

Adapting the EU Farm to Fork Strategy to Albania: opportunities and challenges for sustainable agricultural transformation

Abstract

The EU's 'From Farm to Fork' Strategy, a central pillar of the European Green Deal, seeks to reshape the EU food system into one that is fair, healthy and environmentally sustainable. Spanning the entire food chain, it incorporates environmental, social and economic objectives to promote sustainability as a competitive advantage. This article explores the multifaceted challenges in implementing the Strategy, including the economic burdens, social equity, political feasibility and environmental constraints, with a particular focus on Albania. By analysing Albania's 'Agriculture, Rural Development, and Fisheries Strategy 2021-2027', the study outlines the pathways for harmonising national agricultural policy with the EU's sustainability agenda. Emphasis is placed on the potential benefits for small-scale producers, who stand to gain from improved access to sustainable practices, market opportunities and fair value chains. The findings underline the importance of strategic alignment, institutional capacity building and stakeholder involvement in successfully adapting the Strategy to Albania's agricultural context.

Keywords: Farm to Fork Strategy, sustainable agriculture, food systems, agricultural policy, EU integration

Introduction

In recent years, the transformation of agri-food systems has emerged as a top priority in global, regional and national policy agendas. In 2020, the European Union (EU), recognising the interdependence of health, environment and the economy, launched the European Green Deal as a blueprint for sustainable growth. At the heart of this Green Deal lies the 'Farm to Fork' Strategy – an ambitious roadmap aiming to ensure fair, healthy and environmentally sustainable food systems. It spans the entire value chain, seeking to reduce the environmental and climate footprint of food production while promoting food security, animal welfare and equitable access to nutritious food.

The 'Farm to Fork' Strategy is particularly relevant for candidate countries like Albania, which are working to align domestic policies and practices with EU norms as part of the accession process. Agriculture in Albania plays a vital role in rural livelihoods and contributes significantly to employment and food supply chains. However, it also faces multiple challenges: land fragmentation, weak infrastructure, low levels of mechanisation and limited access to sustainable technologies. Against

this backdrop, adapting the EU's Strategy to the local context represents an opportunity while, at the same time, being a complex task. Albania must not only adopt the principles and regulatory frameworks of the EU but also address capacity gaps, social equity concerns and long-term environmental risks.

The research on which this article is based investigates how Albania can effectively align its agricultural and food policies with the EU's sustainability goals. It provides a contextual analysis of Albania's Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries Strategy (2021-2027), examining the compatibility of its objectives with those outlined in the EU's 'Farm to Fork' framework. Furthermore, the study evaluates institutional readiness, funding mechanisms and stakeholder inclusion, with particular attention to small-scale producers. The findings are intended to support policymakers, practitioners and researchers in identifying practical pathways for transforming Albania's agri-food system in line with EU priorities.

The policy framework and its challenges

Farm to Fork has attracted extensive scholarly interest as a transformative framework guiding the EU's transition to a climate-neutral and resilient food system. Scholars such as Lang et al. (2009) and Allen and Prosperi (2016) laid the early groundwork by articulating the systemic nature of food challenges, emphasising the interconnectedness of agriculture, health and environmental sustainability. More recently, an important study by Pe'er et al. (2020) has examined the Strategy's operational feasibility and its alignment with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), drawing attention to the trade-offs between environmental goals and economic viability.

Matthews (2020) lays stress on the need for coherence across EU instruments, warning that the Farm to Fork objectives may risk dilution without binding commitments or coordinated implementation. In turn, Mie et al. (2020), in analysing the health impacts of organic and sustainable diets advocated by the Strategy, find substantial evidence for their benefits but also note significant barriers to their widespread adoption, particularly among small-scale farmers.

In the context of non-EU countries and accession candidates, a thread in the literature highlights an additional layer of complexity. According to Bogdanov (2020) and Volk et al. (2021), western Balkan states, including Albania, face structural and institutional gaps that hinder full alignment with EU agri-environmental policy. These include limited absorption capacity for EU funds, insufficient institutional coordination and a lack of data and monitoring systems. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) signed a country programming framework (CPF) with Albanian in 2023 specifically in relation to establishing sustainable and resilient agrifood systems and rural development.¹ The CPF underlines the vulnerability of

1 See: 'FAO partners with Albania for sustainable and resilient agrifood systems and rural development' (press release), accessed 4 April 2025 at: <https://www.fao.org/europe/news/detail/fao-albania-partner-for-sustainable-and-resilient-agrifood-systems-and-rural-development/en>.

Albania's food systems to climate change and market disruption, noting that sustainability reforms require both top-down regulation and bottom-up innovation.

Despite these challenges, comparative policy reviews show promising trends. Serbia and North Macedonia, for example, have launched targeted reforms to align their pesticide use regulations, organic farming support and agri-food certification systems with EU standards. Such cases provide important potential learning models for Albania. Yet, there is a paucity of empirical studies assessing how the specific instruments of Farm to Fork – such as fair value chains, sustainable labelling and the reduction of food loss – can be localised in countries outside the EU.

This article seeks to fill that gap by situating Albania within the broader regional and policy transformation narrative.

Methodology

The study reported in this article is part of a much broader work programme which adopts a qualitative case study methodology complemented by document analysis, expert consultation and comparative policy assessment. The objective is to evaluate Albania's institutional readiness, policy coherence and capacity to adopt the 'Farm to Fork' Strategy within its domestic context. Given the policy-oriented nature of this research, the methodological framework focuses on three main components.

First, a detailed review of EU documents related to Farm to Fork and the European Green Deal was conducted to extract priority objectives, benchmarks and indicators. Second, Albania's Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries Strategy 2021-2027 was analysed for consistency with EU standards. Third, qualitative insights were collected from existing FAO, Eurostat and INSTAT² data to contextualise Albania's agri-food transformation trajectory. The analysis includes a SWOT framework to map Albania's structural strengths and weaknesses, institutional constraints and strategic opportunities in terms of adapting the EU framework.

Additionally, a comparative alignment table has been created to visualise the policy gaps between Albania and the EU's key sustainability indicators – particularly in areas like pesticide use reduction, organic farming promotion and food waste mitigation. This triangulated approach strengthens the analytical validity of the study by combining normative policy benchmarks with real-world national data.

To complement the qualitative review, a mixed-methods approach was applied including semi-structured interviews with five national policy stakeholders and two independent agricultural economists. These interviews focused on implementation barriers, policy gaps and administrative experience with the support programmes set down under IPARD III (the EU's Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance Rural Development Programmes). Additionally, the monitoring reports of the Ministry of Agriculture, EU Progress Reports (2021-2023) and technical evaluations by the World Bank and FAO were also reviewed. To contextualise Albania's policy alignment, a policy alignment matrix was constructed assessing progress across Farm to Fork thematic areas (e.g. pesticide use, soil health, waste reduction and rural

2 INSTAT is Albania's statistical authority (Republika e Shqipërisë Instituti i Statistikave).

development) relative to five selected EU member states (including Greece) and two western Balkan neighbours (North Macedonia and Serbia).

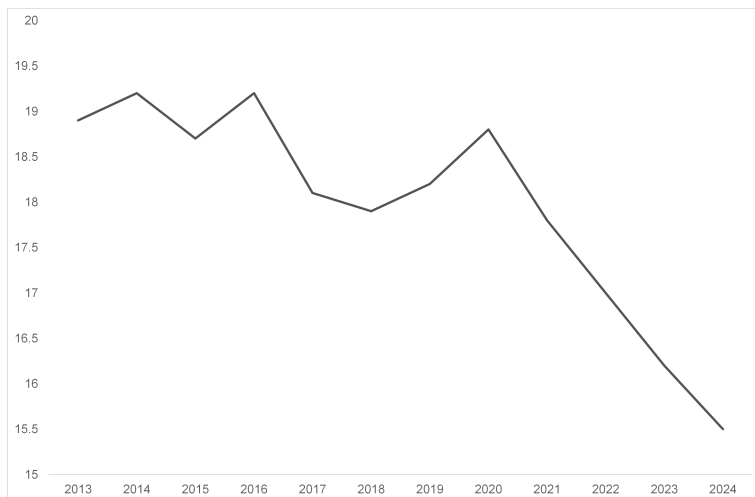
The triangulation of these data sources provided a robust framework for identifying convergence zones, policy inertia and institutional readiness indicators. All qualitative responses were coded using thematic analysis, while document review results were categorised according to compliance and adaptation levels. The combination of these tools ensures a holistic view of Albania's positioning within the European sustainability framework.

Analysis

The analysis maps the strategic objectives of the 'Farm to Fork' strategy against Albania's current agricultural policy. The EU strategy prioritises the reduction of pesticide use, sustainable food production, enhanced animal welfare and fair economic returns across the value chain. Albania's national strategy reflects parallel goals but lacks binding environmental targets and robust enforcement mechanisms. The SWOT analysis reveals strengths in agricultural diversity and EU approximation commitments, alongside weaknesses such as fragmented land ownership, poor irrigation and weak extension services. The comparative matrix highlights partial alignment, with gaps in areas such as the digitalisation of farms, traceability systems and public-private coordination.

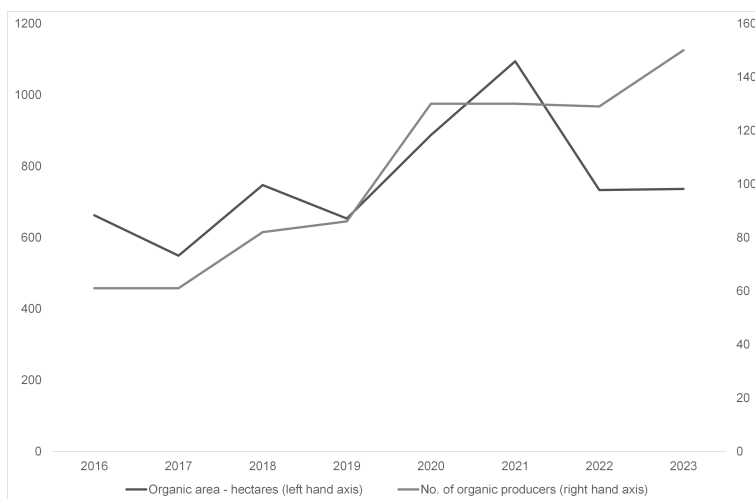
The analysis highlights the substantial potential for Albania in terms of converging with the EU's agri-food sustainability framework, but it also exposes several systemic challenges. The declining contribution of agriculture to GDP from 19.2% in 2014 to 15.5% in 2024 (see Figure 1) reflects structural transition but also rural vulnerabilities. At the same time, while there is a trend of growth in organic agriculture (Figure 2), there are ups and downs. Furthermore, particularly in terms of the number of hectares given over to organic agriculture, the growth is both modest and extremely low, amounting to no more than 0.1% of total agriculture land, while the number of producers, while growing more strongly, is also extremely low. Nevertheless, this does indicate increased sustainability awareness.

Figure 1 – Agriculture, forestry and fishing, value added (% of GDP) in Albania (2013-2024)



Source: World Bank Open Data.

Figure 2 – Growth of organic farming area in Albania (2015-2022)



Source: Research Institutes of Organic Agriculture FiBL (various).

Further analysis reveals that Albania's IPARD programme absorption remains limited due to administrative complexity and a lack of awareness among rural beneficiaries. Institutional fragmentation also hinders coordination between ministries,

municipalities and producer associations. Nevertheless, stakeholder interviews suggest increasing demand for sustainability training, especially among younger farmers.³

Results and discussion

The results demonstrate a mixed landscape of institutional readiness. On the positive side, Albania's strategic documents reflect growing convergence with EU priorities. The 2021-2027 agricultural strategy explicitly references sustainable development, the modernisation of farms and digital monitoring. However, practical implementation remains weak. For example, pesticide regulation is outdated and national organic standards are only partially harmonised with EU guidelines.

One critical issue is the accessibility of EU funds. While Albania is eligible for IPARD III, disbursement has been slow and many local actors lack the capacity to apply for or manage these funds. This represents a key bottleneck in translating strategic intentions into measurable sustainability outcomes. Furthermore, the analysis underscores the importance of expanding traceability, labelling systems and consumer education to align with the EU's vision of responsible consumption and fair food systems.

Further findings suggest that one of the most underutilised channels of EU support is technical training and advisory services. Interviews confirm that farmers and small producers and processors lack access to tailored knowledge on certification, regenerative practices and compliance with traceability systems. Policymakers cite the need to integrate Farm to Fork principles directly into school curricula and national research funding priorities. In addition, gender equity in access to grants and land ownership is not currently a focus, despite its importance for inclusive sustainability.

The regional context also matters: compared to North Macedonia, Albania has lagged in piloting pesticide-free zones or rolling out climate-smart agriculture pilots. However, Albania has outperformed Serbia in enforcing animal welfare protocols and is seen as a regional leader in integrating food safety labs into agricultural policy. Similarly, Greece has implemented decentralised advisory services for organic farming certification. Albania could benefit from adopting a peer-learning model by collaborating with neighbouring countries through regional knowledge-sharing platforms and joint sustainability pilots.

These findings support the argument that a more tailored, sector-specific approach – rather than a generic alignment process – will be essential to make Farm to Fork truly operational in Albania.

To support sustainable transformation, Albania should consider incorporating innovative financing instruments such as green bonds, results-based payments and blended finance schemes. These mechanisms can attract private investment while

3 See also: 'FAO – The Ministry of Agriculture and the Agriculture University of Tirana join forces to support youth driving towards the digital transformation of agriculture' (press release), accessed 4 April 2025 at: <https://albania.un.org/en/219129-fao-ministry-agriculture-and-agriculture-university-tirana-join-forces-support-youth-driving>

tying funding to measurable sustainability outcomes. IPARD disbursement protocols should also be redesigned to favour applicants proposing regenerative, climate-smart or biodiversity-enhancing practices.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

This study on which this article is based provides a comprehensive overview of how Albania can adapt and internalise the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy to modernise its agricultural sector while advancing sustainability. Although policy convergence has begun, much remains to be done in terms of implementation, monitoring and stakeholder empowerment.

The study's key recommendations include:

- developing a national roadmap for full alignment with EU sustainability indicators
- creating technical support units for smallholders to access IPARD and implement best practice
- reforming pesticide regulations and harmonising organic certification standards with the EU
- expanding agri-digital tools and traceability systems
- promoting inter-ministerial task forces for sustainability policy coherence
- launching consumer awareness campaigns to support sustainable consumption patterns.

In conclusion, Albania's agricultural transition is not only feasible but strategically vital for EU integration and long-term food system resilience. With the right investments and governance reforms, the Farm to Fork vision can be meaningfully localised to support inclusive, competitive and sustainable development.

In the medium term, Albania should prioritise policy coherence by linking rural development objectives with climate action and public health initiatives. Scenario analysis suggests that, without accelerated investment and governance reform, the country may meet only 50% of EU sustainability benchmarks by 2030. Conversely, if properly guided, Albania could serve as a regional model for Farm to Fork adaptation by building on local innovation and diaspora investment.

Policymakers must also consider the role of consumer behaviour. Evidence shows that awareness of sustainability standards is low and labelling schemes poorly understood. Effective communications campaigns that promote local, certified and environmentally responsible food could create bottom-up demand for reform. Finally, regular monitoring using EU-aligned key performance indicators and the introduction of performance-based grants would boost transparency and trust in the transition process.

The active participation of civil society organisations, farmer cooperatives and grassroots networks can amplify the impact of Farm to Fork reforms. Community-led food initiatives, participatory policy forums and multi-stakeholder roundtables will ensure that reform is inclusive, transparent and responsive to local needs. Promoting local food festivals, sustainability labelling campaigns and school gardening

programmes can all help to anchor sustainable practices further in the public consciousness.

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