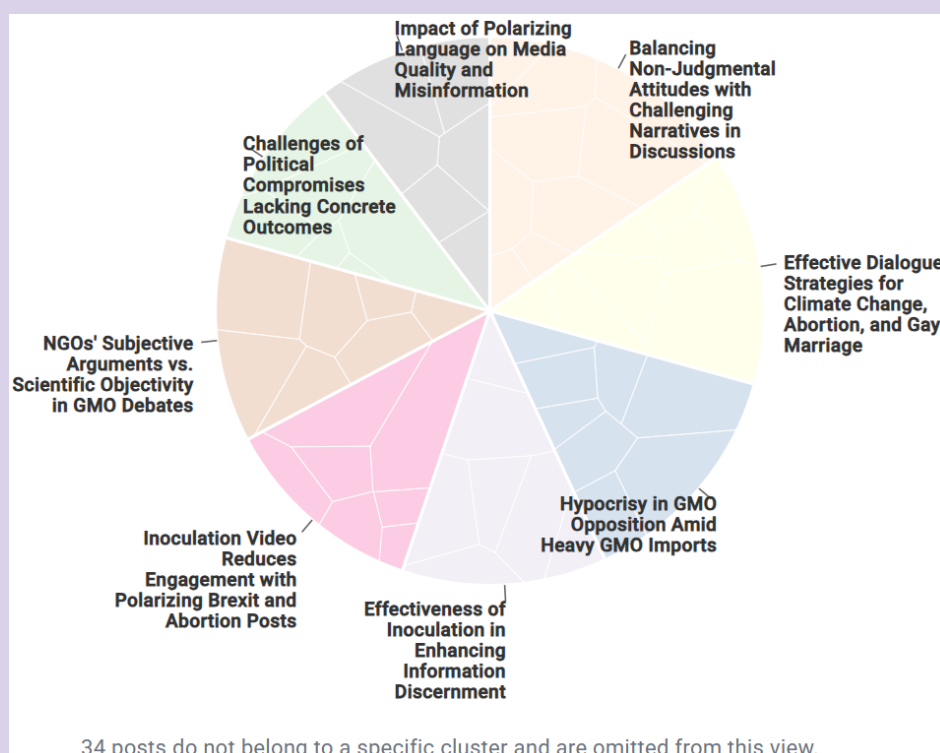
1. Interactive Clustering



Annex - Figure 2. Clustering of Workshop 1: Actors and Agendas (18 October 2024). The Interactive Clustering is available at this [link](#)



Annex - Figure 3. Clustering of Workshop 2: Roots of Polarisation (15 November 2024). The Interactive Clustering is available at this [link](#)

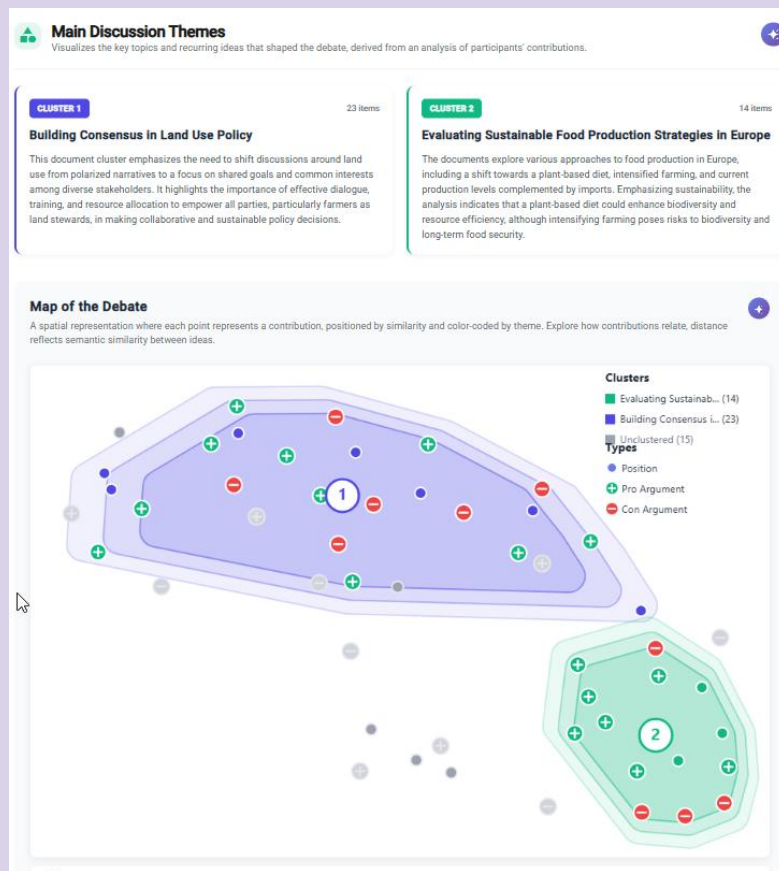


Annexe - Figure 4. Clustering of Workshop 3: Depolarisation Tools and Solutions (3 December 2024). The Interactive Clustering is available at this [link](#)

2. Discussion Themes and Mapping

This functionality provides a representation of the main topics and recurrent patterns (**Main Discussion Themes**) emerging from the debate, based on an analysis of participants' contributions. For the workshops, the results were obtained exclusively through AI-based analysis of the transcribed discussions, uploaded to the BCause platform.

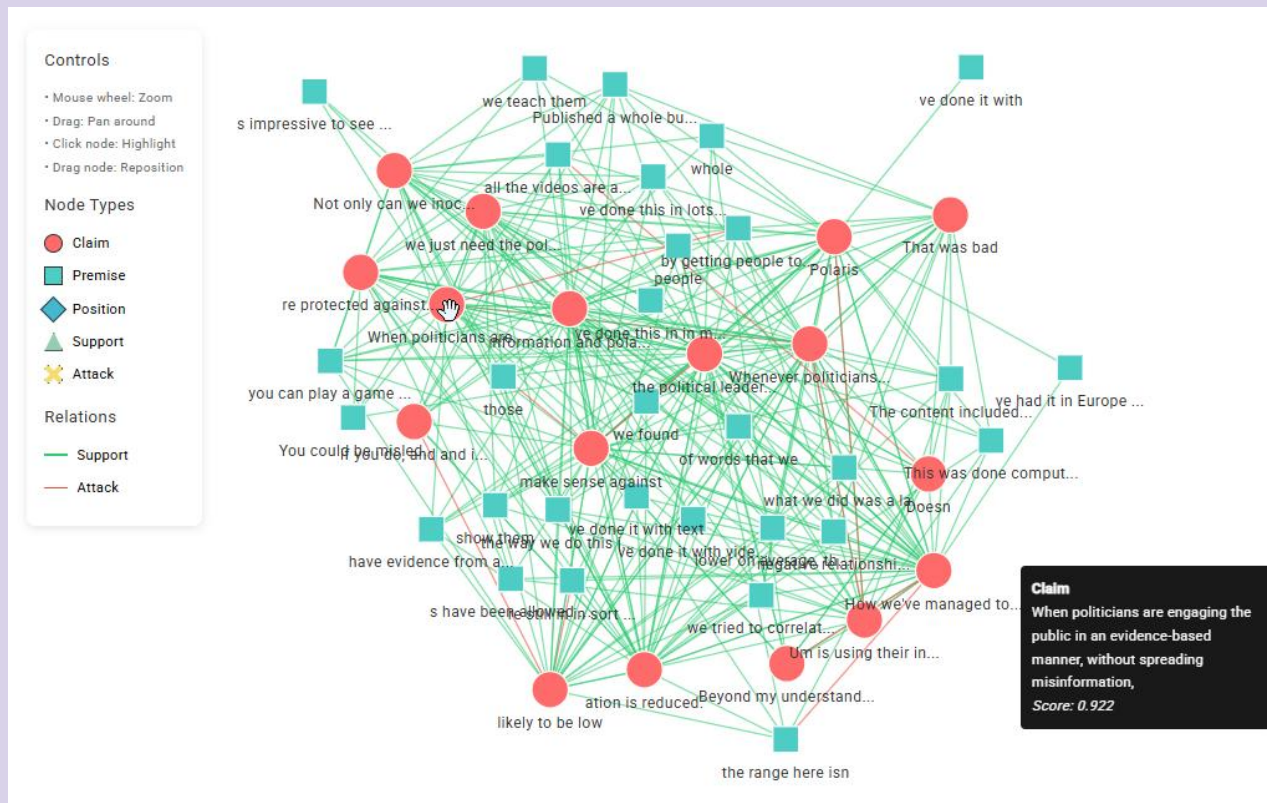
This section also includes the *Map of the Debate*, an interactive visualisation in which each point corresponds to a single contribution. Contributions are positioned according to their semantic similarity and colour-coded by thematic grouping, allowing users to examine relationships between ideas, with spatial distance indicating the degree of semantic relatedness.



Annex - Figure 5. Example of Main Discussion Themes from Workshop 1: Actors and Agendas (18 October 2024)

3. Argument Network

Another type of visualisation produced by the ORBIS toolkit provides an **interactive Argument Network** based on a number of **nodes**—namely: Claim, Premise, Position, Support, and Attack—and their corresponding **relations**: Support and Attack. This interactive map enables to trace each node back to the specific portion of the transcript from which it was derived (Figure 5).



Annex - Figure 6. Example of Argument Network from Workshop 3: Depolarisation Tools and Solutions (3 December 2024)

Finally, the ORBIS Toolkit enables the extraction of additional analytical elements from anonymised transcripts and/or direct discussions within BCause platform, including:

- Discussion Summary that synthesises key points of the discourse, and the identification of the main positions and directions that emerged from the debate, offering a starting point to explore the discussion landscape.
- Most Contested Position, identifying the strongest disagreement among participants, based on the structure and intensity of arguments exchanged.
- Under-explored Ideas, which highlight discussion points that received limited engagement but hold potential to advance or balance the debate.
- Policy Recommendations, AI-generated suggestions translating the debate's outcomes into policy-oriented directions, aligned with participants' expressed values and concerns.

This experimental phase was primarily designed to evaluate the usability and analytical relevance of the ORBIS technical tools in real-world deliberative settings. The results obtained should therefore be understood as exploratory and subject to refinement. While the toolkit does not yet provide fully automated or definitive outputs, its application nevertheless proved valuable for research purposes, contributing substantively to the analytical process and revealing concrete directions for further

technical development. The insights generated through this experimentation informed the continued evolution of the ORBIS methodology, as well as broader efforts to integrate AI-supported deliberation within institutional policy-making processes.

DIALOGUE #1: Reimagine Food and Agriculture

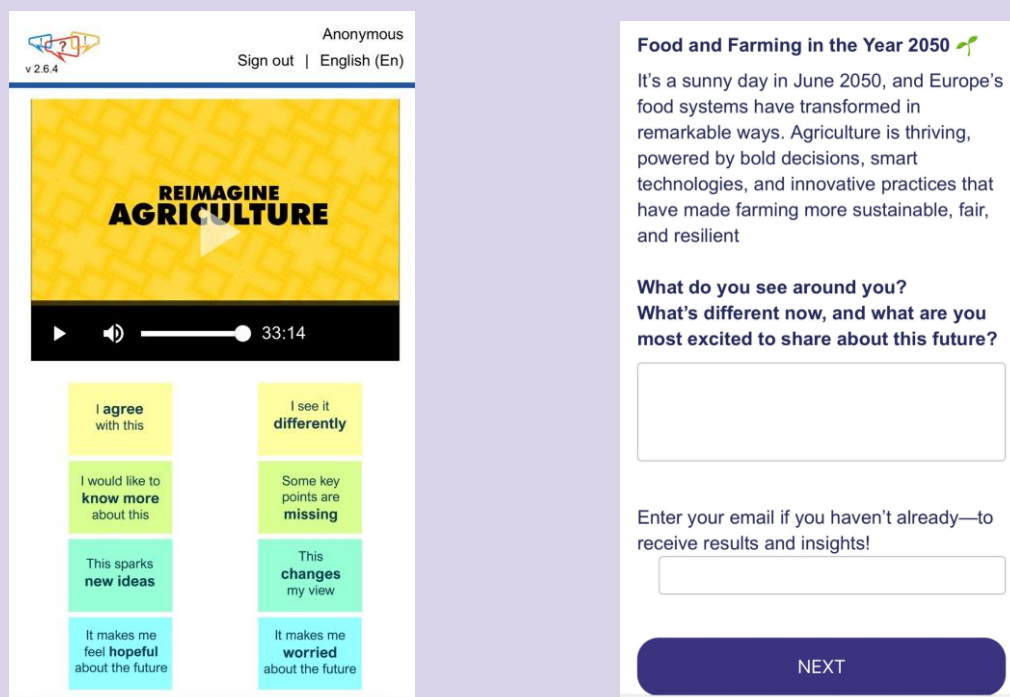
The series of workshops was followed by *DIALOGUE #1: Reimagine Food and Agriculture*, a subsequent activity under the ORBIS project. This initiative served as a digital deliberative exercise designed to explore, discuss, and collaboratively shape a forward-looking vision for the future of food and agriculture. The Dialogue was conducted from **May 23 to June 8, 2025** online.



This pilot initiative invited participants to engage with a short video podcast entitled *Reimagine Agriculture*, featuring Professor Louise Fresco, an internationally recognised expert in the field. The episode provided an overview of the achievements, current challenges, and prospective directions of the European agricultural system within a broader global framework. Participants were encouraged to reflect on the content by interacting with embedded digital prompts—so-called “interactive cards”.

At the conclusion of the episode, individuals were prompted to articulate their personal *Vision for the Future of Food and Farming in 2050*, imagining a scenario in which food systems have evolved to become more intelligent, equitable, and resilient. This visioning exercise served as a mechanism to capture diverse perspectives on the desired trajectory of food systems transformation.

The podcast was delivered in English, with multilingual subtitle support available in French, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, and Spanish. The estimated time commitment for participation was approximately 30 minutes. Further information is available at the following [link](#).



Annex - Figure 6. DIALOGUE #1: Reimagine Food and Agriculture - Part I and II

Analysis of Participant Responses on Food and Farming in the Year 2050

The majority of reactions in Part I centred on the perceived role of the European Union in shaping a shared vision for the future of agriculture—particularly when discussing themes such as innovation, sustainability, and the inclusion of youth perspectives. Viewer reflections spanned a spectrum from curiosity (e.g., “I would like to know more about this”) to optimism (e.g., “It makes me feel hopeful about the future”), suggesting a broad engagement with both the content and its implications. These sentiments align with recent policy developments; notably, in February 2025, [the European Commission introduced a renewed vision for farming and food systems](#), following the conclusions of the Strategic Dialogue. Audience responses appear to echo and reinforce these evolving EU priorities.

Quantitatively, the largest proportion of interactions was observed in the **"YOUR PERSPECTIVE"** category (33.0%), with 22.8% of total responses indicating “I see it differently” and 10.2% expressing agreement (“I agree with this”). The **"DEEPENING PERSPECTIVE"** category accounted for 24.8% of responses, comprising 13.6% who wished to learn more and 11.2% who felt key points were missing. The **"SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE"** category represented 22.8% of responses, with 7.8% stating “This changes my view” and 15.0% indicating “This sparks new ideas.” Finally, the **"FUTURE PERSPECTIVE"** category made up 19.4% of responses, including 7.3% expressing hope and 12.1% voicing concern about the future. Collectively, these data reflect a nuanced mix of personal reflection, critical engagement, and forward-looking sentiment among participants.

The interactive cards proved effective in generating **rich, diverse feedback** across thematic categories. The format allowed for **multidimensional reflection**, capturing more than just positive/negative reactions—it provided insight into *how* and *why* participants respond in certain ways.

With an average of nearly 5 interactions per participant (4.6), the data suggest that most participants interacted with **multiple cards**, indicating a relatively **high level of engagement** for a qualitative feedback tool. All **8 reflection cards** were used, confirming that the **full range of perspectives** was activated. The popularity of “I see it differently” and “I would like to know more” reflects a willingness

to critically engage and seek deeper understanding, rather than passive agreement. Although fewer participants indicated a shift in perspective, a substantial number reported that the content sparked new ideas (15%), showing cognitive engagement even in the absence of full opinion change.

The distribution of responses suggests that participants were not only **evaluating the content**, but also **deepening their understanding, generating new ideas, and considering broader implications**—making this tool a valuable method for participatory insight gathering, resulting in **strong engagement and thoughtful reflection**.

Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses (Part II)

In addition to the structured response categories analysed in Part I, participants were invited to share open-ended reflections on their vision for the future of agriculture and food systems. The analysis revealed a set of recurring themes that reflect a strong desire for sustainability, equity, innovation, and cooperation—while also highlighting areas of tension between differing visions for the path forward. The following summarises core themes and points of divergence.

Key Common Themes Across Open Responses:

- **Sustainability and Environmental Protection:** All responses emphasise sustainable agricultural practices, including the use of clean technologies and methods that preserve soil health, reduce pollution, and ensure biodiversity. A shift from monocultures and pesticide-heavy farming to ecologically balanced systems is highlighted.
- **Improved Nutrition and Public Health:** There is a strong focus on improving food quality, with mention of nutritious, vitamin-rich diets enabled by new technologies. Some responses advocate for plant-based (vegan) diets, while others support diverse, nutrient-dense food systems. The vision includes healthier populations and reduced chronic health issues like obesity and malnutrition.
- **Fair Labor Practices and Economic Equity:** Several responses call for the fair treatment of agricultural workers, including fair wages and an end to exploitation. Emphasis is placed on reducing food price inflation and ensuring that nutritious food is affordable to all, as opposed to the current dominance of cheap, unhealthy fast foods.
- **Technological Innovation with Oversight:** Genomic technologies and clean tech were seen positively, but regulatory oversight, especially by health authorities such as the EU, is noted as essential for ensuring safety and efficacy.
- **Community and Global Cooperation:** A recurring theme is the idea of sharing agricultural innovations and community-based farming models globally, enabling poorer regions to combat hunger and malnutrition. This points to a more cooperative, interconnected global food system.
- **Food as a Bridge to Broader Social Change:** Some imagined agriculture as a driver for social cohesion, enabling dialogue around migration, solidarity, and European identity rooted in diversity.

Differences in Perspective:

- **Technological vs. Traditional Approaches:** Some responses prioritise high-tech solutions (e.g., genomic technologies), while others advocate for community-based or ecological farming methods.
- **Global vs. Local Focus:** Some responses emphasise global cooperation to address food insecurity, while others highlight local or regional strategies such as small-scale, ecological farming.
- **Dietary Preferences:** While some responses envision a vegan future, others advocate for diverse, sustainable diets, reflecting a spectrum of dietary philosophies.

About the ORBIS Project

[ORBIS](#) (Augmenting participation, co-creation, trust and transparency in deliberative democracy) is a EU-funded research project which aims to make policymaking more inclusive. Its technology is boosted by Artificial Intelligence to analyse and visualise discourse around challenging topics, helping us identify common ground where restart the public debate on our future.

