



# Policy-level enablers and barriers to the uptake of Sustainable Farming Practices

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Policy stakeholders in the UK and France were asked about policy-based enablers and barriers to farmers adopting sustainable farming practices as agricultural policy comes into a major period of revision. Participants shared their views on current policies and identified key actions for improvement, including:

- › Increase funding to public agencies, advisory services and farmers
- › Improve balance between incentives and regulations
- › Enhance accessibility of communication and government-led training
- › Promote collaborative knowledge exchange
- › Implement multi-level agri-food supply interventions

## Introduction

In the EU, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the primary legislative policy that affects farmers, is currently in a state of transition. New reforms are due to come into effect in 2023 and as the UK leaves the EU, a new agricultural policy will come into play from 2022 onwards. This provides an opportunity to consider how agricultural policy hinders or promotes sustainable farming practices, as governments aim to promote environmental benefits and “public money for public goods”.

The CAP, primarily implemented through the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and Agri-Environment-Climate Schemes (AECS), is intended to promote the uptake of sustainable farming practices primarily through economic incentives. Efforts to promote sustainable practices have focused on improving water quality, Water-Use Efficiency (WUE) and Nutrient-Use Efficiency (NUE) through the Water Framework Directive and Nitrates Directive. While the directives are applied differently in different countries, these schemes have been widely criticised for failing to improve environmental indicators and are viewed as prescriptive and restrictive by farmers. Understanding the drivers, enablers and barriers for the uptake of sustainable innovations from a policy perspective as the CAP is revised and, in the case of the UK, replaced, is key to improving the efficacy of sustainable agriculture policy in Europe.

## Approach

As part of the SolACE project, policy stakeholders in France and the UK were interviewed about enablers and barriers to the adoption of sustainable farming practices. The French interviews included 22 stakeholders and took place in June 2020 (Neill, 2020). In the UK, 25 participants were interviewed between November 2018 and February 2019 (Banda, 2020).

The primary themes arising from interviewing policy stakeholders were broadly financial, regulatory and social, with enablers and barriers in each category.

## Policy Stakeholder Views

### Financial incentives

While direct payments are generally considered incentivising, especially as a means to mitigate risks associated with adopting new strategies, policy stakeholders in both France and the UK acknowledged that financial incentives do not necessarily cover the costs of adopting sustainable farming practices, including technology and additional labour. In the UK, the overall cost of sustainability is actually considered a hindrance to adopting WUE and NUE practices, but grants were considered more useful as a means to acquire more sustainable equipment/infrastructure. Despite overall feelings that CAP funding was not ambitious enough to truly promote shifts toward

Theme	Enabler	Barrier	Improvement
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Direct-payments</li> <li>› Market-related incentivisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› High cost of sustainable practice adoption</li> <li>› Poor visibility of longer-term financial schemes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Overall funding increase (public agencies &amp; advisors)</li> <li>› Multi-level supply chain interventions</li> <li>› Incentivise early sustainable practice adopters</li> </ul>
Regulatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Mandatory requirements</li> <li>› Regulatory accountability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Constrictive/punitive regulations</li> <li>› Bureaucracy in registration (top-down approach)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Balance of incentives &amp; regulations</li> <li>› Clear, accessible communication &amp; training</li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Regular, accessible information on sustainability</li> <li>› Consumer support of local supply chains</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Technical language</li> <li>› Societal perception of farmers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Government-led training</li> <li>› Collaborative knowledge exchange</li> <li>› Public-facing dissemination</li> </ul>

Table 1: Summary of policy stakeholder views

sustainability, financial incentives were deemed necessary, and stakeholders in France also noted that besides direct payments, policy-assisted market-related incentivisation is a key enabler of sustainable agriculture. The interviews with French participants took place in spring 2020, meaning they were also keenly aware of the effects the global COVID-19 pandemic had on the food supply chain, which highlighted the importance of local, short supply chains, with clear room for policy to support multi-level supply chain interventions in the European market.

*“I don’t think the encouragement policy has been well developed. Because currently, we have ‘thou must not do’ approach to regulation. So, certain practices are banned. So, the regulation is based on a negative command, not a positive command.”*

- UK participant

*“We noticed a change during lockdown; [consumers] resorted to short supply chains, local, proximity buying. As soon as consumers and farmers are brought closer together, the farmer becomes even more sensitive to how they produce because there is this closer, trust-based relationship between them.”*

- French participant

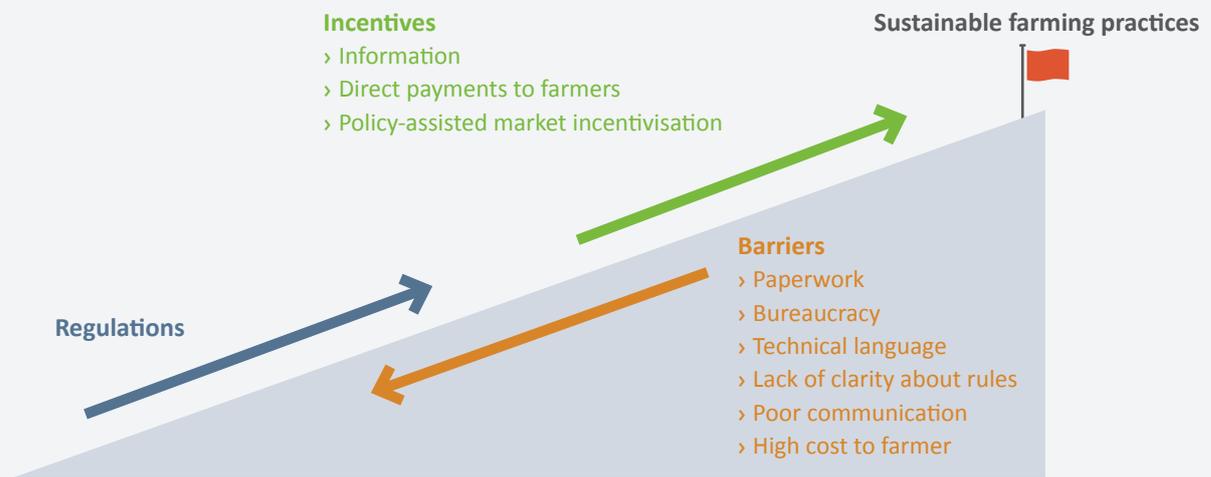
hindrance, and UK stakeholders specifically mentioned paperwork as a barrier to farmer uptake of sustainable farming practices.

### Social enablers and barriers

The social enablers and barriers identified by policy stakeholders were focussed primarily on communication and dissemination. The information available to farmers and other agricultural stakeholders is considered beneficial, especially if reliable, but participants in both France and the UK noted that more access to government-led training and advice would support adoption of sustainable practices even further. Accessibility and clarity were noted as essential—technical language is a barrier, especially when this prevents farmers from understanding how sustainable farming practices would positively impact their farming systems. When regulations, including their benefits, are communicated effectively (and regularly) to farmers, uptake improves, but stakeholders in the UK noted that the rules affecting WUE and NUE often lack clarity in what farmers can and cannot do (and the consequences for regulation violations). Stakeholders in France also very clearly highlighted a concern over negative perceptions of farming from the media, policy makers and society at large, noting that this leads to public misunderstanding of sustainable agricultural policy and defensive farmer responses to regulation.

### Regulations in sustainable agriculture policy

Regulations, similar to economic incentives, were also considered a necessary component of sustainable agriculture policy but are viewed as more constrictive and therefore less preferred. In both case study countries, regulations are viewed as both enablers and barriers, with potential to increase farmer participation in sustainable practices in collaboration with financial incentives but too often acting as punitive out of context. In the UK, stakeholders suggested that financial incentives are viewed as the carrot, while regulation is the stick, and in France, the top-down approach of regulation is considered too technocratic and irrelevant to individual farmers. Additionally, the bureaucracy of regulations and compliance related to the CAP is also viewed as a



Regulatory factors and social / financial incentives working against the barriers hindering the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices.

## What Needs to Change?

Through the interviews, policy stakeholders were asked what needed to change to the current agricultural policy to better enable uptake of sustainable farming practices.

### Overall funding increase

Overall, there was concern about revisions to the CAP (France) and the direction of new agricultural policies (UK), but participants in both countries agreed that overall additional funding to implement and support agricultural policy is essential. French participants suggested that the current CAP scheme is not financially ambitious enough and UK stakeholders proposed increases in funding would make regulatory agencies/farm advisors more effective through increased dissemination and monitoring capabilities.

*“ We need to be very clear what the law says you can and can’t do. And saying, you’ve got these many months to rectify this, otherwise this and this will happen. That kind of clear approach that just doesn’t seem to be happening in all instances.”*

**- UK participant**

### Better communication of all payment schemes

While direct payments are easily understood, stakeholders noted that additional means of financial support for sustainable farming practices should be promoted more visibly. French participants noted that AECS can effectively mitigate risks for farmers but are not as recognised as direct payments. A key area of improvement from policy stakeholders revolved around better communica-

tion of financial incentives beyond direct payments to encourage further adoption of sustainable practices.

*“We don’t speak enough about this but initial and continued farmer training ensures there is a general sharing of knowledge, and it allows farmers to move their practices forward.”*

**- French participant**

### Government led training and advice

The overall clarity of existing regulations was also considered a hindrance by stakeholders. Those in the UK suggest that regular, concise explanations of the dos and don’ts of WUE and NUE policy will improve sustainable practice uptake. French stakeholders also noted the potential strength in communal frameworks across the EU but that actions related to the CAP need to be clear and relevant at the farmer level. Beyond technical support on implementing sustainable farming practices, participants emphasised the need for government-led training and advice on how to successfully obtain funding. Multi-faceted training to help farmers understand regulations as well as access financial incentives will go a long way to encourage sustainable agriculture practices.

### Support more collaboration amongst farmers

While dissemination and communication from government agencies is essential, stakeholders also emphasised the need for policy that supports more collaboration amongst farmers, through knowledge-exchange and dissemination. Farmer-to-farmer collaboration is essential to uptake of sustainable practices and participants noted that policy should support (and fund) events and other knowledge-sharing opportunities driven by farmers.



Farmers and stakeholders at a demonstration event. Source: LEAF (2020)

### Public-facing dissemination

Participants expressed worry that farming is often perceived as detrimental to environmental sustainability and that communication to the public about sustainable agricultural policy would benefit farmers and encourage adoption of sustainable practices. French stakeholders suggested policy aimed at educating citizens about farming could contribute to additional customer-driven market incentives for farmers. Additionally, participants proposed collaboration between farmers and society at large to encourage a collective approach to sustainable land management.

*“Citizens could get training, so at the very least, consumers know what they are buying. [...] I think that you could include this in school curriculums, a sort of initiation to eating sustainably.”*  
- French participant

### Incentivise early SFP adopters

UK stakeholders also suggested incentivising early adopters of sustainable farming practices. Farmers who are already farming sustainably will be rewarded, encouraging those that lag behind to engage. In this way, policy supports and is further driven by those who are already farming sustainably.

### Multi-level supply chain interventions

While the interviews in the UK took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholders in both countries suggested that policy should consider the full agri-food supply chain with the cost of adopting sustainable farming practices spread across the market and highlighted that fair prices incentivise farmers. For French participants, this was further emphasised by changes to the

market and consumer behaviour during lockdown, with potential to encourage sustainable practices by demanding more local, short supply chains through multi-level supply chain interventions.

### References

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