

The future of research on sustainable food systems: Building an early-career network of agricultural economists in Europe

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Abstract

The agricultural economics profession plays an essential role in the transition towards more sustainable and resilient food systems. The interdisciplinary perspective of the profession, the rapidly evolving methods and new data, as well as the diverse agricultural, climatic, and political and cultural landscapes of the European Union member states and associated countries pose specific challenges. In this study, we summarize what this implies for Early-Career researchers and how the European Network of Early Career Agricultural Economists (AgEconMeet) tries to support these youngsters in their career development. Finally, we introduce the articles of this special issue that represent the diverse landscape of agricultural economics in Europe. [EconLit Citations: A11, Q1, Q18].

1 | AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS IN EUROPE

In a recent article published in the *European Review of Agricultural Economics*, David J. Just (2023) explains how agricultural economics is suddenly being treated as one of the key disciplines for solving a whole range of global problems. International crises such as the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, the Ukraine war, or climate change show how vulnerable food systems can be and how quickly the successes in the fight against poverty and hunger of

Abbreviations: CAP, Common Agricultural Policy; EU, European Union.

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recent decades can be reversed. The key to the regained fame of agricultural economics lies in the fact that it is an applied economic science that is rooted deeply in real social problems and bridges the gap between the social and natural sciences.

That is, agricultural economists are often educated as universalists coming from general agricultural science and afterwards specializing in agricultural economics. Thereby, agricultural economists are not only trained on the economic aspects of agricultural and food systems, but also understand how the environment affects crop and livestock physiology, how inputs are turned into outputs, and how different actors along food value chains are acting in unique market environments. A logical consequence of such a training background is a bigger affinity and interest for inter- and multidisciplinary research efforts. Agricultural economists often collaborate broadly, and publications tend to have multiple authors, often including colleagues from other natural or social science disciplines.

Although such an inter- and multidisciplinary perspective might be frowned upon in other economic disciplines, we believe it is one of the biggest arguments that agricultural economists bring to the table and why they should play a central role in the transformation processes towards more sustainable and resilient food systems (Fresco et al., 2021; Zilberman, 2019).

Without diminishing the success of our colleagues abroad, in this article, we want to highlight agricultural economics research in Europe and why we believe it is important to train and build a strong, competitive, and visible community of next-generation agricultural economists here. First and foremost, Europe and in particular the European Union (EU) present a unique political economy covering a wide range of political, climatic, and cultural landscapes of EU member states and associated countries. Agricultural markets are generally highly integrated, but cultural patterns of food consumption remain strong, even though all countries share concerns about unhealthy eating and malnutrition. This results in diverse food systems, farm structures, and environmental challenges concentrated in a relatively small geographic area. For example, farm structures vary from small family farms in e.g. Alpine regions to large-scale farms in, for example, Eastern Europe. The European Environmental Agency identifies 13 different climate zones in Europe all representing different conditions for ecosystem services, agricultural production, and ultimately local socio-ecological systems. Lately, this is also connected to different environmental concerns, including desertification in Southern Europe, strong nitrogen pollution in several parts of Central and Western Europe, and climate uncertainties throughout the continent (Naumann et al., 2021; Nichayin et al., 2022; Wassen et al., 2022). Despite all these local and national differences, EU member states share the same Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Acknowledging national differences, it allows for national-level policies and programs to implement targets agreed upon in the CAP. Agricultural economists are therein crucial to uncover conflicting policy targets and propose solutions that lead to a more resilient, sustainable, and food secure European food system (Candel et al., 2023; Dalhaus et al., 2023; Fesenfeld et al., 2023; Schebesta & Candel, 2020).

In addition to understanding land use and agricultural dynamics within Europe, European agricultural economics research must also extend to linkages between European food systems and global societal challenges. Among others, this includes topics such as international trade agreements, and the role of tariffs, standards, and certificates. After decades of peace in Europe, the Ukraine war is not only a tragedy for the people of Ukraine but has serious implications for food security and livelihoods in countries in the EU and worldwide (Behnassi & El Haiba, 2022). It is, thus, essential to understand drivers of poverty and rural transformation processes, aiming to contribute towards sustainable livelihood development in all parts of the world.

All these aspects show the extent to which food systems are globally connected, but also how consequences might differ across geographic regions. Therefore, it should be a key interest to train and build a community of next-generation agricultural economists that is well-equipped to address the great challenges around food systems in Europe and beyond. European universities have the capacity to provide high-quality PhD programs, educating the large, and rapidly increasing number of researchers with solid analytical skills, good scientific practice, and effective communication. However, the critical time to keep talented people in research and prevent them from leaving for other countries or the private sector begins after graduation. Similar to the different political systems in

Europe, academic traditions and cultures, research emphasis, publication styles, and funding structures are quite diverse. While some countries have tenure-track systems (e.g., the Netherlands) and increasingly align with the “Econ Job Market,” others do not (e.g., Germany). Navigating such a diverse academic landscape can be challenging and is prone to discouraging research careers in Europe. We, therefore, believe that this early-career stage deserves more attention and support in Europe, and specifically in a way that surpasses national boundaries.

2 | THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF BEING AN EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHER (IN EUROPE)

For young people embarking on a research career, the first phase directly after the PhD graduation comes with a set of challenges but also opportunities. In the following, we identify a few areas where we believe a network and community of early-career researchers will help to improve future contributions to the agricultural economics profession and facilitate individual career development. This builds on the premise that exchange across national borders and academic cultures will uncover hidden curricula of respective national academic systems and encourage collaborations.

We are convinced that early career researchers are often more knowledgeable about the methodological frontiers of the field. The interdisciplinary nature of agricultural economics research and the rapid advances in empirical methods and computing power require PhD candidates and early career researchers to constantly brush up their empirical portfolios. Some examples are the design of surveys and experiments, preference elicitation methods, causal econometric approaches, machine learning, and simulation methods, which are all developing rapidly (e.g., Benami et al., 2021; Lefebvre et al., 2021; Storm et al., 2020; Varian, 2016). Bringing together data from different sources, scientific fields, and spatial scales can generate valuable research opportunities but requires some upfront time investments to test the feasibility of ideas—something that upcoming researchers are generally more willing to do than their senior colleagues. Consequently, young researchers drive development in innovative research questions by combining information such as economic or production processes related to farm-, firm- or consumer-level data, geospatial data, commodity price data, or environmental data. Although we want to emphasize the value of senior mentors regarding the development of a research agenda, the particular ways of disciplinary fields, or soft skills such as research communication, their experience with up-to-date hard or technical skills might come up short. Exchange among young researchers, struggling with similar technical issues is thus an important aspect of skill development. However, in smaller and national research communities, the critical mass of colleagues facing the same issues might be small, and networking at a larger scale is crucial.

Furthermore, there is a constant stream of new tools and software packages to implement new econometric methods, improve transparent collaboration, pre-register experiments, and registered reports (Finger et al., 2023). At the same time, the landscape of academic journals and publishing formats becomes ever more crowded. This makes it difficult to find the right outlet for publications and to identify predatory publishing practices. Also keeping track of funding and job opportunities is hard when faced with a multitude of national funding programs, and different levels of EU funding initiatives. Although advice on funding opportunities or career development within one's own country might be available through individual academic institutions, careers are increasingly international. Therefore, getting connected at a European level is necessary to share information, experiences, and opportunities related to tools, publishing methods, research funding, and career trajectories.

Finally, mentoring among peers is inherently different from one-on-one mentor–mentee relationships. Generating a platform for interactions among researchers at similar career levels allows them to share experiences in the absence of strong hierarchical structures. Sharing doubts and struggles regarding professional hurdles, discriminatory practices, or situations that challenge mental health, is easier at a level that goes beyond the own academic home. It allows to discuss experiences anonymously. However valuable senior mentors can be, we are convinced that peer mentoring provides a different and unique perspective.

3 | CONNECTING EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHERS AND THE ARTICLES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Career development for agricultural economists in Europe is less institutionalized than for, example, the Econ Job Market in the United States, where PhD candidates are trained intensively to compete for tenure-track positions right after their graduation. Based on the lack of such structures or programs in Europe and our struggles and experiences over the last few years, there was a need to better organize the community of early-stage agricultural economists. A group of back-then early career researchers took the initiative and set up the European Network of Early Career Agricultural Economists (AgEconMeet), gradually extending it to strengthen the future generation of agricultural economists and now including more than 500 members. Access to the network is open to anyone irrespective of their (academic) age, nationality, position, or research topic—as long as they self-identify as an early-career agricultural economist or would like to interact with those who do.

Online seminars build the backbone of AgEconMeet, either featuring thematic presentations by junior and senior researchers on a variety of topics or discussing the hidden curriculum of agricultural economics in terms of job market preparation, networking, publishing, methods and data, and research funding. Moreover, AgEconMeet aims to provide an informal platform to exchange ideas, share experiences, and meet colleagues at other institutions by organizing informal gatherings online and at main agricultural economics conferences. A first 3-day in-person meeting with the explicit goal of facilitating networking and exchange among next-generation agricultural economists was organized in the form of an EAAE Seminar in the fall of 2022 in Göttingen, Germany. At one of the oldest agricultural faculties in Europe, the objectives of the seminar were threefold: (i) to present and give feedback on papers that present emerging methods and data sets, (ii) to share perspectives on the future of agricultural economics in Europe and its role in reaching out to policymakers, and (iii) to generate a safe space for exchanging challenges and experiences, and to network with peers. To stimulate open discussions and maximize feedback, we explicitly welcomed not only papers, but also work-in-progress, or project proposal presentations with a general focus on either:

- methodological developments such as survey and preference elicitation, econometrics, machine learning, simulation methods or
- the possibilities of emerging data such as economic or production process related farm-, firm-, or consumer level data, commodity price data, environmental data
- while remaining open for papers in other areas and approaches that show a promising direction for the profession were highly welcomed.

This special issue highlights 9 publications that arose from the presented papers at the conference. These papers cover a variety of topics in agricultural economics research, showcasing the wide interest and potential of early-career agricultural economists in Europe and AgEconMeet in particular. All of the 9 publications are first-authored by early-career researchers, not (yet) being in tenured positions at the time of attending the conference, as all authors (guest-editors of this special issue) are at the time of the publication of this article.

In terms of geographical diversity, this collection of studies illustrates how the European community of agricultural economists focuses on food systems in Europe as well as beyond. About half of the papers focus on European food systems, including papers focusing on Norway (Jaghdani et al., 2023), Germany (Ang & Ramsden, 2023), and the EU as a whole (Nes, 2023), whereas the other half focuses on countries in the Global South, including India (Itin-Shwartz, 2023; Preusse et al., 2023) and Ghana, Senegal, Uganda, Mali, and, Tanzania in Africa (Ölker & Musshoff, 2023; Santalucia & Sibhatu, 2023; Ziesmer et al., 2023). In addition, the special issue covers a diversity of economic issues along food value chains. Nes (2023) uses a novel database of claims and labels on food products to analyze trends in sustainability claims and labels across Europe. At the food processor level, Ang and Ramsden (2023) assess the efficiency of dairy processors in Germany. At the market level, Ziesmer et al. (2023)

identify key sectors of sustainable development in Ghana, Senegal, and Uganda. Finally, at the farm level, Ölker and Musshoff (2023) explore determinants of loan demand in Mali.

With this collection of articles, we hope to illustrate the broad landscape that was reflected in the contributions and attendance of 113 early-career economists in this event that aimed at building new and strengthening existing networks to bring their innovative research from Europe into the world.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article, as no data sets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Not applicable.

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