

# Agricultural Food Marketing, Economics and Policies

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## 1. Introduction

Agriculture and food production have long been called upon to become more sustainable in order to contribute positively to the transformations taking place in this historic era, such as the increase in world population and living standards in certain areas of the planet that poses problems in terms of safeguarding food and nutrition security, mitigating the effects of climate change and environmental degradation that are particularly intense in certain territories and achieving wealth and well-being equality for all players in the food chain.

According to existing literature, this can be done through the development of innovative methods and tools to rationalise/reduce resource use, material consumption, waste generation and biodiversity loss, without compromising sufficient, nutritious, sustainable and affordable food for modern societies.

This general need, which is shared at the international political level, is all the more urgent today because of the need to recover from the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the after-effects of the war in the European area, both of which have accentuated the effects of degrowth and are continuing to do so. North and south need a new economic model, one more oriented towards equity, the restructuring of production and consumption patterns and sobriety, combined with full employment and social security, as well as food security and local agriculture. This is perfectly in line with the importance of food and agriculture to the achievement of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, all of which are directly or indirectly related to food, and for accelerating the transition towards the 2030 Agenda.

In this general context, this Special Issue on “Agricultural Food Marketing, Economics and Policies” was launched in order to search for research contributions and reflections, applied in different territorial contexts, on the following topics:

- Policies at different decision-making levels, intended both to capture trends towards the creation of healthy and sustainable food environments, and to characterise integrated and shared forms of responsibility between civil society, business, policy makers and producers aimed at dialogue and cooperation for the creation of sustainable development hubs;
- Aspects of production that promote regenerative and agroecological practices and healthy and sustainable food systems; organisational and management changes induced by the COVID-19 crisis; organisational and management changes aimed at achieving the Millennium Goals;
- Agrifood supply chain and its orientation towards health and sustainability, analysed in pursuit of the level of involvement of the entrepreneurial system in change and areas for improvement from “field to fork”, as well as with the aim of reducing food losses and waste; analysing the extent to which sustainability is an integral part of corporate strategies; ensuring the transparency of its processes throughout the supply chain; strengthening regional and local supply chains to improve distribution, thus helping to guarantee the right to food;



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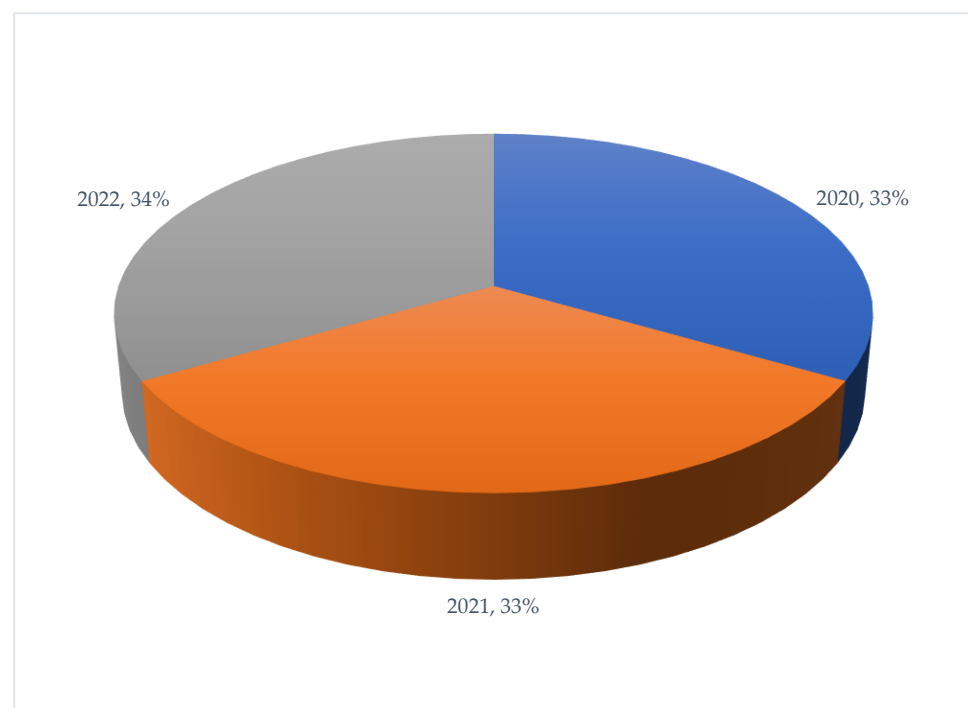
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- Agrifood marketing, analysed in pursuit of food needs, preferences and cultures; the level of information on the economic, social and environmental impacts of everyday food choices; technological, digital and geospatial solutions aimed at the creation of knowledge networks for the exchange of information on more sustainable choices and innovative solutions by farmers and producers; promotion of training programmes and awareness-raising campaigns to make food production and consumption patterns healthier and more sustainable and to adopt more responsible food behaviour in order to reduce the environmental, economic and social impact of food waste.

These are wide-ranging topics, very inclusive, designed precisely to foster dialogue between researchers belonging to different international academies and to build a body of contributions large enough to represent ideas, solutions, methodological approaches and theoretical and empirical references useful for the transition towards new production paradigms in the agrifood field.

## 2. Results Produced by this Special Issue

As many as 60 papers were accepted and published between November 2020 and October 2022, at the end of a lengthy review process involving hundreds of reviewers and multiple academic editors, operating under the strict evaluation process adopted by Agriculture MDPI (Figure 1). The approval rate was 42% (ratio of submitted to approved papers), which is substantially higher than in traditional marketing journals, but much lower than in open access journals in general.



**Figure 1.** Annual distribution of published papers.

As shown in Table 1, out of the 60 papers, 6.7% of the articles were awarded the title “Feature paper”, distinguished because, on proposal of the scientific editors and after positive feedback from the reviewers, they were judged to represent the most advanced research with significant potential for great impact in the field [1–4], while 10% were identified as “Editor’s Choice” articles because, based on recommendations from the scientific editors of MDPI journals worldwide, they were considered particularly interesting for readers or important for the respective research area [5–10].

**Table 1.** Overall results produced by this Special Issue (\*).

| Indications             | Values | Indications           | Values |
|-------------------------|--------|-----------------------|--------|
| Paper Type, %           |        | Cited, %              |        |
| Article                 | 81.7   | None                  | 20.0   |
| Feature paper           | 6.7    | Up to 2 citations     | 26.7   |
| Editor's Choice         | 10.0   | From 3 to 6 citations | 36.7   |
| Communication           | 1.7    | Over 7 citations      | 16.6   |
| Viewed, %               |        | Interest area, %      |        |
| Up to 1200 views        | 33.3   | A                     | 23.3   |
| From 1201 to 2400 views | 48.4   | B                     | 25.0   |
| Over 2401 views         | 18.3   | C                     | 21.7   |
|                         |        | D                     | 30.0   |

(\*) Our elaboration. The areas of interest are identified as follows: A = policies at different decision-making levels; B = aspects of production; C = the Agrifood chain and its orientation towards health and sustainability; D = agrifood marketing.

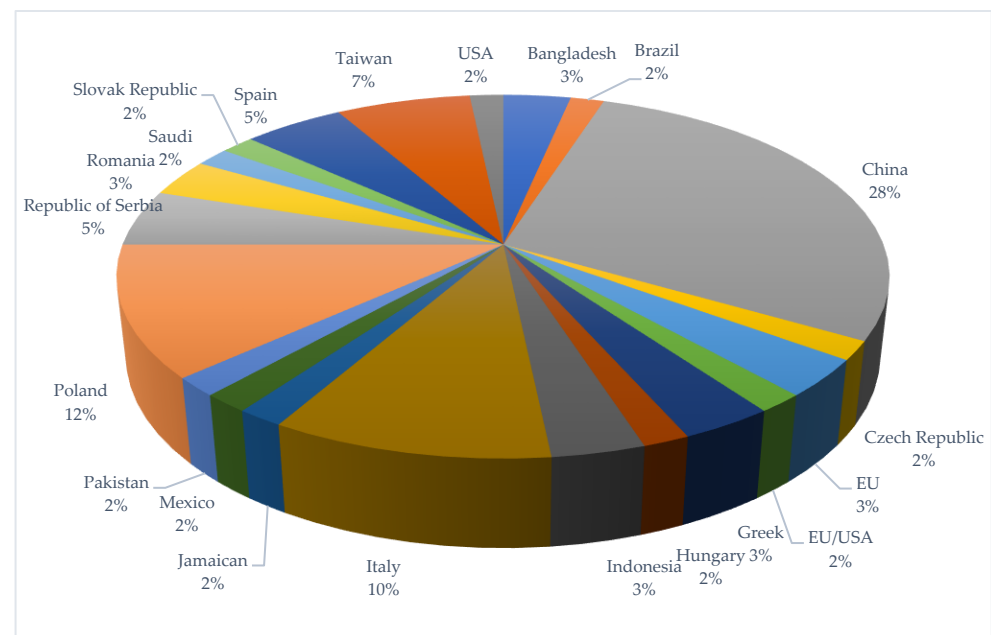
In the “Feature papers”, the topics of contractual economics; small and medium-sized agribusiness; short- and long-term market dynamics resulting from positive and negative shocks of macroeconomic variables on crops; diversified and sustainable business strategies for small farmers and their openness to multifunctionality and, in particular, recreational activities; and the propensity of agricultural operators to adopt the digital solutions of “Agriculture 4.0” were dealt with, demonstrating the potential of each, along with their limitations. The “Editor's Choice” articles, on the other hand, dealt with various aspects of market assessment and customers' willingness to consume certain varieties of fruit; sustainable consumer food behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic and the construction of behavioural clusters between indifferent, pro-environmental and health-conscious consumers. Also included in the same category is the development of programmes and strategies to prevent and manage food loss and food security, with an eye on the younger generation considered to be a group of consumers more prone to food waste; the effects of participation of smallholder farmers in the agricultural value chain for rural development and poverty reduction; and the assessment of sustainability performance in the four dimensions of good governance environmental integrity, economic resilience and social welfare in livestock farming.

Among the indicators of impact to be considered are “views” and “citations”. In particular, views grew in parallel with the publication of various papers and on 1 March 2023, they reached almost 109,000, with a minimum of 605 and a maximum of 6146 for a single paper (the average number of views is 1809). In addition, 48% of the papers had between 1200 and 2400 views. Views are particularly important for an open access paper because they signal an initial intellectual curiosity aroused in the reader; furthermore, they are a precursor to possible citations.

Citations also express enjoyment of, and interest in, the paper produced. Thus, the Special Issue papers received a total of 202 citations, with a minimum of 0 (no citations) and a maximum of 14 citations. The average number of citations was 4; however, around 37% had between 3 and 6 citations, and 17% more than 7.

The territorial areas in which empirical research was carried out are summarised in Figure 2. Important is the body of research carried out in China (28%), Poland (12%) and Italy (10%), although there was no lack of research contributions in other countries across the globe.

Finally, distributing the papers according to the areas of interest identified by this Special Issue presentation (policies, production, supply chain and agrifood marketing), the largest body concerns agrifood marketing (30% of the contributions), followed, in order of importance, by the economics of production (25%), policies at different decision-making levels (23%) and the sustainable agrifood chain (around 22%).



**Figure 2.** Area in which the 60 papers were concentrated, %.

### 3. Nature of Contributions Collected and Level of Advancement in Knowledge

This Special Issue encompasses a rich research landscape. Moreover, from a methodological point of view, various approaches were explored: combination of principal component analysis (PCA) and a multivariate logit model or cluster analysis [3,6]; the NARDL (Nonlinear Autoregressive Distributed Lag), ARDL (Autoregressive Distributed Lag) and ECM (Error Correction Model) models adapted to predict the import demand for potatoes, rapeseed and beef in the long and short term and verified by modified ordinary least squares (FMOLS), dynamic ordinary least squares (DOLS) and canonical cointegrating regression (CCR) methods [2,11]; the multivariate probit model with a propensity score matching to reveal various aspects of the role of women in the adoption of CSA (climate-smart agricultural practices) [12]; the Policy Delphi methodology both to assess the existence of a relationship between a wine brand and the territory of its origin [13] and to select agricultural experts and rural household organisations for indicator modelling and empirical analysis for the development of innovative marketing strategies [14]; fuzzy logic (CRITIC—importance of criteria through inter-criteria correlation; combined with CRADIS—compromise ranking of alternatives by distance from the ideal solution), for the analysis of the pear market [5]; and dual-frontier Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) based on slack measurement (SBM) for hierarchical network systems and followed by a tie-breaking method to support small farmers in the decision-making process for the supply of their products and the preparation of daily meals in public schools [15]. Valuable applications have also included fuzzy C-means clustering and the entropy method to evaluate the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); a Chinese-designed development approach to invest in arable land in Asia, Africa and Europe [16]; interrupted time series analysis (ITSA); and GARCH models to estimate the impact of apple futures on spot price volatility [17].

Research on marketing and consumer behaviour has explored the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework to assess the impact of external stimuli, such as consumers' social network and vendors' resource endowment and infrastructure development levels, on consumers' perceived value and risk and ability to influence their purchase intentions [18]; the response to the main dimensions influencing consumers' purchase of sub-optimal foods (with shorter production time or lower quality) during the COVID-19 pandemic [19]; initiatives promoting healthy and balanced consumption (e.g., labelling, branding and trust in the information provided) that may influence consumer choice [20]; and the weight of health benefits and environmental impact as key attributes explaining the consumption of

organic products [21]. There was no shortage of contributions on the generational component of wine consumption, demonstrating the interest of young people (Generation Y) in online information (especially for the link that connects producers with consumers to allow them to obtain further information and send comments, suggestions and/or praise) [22]; the willingness to pay for functional foods (pasta enriched with *Opuntia Ficus Indica* L.) or for mushrooms with a high protein content [23,24]; and the relevant factors influencing consumers' purchase intention with regard to the "blind box", a new business model for surplus food [25].

Studies on the policy at different levels have been developed through research on cereal subsidy interventions and how farmland transfer influences farmers' green production behaviour [26]; on the construction of regional branded agricultural products for the promotion of local development in areas where this policy has not yet been widely used [27]; on the adoption of sustainable strategies (economically, environmentally and socially) by farmers to counteract the damage of climate change [28]; on the direct influence of green transformational leadership on the environmental performance of food organisations and its indirect influence via the green behaviour of employees in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [29]; on the agricultural commodity futures market and the real market in order to derive insights for food policy makers [30]; and on the identification of key factors in the emergence and development of social innovation processes that give rise to new organisational formulae among farmers and contribute to the coordination and efficiency of the food supply in Alternative Food Networks [31]. Other contributions have been developed to understand the effects produced by EU CAP policies in rural areas, showing that areas with structural defects and development needs in Poland have experienced lower than average levels of participation in all programmes, regardless of their objectives, increasing the gap between rich and poor areas and undermining the principles behind the policies [32]; to assess the connection between service and financial performance in wine production and the environmental, ethical and disclosure behaviour of the producers themselves [33]; to evaluate digital village development (DVI) policies in order to identify cooperation and mutual assistance formulae for overcoming the regional gap [34]; and to assess the agricultural competitiveness of EU Member States by means of a competitiveness pyramid model and to draw useful indications for the CAP (common agricultural policy) [35]. Finally, there was no shortage of contributions on the overall trade policy of the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (US), as well as on their bilateral relations [36]; on the stability of farmers' incomes in order to evaluate their social sustainability [37]; on the agricultural supply chain, the export of agricultural products, general food safety and the perceived risk of farmers in the COVID-19 pandemic phase; on the production and consumption attitudes of GMO foods [38,39].

The analysis of production was characterised by various contributions ranging from the Polish bakery industry, labour processes and related economic performance [40]; the size and production orientation of farms, as well as their productivity and profitability in the Czech Republic [41]; the pricing strategy of agricultural products, the distribution of enterprise income and the overall profitability of the agricultural supply chain [42]; the insurance coverage of pig farms and the related health problems [43]; the perception of entrepreneurial success and the impact of factors such as internal financing, innovativeness, capacity and educational background [44]; the analysis of the technical efficiency (TE) of dairy farms in order to identify its determinants [45]; the migration of family labour and its contribution to the probability of farmers' access to productive agricultural services [46]; the risk factors and possible impacts of policy measures on the desirability of innovative crops to foster youth enterprise start-ups in Greece [47]; risks in agriculture and the diagnosis of critical aspects and the measurement of financial indicators of farms in order to eliminate risks and maintain, as well as increase, their competitiveness [48]; and Polish milk prices and their difference from the milk prices recorded in their western neighbours [49].

Contributions to research on the supply chain focused on blockchain-based anti-counterfeiting traceability systems, investigating in particular investment conditions and



supply chain coordination in light of the costs of implementing modern technology [50]; on contract economics and the consequences for small farmers with the increased modernisation of retailing [51]; on the effects of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic on food production, acquisition and consumption behaviour [52,53]; on the development of a profit model, applying Stackelberg game theory, to determine which type of subsidy and decision-making process can provide the greatest benefits to e-commerce agricultural supply chains and participation in e-commerce sales platforms [54,55]; on the distribution implications of the choice of food distribution channels [56,57]; on the mechanisms of supply chain malfunctioning due to a lack of market information, poor institutions and agreements, inadequate marketing infrastructure and transport systems and a high and unequal distribution of profit margins among value chain actors [58]; on the effects of mass losses and unpaid quotas that occur during the harvesting and storage process of perishable fruits [59]; on the development of diversified and sustainable strategies and business models for small-scale farmers [60].

#### 4. Conclusions

It is difficult to ascertain before the fact what the interest and curiosity raised by the publication of a Special Issue may be. In this case, the flattering results prove that the quantitative and qualitative objectives which an editor hopes to achieve has been met.

Some reflections at the conclusion of the experience should be noted. First of all, it is worth noting the great interest shown by agricultural economists on an international level towards the proposed topics, demonstrating the very active role of agricultural economics in the study of the sustainability of food systems, starting from the land and the farm and its links with the food chain, the consumer and the environment, up to the systematic analysis of the entire food system. Such importance lies in the considerable contribution that agricultural economics, in conjunction with other disciplines, can make, not only in terms of the study but also the design of modern, sustainable, healthy and inclusive food systems.

Another insight concerns the role that agribusiness plays in the economy and in the social cohesion and environmental sustainability of the territories in which the empirical research was conducted. The results presented in the various papers show that agribusiness continuously provides economic (e.g., ensures economic vitality), environmental (e.g., maintains natural resources) and social functions (e.g., ensures a good quality of life, overcoming gender inequality and the inclusion of young people in employment), according to a process of integration that is perfectly in line with the concept of sustainability.

A number of methodological difficulties were faced in order to take due account of the many technical, ecological, economic and social elements that interact with this subject in a multidimensional manner, and a generalisation of the results and the formulation of recommendations for different categories of stakeholders, both public and private, were achieved.

It is worth mentioning the contributions which address the size, production orientation, productivity and profitability of several case studies; the trade dependence of economic systems on imports and market fluctuations; the development of new techniques, skills and interventions that led to innovative behaviour towards climate change; the role of the environment and the territory in the valorisation of local products and economic development; resources and employees' perceptions of every aspect of job satisfaction and its correlation with the economic performance of companies; the adoption of modern technologies (ICT and Blockchain, for example); sustainable business models; the impact of policies on the development of rural areas; the impacts that catastrophic economic events (e.g., COVID-19) have had on agrifood production systems and consumption, etc. All of which are worth reading very carefully.

The success of this Special Issue also brings with it the responsibility to think about the future. Therefore, this Special Issue aims to continue with a new edition of the project with the objective of researching and identifying new environmental, economic and social

transformations that can support each other in the full realisation of that agro-ecological transition so much desired by politics and public opinion.

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