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Opinion Piece

**CAP needs further clarity to facilitate the work of fruit and vegetable producer organisations!**

Many European consumers are often unaware of the vital role Producer Organisations play in the agricultural sector. Yet, in my sector of fruits and vegetables, they form the backbone of our marketing efforts. As of 2022, the European Commission has recorded 1,536 producer organisations and 26 transnational producer organisations in this sector. Traditionally referred to as "POs," these fruit and vegetable producer organisations are very unique organisations in that they consist of a group of producers or cooperatives who join together to pool their production of produce with a view to marketing it.

POs are essential because they ensure a stable supply of high-quality, healthy products, while also guaranteeing compliance with logistical agreements to meet retailers' needs and protect consumer health.

Since 1996, the EU has provided targeted aid to fruit and vegetable producer organisations. This aid primarily aims to strengthen the position of growers within the supply chain by encouraging collective actions and investments, crisis management, and efforts to adapt to climate change and protect the environment. This support is also proportional to the PO’s turnover, enabling co-financing of up to 50% of the operational fund that growers establish to implement multiannual operational programmes.

Thanks to these EU-cofinanced operational programmes, producer organisations in the fruit and vegetable sector enhance individual growers' bargaining power and ensure a fair, transparent sales system for all members. Additionally, POs promote sustainable development by addressing economic, social, and environmental dimensions collectively, offering group certifications like GlobalGAP.

Such achievements would not be possible at the same cost without this community aid, which ultimately benefits EU consumers by keeping fresh fruit and vegetable prices affordable.

However, this virtuous system - an EU success story that I believe isn’t highlighted enough and aligns perfectly with societal demands - is now jammed to some extent, and I’m concerned for the future. Let me explain.

From 2023, POs must gradually implement their operational programmes under the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) by 2025. The new CAP grants greater subsidiarity to Member States, allowing them to apply their national strategic plans based on their own agricultural priorities.

After one year of experience with the new CAP, I’ve observed that some provisions are poorly developed, unclear or open to interpretation. The specific characteristics of producer organisations in the fruit and vegetable sector are not adequately considered in the horizontal provisions of operational programmes, and this misinterpretation of subsidiarity can have serious negative effects.

This situation is creating legal uncertainty, leading to inconsistencies and reducing options for operational programmes in the fruit and vegetable sector. For instance, under the previous system, small and medium-sized POs were able to receive partial payments directly from the EU. However, under the new CAP, these partial payments are left to the discretion of Member States or regions, which may choose not to implement them. Another example is the refusal by some authorities to adjust wages for inflation, citing that such increases were not included in the initial programme declarations.

I fear that by 2025, many small and medium-sized producer organisations in the fruit and vegetable sector may be unable to establish new multiannual operational programmes under the new CAP rules or decide not to. This could result in a significant reduction in the volume of fruit and vegetables marketed through Pos - a step backwards in every sense!

As Member States and the Commission discuss the future of the fruit and vegetable sector in the next meeting of the Special Committee on Agriculture (SCA), I urge them to ensure that the transition of the operational programme of the POs to the new CAP model is a success, not a setback. It is crucial to incentivise the growth of recognised producer organisations, especially in regions where the organisation of fruit and vegetable growers is currently limited.

**Luc Vanoirbeek, Chair of Copa and Cogeca Working Party on fruit and Vegetables and Secretary General of the Federation of Belgian Horticultural Cooperatives**

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Translations will be available in DE, ES, FR, IT, PL and RO on the Copa-Cogeca website soon.

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