

The Impact of Agricultural Support Measures on the Sustainability of Farm Holdings: Farmers' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to evaluate how agricultural policies implemented through the Agency for Payments and Intervention in Agriculture (APIA) contribute to strengthening the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of agricultural holdings. The research was based on an online questionnaire applied to 101 active farmers from Buzău County, selected to reflect the structural diversity of farms in the region. The collected data were analysed comparatively in order to identify the main trends and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of support instruments and the difficulties encountered in relation to the financing institution.

The results indicate that direct payments represent the main form of support accessed, perceived as essential for maintaining agricultural activity and ensuring income stability. Financial assistance is regarded as having positive effects on productivity, investment capacity, and the economic resilience of farms. The funds are primarily directed toward expanding cultivated areas, covering operational costs, and modernizing the technical base. At the same time, several major constraints were identified, including procedural complexity, inadequate access to information, and limited advisory support - aspects that may undermine the effectiveness of public interventions. From a social perspective, the support provided helps maintain agricultural activities and reduces the risk of farm abandonment. However, sustainable practices and agri-environmental measures are applied unevenly, influenced by administrative complexity and the low attractiveness of existing incentives.

The conclusions highlight the need to simplify administrative procedures, strengthen the agricultural advisory system, and adapt support schemes to the specific needs of small and medium-sized farms. The results provide empirical evidence to inform regional-level agricultural policies aimed at enhancing efficiency, equity, and sustainability.

Keywords: agricultural policies, sustainability, farmers, financial support, rural development.

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture holds a central place in Romania's economy, contributing to gross domestic product, employment, and food supply. The sector also supports ecological balance and sustains social structures in rural areas. Under these conditions, national and European agricultural policies require continuous adjustment to address farmers' needs, reduce regional disparities, and promote the sustainable development of rural communities (Oțiman, 2012).

Romania's integration into the European Union has created opportunities for the development of the agricultural sector by providing access to support mechanisms under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). In this context, the Agency for

Payments and Intervention in Agriculture (APIA) plays a central role in implementing European financial instruments, overseeing direct payment schemes, rural development programs, agri-environment measures, and other forms of support for agricultural producers. Nevertheless, assessing the effectiveness of these measures extends beyond administrative or economic considerations, requiring an applied analysis grounded in the concrete realities of rural areas and in the perceptions of direct beneficiaries (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2022).

The relevance of this topic stems from the growing need to assess how effectively public policies function in local contexts. Although agricultural measures are formulated at national and European levels, their impact depends on the extent to which

they address the actual needs of those who implement them. A territorial analysis contributes by generating empirical evidence from the perspective of individuals and institutions engaged in agricultural activities.

The subject is particularly relevant in the context of the 2023-2027 reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which places greater emphasis on sustainability, digitalisation, and social inclusion. In this context, understanding how farmers perceive and access the support offered through APIA provides valuable insights for adjusting future policy instruments so they align more closely with the needs of agricultural holdings (European Commission, 2020).

Agriculture in Buzău County is shaped by a combination of natural, historical, and economic factors, which give the region a distinct identity within Romania's agricultural landscape. This diversity is reflected not only in crop structure and farm typology but also in the way rural communities organise their economic activities and interact with agricultural support policies.

Against a backdrop of favourable natural conditions, agriculture in Buzău County has undergone significant transformations over recent decades, influenced by post-communist restructuring, land-ownership fragmentation, and, subsequently, Romania's integration into the European Union. These developments have generated a complex dynamic within the agricultural sector, where traditional farms coexist with modernised holdings, subsistence production with market-oriented practices, and conventional methods with an increasingly visible shift towards ecological agriculture (Buzău County Directorate of Statistics, 2024).

The Agency for Payments and Intervention in Agriculture (APIA) is a key institution in the implementation of agricultural policies, ensuring the alignment of national priorities with European standards. It facilitates farmers' access to support schemes by streamlining administrative procedures and advancing the digitalisation of internal operations. Academic studies indicate that APIA's

activities contribute to sustainable agricultural practices and farm economic stability. Recent research also highlights improvements in productivity and increased resilience in sectors exposed to climatic and market pressures (Copăceanu and Mazăre, 2023).

Within the Common Agricultural Policy, the direct payments administered by APIA pursue two core aims: stabilising farm income and encouraging sustainable rural development. The main instruments include the Single Area Payment Scheme (SAPS), the redistributive payment targeted at small and medium-sized farms, support for young farmers, and payments granted for environmentally beneficial practices. These measures are financed through the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and are governed nationally by Government Emergency Ordinance No. 3/2015, which provides the legal basis for implementing CAP objectives in Romania (European Commission, 2020).

A newer element within the CAP is the development of risk-management mechanisms, such as financial support for agricultural insurance premiums. These tools represent a recent policy direction at the EU level and are implemented nationally through APIA. Through these measures, the institution contributes to income protection for farmers in both crop and livestock production, helping offset the effects of climatic variability and market fluctuations (Robu et al., 2024).

Among the most frequently accessed forms of support is the Single Area Payment Scheme, which offers a uniform per-hectare payment, irrespective of crop type. Its purpose is to provide a basic level of financial stability for eligible farms. Complementary redistributive payments are available, focusing on small and medium-sized holdings and aiming to reduce structural disparities and support the continuity of rural communities (Gherasimescu et al., 2024).

APIA also manages a set of measures to support investments in technology and agri-food infrastructure and to promote innovative

business models in rural areas. A first group of measures targets the modernisation of production structures, focusing on the acquisition of high-performance machinery, the implementation of efficient irrigation systems, and the development of facilities for the storage and processing of agricultural products. Such investments contribute to increased competitiveness, reduced operational costs, and improved production quality (Şerban et al., 2024).

A second group of measures promotes the diversification of farm activities by encouraging complementary sectors such as agritourism, local food processing, and semi-intensive livestock systems. These initiatives contribute to local employment and strengthen rural value chains.

Support schemes for young farmers include installation grants designed to facilitate entry into the sector and stimulate innovation. Such measures help slow the ageing of the agricultural workforce and encourage the emergence of more efficient and sustainable production models (Galluzzo, 2020).

Another relevant component consists of environmental schemes that finance investments in eco-friendly infrastructure, including ecological greenhouses, high-efficiency irrigation systems, water-treatment facilities, and agricultural waste-management units. These interventions encourage compliance with environmental standards and reduce the ecological footprint of agricultural activities (Ionescu et al., 2020, 2021; Voicilă et al., 2024).

Cooperation measures further promote the establishment of associations and producer groups, supporting investments in marketing initiatives, short supply chains, and collaborations between farms, research institutions, and local authorities (Florea et al., 2019).

Recent research indicates favourable outcomes associated with these interventions, including the expansion of irrigated land, the modernisation of processing facilities, higher farm incomes, and the emergence of enterprises managed by young agricultural

producers. Beneficiaries, however, continue to report difficulties related to complex application procedures and administrative requirements that often necessitate specialised advisory services (Banes et al., 2024).

A comprehensive review of the literature shows that agricultural support policies in Romania combine income-stabilisation instruments with measures aimed at structural modernisation and environmental compliance. Their effectiveness, however, depends largely on how these instruments interact with the diversity of farm structures and with the administrative capacity of payment agencies. Recent evaluations of CAP implementation underline that the territorial dimension plays a decisive role in shaping outcomes, as local production systems, natural constraints, and socio-economic conditions can influence both access to support and its long-term effects (Volkov, 2019).

Within this context, analysing farmers' experiences in Buzău County offers relevant insights into how national support mechanisms operate on the ground and how policy design can be more effectively aligned with regional agricultural realities.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study employed a mixed-methods design combining theoretical inquiry with empirical investigation to examine how farmers in Buzău County perceive and use the support measures administered by APIA. This approach made it possible to connect the institutional framework of agricultural policy with the experiences of its direct beneficiaries.

The documentation stage involved outlining the conceptual and institutional foundations of the Common Agricultural Policy by consulting academic publications, research reports, statistical sources, and key legislative documents. Among the materials reviewed were the National Strategic Plan 2023-2027, the regulations governing direct payments, and APIA's institutional reports, which together helped define the regulatory and operational background of current support schemes.

The empirical component relied on an online questionnaire completed by 101 active farmers in Buzău County. The participants were selected to reflect the structural diversity of farms in the region. Although participation was voluntary, the sample size is adequate for exploratory analysis, considering the roughly 14,000 individual holdings and agricultural enterprises in the county (NIS, General Agricultural Census, 2021). This level of coverage enables the identification of general patterns and prevailing views regarding the functioning of APIA support instruments. The questionnaire collected information on the types of support accessed, farmers' assessments of measure effectiveness, and the difficulties encountered in the application process. The responses were compiled and examined using descriptive and comparative techniques to explore relationships between farm characteristics, the use of support schemes, and perceived outcomes. Participation was anonymous and voluntary, in line with established ethical standards.

The general objective of the research is to assess the extent to which the support measures implemented through APIA contribute to the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of agricultural holdings in Buzău County, based on farmers' perceptions of the effectiveness and impact of these policy instruments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of farmers' responses forms the basis for interpreting the results, offering insight into how APIA support measures influence the activity and sustainability of agricultural holdings. To outline the participants' profiles, the structure of the holdings they manage was examined. The type of holding is a relevant indicator because it reflects the nature of agricultural activities and the associated need for financial support, which, in turn, shapes the relevance and effectiveness of APIA interventions.

The results show a clear predominance of crop farms, managed by roughly 70% of respondents, consistent with the agricultural profile of Buzău County, where field crops

occupy a substantial share of cultivated land. Mixed farms account for about 20%, while livestock farms represent approximately 10% of the sample.

The distribution of respondents by cultivated area indicates that small farms of under 10 hectares constitute the largest group, accounting for around 45%. Medium-sized holdings (10-50 ha) represent about 35%, while larger farms (over 100 ha) account for roughly 20%. This pattern reflects both the dominance of small-scale farms in the county and the sector's structural polarisation. Larger holdings tend to display greater capacity for investment and resource consolidation, whereas smaller farms rely more heavily on support provided through APIA.

Regarding legal status, most farms are operated by natural persons (46.5%), followed by individual enterprises and authorised individuals (33.7%). Commercial companies account for 17.8%, while agricultural cooperatives represent only 2%. This structure highlights the traditional and fragmented character of agriculture in Buzău County and the limited level of producer association, which constrains opportunities for economic integration and efficient access to APIA programmes.

The combined analysis of the three indicators - type of holding, cultivated area, and legal status - shows that small crop farms, mainly operated by natural persons or individual enterprises, form the core of the agricultural sector in Buzău County. Mixed and livestock holdings organised under commercial legal forms are more common among medium and large farms, which tend to have greater capacity to access APIA funding and to integrate into local value chains.

Typology of APIA Support

Identifying the types of support accessed by farmers in Buzău County is a central element of the analysis, as it highlights how different categories of holdings use the instruments provided by the Common Agricultural Policy. The distribution of responses, presented in Table 1, outlines a coherent statistical profile that is closely linked to the socio-economic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Structure of APIA support types accessed by farmers

Combination of APIA Support	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Direct payments	45	44.6%
Direct payments, agri-environment and climate subsidies, other forms of support	27	26.7%
Other forms of support	13	12.9%
Rural development aid	9	8.9%
Agri-environment and climate subsidies	7	6.9%

Source: Authors' processing, based on survey data (2025).

Direct payments, accessed by 44.6% of respondents, constitute the most frequently used form of support. This pattern aligns with the high share of small crop farms and natural persons identified in the profile analysis. Because these payments involve relatively simple administrative procedures, they meet the needs of farms focused on basic production and operating with limited capacity to engage in more complex programmes.

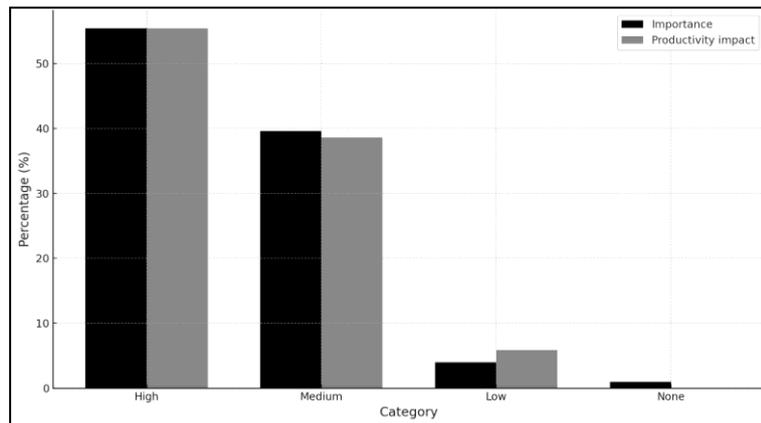
Around 26.7% of respondents reported using combinations of schemes, including direct payments, agri-environment and climate measures, and other complementary forms of support. This category mainly includes farmers managing medium- and large-scale holdings with formal legal status—authorised individuals, individual enterprises, or limited liability companies. These holdings generally have stronger administrative capacity and a clearer orientation towards modernisation and diversification. The link with farm size and legal form suggests that such farms possess the resources needed to meet the additional compliance and reporting obligations required by more complex instruments.

The relatively small shares recorded for rural development support (8.9%) and agri-

environment schemes (6.9%) indicate lower participation in programmes that require initial investments, technical knowledge, or the ability to manage extensive documentation. This distribution is consistent with the agricultural structure of Buzău County, where small, traditional farms predominate and may perceive complex schemes as difficult to access or as involving higher levels of risk.

Correlating the support schemes with farm characteristics shows a clear relationship between holding size, legal form, and the range of measures accessed. Small farms remain concentrated in direct payments, while medium- and large-scale holdings tend to draw on a more varied set of instruments. These patterns reflect structural differences in APIA fund-absorption capacity across the county.

Farmers' perceptions of the role of APIA support in daily operations and productivity offer a consolidated picture of how public subsidies influence the sustainability of agricultural holdings in Buzău County. As shown in Figure 1, the percentage distributions of perceived support importance and its impact on productivity follow similar trajectories, indicating a strong reliance on CAP funding.



Source: Authors' processing, based on survey data (2025).

Figure 1. Importance and productivity impact of APIA support

A majority of respondents view APIA payments as essential: over half consider them “very important,” while almost 40% rate them as “fairly important.” Only a small fraction considers them to be of limited importance. This pattern reflects an agricultural context marked by climatic uncertainty, price fluctuations, and low capitalisation, in which subsidies represent a core component of farm viability.

A similar trend emerges regarding productivity: approximately 55% of farmers believe that APIA support has had a “significant” effect, while nearly 40% report a “moderate but positive” impact. These responses indicate that the funds are often used for technological upgrades, higher-quality inputs, or improvements in production infrastructure. The small share of respondents reporting no effect may correspond either to very small holdings or to farms that use subsidies mainly to cover ongoing expenses rather than to finance investment.

The correlation between the two dimensions indicates a direct link between the perceived importance of subsidies and their perceived influence on productivity. Farmers who view financial support as essential are generally the same respondents who report improvements in technical and economic performance. This pattern aligns with the dominant profile identified in the sample: small and medium-sized crop farms, often managed by natural persons, for whom direct payments remain a central financial resource with visible operational effects.

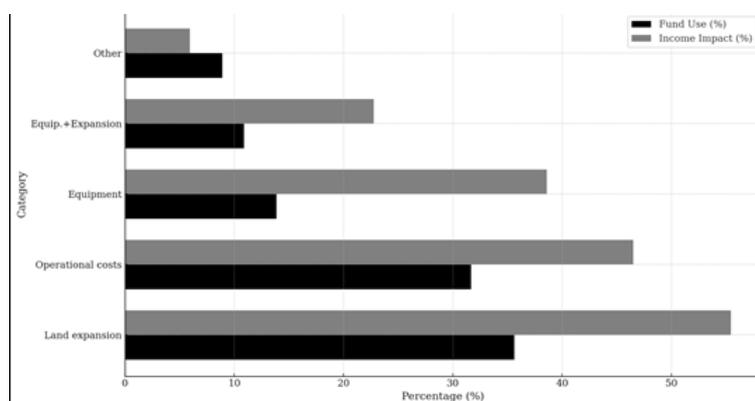
A similar relationship emerges when the typology of accessed measures is considered. Farmers who use combinations of schemes - such as direct payments, agri-environmental commitments, rural development measures, or other complementary instruments - tend to report stronger productivity gains. This outcome may reflect their higher administrative capacity, willingness to diversify activities, and ability to adapt production practices to programme requirements. At the other end, very small farms that rely mainly on direct payments report more limited effects, consistent with subsidies primarily covering current operational needs without enabling structural investment.

Taken together, the perceived importance of support, its reported impact on productivity, the profile of agricultural holdings, and the range of measures accessed point to the structuring role of APIA programmes in Buzău County. These measures act as a stabilising factor for smaller holdings and as a source of modernisation for farms with greater investment capacity.

The correlational analysis of how APIA funds are allocated and the perceived effects on income, shown in Figure 2, further illustrates the connection between financial decisions and economic outcomes. This relationship suggests that the benefits derived from public support depend not only on the amount received but also on the strategic orientation of resource use within the farm.

When funds are directed towards productive investments, improvements in income become more visible; when they are used

mainly for routine expenses, the effect on profitability is more limited.



Source: Authors' processing, based on survey data (2025).

Figure 2. Correlation between fund use and income impact

The distribution of fund use shows that expanding the cultivated area is the main direction in which financial resources are channelled, representing around 36% of all responses. This option is linked to an income effect surpassing 55%, indicating that investments aimed at increasing production capacity tend to deliver notable economic gains. The result corresponds to the profile of respondents, most of whom manage crop-oriented small and medium holdings, where enlarging the land base remains one of the few feasible ways to increase revenue.

Allocations directed towards operational expenses account for approximately 31% of responses and produce an income effect of about 47%. Although positive, the impact is more modest, illustrating the situation of many small farms where subsidies are incorporated into routine financial operations and act primarily as a stabilising tool rather than as a driver of long-term improvements. This pattern is especially characteristic of natural-person farmers working small plots, who rely heavily on such spending, which limits their prospects for income growth.

Funds directed towards the purchase of agricultural machinery or combined uses ("equipment + expansion") represent smaller shares - 13% and 10%, respectively. Even so, these categories generate appreciable income effects (around 38% and 22%). This suggests

that technological upgrades contribute to better economic performance. However, such investments are less accessible to small farms and are more frequently found among medium-sized holdings and legally registered entities, such as authorised individuals, individual enterprises, or limited liability companies. While the benefits are clear, the ability to implement these investments depends heavily on legal form and available capital.

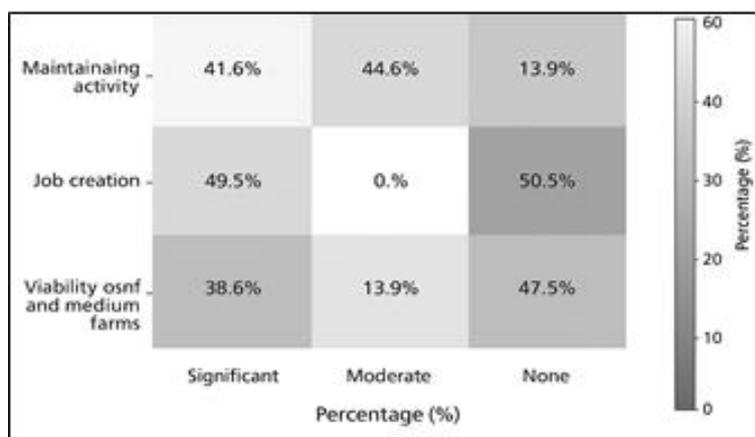
The "other uses" category, which accounts for roughly 9% of responses, records the lowest income effect (around 6%). This indicates that spending directed towards non-strategic or reactive purposes - such as taxes, repairs, or unplanned consumption - does not contribute to sustained performance improvements and serves mainly as short-term financial assistance.

Overall, the link between how funds are allocated and the income effects reported by farmers points to a consistent pattern: uses aimed at development - such as land expansion, technological investment, or other structural upgrades - are associated with higher economic returns. In contrast, allocations dedicated to routine operational consumption tend to generate only moderate or limited improvements, reflecting the traditional structure and constrained financial capacity of many farms in Buzău County.

Socio-economic effects of APIA support

The socio-economic effects of APIA support are evident in farmers' perceptions and highlight several dynamics that help clarify the role of subsidies in rural areas. Figure 3 offers a concise overview of these influences, organising farmers' responses around three key dimensions: the

continuation of agricultural activity, job creation, and the viability of small- and medium-sized farms. Examining the percentage distributions allows for meaningful interpretative links regarding how financial support contributes to the functioning and stability of the agricultural sector in Buzău County.



Source: Authors' processing, based on survey data (2025).

Figure 3. Socio-economic effects of APIA support

Regarding the continuation of agricultural activity and the reduction of migration, the data show that most farmers perceive APIA support as having a positive influence, either significant (41.6%) or moderate (44.6%). The concentration of responses at the upper end of the scale points to the stabilising role of subsidies in an economic setting marked by volatility and multiple risks. In this sense, APIA support helps ensure the continuity of agricultural activity by allowing farms to remain functional even under conditions of climatic variability, rising costs, or market uncertainty - factors that, in the absence of support, could prompt reductions in activity or even abandonment. At the same time, the share of respondents who do not observe a clear impact (13.9%) suggests that retaining the agricultural workforce and reducing migration depend on a broader mix of structural factors. Although APIA eases risks and contributes to greater predictability, elements such as local infrastructure, opportunities for non-agricultural employment, and the overall attractiveness of rural areas remain decisive in shaping migration behaviour.

The perceived impact on job creation is far more polarised, as illustrated in the figure. Approximately half of the respondents (49.5%) consider that APIA support contributes significantly to employment, whereas the remaining 50.5% report no effect. The absence of a "moderate" category in the responses highlights a clear divide in farm behaviour: some holdings treat financial support as an opportunity for investment and expansion - changes which may require additional labour - while others use subsidies only to cover ongoing operating costs, a strategy that does not generate new employment. This divide reflects the structural heterogeneity of farms in Buzău County and also the limitations of APIA support when not paired with policies explicitly designed to stimulate agricultural employment.

With respect to the viability of small and medium-sized farms, Figure 3 displays a balanced yet somewhat strained distribution. A notable proportion of farmers perceive the support as adequate or significant (38.6%), whereas almost half (47.5%) consider it insufficient for ensuring long-term economic

resilience. Only 13.9% rate the impact as moderate. This configuration indicates that, although subsidies are essential for the functioning of smaller farms, they do not fully compensate for pressures arising from increased production costs, market-access challenges, or compliance with environmental obligations.

The findings suggest that farmers who adopt investment-oriented strategies - such as purchasing equipment or expanding cultivated areas - tend to perceive the support as more effective. In contrast, holdings with limited financial capacity, which rely almost entirely on subsidies for routine consumption, face greater difficulties in maintaining economic sustainability.

Taken together, the data in the figure outline a consistent pattern in the socio-economic effects of APIA support. The strongest perceived influence relates to maintaining agricultural activity, reaffirming the cushioning role of direct payments. By comparison, the contribution to job creation is the weakest, and the viability of small and medium-sized farms is shaped by significant structural disparities. Overall, although APIA support clearly contributes to stabilising the agricultural sector in Buzău County, its effectiveness ultimately depends on the extent to which farmers are able to convert

financial assistance from a mechanism of survival into a driver of development.

Correlation between the difficulties encountered and the measures proposed by farmers

When examining how farmers access APIA support, focusing solely on individual obstacles offers an incomplete perspective. A broader assessment is required - one that links the difficulties reported by respondents with the solutions they view as appropriate for improving the system. Such an approach helps clarify the extent to which farmers' perceptions correspond to the administrative requirements of agricultural policy and highlights the areas where adjustments are most needed.

In this context, Table 2 provides a comparative overview of the challenges identified and the measures proposed, forming the empirical basis for the subsequent correlational analysis. Overall, the findings emphasise the need for administrative reform that combines procedural simplification, guided digitalisation, and strengthened advisory services.

Respondents consistently regard these elements as essential conditions for improving both the accessibility and the effectiveness of APIA support.

Table 2. Correlation between the difficulties encountered and the measures proposed

Identified difficulty	No. of mentions	Proposed correlated measures	No. of mentions
Excessive bureaucracy	18	Simplification of APIA documentation and procedures	17
		Elimination of regional differences in implementation	5
Lack of clear and accessible information	13	Clear and continuous information on active measures	8
		Access to free agricultural advisory services	11
Delays in processing applications	10	Increase in the value of financial support	14
		Simplification of APIA procedures	17
Cumbersome/unclear forms	8	More intuitive and user-friendly digital platform	9
		Standardisation and simplification of documentation	17
Lack of advisory support/guidance	6	Access to free agricultural advisory services	11
		Continuous and accessible information	8
Misunderstandings regarding eligibility	5	Adaptation of schemes to local specificities	6
		Clear and continuous information	8

Source: Authors' processing, based on survey data (2025).

Excessive bureaucracy is the most frequently reported difficulty (18 mentions), and it corresponds directly with the most common proposed measure: simplifying APIA documentation and procedures (17 mentions). The close alignment between these two elements indicates a structural bottleneck that restricts farmers' ability to access funding. Small and family-run holdings are particularly affected, as their limited administrative capacity and lower levels of digital literacy make it especially challenging to comply with complex procedural requirements.

The lack of clear and accessible information (13 mentions) is strongly associated with requests for free advisory services (11 mentions) and for regular updates on available support schemes (8 mentions). This pattern points to persistent gaps in institutional communication, including the clarity of official wording and the availability of reliable, user-friendly sources. Respondents implicitly call for communication tools that account for the diverse educational backgrounds present in rural areas.

Delays in application processing (10 mentions) and the use of forms that are difficult to understand (8 mentions) are consistently linked to proposals for developing a more intuitive digital platform (9 mentions). These results suggest that current digitalisation efforts have not yet reduced administrative burdens and that low digital skills may generate new obstacles for certain categories of farmers. While digital tools are indispensable, they must be accompanied by guidance, technical support, and local assistance points to ensure that technology enhances accessibility rather than restricts it.

Issues related to eligibility criteria (5 mentions) and the lack of advisory support (6 mentions) converge with proposals to adapt schemes to local conditions (6 mentions) and to reduce territorial inconsistencies in implementation (5 mentions). This association indicates that respondents perceive uneven application of APIA measures across regions, leading to differences in access and funding

opportunities. Tailoring interventions to regional characteristics could increase fairness and improve the efficiency of fund allocation.

The integrated assessment of difficulties and proposed measures reveals a clear pattern: the most frequently reported problems correspond to the most commonly suggested reforms. This suggests that farmers not only identify systemic challenges but also articulate targeted solutions for the areas in greatest need of adjustment. An exploratory comparison of frequencies reinforces this connection, showing that higher perceived severity of a problem tends to coincide with more frequent proposals for appropriate corrective measures.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of farmers' perceptions in Buzău County shows that APIA support primarily fulfils a stabilising economic role for agricultural holdings. Direct payments remain the dominant form of assistance, especially among small crop farms operated by natural persons, underlining their importance in maintaining basic agricultural activity and securing minimum income levels in a context shaped by climatic uncertainty and market volatility.

The correlation between farm profiles and the support schemes accessed reveals that small holdings rely almost exclusively on direct payments, while medium and large farms - typically organised as commercial entities - draw on a more diverse range of instruments, including agri-environment measures, rural development schemes, and complementary forms of support. This pattern highlights structural disparities in administrative capacity and investment potential, which may, over time, widen the gap between farms able to modernise and more traditional small-scale operations.

From an economic standpoint, respondents link APIA support to higher productivity and income when resources are allocated to land expansion, technological upgrades, or mixed investment-operational uses. When subsidies are used mainly to cover routine expenditures, perceived effects

are more modest, indicating that internal fund allocation practices are critical in shaping economic outcomes. The socio-economic contribution of APIA is most visible in sustaining agricultural activity and reducing abandonment risks. By contrast, its influence on job creation is limited and uneven, as many farmers consider the support to preserve current employment levels rather than generate new positions in the absence of targeted investment policies.

Perceptions of the long-term viability of small and medium-sized farms are mixed. For some respondents, existing support is adequate for maintaining operations; for others, it is insufficient for ensuring continuity. This contrast reflects the dual nature of subsidies: they provide short-term stability, yet they are also expected to underpin structural development through investment, associative forms of organisation, and improved integration into agri-food value chains.

The difficulties identified in accessing support - bureaucratic complexity, unclear information, complicated forms, processing delays, and limited advisory services - illustrate that the effectiveness of APIA measures depends not only on financial allocations but also on administrative performance. The alignment between these challenges and the solutions proposed by farmers, such as simplifying procedures, strengthening advisory systems, improving digital tools, and adapting schemes to local realities, indicates a shared understanding of the key areas requiring adjustment.

From a methodological perspective, the study is exploratory due to the voluntary sample. Although this limits the generalisability of findings to the national level, the internal coherence of the data ensures strong regional relevance. The results can guide policy adjustments tailored to the specific characteristics of Buzău County and serve as a basis for comparative analyses in other regions.

Overall, the findings confirm that APIA support remains essential for the functioning of agricultural holdings. However, for it to evolve from a basic stabilisation instrument

into a stronger catalyst for sustainable rural development, further progress is needed in procedural simplification, the consolidation of advisory structures, the promotion of investment-oriented fund allocation, and the adaptation of support schemes to the operational realities of small and medium-sized farms.

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