Fieldwork action plan to study cases in Italy and Czechia

WP5 Research Action Plan: Researching Agricultural Workers' Perceptions of Environmental Change in Czechia and Italy

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CiDAPE

Climate, Inequality & Democratic Action:
The Force of Political Emotions

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CIDAPE
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WP5 Research Action Plan: Researching Agricultural Workers' Perceptions of Environmental Change in Czechia and Italy

Deliverable 5.1

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Executive Summary

The agricultural sector is feeling the harsh effects of climate change more than many others. Farmers and other agricultural workers face increasing challenges such as extreme weather events, prolonged droughts, and changes in crop viability. At the same time, farming contributes significantly to global carbon emissions, making it both a victim and contributor to the climate crisis. Recent farmer protests across Europe prior to the elections to the European Parliament in 2024 highlight a growing dissatisfaction with how policymakers are handling these issues. Many farmers feel their needs, concerns, and lived experiences are being ignored at local, national, and European levels.

This study focuses on understanding how farmers, especially those in Czechia and Italy, are navigating the ongoing changes brought about by climate change. By speaking directly to farmers and winemakers in South Moravia and Veneto—agricultural regions facing significant climate challenges—we aim to uncover how they perceive these changes in their everyday lives. Through narrative walk-along interviews, we will uncover the values, emotions, and beliefs these agricultural workers hold as they confront the realities of a changing climate.

The voices of farmers, often underrepresented in climate discussions, are crucial for shaping effective climate policies. Understanding how they feel about and respond to these challenges will provide vital insights for policymakers. Including their perspectives can lead to more practical, cooperative solutions that not only target climate goals but also maintain social cohesion in rural communities. By bringing their voices into the conversation, we hope to bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that those most affected by climate change have a say in shaping the future.

1 State of the art and aims of the research

The agricultural sector is one of the most affected by climate change while simultaneously contributing to up to 20% of global greenhouse emissions. On the one hand, farmers increasingly feel the impact of climate change, which threatens their jobs and livelihoods. On the other hand, many of them oppose the tightening of climate change measures, which they consider inappropriate for a variety of reasons including a perception of low efficiency, excessive bureaucracy and the lack of trust in climate science (Soubry et al. 2020, Madhuri & Sharma 2020). While there is a plethora of studies analysing the practical effects climate crisis has on the sector such as the impact of droughts on crop yields or the impacts of climate change on the frequency and severity of natural catastrophes (i.e., Agovino et al. 2019, Hristov et al. 2023), only a few have looked at how agricultural workers perceive, and emotionally relate to, the creeping crisis.

Yet this underrepresented and under researched area is extremely important. While understanding the on-the-ground effects climate catastrophe brings is indeed necessary, it is at the societal levels where the understanding of these changes materialise. Whether farmers feel depressed, threatened and disillusioned is, at the end of the day, not produced by the creeping crisis, but by their social construction of this crisis (Gigliotti 2020, Kalman 2019). It is our aim, thus, to understand how farmers perceive the climate crisis and what strategies they develop, based on their lived experience, to cope with its impacts. We believe that it is important for at least two particular reasons. First, as stated before, farmers and other agricultural workers contribute a significant amount to global carbon emissions and at the same time experience the creeping changes first hand. Their participation is therefore highly needed to fulfil the Paris Agreement targets of 2, respectively 1.5 degrees Celsius change. Second, agricultural workers are increasingly dissatisfied with the ways in which governments within (and outside) the EU approach environmental politics. The pictures of tractors in the streets or heaps of manure in front of governmental buildings is becoming an everyday experience across the EU, as was clearly visible prior to the elections to European Parliament in 2024 (Henley 2024). Angry with their governments, some farmers are increasingly siding with anti-systemic forces including the radical right (Holdo 2024). Deeper understanding of these triggers for farmers' negative feelings, like disillusionment and anger, will allow us to focus on concrete measures that would help prevent these negative feelings and avoid civil unrest.

Most of the studies in this vein have been situated in several specific regions, such as parts of Latin America (Fierros-Gonzales & Lopez-Feldman 2021, Roco et al. 2015), the United States (Houser 2016) or highly threatened areas in Africa and Asia (Habtemariam et al. 2016). The European Union has been all but left out of these debates. The scarce research in this vein includes Asplund's (et al. 2013) article analysing the framing of climate change in Swedish agricultural media, arguing that "climate change communicators addressing farmers and agricultural extension officers should pay attention to how these frames may be interpreted by different target audiences". Nassivera (et al. 2022) surveyed Italian farmers' perceptions of climate change to decode its impacts on adaptation measures, finding that "the actual experience of negative consequences linked to specific extreme meteorological events is the main driver for the adoption of mitigation strategies". Mihai Micu (et al. 2022) analysed a questionnaire on farmers' perception in Romania, uncovering the most pressing issues, but without a broader connection to social norms and attitudes among them. More recently, Brown (et al. 2024) has surveyed how farmers perceive injustices arising from land-use transformations and how this aggravates them in face of governmental policies. Similarly using case studies from the Czech Republic Zandlová and Čada (2023) and Zandlová (et al. 2023) illustrated the potential for deliberative action based on ethnographic observation.

To sum up, while there is some recent research on farmers' perceptions of climate change, this is anecdotal and requires further attention. Our aim is to help fill this gap by understanding farmers' perceptions of climate change norms via a comparative case design of Czechia and Italy. Our methodology will be qualitative and will link ethnographic observation and interviews. We aim to select a sample of farmers and winemakers in villages or small cities in two selected regions – South Moravia in Czechia and Veneto in Italy, and conduct narrative go-along interviews with them (n= approx 10-15 in each of the selected regions, targeting saturation). Our focus will be on small farmers and winemakers in villages or small cities., with little means of representations on policy making levels. We will then interpret the gathered data based on the symbolic boundaries approach (Bottero & Irvin 2003, Schwalbe et al. 2000, etc.) and newly defined literature on climate boundaries.

We ask how climate change is perceived by the participants in their daily lives. Particularly, we are interested in the ways in which farmers create and relate to moral dilemmas, social expectations, and political emotions connected to climate change and how they construct social identities vis-a-vis ongoing political and social changes. Since we are conducting narrative interviews and aim to do an inductive line of reasoning, we do not create specific pre-selected categories towards which we guide the interviews. Applying this methodological approach, we aim to inductively understand, via these two selected case studies, how participants deal with the day-to-day climate change effects, especially in terms of social interactions, moral and ethical values, norms and perceptions. Finding this, we believe, will offer two contributions. First, in terms of social sciences, we aim to advance the under explored debate on the emotional perceptions of climate norms among specific communities that are hit by climate change impacts. Second, in terms of policy advice, we aim to discover the best way to address these feelings and emotions in order to advance climate-related policymaking.

2 Case selection

As stated above, our main goal is to analyse farmers' perceptions of the climate crisis. To do so, we intend to rely on ethnographic observation and narrative go-along interviews (Kusenbach 2003). For case selection, we have identified two regions in Czechia (South Moravia) and Italy (Veneto). Despite differing levels of GDP, these two countries are largely similar in terms of Gross Domestic Product Per Capita in purchasing power parity (GDP PC PPP, Italy USD 55.421, Czechia 51.695, World Bank 2024). Similarly, both of the regions rank as median or higher than median GDP/PC in the country, with Veneto averaging 114% of Italy's GDP/PC, and South Moravia 98% of Czechia's GDP/PC (this is skewed by the relative economic strength of Prague that accounts for 28% of Czechia's GDP, and amounts to 211% of Czechia's average GDP/PC see Eurostat 2024. South Moravia is the second richest region in Czechia just after Prague). Both of these regions have a significant proportion of agricultural industry, including wineries and food production. While set in different geographical settings, both regions have been negatively affected by climate change effects. In South Moravia, average temperatures have risen by more than 2.3 degrees already (1.5 degrees in the last 60 years only, scoring approximately more than 10% of the average temperature of 11.5 degrees Celsius, see Czech News Agency 2023), closing in on the Mediterranean climate. There have also been recent occurrences of climate-induced catastrophes, like a tornado in 2021, that were unheard of in recent history. Likewise in Veneto, the average temperature has risen by 2 degrees in 2023, compared to the 1993-2021 period, culminating in recurring floods, unexpected hail, and periodic droughts in a region that heavily relies on agricultural production (Veneto 2024).

Despite these similarities, there are cultural and historical differences that may significantly influence how local farmers perceive the climate crisis and develop strategies to cope with its impacts. Italy has a significant history of agricultural practices with deep cultural roots. Czechia's agricultural sector has undergone significant changes due to the transformation into the post-communist era. Prior to the onset of the communist regime in 1948, Czechoslovakia was an industrial region with a high-level production of raw resources, and machinery, but also with a significant agricultural sector. Due to large amounts of fertile land around Czechia's main rivers,

agriculture was intensive and land extensively cultivated (with fallow land amounting to approximately 5% of all Czech land by the end of the 19th century, see Bičík et al. 2001). After the onset of the communist regime, nationalisation and so-called socialist industrialisation led to an enormous increase in the exploitation of natural resources.

The impacts on land-use structure were enormous (Bičík et al. 2001). Production was de-facto nationalised and the economy planned. Technologically lacking industrialization and the high demand for resources transformed the Czech economy to one with high consumption of materials (esp. brown coal) and energy per unit of production and with a lower quality (use-value) of the products. This had detrimental effects on the environment. At the same time, the agricultural sector was somewhat prioritised by the state as one of the ground stones of the socialist system. Investment was made into machinery, fertilisers and irrigation systems, which provided a significant output of food stocks (Turnock 1996, although some crops were considered to be more important than others. Wine was, for instance, considered a bourgeois beverage and therefore not prioritised by the state). That said, to achieve high levels of production, the communist governments untangled the social fabrics of the agricultural regions. Stripped of their land and forced to work in large, collectivised farms, the pre-communist social ties disappeared. Since the revolution in late 1980s, agricultural systems of the former Soviet bloc have changed profoundly towards market economy agriculture. Following the overall economic slump in the 1990s, there has been a steady increase in quality as well as structure of agricultural production – employment in the sector has decreased, however, the production moved to the more fertile lands and crop selection has become specialised (see Grešlová et al. 2019). Recently, sustainable farming has become prioritised by many agricultural workers and wine makers.

The Italian agricultural sector has been for centuries an important part of the economy as well as lifestyle. Gifted with fertile land and favourable weather conditions, Italian agriculture produced goods such as wine, cheese, wool or fruits of an inimitable quality. During the late 19th and early 20th century, however, agriculture experienced a series of setbacks. During the first half of the 20th century, powerful landowner families, dissatisfied with decades of political stagnation, resorted to fascism, with an agricultural policy aimed at increasing the production of wheat to provide the energy necessary for the resurrection of the splendours of ancient Rome (Cohen 1979). After WW2, the sector was remodelled based on the US, experiencing significant technological growth with the help of favourable economic policies set by the European Communities. Since the 1980s, there has been a gradual shift towards "multifunctional agriculture", linking sustainable business models with specialisation in crops selection and modes of production, and complementarity of agricultural production with other means of revenue creation such as agro-tourism (Cardillo et al. 2023). This shift has reinvigorated the industry, yet it is not necessarily a break from the past (as it was for the Czech agriculture following the end of the communist regime), but rather an ongoing internal transformation of the sector, which still relies on existing social structures.

The regions we selected for our case study – South Moravia and Veneto – are in many ways the best representatives of agricultural history present in both countries. Fertile lands in both of these regions have attracted cultivation for centuries. While their historical development differs – and especially so in the 20th century - they are currently struggling with similar phenomena including droughts, extreme heats, soil erosion and extreme weather events. This offers the chance to explore nuanced understanding of similar phenomena.

3 Narrative analysis and go-along interviews

Our methodology is built on ethnographic observation and narrative go-along interviews. Although narratives might possess various forms depending on the discipline, epistemological and ontological perspectives of the authors and other variables, they share a preoccupation with storytelling in shaping social phenomena. Inspired by the work of Roland Barthes, narratives and storytelling are understood as everyday components of social life. By telling stories, people, communities and even countries put experience into sequences, find possible explanations and construct a chain of events that shapes individual and social life. Stories attribute meanings to events and processes, which allows us to interpret political and social realities around us (Jovchelovitch & Bauer 2000). Closely linked, yet distinct from discourse analyses, the analyses of narratives usually attempt to deconstruct the stories actors tell in order to understand their positioning within the narratives, the roles of other agents within their stories, as well as any intervening variable that has an influence over the story.

Although there are a myriad of forms of narrative analyses, there are several key characteristics that distinguish narrative analyses from other forms of discursive methods (see Patterson & Monroe 1997, Hajer 1996): i) narratives require an agency. Actors (be it human beings, cities, states etc) are actors in the story, and have a place in the plot. Their actions and motivations provide insight on how they organise, process and interpret information; ii) narratives suggest the speaker's view of what is canonical. The speakers assume that what is ordinary is a matter of fact. The unusual and exceptional are remarked on, providing data for analysis of not only what is said, but also what is left out; iii) narrative requires ordering of events, even if the events are not real. The ordering of events and the way how they are recounted (rather than whether or not they happened this way) reveals the speakers' mode of mental organisation and their perception of what is and is not important within their stories; iv) narrative requires the narrator's perspective. It thus reveals the positioning of narrators vis-a-vis the others and vis-a-vis the context. They construct what they consider to be relevant for their stories, and this makes the narrative contextually thick. It provides a sense of speakers' cognitive maps of themselves, both in relation to others and in the specific contexts of their described behaviour (Patterson & Monroe 1997: 316).

Narratives and narrative analysis are especially useful in revealing the speakers' concept of selves and their positioning of self vs. others. The self is in the centre of the narrative – it can be a passive experiencer or an active agent, yet the agency in narrators' accounts presents a valuable insight into how they construct their stories, how they differentiate among events and how they attribute moral and social values to them. The stories are rooted in their past experiences, which is in turn used to make sense of both present and the future. These stories can be individual, but also collective, forming the foundations of modern nation states and international systems.

We are particularly interested in how farmers see their lives in the context of the climate crisis. In particular, we are interested in the four categories defined below:

1. *Characters (including the positionality of informants vs researchers)* – how do they see themselves in their story? What qualities do they attribute to themselves? Why do they do things they do?
2. *Their identification of the main storyline* – what are the main issue(s) they are facing? How do they deal with the ongoing situation and its change? How are the events ordered in their minds – what is the beginning, the middle and the end of the story? What is the context of the story?
3. *Who are the intervening actors?* Whom do they identify as the main actors in their storyline? What qualities do they ascribe to them – are they good, bad, helpful, unhelpful etc.? Who is at fault for the current situation? What is the role of governments, media, communities, the EU, NGOs, administration etc?

4. *What is relevant for their stories?* What is the Other they distinguish themselves from? How do they perceive boundaries between them in communities/cities/states? Do they feel comparatively better/worse with the ongoing changes? How do processes connected to climate change influence their lives (vis-a-vis other professions, people)? What role do external events play in their lives?

These categories correspond to the narrative analysis literature. Since we aim to work inductively (and thus create categories and codes based on what the participants tell us), we aim to allow the participants the maximum amount of freedom to talk about issues that are salient for them and will not force them into speaking about pre-defined topics. The aim is to create an environment in which the participants will feel secure to share their feelings. We, therefore, aim to approach them via so-called go-along narrative interviews. These are a form of sociological inquiry in which the questions and categories are not predefined but appear spontaneously during conversations. It is up to the participants to decide which way they will take us, what working tools they will bring with them, what they will choose as key and what they will leave aside. By letting the participants take charge of the interview, we also dilute the power positions between us urban researchers and the locals. It is the locals who choose the path we take (literally). Since the categories are not predetermined, narrative interviews allow the researchers to follow the stories the participants construct. These stories, as the narrative analysis literature defines, allow us to understand norms, values and perceptions the respondents hold towards the environmental and social change (Bartlett et al. 2023, Bibi & Ehgartner 2021).

Before the interview, each participant will receive an informed consent form to sign, along with a copy to keep for their records. This will allow them to contact the researchers at any time in the future. The informed consent form will indicate that the research focuses on climate change and give a brief outline of our research aims. At the beginning of each interview, we will explain that our approach is somewhat unique (in line with the narrative methodology mentioned above)—we will not be asking specific questions but are interested in what the participant chooses to share and what is important to them. The narrative interview will start with this introductory question: "How is your life here in Southern Moravia/Veneto? What is it like to live here and work in agriculture?" During the interview, we will only ask follow-up questions to clarify anything unclear (e.g., to understand what the participant meant by certain statements). Only when it seems that the participant has finished their narration will we ask additional questions in a semi-structured format, elaborating on topics that are relevant to their stories and the research questions of CIDAPE.

We expect the narrative interview with a single informant to last around 1-1.5 hours. After carrying out the first round of interviews (n= approx 10-15- 20-30 in total for both selected regions – in order to reach saturation of topics), some of the contacts might be revisited to conduct semi-structured interviews. If this would not be possible (due to, for instance, lack of time/will of the participants), the semi-structured part of the interview can be done on the spot after the initial go-along interview. If revisiting the interviewees later, it is recommended to have at least a one-week interval between conducting the narrative interview and the subsequent semi-structured interview. Therefore, it is necessary to plan for multiple returns to the field.

In the semi-structured part of the interviews, we expect to focus the questions more specifically to the research topics relevant for CIDAPE, such as: i) what is the participants relationship with the nature, if and why is it necessary to protect it (i.e., anthropocentrism vs. ecocentrism), how is climate change impacting on their social contacts and relations? If and how they localise (perceive) global climate norms? Who is at fault for the climate crisis? How to best deal with the crisis (techno optimism vs. going back to the roots)? ii) how do they perceive the government, politicians, the EU, the media etc. What do they think about climate strategies such as the Green deal? Do politicians/governments respect their views, do they feel heard? How do international events impact their work (i.e., Ukraine war)? iii) do they agree with how subventions are distributed?

Do they feel they are comparatively better or worse during the ongoing changes? Do they feel that the boundaries between city and countryside are loosening, or strengthening? iv) how do they perceive bureaucracy? Do they feel they are free to do what they want? How do they cooperate with NGOs and other actors that attempt to help them? How do they cooperate with state institutions? The EU? etc. Based on the study of current climate-emotions-related literature, we anticipate that the categories we will follow will include the four areas specified above. However, our approach is primarily inductive, so the emphasis will be on elaborating on the concepts that the actors themselves engage with.

We intend to locate the interviewees via selected gatekeepers and snowballing technique. As parts of our team have already carried interviews and/or participated in fieldwork in the area, we will seek these contacts and make use of them to locate other possible participants. We will also contact mayors of local municipalities in those two regions, who are well connected among the local people, and could provide valuable contacts. While the agricultural sector is male-dominated (in both Czechia and Italy, the gender ratio is approximately 2 men to 1 woman, see Czech Ministry of Agriculture 2023, Menicucci 2022), we expect the majority of our interviewees to be male. However, we will strive to collect at least a few female participants.

4 Coding

After we gather the interview data, we will code them with the assistance of one of the coding software out there – either with MaxQDA or REQUAL. Once we have completed the narrative analysis, we will proceed with an analysis of each component of the narrative. This second layer of analysis will allow us to identify recurring themes and patterns within the characters, plot, setting, and other narrative elements. By combining these two approaches, we will be able to preserve the uniqueness of individual stories while also uncovering the broader themes that emerge across the data. This integrated approach will provide us with a nuanced understanding of how farmers experience and respond to the climate crisis. The more specific coding schemes will be defined in due time. We will interpret the gathered data with the help of climate boundaries theories, as identified and proposed by WP4. The theoretical part will also be defined in due time. We aim to produce at least two outcomes based on this dataset: 1) an academic article analysing/comparing climate perceptions of farmers in the two regions, and 2) together with the NGO ‘People in Need’, we will write a policy brief elucidating the best ways how to sensitively approach farmers with climate-related agenda.

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