

# Using policy support tools to create an evidence-based policy vision: a participatory vision-building exercise in Slovenia

Ilona Rac<sup>1</sup>, Matic Soklič<sup>1</sup>, and Emil Erjavec<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Ljubljana Biotechnical Faculty, Jamnikarjeva 101, Ljubljana, Slovenia

## Abstract

**This paper presents the conceptual foundation and initial implementation of a case study under the EU-funded Tools4CAP project, which focuses on participatory, multi-level governance tools in the context of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The Slovenian case study explores the potential of engaging with decision-makers and stakeholders in combining different tools in the formulation of the next CAP strategic plan (CSP). This short paper outlines the design logic, methodological tools selected, and early-stage insights gained from the process. While the study is still ongoing, the ambition of the Case study is to offer a replicable approach for other Member States exploring combinations of different tools, especially participatory methods, in CAP planning and implementation.**

## INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1962, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been shaped predominantly through top-down processes led by EU institutions, often criticised for limited transparency and limited involvement of non-state actors in decision-making (Roederer-Rynning, 2019). Historically, CAP negotiations took place behind closed doors, privileging national governments and agricultural lobbies while marginalising environmental and civil society perspectives (Greer & Hind, 2012; Termeer & Werkman, 2011). Over time, especially since the 2003 and 2013 reforms, the policy framework has seen a gradual shift toward 'more subsidiarity', giving Member States more autonomy in implementation through national CAP Strategic Plans (Jongeneel et al., 2019; Rac et al., 2020). This devolution of decision-making powers has opened new opportunities—but also responsibilities—for inclusive governance, accountability, and the tailoring of agricultural policy to local sustainability needs. In practice, Member states have been given the freedom and obligation to accommodate and integrate the often colliding preferences of an increasingly open circle of stakeholders (Cagliero et al., 2021). Such a setting requires evidence-based, inclusive and flexible strategic planning, which in turn demands a high level of administrative capacity, including high levels of adaptability to a changing policy environment (Erjavec et al., 2018).

In response to increasing demands for transparency, adaptability, and stakeholder inclusion in CAP strategic planning, and given the complexity of integrating the preferences of different stakeholder groups (Fischer et al., 2007), the Tools4CAP project (Bertolozzi-Caredio et al., 2023) provides, inter alia, a suite of governance tools aimed at enhancing participatory decision-making (Rac et al., 2024). The overarching goal of the project is to contribute to stronger national administrative capacity in a complex, multi-level governance setting. This paper presents the early phases of the Slovenian case study conducted within the frame of this project, which aims to pilot an integrated combination of selected tools in a real-world, policy-relevant setting, explore how participatory governance tools can make national CAP strategic planning more inclusive, evidence-based and systemic, and which factors may affect this process positively or negatively. The focus of the case study is on developing a governance process that supports the formulation of a shared vision for a sustainable Slovenian food system over the next 15 years, as well as providing a substantive basis for the CSP for the period 2023-2027.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The case study is being conducted in Slovenia between November 2024 and September 2025. The process involves collaboration between the Ministry of agriculture, forestry and food of Slovenia (MAFF), the Biotechnical Faculty at the University of Ljubljana (BF UL), the Agricultural Institute of Slovenia, and a broad range of stakeholders representing the Quadruple Helix (policy, society, business, research). Conceptually, the case study is based on the multi-level, participatory governance framework developed in Deliverable 3.3 of Tools4CAP (Rac et al., 2024), which outlines protocols for tool selection and stakeholder engagement. The Slovenian pilot is applying a sequence of tools, selected in consultation with the MAFF to address two key CAP-relevant governance tasks, namely co-developing a shared understanding of needs and priorities, and structuring policy options.

The tools combine participatory identification of needs and priorities with scenario building based on a selection of corresponding variables and their indicators spread across the three pillars of sustainability (economic, environmental and social), as well as horizontal (AKIS-agricultural knowledge and innovation system), with metrics such as agricultural income, GHG emissions, biodiversity indices, and quality of life indicators. A small group of BF UL and external experts is supporting Ministry officials developing an initial draft of the Vision, which will then be refined through structured stakeholder engagement, including focus groups and consensus-building sessions. Scenario analysis will support the ex-ante evaluation of various CAP policy options that involve trade-offs among CAP objectives.

The process includes identifying a baseline scenario and an alternative desired scenario balancing issues from all three pillars into a desirable, sustainable food system, which is to be validated with key stakeholders in a series of stakeholder workshops. Possible scenarios will be built around the current CAP and other (existing and future) European Commission documents relevant to the CAP's design and implementation, such as the results of the Strategic dialogue (Strohschneider, 2024), the announced EU-level vision, as well as any developments related to the forthcoming proposals for the new CAP programming period and Multiannual financial framework (expected in July 2025). They will also strongly reflect national policy objectives, placed within the overall EU CAP framework and strategic guidance.

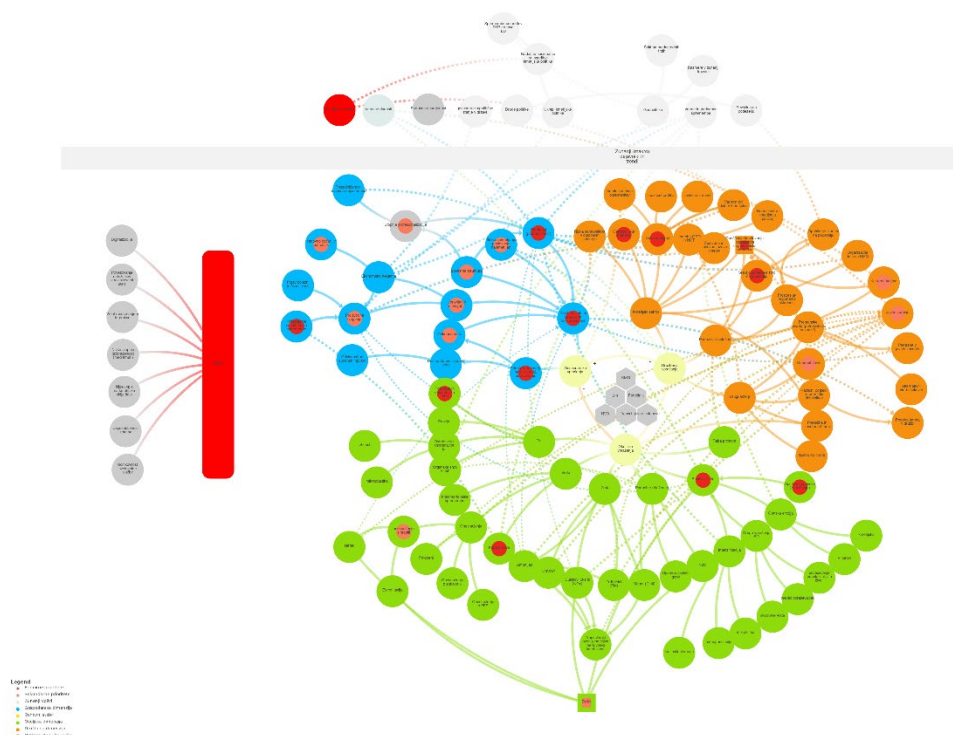
As the goal was to support the needs of the Ministry, the work has been separated into two phases, one involving ministry officials, BF UL researchers and other relevant experts, and a second involving additional stakeholders in which the results of the internal process are to be tested, validated and lent democratic legitimacy.

## EXPECTED OUTCOMES, CO-CREATION PROCESS AND PRELIMINARY RESULTS

In principle, the integrated application of participatory and analytical tools is expected to produce:

- A co-created Vision document with strong stakeholder ownership and political relevance
- A set of policy scenarios illustrating different policy development pathways and trade-offs between different goals
- An indicator-based monitoring tool that links scenarios to measurable outcomes
- Strengthened institutional capacity within the MAFF and stakeholder organizations
- Enhanced trust, transparency, and inclusiveness in the CAP strategic planning processes
- Improved quality of the next generation CSP, including its result orientation, flexibility and monitoring framework.

Although the case study is still underway at the time of writing, several early observations can be shared. First, the discussions at the ministry-experts level revealed that the ministry officials tasked with formulating the vision were interested in steering the vision towards a broader, integrated 'food systems' orientation, which includes issues beyond those traditionally addressed under the CAP, such as health aspects, the food environment, new genomic techniques, etc. (ministry meeting notes, 8.1.2025; cf. Galli et al., 2020; LEI Wageningen UR et al., 2016; Resnick & Swinnen, 2023). This is in line with a seeming shift at the EU level initiated by the Farm to fork strategy in 2020 (Fiala et al., 2024; Mowlds, 2020). However, once the list of potential issues and their indicators began to take form, it became clear that there are different understandings among ministry officials and experts of what constitutes a sustainable food system, its elements and trade-offs. Therefore, to initiate a more systemic discussion, a graphical representation of issues faced by the Slovenian food system was constructed by the researchers and supplemented with inputs from other researchers and ministry officials, building on the traditional division of sustainability issues into three pillars (Figure 1).



*Figure 1: Visual representation of issues related to the Slovenian food system. Each coloured circle represents an issue, as conceptualized by the authors, with each colour (orange, blue, green) belonging to one pillar of sustainability; grey colours above the main scheme represent external factors and the grey section to the left represents the AKIS. Squares denote cross-cutting issues. The central hexagons represent players central to the food system (farmers, consumers, processors, retailers, NGOs, public institutions).*

The scheme shown in Figure 1 provided a basis for a preliminary prioritization of issues, which was done in an internal workshop attended by MAFF officials and invited experts. After a presentation of the main issues, each participant was allocated a limited number of voting points (3 per sustainability pillar + 3 to be allocated freely). This exercise resulted in a shortlist of priorities (Table 1) selected for the next phase of modelling for scenario-building.

**Table 1.** Policy priorities selected in the internal MAFF workshop.

Economic Issues	Environmental Issues	Social Issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low, unstable incomes and competitiveness</li> <li>• Farm management</li> <li>• Risk management</li> <li>• Consumer – price sensitivity</li> <li>• Productivity</li> <li>• Power relations in the value chain; cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land take (urban sprawl)</li> <li>• Nutrient pollution</li> <li>• Biodiversity</li> <li>• Land abandonment (over-growth)</li> <li>• Adapting agriculture to climate change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generational renewal</li> <li>• Possibility of rest (Substitute labour service)</li> <li>• Cooperation with producers, supply chains (also for smaller farms)</li> <li>• Ageing rural population</li> <li>• Abandonment of basic services in rural areas</li> <li>• Abandonment of farming and consequences for rural areas</li> <li>• Image of agriculture, perception of farmers in society</li> </ul>

After additional discussion, certain issues were subsequently added to this list, namely AKIS – related issues, such as Educational structure, Amount of funding for AKIS, Extent of digitalization by economic size class. Discussions on further additions are still ongoing and will likely include climate change mitigation and health-related indicators, where available. At the time of writing, the BF UL team is analysing available data that measure the above issues as translated into appropriate indicators, which will feed into the design of the baseline and desirable scenarios. Future participatory process elements, which are to follow the structuring of the selected indicators into coherent scenarios, involve presenting the vision and priorities to a broader set of stakeholders and legitimizing the selected priorities and vision narrative. Subsequently, outputs of this process will be refined for integration into the Slovenian CAP Strategic Plan and potentially into other policies relevant to the food system.

## DISCUSSION

The process of formulating a long-term vision for the Slovenian food system provides a strategic entry point for using policy support tools to align the CAP with broader sustainability goals across environmental, economic, and social dimensions. If successful, the case study results could demonstrate the potential of combining participatory and evidence-based tools in national policy planning. As the case study progresses, its outcomes are expected to offer transferable insights for other Member States exploring sustainable agricultural transitions through collaborative governance models. The hope of the research team is that the Slovenian case study will highlight the value of using structured participatory tools with strong stakeholder involvement to strengthen the policy's legitimacy and relevance, as well as stimulate a more comprehensive approach to planning and policy innovation.

However, despite the initial designs to steer the vision towards a food-systems perspective, this has heretofore been limited, mainly due to the fact that the process is still largely bound to and framed by the future CAP. The discussions and resulting graphic (Figure 1) reflected that the thinking of the majority those involved seems to be mostly embedded in past and current discussions of issues facing farming, rather than the food system as a whole. Furthermore, it highlighted the high level of complexity, with many interactions between different elements, which appear at different spatial and even conceptual scales. While the diagram itself was not directly usable for modelling purposes, it did help to structure thinking and provided a platform for the consideration of interactions and for prioritization. In spite of the relatively broad expertise of the involved ministry officials, researchers and other external experts, the process so far has revealed a persistent framing of issues through the lens of farm productivity and competitiveness—such as low and unstable income, limited cooperation, and farm succession challenges. When prompted to reflect on broader sustainability issues, participants still tended to gravitate toward economic issues tied to the viability of individual farm holdings. Even issues falling into the 'environmental' pillar of sustainability were predominantly selected based on their implications for agricultural production. These priorities demonstrate the resilience of a productivist policy paradigm, as identified in earlier CAP literature (Greer & Hind, 2012; Pe'er et al., 2019), and mirror critiques that EU agri-food systems often default to agricultural rather than food system perspectives (Brunori et al., 2024; Fiala et al., 2024; Galli et al., 2020; Mowlds, 2020; Resnick & Swinnen, 2023). Furthermore, discussions on social issues revealed a field that was significantly less clear and structured compared to economic and environmental issues, with a less developed indicator framework. This highlights the challenge of achieving a truly integrated food system perspective in policy planning. This entrenchment is likely to be even stronger at subsequent stages of the policy process, as most stakeholder can be expected to remain subjected to siloed, sectoral thinking. This confirms the need for deeper institutional incentives to support integrated thinking across agriculture, environment, health, and rural development domains. Future processes may require more explicit framing tools, narrative techniques, or actor mapping to help participants step outside dominant paradigms.

Nevertheless, the set of highlighted issues co-developed through deliberation did include economic, environmental and social dimensions, forming a starting point for future discussions and potentially even a monitoring framework tailored to national needs. This signals potential for increased institutional learning, which is often highlighted as a critical gap in current CAP governance models (Bertolozzi-Caredio et al., 2023). While the case study will hopefully deliver meaningful outcomes in terms of a substantive vision and subsequent CSP, its deeper value may lie precisely

in institutional implications. Stakeholder engagement, combined with adaptive methodological and substantive adjustments, could significantly enhance the policy community's capacity to align the policy process and applied tools with a shifting policy environment. This form of adaptive planning is particularly valuable in the CAP context, which must respond to emergent challenges such as climate change, demographic shifts, and market volatility. However, as Pe'er et al. (2019) note, the success of such approaches depends on genuine political and institutional willingness to open up decision-making spaces, not just on technical design. Practical engagement with external stakeholders has been (intentionally) scarce so far, especially in terms of opening up the discussion for stakeholders other than the habitual agricultural community. This reluctance limits the potential of the process in terms of gaining legitimacy and support, while also indicating that the need to conduct a fully participatory policy process is not yet quite internalized, nor does there seem to be sufficient institutional capacity to conduct it. Still, the relatively early stage of the process still allows for significant stakeholder engagement in subsequent phases, and this remains the MAFF's intention.

Finally, we can make some observations about the process itself. Since the case study's inception, communication with the MAFF has been central to garner the Ministry's own interest in conducting a policy process supported by the Slovenian research team. As each policy process is specific, designing an approach for formulating a CSP in a dynamic policy setting such as the one surrounding the CAP (see e.g. Daugbjerg, 1999; Patterson, 1997), is by necessity itself a dynamic undertaking. Regular communication has proven to be central, as needs have been evolving, necessitating a high level of flexibility both on the side of the Ministry and on the side of the supporting team of researchers. The gradual increase in engagement from the Ministry of Agriculture can certainly be considered a positive institutional outcome. However, at the time of writing, a fluctuation in the ministry personnel responsible for the vision process seems to be indicating a shift in policy priorities.

There are some clear limitations to our study. First, it is still ongoing, which restricts the potential for drawing final conclusions. Only once the visioning process is complete will a full assessment be possible. Evaluating the impact of the (participatory) policy process will also be challenging—if for no other reason, due to the lack of appropriate impact indicators. A second limitation is that the observed process focuses solely on vision development, not on the design or implementation of concrete policy measures. As a result, any real-world impact can only be inferred indirectly, rather than demonstrated.

## CONCLUSION

The Slovenian foresight and indicator development process demonstrates how participatory and systems-based tools could add both procedural legitimacy and substantive depth to CAP planning. It also shows that engagement with policy officials and additional external experts can yield a relatively comprehensive set of issues to be tackled in a more systemic approach to food systems, going outside the exclusive remit of agriculture. However, the persistence of sectoral framings, institutional inertia, and implementation gaps suggests that further work is needed to support the integration of such approaches into policy. Therefore, a possible avenue for future research is to explore potential impacts of participatory approaches on decision-making, as well as the conditions under which systemic framings could displace entrenched paradigms.

## REFERENCES

- Bertolozzi-Caredio, D., Dupeux, B., Witzke, P., Havlik, P., Schingo, C., Rustom, R., Jongeneel, R., Erjavec, E., Rac, I., van Asseldonk, M., Donnellan, T., Sterly, S., Wember, C., Gonzalez-Martinez, A., Dillon, E., Casares, B., Marianos, N., Van den Bossche, L., Fellmann, T., ... Beber, C. (2023). *TOOLS4CAP CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK*.
- Brunori, G., Carzedda, M., Iliopoulos, C., D'Haese, M., Lanfranchi, M., Lerro, M., Martino, G., Pettenella, D., Van Passel, S., & Troiano, S. (2024). Has transformation of food systems reached an impasse? Considerations on the role of agri-food research. *Agricultural and Food Economics*, 12(1), 26, s40100-024-00308-8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40100-024-00308-8>
- Cagliero, R., Bellini, F., Marcatto, F., Novelli, S., Monteleone, A., & Mazzocchi, G. (2021). Prioritising CAP Intervention Needs: An Improved Cumulative Voting Approach. *Sustainability*, 13(7), 3997. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13073997>

- Daugbjerg, C. (1999). Reforming the CAP: Policy Networks and Broader Institutional Structures. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 37(3), 407–428. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00171>
- Erjavec, E., Lovec, M., Juvančič, L., Šumrada, T., & Rac, I. (2018). *The CAP Strategic Plans beyond 2020: Assessing the architecture and governance issues in order to achieve the EU-wide objectives*. Brussels, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion ....
- Fiala, V., Jacob, K., Barnickel, C., & Feindt, P. H. (2024). Diverging Stories on food system transitions. A qualitative analysis of policy narratives in the public consultation on the European Commission's Farm to Fork Strategy. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 110, 103374. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103374>
- Fischer, F., Miller, G., & Sidney, M. S. (Eds.). (2007). *Handbook of public policy analysis: Theory, politics, and methods*. CRC/Taylor & Francis.
- Galli, F., Prosperi, P., Favilli, E., D'Amico, S., Bartolini, F., & Brunori, G. (2020). How can policy processes remove barriers to sustainable food systems in Europe? Contributing to a policy framework for agri-food transitions. *Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia*, 96, 101871. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2020.101871>
- Greer, A., & Hind, T. (2012). Inter-institutional decision-making: The case of the Common Agricultural Policy. *Policy and Society*, 31(4), 331–341. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2012.09.005>
- Jongeneel, R., Erjavec, E., García Azcárate, T., & Silvis, H. (2019). Assessment of the common agricultural policy after 2020. In *EU Bioeconomy Economics and Policies: Volume I* (pp. 207–228). Springer.
- LEI Wageningen UR, Fresco, L. O., & Poppe, K. J. (2016). *Towards a common agricultural and food policy*. Wageningen University & Research. <https://doi.org/10.18174/390280>
- Mowlds, S. (2020). The EU's farm to fork strategy: Missing links for transformation. *Acta Innovations*, 36, 17–30. <https://doi.org/10.32933/ActaInnovations.36.2>
- Patterson, L. A. (1997). Agricultural Policy Reform in the European Community: A Three-Level Game Analysis. *International Organization*, 51(1), 135–165.
- Rac, I., Erjavec, E., Jongeneel, R., & Wember, C. (2024). *PARTICIPATORY AND MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE DECISION-MAKING TOOLS: METHODOLOGICAL GUIDELINES, INCLUDING PROTOCOLS* (Deliverable 3.3).
- Rac, I., Erjavec, K., & Erjavec, E. (2020). Does the proposed CAP reform allow for a paradigm shift towards a greener policy? *Spanish Journal of Agricultural Research*, 18(3), e0111–e0111. <https://doi.org/10.5424/sjar/2020183-16447>
- Resnick, D., & Swinnen, J. (Eds.). (2023). *The political economy of food system transformation: Pathways to progress in a polarized world*. Oxford University Press.
- Roederer-Rynning, C. (2019). The Common Agricultural Policy: A case of embedded liberalism. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.
- Strohschneider, P. (2024). *Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture*. European Commission. [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/171329ff-0f50-4fa5-946f-aea11032172e\\_en?filename=strategic-dialogue-report-2024\\_en.pdf](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/171329ff-0f50-4fa5-946f-aea11032172e_en?filename=strategic-dialogue-report-2024_en.pdf)

Termeer, C. J. A. M., & Werkman, R. A. (2011). Changing closed agricultural policy communities. *Critical Policy Studies*, 5(3), 283–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2011.606301>