

# Combining Policy Instruments and Local Measures to Promote Agrobiodiversity

Combiner instruments de politique et mesures locales pour promouvoir l'agrobiodiversité

Kombination von politischen Instrumenten und lokalen Maßnahmen zur Förderung der Agrobiodiversität

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## A research gap on policies for agrobiodiversity

Agrobiodiversity, defined as 'the diversity within and between species present in an agroecosystem that contributes to food and agriculture' (Pascual *et al.*, 2013), is globally in decline. As a central component of agrobiodiversity, crop and varietal diversity in particular is under threat. Although more than 6,000 plant species have historically been cultivated for food, fewer than 200 'major crops' make a substantial contribution to global food production, with only nine accounting for more than 60 per cent of total crop output (FAO, 2025). Current food systems are therefore genetically dependent on a small number of crops, to the detriment of others, classified as 'minor crops'. In Europe, wheat, barley and maize accounted for more than 50 per cent of harvested arable land in 2022 (FAOSTAT, 2024). Another illustration of this process is the abandonment of 'conservation varieties' – that is, traditional, often local, varieties – which now represent less than 1 per cent of all varieties listed in the official Common European Catalogue of Plant Varieties (Didonna *et al.*, 2024).

This dependence on major crops and modern varieties threatens both the resilience of agroecosystems in the face of climate change and the quality

and diversity of human diets (IPBES, 2019). Numerous studies have shown how the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has contributed to the intensification of agriculture and a narrowing of crop and varietal diversity, thereby accelerating the erosion of agrobiodiversity (Vernooij, 2025). However, since economic incentives are a major lever for changing agricultural practices, a research gap remains regarding how the CAP and other policy measures in European countries can economically support greater agrobiodiversity on farms (Pascual *et al.*, 2013).

“ Les mesures gouvernementales peuvent apporter une aide économique aux exploitations agricoles qui promeuvent l'agrobiodiversité. ”

This article is based on the work of the ongoing European project DIVINFOOD (2022–2027) whose objectives include developing new farm-level business models that promote minor crops and traditional varieties. One of the findings that

prompted the research was that farmers were not sufficiently informed about policies that could support farm-level business models based on agrobiodiversity. The research therefore first sought to identify existing European and national policy instruments that could provide economic support for the use of agrobiodiversity by farmers. At the same time, one of the project's hypotheses was that the development of local food policies, generally motivated by sustainability objectives (Moragues-Faus and Battersby, 2021), would open up new economic opportunities for crop and varietal diversification. The research then sought to identify local initiatives launched or facilitated by local authorities as part of their food policies, and using or supplementing these instruments with local measures to support the use of minor crops and traditional varieties at farm level.

## Methods

The first stage of the research involved examining official policy documents at the European level, with a particular focus on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and in the seven countries involved in the project (Denmark, France, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland). However, difficulties in identifying policy instruments specifically dedicated to agrobiodiversity led to

interviews being conducted with experts, covering experts in the CAP and/or national agricultural policies, experts in local food policies (e.g. the Milan Pact) and experts involved in the field of agrobiodiversity. Nine experts were interviewed in the summer of 2023, including institutional actors (from the EU CAP network, Ministries of Agriculture, European agricultural advisory and food policy networks) and researchers external to the project. These experts helped identify existing policy instruments providing direct, indirect or potential support, as well as some local initiatives making use of these instruments.

The second stage of the research aimed to better capture the range of local initiatives promoting these policy instruments, in combination with local measures, in order to provide economic support to farms cultivating minor crops and/or traditional varieties. The identification of these initiatives also focused on the 7 countries involved in the project and was based on a review of academic and grey literature, supplemented by online searches using keywords such as 'agrobiodiversity', 'minor crop', 'traditional variety', 'policy', 'economic support', 'local authority', 'local initiative' and equivalent terms. The search resulted in the identification of 62 initiatives. These were first classified into three types, based on four criteria: leadership, policy instruments used, local measures implemented and the



'Alvaizere capital do Chicharo', Grass pea (minor crop) festival, Portugal ©Vaz Patto C.

role of local authorities. Subsequently, five case studies of local initiatives representative of the three types were conducted (four in France, one in Italy and one in Portugal), based on document reviews and semi-structured interviews with two to three members of each initiative (Table 1).

### European and national policy instruments for agrobiodiversity

The CAP plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of agrobiodiversity in Europe. This policy consists of two pillars: the first (representing 75 per

cent of the CAP budget) includes direct aid to farmers to support their income and market measures; the second is dedicated to rural development and agricultural transition. However, access to aid under both pillars is subject to compliance with mandatory conditionality measures. One of the institutional actors interviewed, a specialist in the CAP, highlighted that the latest CAP reform (2023–2027) introduced conditionality measures related to crop diversification (GAEC 7), which, in his view, 'can benefit minor crops' (Table 2).

**Table 1: Case studies of local initiatives supporting agrobiodiversity**

| Case | Designation, country  | Leader, initiator                          | Role of local authority(ies)  | Main domain of economic support   |
|------|---|--|---|---|
| 1    | Legumes, Agroecology, Supply Chains and Food Habits (France)                            | A regional natural park (local authority)  | Leader and facilitator  | Market development for legumes; seeking grants to support research on farming systems |
| 2    | Low input supply chains (France)  | A big city, engaged in a local food policy | Leader (city) and funder (regional water agency)                        | Cultivation of minor cereals and legumes  |
| 3    | Peasant Initiative (France)   | An association of farmers                  | Funder (a group of municipalities, a city, and a regional water agency) | Farmer seed saving  |
| 4    | Seeds municipal farm (France)   | A big city, engaged in a local food policy | Funder and facilitator  | Seed access for minor crops   |
| 5    | Food festival celebrating a grain legume and geographical indication project (Portugal) | A rural small-scale city                   | Funder and facilitator  | Consumer awareness, certification   |
| 6    | Direct selling of minor crops (Italy)   | A group of citizens                        | Funder  | Promotion, access to markets  |

**Table 2: CAP 2023–2027 measures that can be used to provide economic support to farms promoting agrobiodiversity**

| Measure   | Description   | Average amount (2023)                                      | Countries concerned                         |
|---|---|--|---|
| <b>Conditionality (Articles 12 &amp; 13 of the Regulation 2021/2115 of the European Parliament and of the Council) - Mandatory measures to access subsidies from the first and second pillars</b> |   |  |   |
| <b>GAEC 7 (Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions)</b>  | Crop rotation on arable land, except for crops grown under water  | N/A  | Not applied in all Member States            |
| <b>First pillar - Support for farmers' incomes - Voluntary measures</b>   |   |  |   |
| <b>Coupled Income Support (Articles 32–33)</b>  | Coupled support for the protein crops sector  | €114/ha (range: €105 in France to €204 in Poland)          | France, Northern and Central Italy, Hungary |
| <b>Eco-schemes (Article 28)</b>   | Crop rotation or diversification; use of crops/plant varieties more resilient to climate change                       | €60–125/ha (from €60 in France to €125 in Denmark)         | Denmark, Hungary, France                    |
|   | Use of crops/varieties more resilient to climate change   | Not specified  | Greece                                      |
| <b>Second pillar - Rural development program (FEADER) - Voluntary measures</b>  |   |  |   |
| <b>Agri-environment-Climate Measures (AECM) (Article 70)</b>  | Specific measures – Custodian Farmers in support of Law 194/2015  | €400/ha (range: €100–€4,000 depending on crops and region) | Italy                                       |
|   | Results-based measure requiring 30 per cent reduction in fertiliser use and 15 per cent reduction in carbon footprint | €3,600/farm/year (lump sum) for five years                 | France                                      |
| <b>Support for Investments (Article 73)</b>   | Financial support for farmers with projects addressing sustainable agriculture at farming or processing stages        | Specific public calls dependent on country and region      | All Member States                           |

N/A: not applicable.

Source: Authors.

In terms of economic support, institutional actors and researchers specialising in agricultural policies agreed that the most direct aid from the CAP to crop and varietal diversity is provided through voluntary measures under the first pillar aimed at greening direct payments. This aid was reinforced by the 2023 CAP reform, which requires at least 25 per cent of first-pillar funds to be allocated to eco-schemes. Experts in agricultural policies and in agrobiodiversity also emphasised that agri-environment-climate measures under the second pillar can serve as appropriate instruments to economically support the use of agrobiodiversity on farms, particularly through the cultivation of legumes. These crops remain underutilised in Europe, despite scientific evidence of their potential to reduce the use of synthetic fertilisers and greenhouse gas emissions.

Moreover, two researchers interviewed suggested indirect instruments, such as second-pillar measures that could support the investments needed for

crop diversification (for example, a dehuller for einkorn, an ancient wheat species) (Table 2). However, an expert involved in a European agricultural advisory network pointed out that, in practice, such measures often favour equipment intended for major crops, though this may vary between countries.

Discussions with experts have thus confirmed the value of exploring policy instruments included in the CAP but also beyond it, in order to consider national measures providing indirect yet significant forms of economic support for the use of agrobiodiversity at farm level. Focusing on the seven countries covered by the project, indirect support can be provided to farms through national policy measures targeting food consumption, thereby fostering new markets for products based on agrobiodiversity. For instance, national plans for public food procurement in Portugal and Hungary promote healthy and vegetarian foods, increasing market opportunities for

legumes. Similarly, the *Egalim* law introduced in France in 2019, which requires 20 per cent organic food and one vegetarian meal per week in public catering, contributes to market development for plant-based products. However, these plans do not directly address crop and varietal diversity.

Nor do national policy measures on the agricultural or food production side. For example, Denmark's National Fund for Plants (2022) supports the development of plant-based food, and France's National and Regional Plan for Plant Proteins (2020) promotes 'plants rich in vegetal proteins'. However, a researcher specialising in agrobiodiversity whom we interviewed noted that such programmes may tend to favour soya bean, which already dominates the international legume sector, to the detriment of minor legumes such as lentils, chickpeas and beans. Italy is the only European country identified as having established a specific national legal framework on

agrobiodiversity, integrating international biodiversity objectives promoted by various treaties, such as the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity. Its national law (64/2004), with regional and subregional applications (194/2015) on *Communities of Food and Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture*, promotes public-private partnerships and provides indirect economic support for the restoration of threatened local crops and varieties, both in terms of production and consumption (Scaramuzzi *et al.*, 2021).

“ Politische Maßnahmen können landwirtschaftlichen Betrieben, die die Agrobiodiversität fördern, wirtschaftliche Unterstützung bieten. ”

Public certifications were also highlighted by a researcher specialising in agricultural policies as a form of indirect economic support, although the expert from the agricultural advisory network noted potential drawbacks, consistent with findings in the scientific literature. On the one hand, Protected Geographical Indications (PGIs), initially designed to protect producers from unfair competition, can enhance market recognition and public appreciation of local plant species or varieties (Mariani *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, while PGIs suit productive crops for which certification costs are economically viable, they are less appropriate for less productive or niche species. In addition, two researchers specialising in agricultural policies emphasised that PGIs can reduce diversity, as protection is only granted to varieties included in the specifications, thereby limiting future evolution.

Evidence gathered through document analysis and expert interviews carried out during the first stage of the research therefore indicated that

European and national policy instruments providing economic support for the use of agrobiodiversity on farms remain limited. Nevertheless, the second stage of the research confirmed that these instruments can be effectively combined with other measures initiated or facilitated by local authorities, in some cases as part of local food policies. The following section will show how this combination of measures is implemented for the benefit of farms that promote agrobiodiversity, through three types of local initiatives.

### Local supporting initiatives developed in partnership with local authorities

Three types of local initiatives combining various policy measures to provide economic support to farmers promoting minor crops and traditional varieties were identified. These types were further explored through representative case studies and are described below.

#### *Public-led initiatives to enhance food security and farmer incomes*

Initiated and led by local authorities, these initiatives generally focus on

food security, territorial development, and the improvement of farmers' incomes and well-being. Their primary aim is not directly related to agrobiodiversity. However, policymakers have recognised the potential contribution of these initiatives to achieving their objectives and, in some cases, to supporting their food policy. Consequently, these initiatives provide farmers with various forms of economic support at both production and consumption levels.

For example, in Case 2 (Table 1), the municipality supports the cultivation of minor cereals and legumes by providing lump-sum payments to farmers and introducing these crops into public catering. In Case 4, the city established a municipal farm to supply free seeds for minor crops, while in Case 5, the local authority organises public events to raise consumer awareness of a local crop. These measures complement investment support and PGIs, which are among the most frequently used policy instruments in this type of initiative.

However, these initiatives generally offer limited and fragmented support, as none provide comprehensive support across the entire value chain. For example, in Case 2, the



The 'Cheylard bean', a forgotten traditional variety promoted in DIVINFOOD ©mPmC.

municipality does not help farmers to acquire optical sorters – essential for producing stone-free products for school canteens – or the equipment required to package harvests in quantities suitable for canteen use (5 kg, compared to farmers' usual storage in 200 kg bags). This results in additional work for farmers.

### *Farmer-led initiatives to increase incomes and preserve agrobiodiversity heritage*

The second type comprises initiatives driven by farmers or small-scale farmer collectives. Their main goals are to improve farmer income and autonomy while preserving and enhancing local agrobiodiversity through the development of value chains. Public funding from the CAP's second pillar or from national funds generally facilitates collective action, with investment measures often used to support the purchase of shared equipment.

“ Policy measures can provide economic support to farms promoting agrobiodiversity. ”

In this type of initiative, local authorities provide indirect economic support through measures that facilitate the use of agrobiodiversity, particularly for minor crops for which research and development remain limited. This support focuses on facilitating seed collection and exchange, knowledge sharing and training, equipment investment, market creation (e.g. collective farmers' shops), and certification schemes (trademarks or PGIs). In France, some farmer collectives involve local authorities in governance to stabilise support, adopting the legal form of a Cooperative Society of Collective Interest (*Société coopérative d'intérêt collectif*). Literature and Case 3 highlight positive outcomes from such initiatives, including increased incomes



**Meeting in support of lupin (minor crop) use, Maremma's Community of Food and Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture, Italy ©Colombo L.**

and opportunities for farmers to share knowledge and experiment with cultivation and processing practices for minor crops (Rossi, 2020).

However, the number of beneficiaries remains limited (typically 10–30 farmers in the identified initiatives). Moreover, most initiatives design their own trademarks, raising questions about the relevance of public labelling to signal agrobiodiversity-based products at national or European level. Finally, these initiatives can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, with limited efficiency and reach.

### *Citizen-led initiatives focused on agrobiodiversity conservation and awareness*

Citizen-led initiatives aim to strengthen both farmer and consumer engagement in the preservation of agrobiodiversity. They seek to restore and enhance local agrobiodiversity and associated food and cultural heritage, while raising consumer awareness.

With support from the second pillar of the CAP or national funds, these initiatives can contribute to the preservation of endangered varieties through community seed banks (Bocci *et al.*, 2025), providing farmers with access to seeds. As in Case 6, they promote local food products and related cultural heritage through events, websites, farmers' markets and collective trademarks such as *Sentinel*<sup>TM</sup>, managed by the Slow Food

Foundation, which promotes minor crops. By taking advantage of the measures implemented by local authorities to promote local food, these initiatives can also foster networks linking farmers, processors and consumers. This helps to increase consumers' willingness to purchase agrobiodiversity-based products through short food supply chains, thereby providing economic support to farms.

These initiatives can also raise awareness among decision-makers about the erosion of agrobiodiversity, encouraging its better integration into public policy. However, they are constrained by limited financial and material resources and rely heavily on volunteers. Their funding must be regularly renewed through public tenders or sponsorship. Nevertheless, according to an expert from a food policy network, the expansion of local food policies over the past decade appears to have facilitated the maintenance and development of such initiatives.

### **Conclusion and policy implications**

Food systems are highly dependent on a small number of crops, both globally and in Europe. Our research indicates that few European and national policy instruments actively support the use of minor crops and traditional varieties by farmers. In particular, direct

payments to farms that diversify crops remain limited.

Nevertheless, although the leverage effect of local food policies on agrobiodiversity requires further validation, some local initiatives demonstrate how European and national instruments can be combined with local measures to provide economic support for farms promoting agrobiodiversity. This support is mainly indirect and non-financial, but it helps farmers overcome barriers to the cultivation and promotion of minor crops and traditional varieties. However, most initiatives do not cover the entire value chain, potentially limiting farmers' commitment to agrobiodiversity. *Existing public policy measures across different governance levels and stages of the value chain should be better identified and*

*coordinated to ensure consistent and effective support.* Local authorities, already engaged in this process, can strengthen their role in coordinating policy measures and facilitating public-private partnerships to cover the entire value chain, by taking advantage of the complementarity of the measures identified in this research across the three types of initiatives.

*Further research is needed to consolidate these findings.* The three types of initiatives presented here may not capture the full diversity of approaches across Europe. Moreover, while the case studies are representative of these types, most were conducted in France, where access to information was easier. Additional research is also required to assess the financial impact of direct and indirect economic support

provided through the combination of policy instruments and local measures, and to analyse how such support, alongside associated partnerships, contributes to the development of new business models at farm level.

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# Summary

## Combining Policy Instruments and Local Measures to Promote Agrobiodiversity

 *Agrobiodiversity is in decline.* While the literature highlights the role of public policy in this process, a research gap remains concerning how policies can help reverse this trend by providing economic support to farms that value crop and varietal diversity. Based on desk research and expert interviews, this article first provides an overview of European and national policy instruments that can be used to economically support the promotion of agrobiodiversity on farms, focusing on seven European countries. Drawing on case study findings, it then presents a typology of local initiatives that combine these instruments with local measures to provide economic support to farms cultivating minor crops and traditional varieties. This support is primarily indirect, ranging from seed provision to market development, although most initiatives do not cover the entire value chain. The results underline the critical role of local authorities and confirm the value of public-private partnerships in promoting crop and varietal diversity. They also emphasise the need for stronger coordination between policy measures and governance levels to support value chains that foster agrobiodiversity, and call for further research to assess how the combined support of policy instruments and local measures contributes to new business models at farm level.

## Combiner instruments de politique et mesures locales pour promouvoir l'agrobiodiversité

 *L'agrobiodiversité est en déclin.* Si la littérature souligne le rôle des politiques publiques dans ce processus, des lacunes subsistent quant à la manière dont ces politiques peuvent contribuer à inverser cette tendance en apportant une aide économique aux exploitations agricoles qui valorisent la diversité des espèces et des variétés végétales. S'appuyant sur une recherche documentaire et des entretiens avec des experts, cet article présente d'abord un aperçu des instruments de politique européens et nationaux qui peuvent soutenir économiquement l'utilisation de l'agrobiodiversité dans les exploitations agricoles, en se concentrant sur sept pays européens. Avec l'appui d'études de cas, il propose ensuite une typologie d'initiatives locales combinant ces instruments à des mesures locales pour apporter une aide économique aux exploitations cultivant des cultures mineures et des variétés traditionnelles. Ces aides sont principalement indirectes, allant de la fourniture de semences au développement des marchés, mais la plupart des initiatives ne couvrent pas l'intégralité de la chaîne de valeur. Les résultats soulignent le rôle crucial des collectivités territoriales et confirment l'intérêt des partenariats public-privé pour la promotion de la diversité des cultures et des variétés. Ils mettent également en évidence la nécessité d'une coordination renforcée entre les mesures gouvernementales et les différents niveaux de gouvernance afin de soutenir les chaînes de valeur favorisant l'agrobiodiversité. Enfin, ces résultats appellent à des recherches complémentaires pour évaluer comment le soutien combiné des instruments de politique et des mesures locales contribue à l'émergence de nouveaux modèles économiques au niveau des exploitations.

## Kombination von politischen Instrumenten und lokalen Maßnahmen zur Förderung der Agrobiodiversität

 *Die Agrobiodiversität ist generell rückläufig.* In der Literatur wird zwar die Rolle der öffentlichen Politik in diesem Prozess hervorgehoben, jedoch besteht nach wie vor eine Forschungslücke hinsichtlich der Frage, wie politische Maßnahmen dazu beitragen können, diesen Trend umzukehren. Ein Ansatz besteht darin, landwirtschaftlichen Betrieben, die Wert auf Pflanzen- und Sortenvielfalt legen, wirtschaftliche Unterstützung zu gewähren. Dieser Artikel gibt auf der Grundlage einer Literaturrecherche und von Experteninterviews zunächst einen Überblick über europäische und nationale politische Instrumente, die zur wirtschaftlichen Förderung der Agrobiodiversität in landwirtschaftlichen Betrieben eingesetzt werden können. Der Schwerpunkt liegt dabei auf sieben europäischen Ländern. Anschließend wird auf der Basis von Fallstudien eine Typologie lokaler Initiativen vorgestellt, die diese Instrumente mit Maßnahmen kombinieren. So können landwirtschaftliche Betriebe, die Nebenkulturen und traditionelle Sorten anbauen, wirtschaftlich gefördert werden. Diese Förderung ist in erster Linie indirekter Natur und reicht von der Bereitstellung von Saatgut bis zur Marktentwicklung, wobei die meisten Initiativen nicht die gesamte Wertschöpfungskette abdecken. Die Ergebnisse unterstreichen die entscheidende Rolle der lokalen Behörden und bestätigen den Wert öffentlich-privater Partnerschaften bei der Förderung der Pflanzen- und Sortenvielfalt. Sie betonen auch die Notwendigkeit einer stärkeren Koordinierung zwischen politischen Maßnahmen und Governance-Ebenen, um die Wertschöpfungsketten zu stärken, die Agrobiodiversität unterstützen. Zudem werden weitere Untersuchungen gefordert, um zu bewerten, welchen Beitrag die kombinierte Unterstützung durch politische Instrumente und lokale Maßnahmen zu neuen Geschäftsmodellen auf Ebene der landwirtschaftlichen Betriebe leistet.

summary