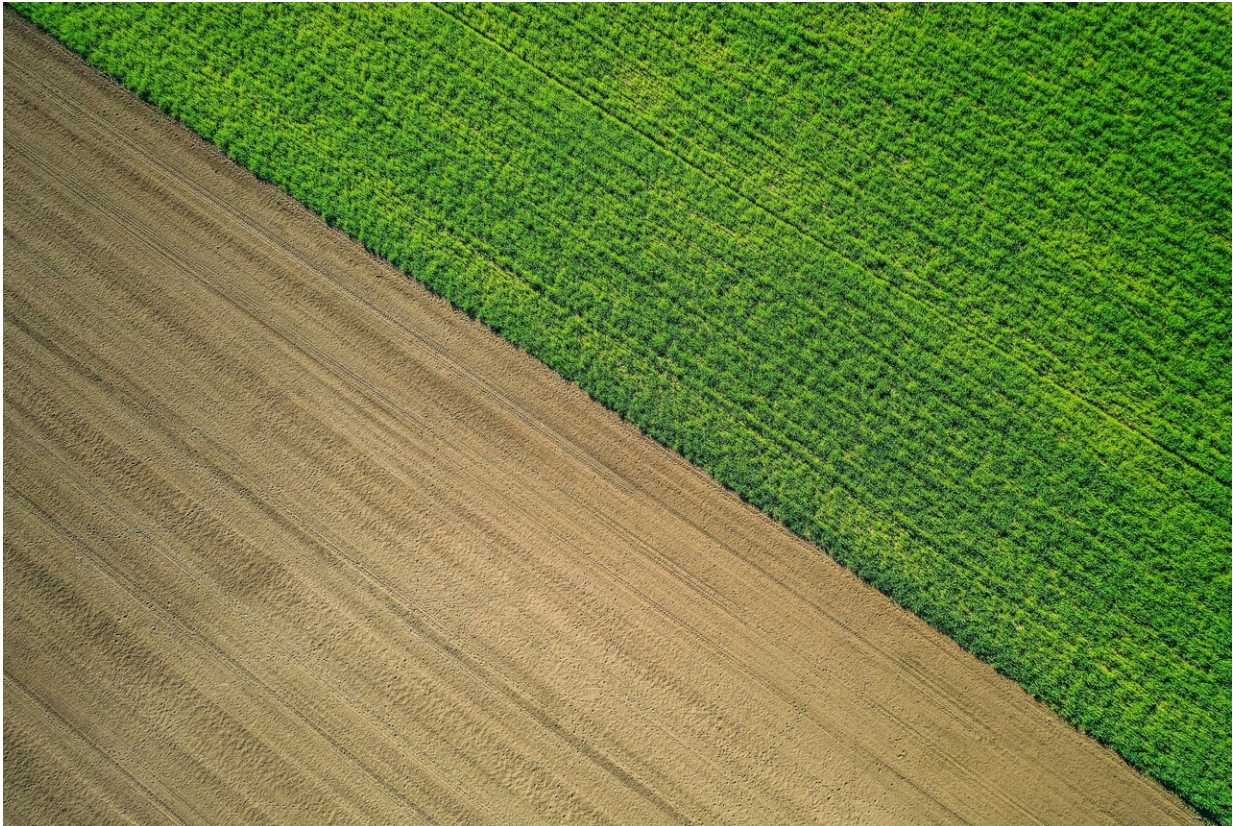


Rural resilience rests on a green recovery

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Credit: Bence Balla-Schottner on Unsplash

The coronavirus pandemic has sent shockwaves across the world's economy, and policymakers have so far responded with a focus on financial stability. But food system experts fear this will keep rural communities on a 'business-as-usual' path—limiting their long-term resilience.

EU policymakers face a daunting task to address the economic fallout caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Do they focus on stabilizing markets or build upon a new green ambition?

On one side, lockdowns and travel bans continue to hammer consumer-facing sectors like tourism and hospitality, which prompted the International Monetary Fund to predict a worse recession than the financial crash of 2008. Then there's the new EU Green Deal—the European Commission's hopes to transform the bloc into the first climate-neutral continent.

So far, it seems financial stability has been the sole priority, according to Thomas Norrby, an expert in rural entrepreneurship at the Swedish Agricultural University.

"Current governments are funding ways to go back to normal, but normal is not what we need," he said. "There is a need for a reframing of the economic system, but I don't think governments are taking that chance."

EU heads of state and government have agreed a €540 billion aid package to help member states weather the economic storm caused by COVID-19, which is mostly focused on preventing businesses going bankrupt and protecting jobs. Elsewhere, green organizations like the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) said the pandemic has exposed existing weaknesses, adding that "the crisis has given a glimpse of new, more resilient ways" forward.

Norrby says it is important to keep as many businesses afloat as possible to limit the length of a recession, but he has also seen new ideas always emerge which could put rural communities on a more resilient path than before.

Since the lockdowns began, there has been an increased demand for [local food](#); hotels are forming partnerships with farmers to send labor where it's needed and supermarkets are replacing some of their lost international suppliers with local producers.

"If we can build on that momentum, it will be very positive for rural economies," Norrby said, adding that governments' response to the financial slump needs to be targeted in a way that lays the foundations towards this kind of system.

This view is shared by the Green Recovery Alliance, an EU-wide initiative campaigning against blanket government checks that prop up a business-as-usual approach. The alliance includes environment ministers from eleven member states, 79 members of the European Parliament, 37 CEOs, 28 business associations, 100 trade union organizations, seven NGOs and six think tanks. Together they want emergency funds to also address environmental issues, like climate change.

Norrby thinks that such a green recovery for rural communities should also consider promoting more circular economy business models and diversification into new sectors.

"With a more diversified, and possibly localised food sector, it is easier to change the production system in response to a crisis and that makes our societies more resilient," he said.

Diversification dilemma

Farmers that have already diversified are already in a less vulnerable position following COVID-19's economic crisis, according to Pablo Fernández Álvarez de Buergo, who works at Agri-food Cooperatives in Spain, where he supports over 3,000 farming groups find innovative solutions to market challenges.

"They were able to be more resilient because they had diversified in the past, which allowed them to balance their problems across markets," said Álvarez de Buergo.

He thinks spreading risk through diversification is part of the puzzle for a more resilient future, but not the silver-bullet solution. It takes time, research and funding to help farmers and cooperatives diversify into new markets, such as biochemicals or biopharmaceuticals—and that requires a stable economy.

It also means food producers hoping to diversify may have to wait until the dust of COVID-19 settles before the finances are available to support such plans, whenever that will be. Álvarez de Buergo says that adds more weight on the immediate financial response from governments, and he emphasizes that farmers desperately need support to deal with the loss of vital markets like hospitality and tourism.

"Almost half the market is gone with the closure of hotels and restaurants in Spain," he said. "Governments need to stabilize the economy as soon as possible."

But rebalancing the economy is no easy task. For example, Europe's tourism industry employs 22.6 million people, and accounts for 9.5 percent of the bloc's economy. But the sector's income is effectively on ice because of travel restrictions and social distance measures.

Even as lockdowns ease, businesses and their suppliers will still feel the financial squeeze for months to come because they need to break even at a lower capacity, such as the 30% limit for restaurants proposed in Spain and Italy. That leaves a lot of job, incomes and businesses needing financial support for a prolonged period of time.

Groups like IPES-Food and the Green Recovery Alliance acknowledge

the need for [financial stability](#), but they have also said environmental issues like climate change and biodiversity loss are not going away. They demand financial support that addresses the pandemic, but also accelerates the EU's transition towards climate neutrality.

Appetite for change

The best place to start for a green recovery for the food system could be where a transformation has already begun, according to Camille Poutrin, a consultant at GreenFlex, a sustainable business company in France.

She says that some parts of agri-food supply chains have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic better than others, which shows that a wider transformation is possible.

"[There are some] supermarkets proposing to supply more French food in their stores because all the smaller markets and distribution circuits were closed," she said, adding that in just one week, these businesses shifted their purchasing towards more local production.

Poutrin believes this trend was partly because of the need for new suppliers, but also from consumers wanting more local produce. After the pandemic, she thinks the situation may return to the previous model to some degree, but not completely, as consumers have reconnected with where their food comes from.

She thinks there is potential to build upon this emerging trend by helping farmers turn their harvests into new products and create localised food businesses. Poutrin says this could also take the shape of a cooperative of farmers that sell added-value products to nearby local or regional markets like schools.

"As people begin to understand where their food comes from, there will

be greater acceptance of farmers," Poutrin said, and hopes this will result in less 'agri-bashing' – a term used by food producers when they feel vilified by public opinion and policies.

Social dimension

The shift in perception of farmers is something that Louise Lennon from the Irish Rural Link, a sustainable development organization, also hopes will expand and consider the role rural communities play in a resilient food system.

"Many of the jobs available in rural areas are lower paid, like working in retail or supermarkets or community health and social care, but the true value needs to be put on those jobs," Lennon said. "The contribution they have put into helping rural communities to get through this pandemic is invaluable."

Rural areas are also facing an uncertain year ahead as construction, agri-food sectors and tourism or seasonal businesses cannot open or face a diminished amount of commerce. These jobs support rural life as well as food security.

"A lot of people have less money coming in," Lennon said, adding that rural communities have been some of the hardest hit communities from lockdown measures like social distancing.

She adds that the subsequent isolation and loneliness is a lot harder for rural populations, but this has helped push more people to volunteer and help their neighbors who cannot leave their homes. She thinks this highlights the value that rural communities have not only to the agri-food sector, but also the social fabric of these areas, which many businesses have built their success on.

"We need to look beyond the economic factors of [rural communities](#) and see what social and environmental issues are important," Lennon said.

More information: Article published following a series of interviews with academics, community organisations and advisors connected to rural entrepreneurship and the bioeconomy as part of the RUBIZMO initiative: rubizmo.eu/

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