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Unravelling nature's values in EU agricultural policy: A critical discourse analysis

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Abstract

1. Agriculture plays a dual role as both a key driver and a potential solution for biodiversity loss. Farmers, holding a variety of values related to nature, are therefore key actors in biodiversity conservation. EU environmental policies, however, neglect this value diversity, potentially leading to ineffective and unjust outcomes.
2. Acknowledging the EU Common Agricultural Policy's (CAP) substantial influence on farmers and nature conservation, we employed a Critical Discourse Analysis to examine nature's values conveyed in CAP documents at EU and German level. We explored four value-centred pathways—Green Economy (prioritizing instrumental values), Nature Protection (prioritizing intrinsic values), Earth Stewardship (prioritizing relational and intrinsic values) and Degrowth (representing instrumental, intrinsic and relational values).
3. All four pathways are represented in the documents with varying dominance, indicating strategic policy formulation based on diverse stakeholder interests, multi-level governance structure and the complex interplay of environmental and agricultural policy objectives.
4. The European Commission predominantly adheres to a Green Economy pathway, which prioritizes environmental goals alongside economic growth, often overshadowing non-economic nature values. Germany shows a greater reflection of Nature Protection and Earth Stewardship pathways, highlighting a tendency to consider intrinsic and relational values of nature.
5. Our analysis demonstrated that the European Commission exerts significant discursive influence, steering Member States' policies towards EU Green Deal objectives. However, Germany's tendency to consider intrinsic and relational values of nature suggests that pathways and values can be dynamically renegotiated at national or regional levels.
6. Critical differences in the expression of diverse values of nature between governance levels hence raise questions about (mis)recognizing EU policy recipients. The predominant focus on instrumental values may undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of policies by failing to adequately represent diverse ecological and ethical considerations of policy recipients.

7. *Policy Implications*: A divergence between EU and German approaches to valuing nature in agricultural policy suggests that EU policies, prioritizing instrumental values, do not fully accommodate plural values of Member States. This can potentially lead to recognition injustices. To enhance policy effectiveness and equity, we advocate for a paradigm shift towards more regionalized policymaking accounting for value plurality and fostering local environmental stewardship.

KEYWORDS
agricultural policy in Germany, discursive power, plural values, recognition justice, value-centred pathways

1 | INTRODUCTION

The biodiversity crisis is of utmost importance today: Two million species face extinction and require immediate conservation action to be saved (Hochkirch et al., 2023). Agriculture, fundamental to human livelihoods, presents a dual role in this crisis: It is both a driver of biodiversity loss and a potential solution (Emmerson et al., 2016; Frei et al., 2020). This duality positions farmers not just as producers of agricultural goods and services, but as stewards of the land. Their land use decisions, which are guided by a plurality of values related to nature, shape landscapes upon which biodiversity depends (Burton et al., 2020; Klebl et al., 2024; Swart et al., 2023). Empirical research demonstrates that farmers' values about nature significantly determine the adoption of conservation-oriented practices (Chapman et al., 2019; Leonhardt et al., 2021; Stupak et al., 2019).

However, EU environmental policies, such as the Green Deal, Nature Restoration Law, Biodiversity Strategy, Forest Strategy, Green Infrastructure Strategy or Marine Strategy Framework Directive, prioritize nature's instrumental values, for instance, via the language of ecosystem services (Maes et al., 2013; Murali et al., 2024; Perez-Soba et al., 2025; Schleyer et al., 2015). Although influential, the ecosystem services concept faces criticism, for example, by some ecological economists, for its anthropocentric focus, simplicity, economic bias and disregard for local and Indigenous ecological knowledge (Muradian & Gómez-Baggethun, 2021).

Recent developments, notably the introduction of the Nature's Contributions to People concept (Díaz et al., 2018), have highlighted the need to acknowledge value plurality (Kadykalo et al., 2019), including instrumental, intrinsic and relational values of nature (Pascual et al., 2023). Ignoring such plurality can lead to delegitimized, ineffective land-use policies and misrecognition, for instance by ignoring and denying different cultures, identities, knowledge, worldviews or values of those managing the land and who are thus pivotal to conservation efforts (Chapman et al., 2019; Kreitzman et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2016; Molnár et al., 2023; Sandberg & Jakobsson, 2018; Schümann et al., 2022; Tobin, 2023).

While the current EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is supposed to contribute to EU biodiversity objectives, for example, via Natura 2000, the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 or the recently adopted EU Nature Restoration Law, it has long been shaped by a 'productivist' discourse, justifying payments aimed at boosting agricultural productivity (Dibden et al., 2009; Erjavec et al., 2009; Potter & Tilzey, 2005; Rac et al., 2023; Rutz et al., 2014; Tilzey & Potter, 2006). The productivist framing may have influenced public and farmers' own perception over time, possibly nurturing instrumental values of nature (cf. Brown et al., 2021; Silvasti, 2003). Despite the CAP's significance for farmers and biodiversity in the EU, little is known about how nature's values are reflected within its policy documents. Previous work by Rac et al. (2023), for instance, provides a valuable analysis of agri-environmental discourses within the CAP, yet their study does not explicitly engage with a systematic typology of nature's values—such as instrumental, intrinsic or relational values (Pascual et al., 2023).

This paper addresses this gap by identifying and comparing the expression of nature values within CAP documents at the EU and German governance levels. To this end, we apply Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how specific value-centred pathways (*Green Economy*, *Nature Protection*, *Earth Stewardship*, *Degrowth*; Martin et al., 2024) are expressed across these governance levels. Our work contributes to and expands the field of agri-environmental policy discourse analyses.

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 | Theoretical framework

The concept of ecosystem services gained acceptance by many scientists and environmental economists as an instrument to communicate the significant benefits humans derive from nature (provisioning, regulating, cultural and supporting services) to policymakers (de Groot et al., 2010; Haines-Young & Potschin, 2010). However, the concept was increasingly criticized for its instrumental and anthropocentric focus (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010). In response to this criticism, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy

Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) introduced the Nature's Contributions to People concept (Díaz et al., 2018). Essentially an evolution of the ecosystem services concept, Nature's Contributions to People recognizes the plurality of worldviews, context-specific perspectives, relational values as well as a more inclusive language (Kadykalo et al., 2019). However, Muradian and Gómez-Baggethun (2021) caution that the shift towards the Nature's Contributions to People concept has not significantly altered the prevailing utilitarian and anthropocentric framing of nature.

Building on earlier work, for instance by Jax et al. (2013), IPBES (Pascual et al., 2023), assessed how values of nature are expressed by people and proposed a new typology for nature's values. This typology spans various worldviews—from anthropocentric 'living from' and 'living in nature' to biocentric 'living with nature' and pluricentric 'living as nature', each aligning with broad values like prosperity, stewardship or harmony with nature. On a more contextual level, specific values of nature represent value judgements about the importance of nature in particular circumstances. They can be categorized into instrumental, intrinsic and relational values (ibid.). Instrumental values regard nature as an asset for achieving human goals; intrinsic values regard nature as valuable in and of itself, independent of human judgement while relational values regard the significance of non-substitutable, meaningful connections between humans and nature, as well as among humans, mediated by nature (ibid.).

This study is grounded in the plural valuation perspective by IPBES and operationalized through Critical Discourse Analysis. To elicit the specific value types (instrumental, intrinsic, relational) in our analysis of agricultural policy documents, we draw on the value-centred pathways to sustainability proposed by Pascual et al. (2023) and Martin et al. (2024): Green Economy, Nature Protection, Earth Stewardship and Degrowth (see Table 1 for an overview). These pathways are conceptually linked to specific values of nature. Specifically, the Green Economy pathway reflects primarily instrumental values, while Nature Protection emphasizes intrinsic values. Earth Stewardship centres on relational and intrinsic values, and Degrowth incorporates all three value types (ibid.). We did not code value types directly but instead looked at how values were expressed through the use of the value-centred pathways in the policy texts. According to Martin and colleagues, these pathways provide a 'narrative framing' (2024, p. 806) based on the different specific values of nature, through which sustainability issues are perceived and upon which the rationale for proposed actions is explained. The authors add: 'While the proponents of a pathway might not agree about every specific intervention, they are more or less united, or at least able to compromise, in their basic appreciation for the main narrative and its core values' (2024, p. 806). The pathways can thus be regarded as discourses in a Faircloughian sense, that is, as stable assemblies of ideas, beliefs and language that structure how social realities are understood, represented and acted upon (Fairclough, 2013; Hajer, 1995). We hereafter continue to refer to them as 'pathways' to maintain consistency with the terminology used by Martin et al. (2024) and IPBES. The pathways serve both as theoretical constructs and coding categories in our analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis is an interdisciplinary method to study language as a form of social practice, reflecting and shaping power relations and ideologies in the form of discourses (Fairclough, 2013). Following Cummings et al.'s approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (2020), we explicitly selected the pathways as pre-existing discourses to structure our analysis and used deductive coding (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019) to identify which of the value-centred pathways to sustainable futures are articulated in the agricultural policy documents. Our use of the four pathways is thus not neutral: alongside a growing body of literature, we assume that the recognition of plural values is important for inclusive and just policies (Himes et al., 2024; Mattijssen et al., 2020; Molnár et al., 2023; Pascual et al., 2023).

Conveying plural values in policy documents is heavily dependent on language as the intermediary of cultural and societal norms. Policy documents are strategically crafted texts, reflecting and shaping political realities. They emerge from complex political processes involving selective representation of truths, influenced by power dynamics and institutional arrangements. Thus, they can both legitimize existing realities and set normative visions for the future, often masking specific interests as universal truths (Fairclough, 2013; Freeman & Maybin, 2011; Hornidge, 2011). So even though policy documents might not explicitly conduct valuations, they function as 'value articulating institutions' (Vatn, 2009; Vatn et al., 2024) selectively presenting and favouring specific visions and marginalizing alternative approaches through discursive framing. Thus, Critical Discourse Analysis allows us to uncover the implicit value underpinnings within EU and German agricultural policy texts, that is how the texts frame nature—for example, as an economic asset, an end in itself or as part of culture—thereby prioritizing one value-centred pathway towards sustainability over another. Specifically, we drew on Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional approach to Critical Discourse Analysis as a guiding framework: (1) textual analysis, (2) discursive practice and (3) social practice. In Fairclough's model, texts are not studied in isolation but are analysed in relation to the processes of their production, distribution and consumption (discursive practice), as well as the wider sociopolitical contexts in which they are embedded (social practice). For our analysis, we focused on the textual features of policy documents (see also the coding process described in Section 2.3 Data Analysis), while also interpreting them in light of the intentions and roles of their authors and the audiences they address (e.g. the European Commission as supranational policy initiator, the German government as an EU Member State responding with its CAP Strategic Plan and farmers, rural communities and citizens as addressees) (see Section 3). To further address discursive practice, we examined how pathway emphases are taken up or recontextualized across the linked documents and institutions (see also Section 3). Finally, we considered the social, cultural and political environments in which these texts are embedded, situating them within broader debates on agricultural policy and

TABLE 1 Overview of Green Economy, Nature Protection, Earth Stewardship and Degrowth pathways. Adapted from Martin et al. (2024, p. 813).

	Green economy	Nature protection	Earth stewardship	Degrowth
Pathway definition	A Green Economy pathway aims to reduce environmental impacts while securing economic growth to improve human well-being and equity (absolute decoupling). It emphasizes solutions based on reform to economic indicators, restructuring institutions and advancing technological innovation	A Nature Protection pathway calls for expanding nature conservation areas to safeguard all life on Earth. It centres biodiversity as the focus of protection for its own sake and emphasizes the pivotal role of biological diversity to ecosystem functioning	The Earth Stewardship pathway promotes responsible use and protection of the land through sustainable practices. It highlights the strong link between cultural and biological diversity, recognizing that languages, cultures and local environments are deeply interconnected	A degrowth pathway advocates for reducing consumption and production in industrialized societies, emphasizing sufficiency and adherence to planetary boundaries. It emphasizes justice, redistribution and ecological limits as fundamental principles
Priority specific values	Instrumental	Intrinsic	Relational, intrinsic	Instrumental, intrinsic, relational
Value-based agenda	Ensure nature's values inform institutions and incentives	Recognize and prioritize the non-anthropocentric value of the diversity of life at all scales	Challenge discrimination and marginalization of social groups to mobilize more diverse values	Rebalance economic with social and ecological values (escape economism)
Key requirement for transformative change	Enable accounting of values of nature, economic incentives for pro-environmental behaviour	Biodiversity conservation, protected areas and recognize non-anthropocentric values	Biocultural conservation, local sovereignty linked to territory and agrarian reform	Reducing material throughput of affluent societies, wealth redistribution and decommodification
Characteristic policies	Alternative metrics to GDP, green taxation, redirecting market incentives and green technologies	Major expansion of area-based conservation, 'Half Earth' to be gazetted as protected areas	Shift from preservationist to biocultural models of area-based conservation, land reforms and Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities rights	Work time reduction, basic or caring income, max–min income ratios, resource and pollution caps

sustainability, the influence of political realities (e.g. geopolitical events or interest groups) in the EU and Germany and possible implications for recognition justice (see Section 4).

2.2 | Data collection

While the final CAP budget is determined through negotiations involving the European Council, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU, the European Commission proposes overarching goals for the CAP—and an initial budget (Milicevic, 2025). Once these are adopted, the European Commission plays a further, key role in steering Member States through recommendations that frame how national Strategic Plans should align with EU-level objectives (Becker et al., 2022). We therefore chose two policy documents for analysis at the EU level: the German versions of the 'Recommendations to the Member States as regards their strategic plan for the Common Agricultural Policy' and the 'Commission recommendations for Germany's CAP strategic plan'. Both documents can be regarded 'soft law', which helps to align EU institutions and individuals, including both private citizens and legal entities, by providing 'a standard for interpretation' (Senden, 2004). As such, the EU-level documents chosen for this analysis are designed to steer and assist Member States in crafting their Strategic Plans to align with the CAP at a national level by directly addressing specific national contexts, providing detailed expectations regarding policy implementation. Additionally, the European Commission reviews the national Strategic Plans to ensure alignment. Although not legally binding, the recommendations can hence be viewed as an exercise of discursive power by the European Commission (Becker, 2024), making them particularly suitable for discourse analysis, as demonstrated by previous studies (Erjavec & Erjavec, 2020; Minotti & Zagata, 2020; Rutz et al., 2014; Villalba, 2008).

On the national level, the final approved German CAP Strategic Plan was selected for analysis (Version 2.0, dated March 16 2023). Under the 2023–2027 CAP, Member States must submit such a single Strategic Plan covering both direct payments and market measures from the EU budget (called Pillar I) and support for rural development, which is covered by EU and Member States' budgets (called Pillar II). For decentralized countries like Germany, where agricultural policy involves both federal and state-level actors, this marks a significant shift (Becker et al., 2022). The plan details Germany's strategy to implement the CAP, tailored to its national context and needs, encompassing input from the federate state ministries gained through consultations, such as the Special Agriculture Ministers' Conferences. The 16 German federal states collaborate with the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture to synchronize national goals with regional requirements, particularly for Pillar II of the CAP (BMEL-Referat 813, 2023). The development of national CAP Strategic Plans requires stakeholder participation; therefore, the content of the Strategic Plan can give insights on the level of inclusion and discursive power of certain stakeholder groups (for a detailed overview of the involvement and consultation of stakeholders in Germany regarding the different sections of the German CAP Strategic Plan see BMEL-Referat 813 (2023)). While this study does not analyse the participation process and its impact on the plan's content, it does consider key stakeholder perspectives in the discussion. By including the national CAP Strategic Plan, we could explore how EU-level discourses are adapted, resisted or transformed at the national level, thus providing insights into multi-level governance processes.

We also chose Germany for pragmatic reasons: all documents, that is, both European Commission recommendations and the German plan, were available in the German language, ensuring linguistic comparability, while the authors are familiar with the linguistic, cultural and political specifics of the country.

Each document was first entirely read and evaluated for text sections suitable for discourse analysis. For all three documents, formatting content, tables or graphs, as well as glossaries and annexes were deemed unsuitable and excluded from further analysis. The German CAP Strategic Plan is an almost 2000 pages long document, additionally containing many lists and repetitive technical sections not suitable for discourse analysis, that is, text not used for framing, narrating or justifying decisions and priorities. For instance, a part of Chapter 2, 'Relevant national and country-specific legal bases and funding instruments', was excluded as the section mainly repeats the content of other legislative acts (cf. Rac et al., 2023). Moreover, the section 'Justification of the target values and associated milestones' (also part of Chapter 2), including the description of the performance indicators, was excluded due to redundancies with the intervention logic.

Subsequently, the following sections of the German CAP Strategic Plan were included and formed the data basis for the subsequent analysis. Significantly, for these sections, stakeholder involvement was ensured (see Annex III of the German CAP Strategic Plan):

- 'Explanation of the strategy' (Chapter 1)
- 'Assessment of needs' (part of Chapter 2)
- 'Summaries of the SWOT analyses' (part of Chapter 2)
- 'Description of the composition of the intervention to achieve the specific objective' (part of Chapter 2)

2.3 | Data analysis

We coded the documents for the pathways, which are conceptually linked to specific values of nature (instrumental, intrinsic, relational) (see Section 2.1). A codebook consisting of the definition, an anchor example and a list of keywords describing each of the four pathways was developed (Table S1). The definitions and keywords for Green Economy, Nature Protection, Earth Stewardship and Degrowth were derived from the description of the pathways in the IPBES Values Assessment (IPBES, 2022). Coding was deductively done based on the codebook (Table S1), using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 2024 (VERBI Software, 2024). The vocabulary, grammar,

logic and arguments were considered and compared with the keyword list. In line with Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework (2013), special attention was paid to implicit meanings—that is, normative judgements implied in, for instance, classifying something as a 'threat' or a 'strength' in the SWOT analysis. Concepts like 'nature-based solutions,' for instance, implicitly express instrumental values in line with Green Economy (Welden et al., 2021). While coding the respective policy documents, either one of the four existing codes was applied, or text was left blank when none of the pathways applied, that is, not every sentence was coded. Multiple codes were applied for segments reflecting multiple pathways. All quotes presented in the results section were translated from German to English by the authors.

2.4 | Reflexivity and rigour

While recognizing Critical Discourse Analysis's interpretive nature, we actively engaged reflexively throughout the analysis. We acknowledge that our interpretations are inevitably shaped by our backgrounds and disciplinary orientations. This reflexivity constitutes a methodological strength in Critical Discourse Analysis, ensuring transparency, critical self-awareness and rigorous interpretive consistency (Zienkowski, 2017). We addressed this by continuously reviewing and validating our interpretations internally and by seeking feedback through discussions within the research team and from peers familiar with Critical Discourse Analysis. This process was iterated throughout analysing the three documents to guarantee consistency across documents.

2.5 | Ethics declaration

Ethical approval was not required for this research as it involved analysis of publicly available policy documents and did not include human participants or animals.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Recommendations to the member states as regards their strategic plan for the common agricultural policy

The European Commission's Communication to Member States on their CAP Strategic Plans (EC Rec. MS) starts by linking the EU Green Deal to the CAP Strategic Plans, advocating for a new sustainable, inclusive growth strategy 'that stimulates the economy, improves health and quality of life, protects nature and leaves no one behind' (EC Rec. MS, p. 2). Throughout the document, nature is constructed as a manageable asset, valued mainly for its utility, underscoring elements of the Green Economy pathways such as payments for ecosystem services (PES), set-asides and eco-friendly technologies. The European Commission's recommendations prompt Member States to consider 'the economic, environmental and social aspects of sustainability' (EC Rec. MS, p. 4), indicating a hierarchy of importance among these aspects, clearly mirroring the Green Economy pathway.

Instrumental values of nature are further expressed by the Green Economy pathway through the idea that environmental impacts and economic growth can be decoupled through technological innovation and economic instruments. Repeatedly, innovation, digitization and knowledge are framed as a key solution for ecological and social problems, for example, 'In general, solutions to many of these challenges lie in a 'smarter', more precise and more sustainable agriculture that relies more on knowledge and (digital) technologies to jointly produce more private goods and ecological public goods with less input and less negative impact' (EC Rec. MS, p. 12) and 'Research and innovation, digitalization and new technologies will be among the most important requirements for the transition to more sustainable and healthier food systems' (EC Rec. MS, p. 18). This view is tied to the broader EU endeavour of enhancing economic growth through digitalization and securing a competitive position in a technologically rapidly accelerating globalized world (cf. Jarzębowski et al., 2024).

We also find that pathways sometimes overlap: The Green Economy, Degrowth and Earth Stewardship pathways blend to acknowledge that 'healthy people, healthy societies and a healthy planet are inextricably linked' and note 'making nature a part of our lives again' (EC Rec. MS, p. 2). A discursive mix is further evident when agroecological practices (characteristic of Earth Stewardship) 'not to plow and to reduce tillage (soil-conserving agriculture), to rewet drained peatlands, to maintain grassland and to lay out and care for landscape elements with high biodiversity' (EC Rec. MS, p. 13) are proposed as potential payment-based environmental schemes aimed at carbon sequestration (characteristic of Green Economy).

Agriculture's dual impact on biodiversity is recognized by the European Commission's use of the Earth Stewardship pathway: 'Some predominantly agricultural areas are important habitats for wild animals and wild plants. Problems there are due to very intensive farming, insufficient cultivation or abandonment of agricultural land' (EC Rec. MS, p. 11). Within the CAP, statements for Member States to regionalize agricultural subsidy programmes further reflect the Earth Stewardship pathway's emphasis on local sovereignty and place-based governance as prerequisites for transformative change (see Table 1). Additionally, the Earth Stewardship pathway is utilized to acknowledge inequalities related to gender and rurality, hence showing awareness of socio-environmental justice and the importance of relational values of nature: 'There is also a gender-specific component, as the proportion of young female farmers is particularly low. Access to land […] is the biggest challenge […]' (EC Rec. MS, p. 15).

Some references in the document bear resemblance to certain degrowth concerns such as the reduction of 'material throughput' and fair (re-)distribution of income (cf. Martin et al., 2024): '[…] there are still clear challenges in the following areas: reducing the use of inputs, especially chemical pesticides, fertilizers, and antimicrobials

in agriculture' (EC Rec. MS, p. 15), and 'Member States should better address the needs of small and medium-sized farms by reducing income disparities between different farm sizes through mechanisms that enable effective redistribution. These include capping, reducing payments, and, in particular, applying supplementary redistributive income support for sustainability' (p. 7). While these proposals do not explicitly challenge growth, they explicitly call for a reduction of payments for large-scale agriculture and challenge the dominance of such systems. At the same time, the statements draw on Green Economy logic by seeking to enhance efficiency as well as fairness within existing market structures.

Similarly, representations of the Nature Protection pathway are few, emphasizing the vital link between healthy ecosystems and agricultural productivity, ultimately blending instrumental and intrinsic values.

3.2 | Commission recommendations for Germany's CAP Strategic Plan

Compared to the recommendations to all Member States, the European Commission's recommendations for Germany's CAP Strategic Plan (EC Rec. Germany) only slightly shift in emphasis, reflecting the specific environmental and agricultural challenges and opportunities within Germany. The document often emphasizes instrumental nature values, underscoring the 'provider gets principle', for example, 'With regard to environmental challenges in Germany, it would be desirable to design income support in such a way that environmental performance is rewarded' (EC Rec. Germany, p. 2). The European Commission addresses specific national circumstances like overstocking livestock beyond regional carrying capacities and the negative impact of intensive land use on ecosystems. The European Commission subsequently urges 'adaptation and modernization of manure storage and spreading systems as well as the adaptation and modernization of livestock housing' (EC Rec. Germany, p. 3), prioritizing a technology-oriented Green Economy pathway over, for instance, Degrowth approaches such as reducing livestock numbers.

The representation of the Degrowth pathway mirrors its depiction in the European Commission recommendations to all Member States. The Nature Protection pathway appears vague and brief when the Commission emphasizes the importance of restoring forests 'to strengthen resilience to climate change with a focus on healthy and biodiverse forests' (EC Rec. Germany, p. 7–8), reflecting a blending of an instrumental rationale and intrinsic values of nature that is sometimes inherent to the pathway (cf. Martin et al., 2024, p. 808).

The Earth Stewardship pathway emerges in the European Commission's communication where social and ecological well-being intertwine: 'The vast majority of small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany are located in rural areas, ensuring food security and providing space for quality of life, nature and tourism' (EC Rec. Germany, p. 9). Rural areas and nature are framed as integral to quality of life, pointing to meaningful relational values beyond mere utility. Additionally, core principles of the Earth Stewardship pathway, such as care and responsibility towards wildlife and livestock, can be found. This includes calls to introduce or maintain 'more non-productive landscape elements with high biodiversity on arable land' to care for 'protected habitats and species dependent on agriculture' with special attention paid to 'farmland birds and wild pollinators' (EC Rec. Germany, p. 7). It also encompasses the European Commission's recommendation to Germany that 'breeding conditions in some livestock sectors, such as pig and poultry farming and dairy production, must be further improved to address animal welfare concerns' (EC Rec. Germany, p. 7). There is a notable overlap with the Green Economy pathway, where these practices are seen as climate protection strategies and are thus incentivized.

The European Commission subsequently continues to advocate for a blend of economic growth and environmental sustainability in its recommendations to Germany. The growth paradigm remains largely unchallenged, as reflected in broader EU strategies such as the Green Deal, the Farm-to-Fork Strategy and the Biodiversity Strategy, which aim to reconcile continued economic growth with environmental sustainability through the logic of green growth.

The repeated emphasis on these strategies may reflect an exercise of discursive power to ensure Germany's alignment with EU policy objectives and as an effort to maintain the relevance of these documents amid the post-COVID shift towards productivism. The reflections of the Green Economy pathway seem to indicate a techno-economic optimism to drive environmental sustainability while safeguarding the EU's economic position in a global market: 'The negative trend in total factor productivity in Germany could be slowed down by promoting cooperation and the sharing of knowledge and innovation and by supporting farmers in finding practicable solutions to meet environmental, climate and biodiversity challenges' (EC Rec. Germany, p. 6).

3.3 | CAP-Strategic Plan for the Federal Republic of Germany

The German CAP Strategic Plan (German CAP-SP) adopts three overarching goals aligned with the European Commission Recommendations: (1) promoting a resilient and diverse agricultural sector for long-term food security, (2) strengthening biodiversity and climate protection, and (3) reinforcing the socio-economic fabric of rural areas. While these reflect the three pillars of sustainability, their specific ordering (economy, environment and then society) may signal a particular prioritization of environmental concerns above the social dimension. Nonetheless, these goals are not consistently embedded in a coherent value-centred pathway. Expressed values and solution strategies vary, and despite biodiversity protection being framed as a central goal, the Nature Protection pathway is only slightly more prominent in the German documents than in those of the European Commission.

In contrast to the European Commission recommendations, restoration is a common thread running through the entire document.

Apart from that, the Nature Protection pathway is mostly confined to the sections titled 'Promoting sustainable development and the efficient management of natural resources such as water, soil and air, including by reducing dependence on chemicals' and 'Contributing to halting and reversing the loss of biodiversity, improving ecosystem services and preserving habitats and landscapes'. The rationale for protecting nature is often linked to the dependency of agriculture on healthy ecosystems, for example 'Loss of biodiversity creates considerable risks for ecosystem functions and the provision of ecosystem services and thus also for agricultural and forestry production itself' (German CAP-SP, p. 171), while protected areas are regarded to also serve in engaging the public in nature conservation: 'The appreciation of natural attractions and social awareness of the causes of their endangerment can take place in protected areas in a special way. Visitor guidance plays an important role here' (German CAP-SP, p. 55).

Nonetheless, the Green Economy pathway continues to be the most dominant pathway reflected in the German Strategic Plan, similarly to the European Commission recommendations. The document consistently emphasizes 'environmentally-friendly production processes' which are framed crucial for resilient farms (German CAP-SP, p. 30), and 'general interest services provided by agriculture' which 'have often not been able to be claimed by farms on the free market due to a lack of valorization' (German CAP-SP, p. 37). In line with the Green Economy pathway reflected in the European Commission recommendations, a reliance on technological advancements for animal welfare and a belief in agricultural digitalization for enhanced efficiency can be observed. Within this instrumental value-centred pathway logic, the protection and sustainable use of biodiversity favours 'the breeding of high-performance resistant bee colonies, among other things, in order to ensure the long-term pollination performance of the honeybee' (German CAP-SP, p. 178) over wild pollinators, which receive only secondary mention.

Statements resembling the Degrowth pathway in the German CAP Strategic Plan follow the ambiguous use of it in the European Commission documents, which could ultimately also be attributed to the Green Economy pathway.

The Earth Stewardship pathway appears more frequently in the national document than in the European Commission recommendations, accentuating relational values of nature more strongly. Earth Stewardship themes present in European Commission recommendations (e.g. care and responsibility towards wildlife and livestock) persist. The German CAP Strategic Plan more strongly encompasses social justice, for example, by focusing on young farmers, gender inequality and fostering social and cultural integration: 'In rural areas in particular, there are still inequalities in terms of gender equality, equal opportunities for social, political and economic participation and self-determined lives' (German CAP-SP, p. 70); 'Opening up prospects for young women and men in agriculture and forestry is an important contribution to the vitalization of rural areas' (German CAP-SP, p. 60); or 'Cultural activities should not be underestimated in terms of their identity-forming significance and unifying effect. An active cultural life means quality of life, contributes to the self-esteem of rural areas and plays a key role in shaping the character of a community' (German CAP-SP, p. 208). Principles of Earth Stewardship particularly show where the CAP Strategic Plan emphasizes relational values linked to agricultural landscapes and rural livelihoods. 'The preservation and maintenance of historical cultural landscapes, traditional forms of farming, patterns of use and characteristic near-natural structural elements safeguard these as important features of landscape character and diversity and promote the identification of land users and recreation seekers with the landscape' (German CAP-SP, p. 56). Throughout the document, the Earth Stewardship pathway emerges to stress the role of small and medium-sized farms in rural areas for sustaining livelihoods, the preservation of cultural landscapes and tourism. It further emerges to advocate for organic agriculture or other agroecological practices, which 'generally make important contributions to reducing stress factors that impair biodiversity and also contribute directly to agrobiodiversity through a broader range of crops and livestock, in some cases varieties and breeds that are of cultural and historical importance' (German CAP-SP, p. 58).

The mix of pathway represented in the document shows Germany's tailored adaptation of EU goals, addressing diverse stakeholder interests reflecting varied pathways to enhance the political viability of agricultural policies.

4 | DISCUSSION

Our analysis revealed how nature is valued through value-centred pathways to sustainability within the specific context of agriculture policy at the EU and German national level. Policymaking inherently involves different forms of power, including decision-making power, agenda-setting power and discursive power (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). In the following discussion, we therefore reflect upon the discursive power of policy actors and institutions. We discuss potential implications for the recognition dimension of justice for policy addressees, understood here as fair acknowledgment, respect and inclusion of diverse identities, worldviews and value systems (Martin et al., 2016), as well as the study's limitations.

4.1 | Value-centred pathways and motivational crowding

We found Green Economy to be the strongest value-centred pathway in the documents across the vertical governance levels. This pathway emphasizes instrumental values of nature and aims to integrate environmental sustainability into an economic model of growth. The CAP not only heavily subsidizes the EU agricultural sector but also contributes to the EU Green Deal, which is framed as a green growth strategy, and Green Economy thinking, for example, via instruments such as the polluter-pays principle and cap-and-trade mechanisms, is further institutionalized (Adamowicz, 2022; Martin et al., 2024). While the European Commission's power was legislatively limited, it

leveraged its discursive power through country-specific recommendations to compel Member States to engage with the Green Deal in their national CAP Strategic Plans (cf. Becker, 2024). Our Critical Discourse Analysis unravelled the European Commission's exercise of discursive power, pushing the Green Economy narrative, mirroring Becker's (2024) findings in what they call 'supranational entrepreneurship through the administrative backdoor'.

Nonetheless, the European Commission's reliance on economic growth raises doubts about long-term ecological viability (Otero et al., 2020). Our findings show that instrumental values, expressed by the Green Economy pathway, make up the most strongly expressed value of nature. This hegemony raises concerns about the potential marginalization of non-economic values of nature, such as its intrinsic and relational values, expressed by the Nature Protection, Earth Stewardship and Degrowth pathways. Brown et al. (2021) propose that a 'simplistic' understanding of farmer motivations, such as an overemphasis on economic motivations in CAP schemes, may undermine farmers' attitudes towards both the policies and environmental goals. Although economic considerations significantly shape farmers' willingness to adopt conservation practices, intrinsic motivations and values, for example, a strong sense of environmental responsibility, can be just as influential or even more so, for some farmers (Klebl et al., 2024). Even though such intrinsic motivations are more difficult to address than economic outcomes, targeting them with policies may ultimately be more effective (Swart et al., 2023).

What is more, policies emphasizing instrumental values, like those prevalent in the CAP, can indirectly shift decision-making by increasing the prominence of self-interested and instrumental considerations, a phenomenon known as motivational crowding, which might persist even beyond policy durations (Bowles & Polania-Reyes, 2012; Koessler & Engel, 2021; Rode et al., 2015). Empirical research from Europe supports this: Studies show that financial incentives, such as agri-environmental schemes within agriculture policies, can erode intrinsic motivations for conservation among farmers (Kieninger et al., 2018; Léger-Bosch & Chervier, 2023; Mills et al., 2018). Farmers in the EU have reported feeling pressured into subsidy-driven practices that may conflict with long-held stewardship values, undervaluing their ecological knowledge (Kovacs, 2021; Quinn et al., 2025). While social learning and peer recognition can counteract these effects (e.g. Kieninger et al., 2018), they are often secondary to dominant economic rationales. Our findings hence raise concerns that the CAP's strong expression of instrumental values of nature could crowd out intrinsic motivations and reinforce farming practices and ideologies that lie at the root of biodiversity loss (cf. Brown et al., 2021; Mattijssen et al., 2020).

4.2 | Value hegemony, political realities and recognition justice

We have found a dominance of instrumental values in the CAP documents, expressed by the Green Economy pathway. This echoes findings by Murali et al. (2024), who showed that Biodiversity Strategies across the globe also predominantly emphasize instrumental values while relational and intrinsic values remain underrepresented. In our analysis, especially the European Commission does not recognize the plurality of values. Recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war against Ukraine have further revived productivist forays (cf. Rac et al., 2023). The impacts of these geopolitical events, for instance, the disruption of value chains, have given interest groups and political parties—particularly those aligned with growth- and productivity-focused agendas—leverage beyond simply shaping narratives. Following ongoing farmers' protests in 2024, environmental ambitions in the CAP have been weakened in favour of productivity (European Commission, 2024; Foote, 2024; Not Just Farmers' Protests, 2024). If policymaking responds primarily to dominant voices, for example, organized lobby groups pushing a Green Economy framing and thereby instrumental values of nature, it risks the misrecognition of other (farmer) perspectives. Research has shown that EU farmers can hold a variety of values related to nature, which are often not reflected in policies (Sandberg & Jakobsson, 2018; Schümann et al., 2022; Stupak et al., 2019). Although framed around economic grievances, farmers' protests also reflect deeper frustrations around political marginalization, structural change and a perceived loss of recognition within EU agricultural policymaking (Matthews, 2024). Notably, Molnár et al. (2023) have shown that traditional knowledge holders in the EU are particularly misrepresented and disrespected within the CAP. Our work now adds to these findings by providing a baseline against which locally held values of nature can be compared in the EU and particularly within Germany.

4.3 | Multi-level governance and discursive resilience

We have found that value emphases can change along vertical governance levels within the EU: Germany incorporates more intrinsic and relational values of nature than the European Commission in their documents. This finding is in line with earlier work by Rac et al. (2023), who identified different value systems in the Rural Development Programs of England, Finland and Croatia. Even though the European Commission urged a Green Economy agenda with the Green Deal, more discursive space was given to Member States to tailor the current EU CAP (2023–2027) to national and regional needs through the introduction of national CAP Strategic Plans. Our results indicate that Member States can use this space. Compared to its recommendations to all Member States, the European Commission emphasizes the Green Economy pathway more strongly in its recommendations to Germany. However, the German CAP document exhibits increased reflections of Nature Protection and Earth Stewardship pathways.

Our results suggest that actual discursive power can be renegotiated at the national and regional levels. Nonetheless, without further examining other Member States' Strategic Plans, this finding remains limited to Germany—where an increase in relational and intrinsic values might be spurred by domestic environmental NGOs and a public more attuned to socio-ecological issues (Grothmann

et al., 2022; Verbände-Plattform, 2022), while the overall dominance of instrumental values can be explained by the strong influence and objectives of Germany's Deutscher Bauernverband (DBV) (Ewert, 2022; Polzin, 2024). Notably, Grohmann et al. (2021) showed that while associations critical of established agricultural policy could institutionalize their interests, established groups like the DBV maintained privileged access to decision-making institutions for shaping the EU CAP post-2022.

4.4 | Limitations

This study provides insights into how nature's values are embedded within EU and national CAP documents. Yet, there are limitations which need to be acknowledged. The first limitation concerns the method. While Critical Discourse Analysis offers valuable insights into discourses, power and ideology, it is not a neutral or purely objective tool. Rather, the interpretations are inherently influenced by the researchers' theoretical lens and positionality. As such, the same statement may be read in different ways depending on what is foregrounded, and different researchers might interpret the nuances of the text differently. For example, while the Nature Protection pathway is grounded in intrinsic values, it often also invokes biodiversity's role in ecosystem functioning and human well-being, introducing an instrumental rationale. A statement such as restoring forests 'to strengthen resilience to climate change with a focus on healthy and biodiverse forests' (EC Rec. Germany, pp. 7–8) illustrates this ambiguity. In our analysis, we acknowledged this ambiguity as characteristic of Critical Discourse Analysis and addressed it by iteratively refining our coding framework and engaging in team discussions.

A second limitation is that the analysis was confined to selected CAP documents at the EU and German national levels. While these documents offer critical insights into the use of value-centred pathways, they do not encompass all the potential data sources that could provide insights into how nature values are expressed, contested and ultimately (not) represented by the policies. For instance, other policy documents, stakeholder submissions or transcripts of policy debates might extend the analytical lens. Likewise, expert interviews or focus groups with policymakers or interest groups could offer further insights. However, we deliberately focused on finalized policy documents at the EU and national level to maintain analytical depth and consistency. While including additional sources would have potentially enriched our findings, it would also have considerably increased complexity and resource demands beyond the scope of this study.

5 | CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Our Critical Discourse Analysis of certain CAP documents focused on how nature values are expressed and embedded in both EU and German documents through value-centred pathways. Our analysis revealed divergent value systems between the EU and Germany. At the EU level, the dominant Green Economy pathway justifies environmental objectives with instrumental values of nature. This approach highlights nature's utility for humans, potentially overshadowing nature's intrinsic and relational values, which are viewed as important for deep environmental stewardship and biodiversity ethics (Himes et al., 2024; Jax et al., 2013; Klain et al., 2017; Norton, 1984). In contrast, Germany's CAP Strategic Plan, while echoing the Green Economy pathway, incorporates more non-economic values. It reflects stronger Nature Protection and Earth Stewardship pathways, demonstrating a more culturally rooted appreciation of nature that emphasizes relational and, to some extent, intrinsic values of nature stronger. This indicates Germany's discursive resilience, suggesting that the actual discursive power—the ability to define how and in which terms nature is valued (Vatn et al., 2024)—can be dynamically re-negotiated at the national or regional level. The divergence between the EU and Germany not only illustrates value differences across governance levels but also raises critical questions about recognizing plurality within EU policy frameworks. By prioritizing instrumental values, the EU CAP may fail to adequately recognize and incorporate the diversity of values held within its Member States, potentially leading to culturally insensitive and ecologically insufficient policies. This could alienate stakeholders, particularly farmers, who are both agricultural producers and custodians of their landscapes. By considering plural values, policies can become more just and effective. Looking forward, it is imperative for the EU to foster a more inclusive, regionalized approach to environmental policymaking. This would involve a more equitable integration of intrinsic and relational values of nature alongside its utility to humans.

Future research should therefore broaden its scope to include multiple Member States' CAP Strategic Plans to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how value-centred pathways and hence values are negotiated in different socio-cultural contexts. Similarly, it would also be useful to compare the values expressed in the CAP documents to locally held values, investigating potential (mis)recognitions. Additionally, it is essential to contrast rhetorical commitments with actual financial allocations and outcomes, considering the latest CAP reform's shift towards a results-based approach. Research should also evaluate how framing policies through different value-centred pathways influences farmers' perceptions and eventually their actions—for instance, through framed field experiments (cf. Lliso et al., 2022).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Iven Froese designed the study with conceptual support from Lasse Loft. Iven Froese collected the data, performed the analyses and wrote the manuscript with guidance and editing from Lasse Loft. All authors contributed to the revisions and gave their final approval for publication.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All analysed data are publicly available policy documents:

1. Recommendations to the Member States as regards their strategic plan for the Common Agricultural Policy, COM/2020/846 final.
2. Commission recommendations for Germany's CAP strategic plan, SWD(2020) 373 final.
3. CAP-Strategic Plan for the Federal Republic of Germany, CCI 2023DE06AFSP001.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Table S1. Codebook for value-centered pathways including description, keywords and anchor examples.

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