



Press Release

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EU agriculture policy: potential of big data analytics largely untapped

The European Commission has not capitalised on the potential of big data for analysing and subsequently designing the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the European Court of Auditors has said in a report today. Although it holds large volumes of data relevant to the design, monitoring and evaluation of the CAP, its current tools and data do not provide certain essential information needed for well-informed policy-making at EU level. As a result, the Commission does not have enough evidence to comprehensively assess the CAP's needs and impact.

The CAP accounts for more than a third of the EU's budget – €408 billion between 2014 and 2020 – and helps the Commission support member states' activities with objectives, often inter-related, ranging from securing food production and strengthening environmental protection to maintaining farmers' livelihoods and developing rural areas. To determine whether its policy instruments efficiently address those objectives, the Commission needs data from a range of sources to establish a causal link between a CAP measure and its results.

"Data is the bread and butter of sound policy-making, and big data is also becoming the gold standard in agriculture," said Joëlle Elvinger, the ECA member responsible for the report. *"The European Commission should enhance its data analytics and do more to tap the potential of big data for analysing the CAP based on broad evidence."*

The Commission is confronted with obstacles in making best use of the data from the EU countries. This is mainly because the relevant data in different member states is not in a single standardised format, which makes it harder to share and reuse it. The Commission also faces restrictions in combining farm-level data from different sources because systems which would facilitate this, such as a unique identifier for farms across the EU, are missing. The member states also excessively aggregate data that they send to the Commission, which limits the value the Commission can extract from it. Nor does the Commission currently collect sufficient data on farming inputs such as fertilisers and pesticides, or on farming practices with an environmental impact. It also has limited access to member states' data on farms and agricultural businesses, which makes it difficult to gain a detailed overview of the distribution of EU funds.

To tackle data gaps, make better use of existing data and meet the CAP's data needs, the Commission has taken several legislative and other initiatives that could contribute to better policy

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' special report. The full report is available at eca.europa.eu.

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analysis. For example, its directorate-general for agriculture (DG AGRI) is further developing possibilities for sharing spatial data from the EU's principal administrative system for agriculture (IACS) across the EU. However, DG AGRI still uses conventional tools such as spreadsheets to manually analyse the data it collects from EU countries and does not use big data techniques for text mining and automated extraction. It also has no automated or semi-automated processing tools for analysing such data, even if the auditors' analysis proves that further automation is possible and that there are potential benefits in replacing time-consuming manual procedures.

The auditors conclude that there is a significant scope for the Commission to incorporate cost-effective advanced analytics and tools into its IT systems for automated information processing, as well as making better use of data for policy analysis. In addition, very few key IT systems that the Commission and member states use in managing the CAP use predictive or prescriptive analytics to help understand what will happen or how to make it happen, which could be used for planning or policy design.

Background information

Globally, organisations are making increasing use of big data. Agriculture is a sector where digital innovations are increasingly being applied: data on farms in the EU is created and collected through various means, including administrative registers and surveys, mobile phone apps, satellites, drones and precision machinery. However, big data is too complex and too large for traditional data-processing systems, and requires advanced tools and computing power.

The Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines call for an evidence-based approach, meaning that policy decisions need to be based on the best available evidence. An evidence-based policy needs relevant data at every stage of the cycle, from planning and design to monitoring and evaluation. Data-driven policies make it possible to better understand the environmental impacts of agriculture, design targeted policies and use data-driven monitoring systems.

Special report 16/2022, "Data in the Common Agricultural Policy - Unrealised potential of big data for policy evaluations", is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu). The report is relevant both to the CAP starting in 2023 and the post-2027 CAP.

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