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SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AND THE GREEN TRANSITION IN ALBANIA: INSIGHTS FROM RURAL TALKS

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Abstract

This paper examines how rural communities in Albania perceive sustainable agriculture and the green transition, using the discussions generated during Rural Talks in the framework of the Rural Parliament of Albania, organized by Albanian Network for Rural Development. The study adopts a qualitative exploratory embedded case study design and analyzes methodological documents, session reporting outputs, and summary materials through a hybrid deductive–inductive thematic analysis. The findings show that rural actors understand sustainable agriculture in a broad and practical sense: not only as an environmental goal, but also as a question of farm viability, market access, rural continuity, and the fairness of value-chain relations. Participants identified field-level opportunities, including medicinal and aromatic plants, local products, agrotourism, resource-efficient practices, and more localized value creation. At the same time, they emphasized major barriers to the application of sustainable agriculture models, including high input costs, weak technical guidance, labor shortages, poor-quality planting materials, traceability and certification difficulties, limited infrastructure, and

fragmented institutional support. The paper argues that sustainable agriculture in Albania cannot be advanced through environmental ambition alone; it requires economically viable farmers, stronger collective organization, fairer value chains, better advisory systems, and more coherent public policies. The study contributes to the literature by linking participatory governance, sustainable livelihoods, and value-chain governance to bottom-up evidence from a rural policy forum and by translating that evidence into policy implications for a more feasible and inclusive green transition in Albania.
Keywords: Sustainable Agriculture; Green Transition; Rural Communities; Participatory Governance; Value Chain Governance; Albania

INTRODUCTION

This paper is grounded in a conceptual understanding of sustainable agriculture and the green transition as interrelated dimensions of a broader transformation of food systems. In this perspective, sustainable agriculture is not limited to raising production or introducing isolated environmentally friendly practices. Rather, it refers to an integrated approach that seeks to balance food production, protection of the environment, rational use of natural resources, and the long-term economic viability of farms.

Within this framework, the green transition in agriculture is understood not simply as compliance with environmental standards, but as a wider restructuring of how agriculture is produced, organized, and supported. The Rural Talks present the green transition as movement toward a model of production that is more environmentally responsible, more efficient in its use of inputs and technologies, less damaging to climate and ecosystems, and more competitive in demanding markets, especially in relation to the European Union. The discussions make clear that this transition must be assessed in practical terms: what it costs farmers to change practices, whether there is a market reward for that change, and whether it leads to higher incomes or merely higher obligations.

This conceptual framing is especially relevant in the Albanian context. The discussion materials repeatedly highlight that agriculture in Albania continues to play a central role in rural livelihoods and territorial development, but that the sector also operates under difficult structural conditions: fragmented farm structures, weak integration into value chains, low investment capacity, rural outmigration, ageing farming populations, and increasing climate pressures. Under these conditions, sustainability cannot be treated as a purely technical or environmental matter. It becomes a broader development challenge, closely linked to whether farmers can

improve their position in markets, access infrastructure and support services, and adapt gradually to new standards in quality, traceability, and environmental management

The relevance of this debate is reinforced by the wider European policy environment. The Farm to Fork Strategy, at the heart of the European Green Deal, aims to accelerate the transition toward a food system that is fair, healthy, and environmentally friendly while ensuring fair economic returns for farmers (European Commission, 2020). The CAP 2023–2027 similarly links agricultural policy to climate action, biodiversity protection, viable rural areas, safe and sustainable food, and the diffusion of knowledge and innovation (European Commission, 2022a, 2022b). For Albania, these frameworks are not only external reference points; they are part of an ongoing process of approximation with European standards and instruments.

The present paper draws on discussions, where the Rural Talks format was explicitly designed as a bottom-up participatory space for hearing the real experiences of rural communities, identifying concrete challenges, discussing practical solutions, and formulating policy messages for broader use. The methodology was not intended as an abstract debate, but as a structured process that privileged field-based experience, equal participation, active listening, and translation of discussion into recommendations. Participants from different backgrounds, including farmers, institutions, businesses, civil society, women, youth, and academics, were encouraged to move from general reflections to concrete examples and actionable proposals.

Against this background, the paper aims to examine how rural communities in Albania perceive sustainable agriculture and the green transition in relation to the realities of rural livelihoods and agricultural change. More specifically, it has four objectives: first, to explore how rural communities understand and interpret sustainable agriculture; second, to identify concrete cases and examples from the field that illustrate how sustainable agriculture is being practiced or discussed in rural areas; third, to analyze the main challenges that hinder the application of sustainable agriculture models; and fourth, to propose policy implications for a more feasible, inclusive, and context-sensitive transition toward sustainable agriculture in Albania. The central argument developed in the paper is that sustainable agriculture in Albania cannot advance through environmental ambition alone. It depends on economically viable farmers, fairer value chains, better local infrastructure, and integrated policies that connect modernization with social inclusion and environmental responsibility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on sustainable agriculture has evolved from a production-centred perspective toward a broader system understanding that integrates economic viability, environmental stewardship, and social equity. Early contributions emphasized sustainability as a

practical alternative to input-intensive and ecologically degrading agricultural models, arguing that long-term agricultural development depends on renewing the ecological base of production while preserving farmer autonomy and rural self-reliance (Pretty, 1995). More recent frameworks developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) define sustainable food and agriculture as an approach that must meet present and future needs while balancing profitability, environmental health, and social and economic equity (FAO, 2014). In this view, agriculture is not assessed only by output levels, but also by how it affects food security, natural resources, and rural livelihoods. This broader orientation is especially useful for the present study because it allows sustainable agriculture to be treated as part of a wider food-systems transformation rather than as a narrow set of environmentally friendly farm practices.

A second major strand of the literature conceptualizes sustainable agriculture through the lens of agroecology. Agroecology has been described as a science, a set of farming practices, and a social movement that links ecological processes, productive systems, and social change (Wezel et al., 2009). Gliessman (2015) further develops this perspective by showing that the sustainability of agricultural systems depends on redesigning farms and food systems around ecological principles rather than merely adjusting conventional models at the margins. FAO's agroecology work similarly presents agroecology as a pathway for transforming food and agricultural systems, organized around ten interrelated elements such as diversity, synergies, resilience, co-creation of knowledge, human and social values, and responsible governance (FAO, 2018a, 2018b). Taken together, this body of work highlights that sustainable agriculture is not simply a technical matter of reducing chemical inputs; it is also a question of how production systems are reconfigured to become ecologically sound, socially embedded, and economically resilient.

A third body of literature stresses that the feasibility of sustainable agriculture depends on the broader livelihood conditions under which rural households operate. The sustainable livelihoods tradition argues that rural development outcomes are shaped by the interaction of multiple forms of capital, natural, human, physical, financial, and social, and by the institutional context that structures access to these assets (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998). From this perspective, farmers' ability to adopt more sustainable practices depends not only on environmental awareness or technical advice, but also on access to labour, finance, infrastructure, knowledge, collective organization, and secure livelihood opportunities. This lens remains analytically powerful because it shifts attention from ideal models of sustainable farming to the real constraints and capacities that shape transition pathways in rural areas. Ostrom's (2009) broader social-ecological systems framework complements this view by

showing that sustainability outcomes are produced through interactions between resource systems, users, institutions, and governance arrangements rather than by environmental management in isolation.

Questions of participation, governance, and value distribution are also central to the literature. Deliberative and participatory approaches argue that environmental and rural policy becomes more robust when it incorporates stakeholder knowledge and treats local actors as legitimate contributors to problem definition and solution building (Dryzek, 2000; Reed, 2008). This is particularly relevant in the context of sustainable agriculture, where policy goals are often formulated at national or supranational level but implemented in highly diverse local settings. At the same time, agrifood value-chain research shows that sustainability is shaped by how risks, costs, and rewards are distributed along the chain. Recent work argues that smallholder inclusion and value creation depend not simply on market participation, but on the wider value networks and institutional arrangements that allow farmers to benefit from upgrading, coordination, and collective action (Schoneveld & Weng, 2023). Similarly, Hidayati et al. (2023) show that sustainable agrifood value-chain transformation depends on enabling factors such as stakeholder support, communication, market expansion, value addition, and governance capacity. These studies are particularly relevant for the Albanian case because they help explain why farmers may support sustainability goals in principle while struggling to apply them in practice under weak bargaining conditions and uneven institutional support.

Recent literature on food systems adds a further layer by stressing that sustainability transitions involve trade-offs and contested narratives. Béné et al. (2019) show that the concept of sustainable food systems is widely used but often interpreted through different disciplinary and policy lenses, creating tensions among goals related to nutrition, environmental protection, incomes, and resilience. This insight is important because it suggests that sustainable agriculture cannot be treated as a universally fixed model; rather, it is interpreted differently depending on the priorities and constraints of particular actors and settings. For this reason, empirical studies that investigate how rural communities themselves understand sustainability remain highly valuable. In the European context, this debate has been translated into major policy initiatives such as the Farm to Fork Strategy and the CAP 2023–2027 framework, which frame sustainable agriculture as a combination of environmental performance, fair economic returns for farmers, biodiversity protection, food quality, innovation, and rural vitality (European Commission, 2020, 2023; European Union, 2021). The Organic Action Plan and the more recent Vision for Agriculture and Food continue this approach by linking sustainability with competitiveness, generational renewal, knowledge transfer, and simplified but effective policy delivery (European Commission, 2021, 2025).

Overall, the literature suggests that sustainable agriculture should be understood as a multidimensional and governance-dependent transition process. Foundational work highlights ecological renewal and self-reliance (Pretty, 1995), agroecological scholarship emphasizes systemic redesign (Gliessman, 2015; Wezel et al., 2009), livelihoods research underlines the importance of assets and institutional access (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998), and value-chain studies show that sustainability is inseparable from coordination and value capture (Hidayati et al., 2023; Schoneveld & Weng, 2023). FAO and EU policy frameworks reinforce this multidimensional understanding by placing sustainability at the intersection of food security, environmental stewardship, social inclusion, innovation, and rural development (European Commission, 2020, 2021, 2023, 2025; FAO, 2014, 2018a, 2018b). These converging strands of literature provide a strong basis for analyzing sustainable agriculture in Albania through the combined lenses of rural perceptions, livelihood constraints, value-chain governance, and participatory policy dialogue.

Conceptual framework

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual framework used in the paper. It links the policy and discussion context to rural perceptions, mediating structural conditions, field-level expressions, policy response dimensions, and expected development outcomes.

1. Policy and discussion context

• EU policy context: Green Deal, Farm to Fork, CAP, and national rural development priorities

• Rural Talks / Rural Parliament discussions as bottom-up input based on real experiences, field examples, challenges, and recommendations

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2. Core concept

• Sustainable agriculture and green transition as one integrated transformation process

• Economic viability of farms

• Environmental protection and efficient use of natural resources

• Social inclusion and sustainable rural livelihoods

↓

3. Rural perceptions

• Not only an environmental goal

• Also a question of income, market access, farm viability, and rural continuity

• Interpreted through everyday farming realities

↓

4. Mediating structural conditions

- Fragmentation of farms
- Weak farmer integration into value chains
- Low investment capacity
- Migration, ageing, and labour shortages
- Limited infrastructure, traceability, and certification
- Weak advisory and institutional support

↓

5. Field-level expressions

- Existing sustainable practices and local cases
- Opportunities: medicinal and aromatic plants, local products, organics, innovation, youth engagement
- Practical barriers to applying sustainable agriculture models

↓

6. Policy response dimensions

- Strengthening farmer organization and value-chain coordination
- Investment in local infrastructure, technology, and quality systems
- Advisory support, innovation, and inclusion of youth and women
- More coherent and implementable policies

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7. Expected outcomes

- More viable farmers
- Fairer and more functional value chains
- Greater adoption of sustainable practices
- Stronger rural livelihoods
- More resilient and competitive rural development

Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking policy context, rural perceptions, structural constraints, field realities, and policy responses

The framework assumes that sustainable agriculture and the green transition are shaped simultaneously by policy goals and by bottom-up rural experience. It also assumes that rural communities' perceptions are filtered through structural conditions such as fragmentation, weak

value-chain integration, low investment capacity, labor shortages, limited infrastructure, and uneven institutional support. These conditions influence the practical application of sustainable agriculture models and, in turn, shape the policy responses considered necessary.

EU POLICIES AND PRACTICES RELATED TO SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

The European Union has increasingly approached sustainable agriculture through an integrated agri-food systems perspective. The Farm to Fork Strategy, launched in 2020 as part of the European Green Deal, is explicitly presented by the European Commission as a strategy to make food systems fair, healthy, and environmentally friendly while also ensuring fair economic returns for farmers (European Commission, 2020). This positioning is important because it confirms that sustainability in agriculture is not treated solely as environmental compliance, but as a combination of ecological performance, public health, food-system resilience, and economic fairness.

The CAP 2023–2027 is the EU's main delivery mechanism for translating these goals into agricultural and rural policy. The Commission presents the CAP as organized around ten specific objectives linked to social, environmental, and economic sustainability, including competitiveness, viable rural areas, biodiversity protection, societal demands regarding food and health, and the modernization of agriculture through knowledge, innovation, and digitalization (European Commission, 2022a, 2022b). EU countries implement these goals through national CAP Strategic Plans, which tailor CAP instruments to local needs while remaining aligned with EU objectives and the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2025b).

A notable feature of current EU practice is that sustainable agriculture is pursued not only through financial support, but also through eco-schemes, advisory systems, training, monitoring, and strategic planning. The Strategic Plans are intended to combine income support, rural development, market measures, knowledge exchange, and climate action in one coherent framework (European Commission, 2025b). This policy architecture is especially relevant for candidate countries such as Albania because it shows that the EU model of sustainable agriculture is built on the interaction of incentives, institutions, and enabling support systems rather than on environmental requirements alone.

The policy discussion has also evolved more recently. The 2025 Vision for Agriculture and Food places stronger emphasis on competitiveness, simplification, generational renewal, and ensuring that knowledge, research, and innovation actually reach farmers (European Commission, 2025a). Rather than abandoning sustainability goals, this newer orientation suggests an effort to make the transition more politically and economically viable. For Albania,

the relevance of EU policy lies not only in formal approximation, but in the broader policy logic these frameworks embody: sustainable agriculture is treated as a joined-up agenda that links environmental goals, farmer incomes, innovation, quality systems, and rural vitality.

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE IN ALBANIA: CONTEXT AND FIELD-BASED APPLICATIONS

Structural context

The Rural Talks portray Albania as a country where sustainable agriculture is both necessary and difficult. Agriculture remains central to rural livelihoods and territorial development, yet the sector operates under structural constraints that make transition challenging. These include fragmented farm structures, weak farmer integration into value chains, low investment capacity, limited infrastructure for storage and processing, migration from rural areas, ageing farming populations, and increasing exposure to climate-related pressures.

These structural factors matter because they affect not only productivity, but also the feasibility of sustainability itself. When farmers lack scale, coordination, access to quality systems, and bargaining power, the adoption of more sustainable practices may become technically possible yet economically fragile. This structural context is central to the logic of the paper and helps explain why the Rural Talks repeatedly connected sustainability to value-chain relations, local infrastructure, and institutional support rather than to environmental practices alone.

Examples of sustainable agriculture application in Albania

Discussions show that sustainable agriculture in Albania is already visible through a range of practical, field-based applications. One recurring example is agrotourism linked to farm production. In the uploaded examples, agrotourism is portrayed as a multifunctional farm model that combines agricultural production, artisanal processing, local gastronomy, and rural hospitality. This model is significant because it shortens supply chains, creates local value added, strengthens territorial identity, and diversifies farm income rather than leaving the farm dependent only on the sale of raw primary products.

A second important application is efficient irrigation and water management. The Albania examples describe drip irrigation and other controlled irrigation systems as concrete expressions of sustainable agriculture in a context of climate variability, seasonal drought, and pressure on water resources. Such examples matter because they show that resource

efficiency is not limited to large commercial operations, but can also be implemented in smaller family farms when the right investment and support conditions exist.

A third application concerns medicinal and aromatic plants. The Rural Talks reporting materials describe this activity as environmentally friendly, low-pollution, relatively efficient in water use, supportive of women's employment, and capable of generating more stable incomes. A fourth application is the use of local varieties and biodiversity-based production, which the uploaded examples associate with ecological resilience, product differentiation, and territorial identity. A fifth application is farm-linked processing, certification, and quality upgrading, including examples of small-scale processing and standards-based upgrading that allow farms to retain more value locally.

Taken together, these examples show that sustainable agriculture in Albania is not merely a policy aspiration. It is already emerging through practices such as agrotourism, efficient water management, medicinal and aromatic plants, biodiversity-based farming, and farm-level processing and certification. What remains unresolved is not whether such practices exist, but whether policy, markets, and institutions can scale them up beyond isolated cases and make them part of a more general model of rural development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research objectives

This paper examines how rural communities in Albania perceive sustainable agriculture and the green transition, using the discussions during rural talks as its main empirical basis. The focus is not on measuring attitudes statistically, but on understanding how rural actors interpret sustainable agriculture in relation to their everyday realities, how they describe concrete examples from the field, which constraints they identify as most significant, and what forms of policy support they consider most necessary. This orientation is fully consistent with the Rural Talks format itself, which was conceived as a structured bottom-up space for listening to real experiences, identifying concrete challenges, discussing practical solutions, and formulating policy messages rather than encouraging abstract debate.

More specifically, the paper pursues four objectives. First, it seeks to explore the perceptions and understandings of rural communities regarding sustainable agriculture and the green transition. Second, it aims to identify field-based cases and practical examples that illustrate how sustainable agriculture is interpreted, practiced, or discussed in rural settings. Third, it analyzes the main challenges that hinder the application of sustainable agriculture models, including economic, institutional, technical, and organizational barriers. Fourth, it

proposes policy recommendations grounded in the priorities and experiences expressed during the Rural Talks

Research design

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative exploratory case study design. The case under examination is the Rural Talks session on “Sustainable Agriculture and Green Transition” as a participatory rural policy forum. This design is appropriate because the paper seeks to interpret meanings, experiences, and practical problem-definitions emerging from discussion, rather than to test causal relationships through quantitative measurement. The session itself functioned as a structured deliberative setting in which rural actors were invited to articulate what sustainable agriculture means in practice, what works in the field, what barriers persist, and what should be changed. The design therefore allows the paper to capture sustainable agriculture not only as a policy concept, but also as a socially interpreted and contested rural development issue.

The study may also be described as an embedded case study, since the Rural Talks session is examined through four analytical dimensions that correspond both to the objectives of the paper and to the structure of the discussion itself: perceptions of sustainable agriculture, field-based examples and practices, challenges to implementation, and policy recommendations. This embedded structure is supported by the official methodology, which required the facilitator, expert, and rapporteur to move the discussion from field experience to concrete challenges and finally toward a synthesis of key recommendations and possible local action.

Epistemological and theoretical approach

The study is positioned within an interpretivist qualitative perspective, which assumes that sustainable agriculture is not only a technical category, but also a concept whose meaning is shaped by the lived experiences, constraints, and expectations of different rural actors. This perspective is especially suitable here because the Rural Talks methodology explicitly privileged practical experience over abstract theory, encouraged participants to provide examples from the field, and sought to make room for diverse social perspectives, including those of farmers, institutions, civil society, women, and youth. In this sense, the paper treats the Rural Talks not simply as a consultation exercise, but as a site where policy meanings are produced through interaction.

Three complementary theoretical lenses strengthen the analytical foundation of the paper. The first is participatory governance or deliberative policy analysis. This lens is

appropriate because Rural Talks were explicitly designed as a bottom-up multi-actor process in which different groups were invited to discuss shared problems, confront perspectives, and contribute to policy-relevant outputs. The emphasis on equal participation, active listening, solution-oriented exchange, and conversion of discussion into recommendations reflects a participatory governance logic rather than a top-down expert consultation model.

The second lens is the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, which is useful for interpreting the material beyond environmental issues alone. The challenges identified in the discussion relate directly to the assets and constraints that shape rural livelihoods: lack of technical guidance and practical knowledge, weak access to finance, insufficient infrastructure and mechanization, labor shortages, organizational weakness, and vulnerability to environmental pressures. Through this lens, sustainable agriculture can be analyzed as dependent on the interaction between natural, human, financial, physical, and social capital rather than on farm practices in isolation.

The third lens is value chain governance. This perspective is especially relevant because the Rural Talks materials repeatedly connect sustainable agriculture with the farmer's weak position in the value chain, limited bargaining power, lack of stable contractual relations, traceability and certification barriers, and the unequal distribution of costs and benefits along the chain. The discussion was focused as well toward questions such as whether quality and sustainability are rewarded by the market, who bears the costs of transition, and what types of coordination are missing between farmers, processors, institutions, and other actors. This makes value chain governance a useful framework for interpreting why sustainable agriculture may be seen as difficult to implement even when its environmental rationale is widely acknowledged.

Taken together, these three lenses allow the paper to interpret the Rural Talks material at different but complementary levels: as a participatory forum of policy knowledge production, as a reflection of rural livelihood constraints, and as an expression of governance imbalances within agri-food value chains. This combined framework is particularly suitable for a paper that seeks to connect perceptions, practical barriers, and policy implications.

Data sources and participants

The empirical material for the study consists of the methodological documents prepared for Rural Talks, and discussion prompts, the reporting outputs from the session on sustainable agriculture and green transition, and related summary and keynote materials used to frame and synthesize the debate. These sources were selected because together they document both the intended design of the participatory process and the substantive outputs generated during it.

The methodology document specifies that Rural Talks were designed for 25–30 participants from different categories, including institutions, civil society, businesses, farmers, academia, youth, and women, all of whom were expected to share real experiences, identify concrete challenges, and propose solutions and recommendations.

Analytical strategy

The material was analyzed through a hybrid deductive–inductive thematic analysis, complemented by a framework analysis logic. A deductive coding structure was first established on the basis of the paper's four objectives and the reporting architecture of Rural Talks: perceptions of sustainable agriculture, field-based examples, challenges to implementation, and policy recommendations. This initial analytical frame made it possible to organize the discussion materials in a systematic way and to keep the analysis aligned with the research questions.

At the same time, the analysis remained open to inductive themes emerging directly from the material. These included, among others, high input and mechanization costs, lack of clear technical guidance, labor shortages, weak financing, poor-quality planting materials, traceability and certification barriers, limited institutional monitoring, and the broader concern that farmers are expected to adapt to sustainability requirements without sufficient support. The moderator prompts concerning cost, market reward, missing support, and the burden of transition were particularly useful in identifying these emergent themes.

In practical terms, the analytical procedure involved four steps. First, the key documents were read repeatedly to identify the formal structure of the discussion and the main empirical outputs. Second, references to meanings of sustainable agriculture, practical examples, barriers, and policy needs were coded. Third, these codes were grouped into broader themes such as economic feasibility, institutional support, value-chain coordination, local practices, and inclusive transition. Fourth, the resulting themes were interpreted through the lenses of participatory governance, sustainable livelihoods, and value chain governance in order to connect empirical findings with broader analytical concepts.

Framework analysis is particularly suitable in this case because the Rural Talks process itself already organized the material into policy-relevant categories such as challenges, opportunities, and recommendations. This makes it possible to compare the discussion outputs systematically and to trace how practical observations from the field were translated into structured priorities for policy.

Validity, credibility, and limitations

The credibility of the analysis is strengthened through source triangulation, since the paper does not rely on a single document, but combines methodological guidance, moderator prompts, reporting outputs, and summary materials. The consistency between the intended design of Rural Talks and the actual reporting of challenges, opportunities, and recommendations increases confidence that the discussion outputs reflect the core concerns that emerged during the session.

At the same time, the study has clear limitations. It does not claim statistical representativeness, since the Rural Talks were a participatory deliberative setting rather than a survey-based sample of all rural communities in Albania. The findings should therefore be read as qualitative and analytically relevant insights into how sustainable agriculture is interpreted and problematized in a structured multi-actor forum, rather than as population-level estimates. A further limitation is that the available material captures synthesized discussion more strongly than verbatim individual narratives. Yet this is also one of the strengths of the method, because the purpose of Rural Talks was precisely to generate collectively processed, policy-oriented knowledge through cross-actor discussion and bottom-up reflection.

This methodological approach is therefore suitable for the aims of the paper: it allows the study to move from participatory discussion to systematic qualitative analysis, while remaining faithful to the bottom-up nature of the Rural talks.

RESULTS

Perceptions of sustainable agriculture among rural communities

The Rural Talks discussions suggest that rural communities in Albania perceive sustainable agriculture in a broad and practical sense rather than as a narrowly environmental concept. Across the discussion materials, sustainability is associated not only with protection of soil, water, and biodiversity, but also with the possibility of maintaining viable farms, stable incomes, and stronger rural livelihoods. In this understanding, sustainable agriculture is meaningful only if it enables farmers to remain economically active while adapting to environmental and market requirements

At the same time, rural actors do not approach the green transition as an abstract policy slogan. The moderator guide explicitly structured the discussion around practical questions: what the green transition means in day-to-day farming, whether it is experienced as an opportunity or as an added burden, whether higher standards are rewarded by the market, and who is actually paying the cost of transition . This indicates that participants interpreted sustainability through the lens of everyday feasibility, not only environmental desirability.

A central perception emerging from the material is that sustainable agriculture is closely tied to the position of the farmer within the wider food system. The workshop summaries emphasize that the challenge is not simply to produce more, but to build a system that creates sustainable incomes for farmers, offers security for consumers, and supports rural territorial development. This reflects a view of sustainability as a systemic issue involving market access, organization, storage, processing, and the distribution of value rather than a question of farm practices in isolation.

Field experiences and examples emerging from the discussions

The findings point to a number of field-based examples and practices that participants associated with more sustainable forms of agriculture. Among the most clearly identified cases was the cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants, which participants described as environmentally friendly, low-pollution, relatively efficient in water use, supportive of women's employment, and capable of generating more stable incomes This example is important because it shows that sustainable agriculture was not discussed only at the level of principle, but also through concrete activities already visible in rural Albania.

Participants also pointed to broader opportunities and enabling trends. The reporting materials identify growing demand for local and organic products, youth participation as a driver of innovation and technology, greater use of digital tools in farm management, the possibility of accessing funding through different programmes, and the development of more local value chains as positive directions that could strengthen the sustainability of agriculture while also raising rural incomes. These examples suggest that rural communities do not view sustainability only through the lens of constraints; they also recognize emerging niches and pathways for more resilient and value-added production.

Challenges faced in applying sustainable agriculture models

The Rural Talks outputs make clear that the application of sustainable agriculture models is constrained by a set of concrete and recurrent barriers. One of the most frequently mentioned challenges was the lack of practical guidance and clear technical information for farmers, especially with regard to soil analysis, the choice of seeds and seedlings, and the use of agricultural inputs. This suggests that sustainability is hindered not only by lack of finance, but also by weaknesses in advisory and knowledge systems

A second major barrier concerns the cost structure of farming. Participants pointed to high costs of agricultural inputs, mechanization, and maintenance, together with inadequate financing and insufficiently effective subsidy schemes. The workshop materials reinforce this

diagnosis by emphasizing that farmers continue to face unstable prices, difficulties with investment, and limited or unevenly functional access to support measures. These findings indicate that the transition toward more sustainable models is often constrained by immediate financial pressures at farm level.

Labor shortages emerged as another major concern. The reporting slides mention the lack of labor in rural areas and the low level of mechanization, while the broader discussion documents connect this to outmigration and ageing in rural communities. Together, these findings suggest that the feasibility of sustainable agriculture is shaped not only by environmental or technical conditions, but also by demographic change and the shrinking availability of labor and generational renewal in rural areas.

Participants also emphasized quality-related barriers. These include the persistence of poor-quality planting materials, insufficient control over such inputs, limited traceability systems, and difficulties in certification. According to the reporting materials, these problems directly affect marketability and reduce farmers' capacity to enter more formal and higher-value market channels. In this respect, sustainable agriculture appears constrained by the absence of the institutional and technical infrastructure needed to transform better practices into commercial advantage.

Institutional weaknesses were another recurring theme. Participants referred to insufficient control and monitoring by responsible institutions and to the absence of a clear, concrete, and implementable strategy for the agricultural sector. These observations suggest that farmers do not see sustainability as blocked only by farm-level deficits, but also by gaps in governance, enforcement, and policy coherence.

Weak farmer position in the value chain as a cross-cutting issue

Beyond individual constraints, the results reveal a broader structural problem: the weak position of farmers within value chains. The workshop summaries state clearly that farmers remain the weakest link in the chain, often unable to negotiate better prices, store products until more favorable selling conditions arise, or benefit sufficiently from processing and standardization. Related materials describe them as price-takers operating under conditions of weak bargaining power, limited information, informal market relations, and insufficient cooperation .

This problem is especially important because it helps explain why sustainable agriculture may be difficult to adopt even when environmental objectives are accepted in principle. The moderator guide repeatedly asks whether higher quality and more sustainable production are actually rewarded in price, whether the farmer has a clear economic reason to change practice,

and whether more stable relations exist between farmers and processors or each actor carries risk separately. These questions point to a consistent concern running through the discussions: sustainability requirements may increase obligations on farmers without creating corresponding incentives.

Sustainability as a desired but not yet fully viable model

Taken together, the results show that rural communities do not reject sustainable agriculture as an idea. On the contrary, the discussion materials indicate that participants recognize its importance and identify practical opportunities already present in the field, such as medicinal and aromatic plants, local and organic products, digital innovation, and localized value chains. However, they also make clear that the transition is not yet experienced as a fully viable development model for many farmers, because the structural conditions needed to support it remain weak.

The overall message emerging from the discussions is that sustainable agriculture in Albania will remain difficult to implement if farmers are expected to comply with higher standards while continuing to operate under fragmented production structures, weak market coordination, limited technical support, inadequate infrastructure, and uneven public intervention. This is why the final reporting message from the Rural Talks insists that there can be no sustainable agriculture and green transition without economically sustainable farmers, fairer value chains, and integrated policies linking modernization with social and environmental development.

DISCUSSION

The results suggest that sustainable agriculture in Albania is understood less as a narrow environmental agenda than as a broader question of rural viability, market inclusion, and institutional support. This is an important result because it indicates that rural communities do not separate ecological sustainability from everyday concerns such as income, labor, market access, and the ability to remain active in farming. The way participants framed the issue is therefore consistent with the conceptual argument advanced earlier in the paper: sustainable agriculture becomes meaningful only when environmental responsibility is linked to economically viable farms and functioning rural livelihoods.

From the perspective of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, the discussions show that the adoption of sustainable agriculture models is constrained by deficits across several forms of capital at once. Human capital is limited by insufficient technical guidance and weak practical information; financial capital is constrained by high input costs, weak financing, and

ineffective access to support; physical capital is undermined by low mechanization and inadequate infrastructure for storage, processing, and certification; and social capital is weakened by limited cooperation and weak farmer organization. This matters analytically because it suggests that the barriers to sustainability are cumulative and mutually reinforcing.

The results also point to a structural tension between the normative appeal of the green transition and its practical feasibility. Participants clearly recognized the value of more sustainable practices and identified concrete positive examples from the field. Yet the same discussions show that many rural actors experience the transition as difficult to realize in practice because the costs are immediate while the rewards remain uncertain. This tension becomes clearer when interpreted through the lens of value-chain governance. One of the strongest messages emerging from the discussions is that the farmer remains the weakest actor in the chain. Under these conditions, demands for higher sustainability, traceability, or quality may simply add new obligations without generating stronger incentives.

The Rural Talks material also reveals the importance of institutional and governance conditions. Participants repeatedly pointed to weak monitoring, insufficiently clear strategies, uneven support, and the absence of practical institutional guidance. From a participatory governance perspective, this is a significant finding: rural actors do not simply ask for more support in general, but identify specific types of public action that would make sustainability more feasible, including better technical advisory systems, clearer implementation, stronger control over inputs and standards, and more coherent support mechanisms.

Another important point concerns the added value of the Rural Talks format itself. Because the discussion was explicitly designed as a bottom-up, multi-actor, solution-oriented process, the results reflect more than isolated individual opinion; they capture a collective process of problem definition. What emerges is a grounded account of how rural actors themselves define the meaning of sustainable agriculture, where they locate the main obstacles, and what kinds of interventions they consider realistic. In this sense, the Rural Talks process supports a deliberative understanding of policy knowledge in which practical expertise and local experience are treated as legitimate sources of analytical insight.

Taken together, the findings and their interpretation lead to a central conclusion: the main obstacle to sustainable agriculture in Albania is not the absence of awareness or willingness, but the mismatch between sustainability expectations and the structural conditions under which rural actors operate. Rural communities appear ready to recognize the value of sustainable agriculture and to point to concrete opportunities in the field. However, they also make clear that transition will remain partial and fragile if farmers are expected to adapt without

fairer value chains, stronger institutional support, and a more coherent linkage between environmental objectives and rural economic viability.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Strengthening farmer organization and value-chain coordination

The first priority is to strengthen the position of farmers within value chains. Across the discussion and summary materials, weak farmer organization, informal market relations, and limited bargaining power are treated as core obstacles to sustainable agriculture. Policy should therefore support producer groups, cooperative and semi-cooperative forms of organization, and more stable contractual arrangements between producers and buyers. The purpose of such intervention is not only to improve market access, but also to increase farmers' negotiating capacity, reduce transactional insecurity, and create more favorable conditions for investment in quality and sustainability.

Investing in infrastructure, technology, and quality systems

A second major implication concerns the need for more targeted investment in the physical and technical infrastructure required for sustainable agriculture to become economically feasible. Participants repeatedly pointed to deficits in storage, cooling, drying, simple processing, mechanization, technical equipment, and product quality systems. These deficiencies reduce farmers' ability to maintain quality, access formal markets, and retain more value locally. Public support should therefore prioritize infrastructure and technologies that enable small and medium producers to move gradually into more structured and higher-value segments of the market.

Linking the green transition to inclusive rural development

A third implication is that the green transition should be explicitly linked to broader goals of inclusive rural development. The Rural Talks outputs emphasize that sustainability measures must be accompanied by practical advisory services, innovation support, and specific assistance for youth and women. This reflects a broader recognition that the green transition will remain socially fragile unless it also creates opportunities for generational renewal, rural entrepreneurship, and wider participation in value-added activities.

Strengthening advisory systems and applied knowledge

The results also point to a clear need for stronger advisory and knowledge systems. One of the most concrete problems identified by participants was the lack of practical guidance on

soil analysis, seed and seedling selection, input use, and implementation of sustainable practices. This indicates that policy should not focus only on financial subsidies, but also on improving access to applied technical knowledge. Training, extension services, demonstration-based learning, and localized technical assistance are all necessary if farmers are expected to adapt to more demanding quality, environmental, and climate-related standards.

Improving policy coherence and implementation capacity

Another implication emerging from the findings is the need for clearer, more coherent, and more implementable policy frameworks. Participants referred not only to insufficient support, but also to weak control and monitoring, unclear or fragmented implementation, and the lack of a concrete and actionable strategy. This suggests that the problem is partly one of governance capacity. Sustainable agriculture cannot advance if policies remain dispersed, weakly coordinated, or difficult to translate into operational support at local level.

Taken together, these implications point to a broader shift in policy logic. Sustainable agriculture in Albania should be approached as a systemic rural development strategy rather than as a narrow environmental compliance agenda. Only under these conditions can the green transition become both environmentally meaningful and economically viable for rural communities.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how rural communities in Albania perceive sustainable agriculture and the green transition, drawing on the discussions developed during the Rural Talks of the IV Albanian Rural Parliament. The analysis shows that sustainable agriculture is understood by rural actors in a broad and practical sense: not simply as an environmental objective, but as a question of whether farming can remain economically viable, socially sustainable, and better connected to markets under changing ecological and policy conditions. In this respect, the results confirm that the green transition is interpreted less as a purely technical matter than as part of a wider process of rural transformation.

The study also demonstrates that rural communities do not reject sustainable agriculture as a desirable direction. On the contrary, the discussion materials reveal recognition of concrete opportunities already visible in the field, including medicinal and aromatic plants, local and organic products, innovation, and more localized value chains. However, these opportunities are constrained by persistent barriers: high production costs, weak technical guidance, labor shortages, poor-quality inputs, traceability and certification difficulties, limited infrastructure, and insufficiently coherent institutional support. These constraints show that the main challenge is

not the absence of awareness, but the mismatch between sustainability expectations and the structural realities within which farmers operate.

A particularly important conclusion of the paper is that sustainable agriculture in Albania cannot be analyzed or promoted without attention to value-chain governance. The Rural Parliament discussions consistently indicate that farmers remain the weakest link in the chain, often unable to negotiate favorable prices, retain value locally, or benefit sufficiently from quality improvements and formalization. Under such conditions, the green transition risks becoming an additional burden rather than an economically meaningful opportunity.

Methodologically, the paper has shown the value of Rural Talks as a bottom-up source of policy-relevant knowledge. Although the findings are not statistically representative, they provide analytically useful insight into how sustainable agriculture is interpreted, debated, and problematized by rural actors themselves within a structured participatory process. The overall conclusion of the paper is that sustainable agriculture in Albania should be approached as a systemic rural development strategy rather than as a narrow environmental compliance agenda. A viable transition requires economically sustainable farmers, fairer value chains, better infrastructure and advisory support, and more coherent policies that connect modernization with social inclusion and environmental responsibility.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

A clear way forward lies in moving beyond fragmented interventions and toward more integrated rural development strategies that connect environmental objectives with farm viability, value-chain upgrading, inclusion, and territorial development. In practical terms, this means that future policy and programming should give greater attention to farmer organization, local infrastructure, applied advisory support, quality systems, and institutional coherence so that sustainability becomes feasible in everyday farming practice rather than remaining primarily a policy aspiration.

At the same time, the study opens important avenues for further research. Since the present paper is based on qualitative evidence from a participatory forum, future studies could deepen the analysis through fieldwork with farmers, processors, local institutions, and rural households across different regions of Albania. Comparative research across value chains would also be useful in order to examine whether the barriers and opportunities identified here differ between sectors such as dairy, medicinal and aromatic plants, horticulture, olives, or agrotourism. Further studies could also combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to assess the actual adoption of sustainable practices, the economic costs of transition, the distribution of value along chains, and the role of gender, youth, and migration in shaping

sustainable rural development. Such research would help build a stronger evidence base for designing policies that are not only environmentally ambitious, but also socially inclusive and economically realistic.

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