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Just agrifood transitions: a cross-country comparison of stakeholder perceptions between Finland and England

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Abstract
Sustainability transitions in agrifood systems imply significant changes in agriculture encompassing land use and farming practices as well as the goods produced. Transition processes are challenging and politically contested in many European countries with various climatic, market, and policy conditions. However, research has not yet examined how perceptions of justice in agricultural sustainability transitions differ or align between countries with relatively similar environmental farming conditions. We compare two countries, England and Finland, with similar challenges in climatic terms yet relatively different policy and market conditions. Using interview and focus group data, we examine how justice related issues are described and claimed by farmers and other stakeholders in the context of agrifood system sustainability transitions in these countries. Findings from both countries revealed more similarities than differences. The similarity of many concerns, especially among farmers, implies that just agrifood transitions would greatly benefit from increased cross-country exchange, learning, and knowledge exchange. We also uncovered relevant differences in, for example, problem diagnosis and proposed or claimed solutions. Our results show the value of cross-country comparisons and have implications for realizing just agrifood transitions more successfully by fostering cross-country learning, exchange, and collaboration.

Keywords Food system · Justice · Just transition · Agriculture · Policy · Sustainability

Introduction

Industrialised societies face the challenge of changing dominant agrifood systems. Transformation is critical to both human existence overall and to safeguarding and improving sustainable food security (see Lang and Barling 2013; Kaljonen et al. 2021). Agrifood systems refer to agricultural production chains and those socio-ecological, economic, and political processes and structures that enable/encourage or disable/discourage different food production and consumption practices. The call for *sustainability transitions* in agrifood systems entails system-level transitions to environmentally and socio-economically sustainable food production. Although explicit definitions are lacking, Juri et al. (2024, 12) outline food system transformations as "significant reconfigurations of the assemblage of food system activities, actors, outcomes, and relationships (dynamics) to move away from the current globalised industrial model and ensure sustainable, resilient, and just models of production and consumption". Hence, transition demands may refer to, amongst others, regenerative food systems, alternative food networks, power relations, agroecological transitions, and plant-based diets (Juri et al. 2024).[1]

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[1] Due to this holism, we do not presuppose a singular restrictive way to describe agrifood system transition towards sustainability but instead accept the co-existence of multiple transition theories and pathways (Juri et al. 2024) insofar as they involve significant improvements in the environmental sustainability.

While environmental concerns are critical for the future of humanity, key sustainability concerns in food systems also include food security, farmers' livelihoods, labour rights, and the status of indigenous knowledges and practices. As such, environmentally oriented sustainability transitions in agrifood systems have socio-economic and cultural repercussions that may cause or aggravate injustices in other sustainability aspects during the transitions. Therefore, food system transitions have become an important topic in *just transition* discussions and research more broadly. The idea of *just* transitions to sustainability has become a widely embraced and broad-ranging concern, enshrined in international agreements and declarations, including the Paris Agreement, the EU Green Deal, and the International Labour Organisation Guidelines for a Just Transition (ILO 2015). These documents emphasise 'a just transition of the workforce' and 'leaving no-one behind'. Although initially focusing on labour, just transition research broadened to a wider range of justice concerns, focusing e.g. on energy transitions in relation to climate change (Bennett et al. 2019; Cha 2020) and, more recently, paying growing attention to food systems. Food system activities (including input production and land use change) are among the main drivers of exceeding planetary boundaries (Campbell et al. 2017). This relates especially to the land use and input resource needs in agriculture, estimated to account for approximately 70–80% of food system greenhouse gas emissions (GHGEs) (Crippa et al. 2021). The opportunities and challenges of agricultural production depend on the climatic, topographic (including soil properties), and anthropogenic (political, market and socio-cultural) conditions that vary across countries. Thus, the impacts and challenges of sustainability transitions also vary locally, regionally and internationally.

While anthropogenic conditions are socially constructed, climatic and topographic conditions are not. The agrifood systems of countries with harsher climatic conditions are largely based on animal production, which means that the transition demands related to decarbonisation and healthy diets fall even heavier (Blattner 2020). Simultaneously, harsher environmental conditions imply fewer feasible alternatives, at least in the short-term, making the transition arguably harder. This makes it particularly important to understand just transition challenges in such contexts.[2] However, research has not yet examined how perceptions of justice in agricultural sustainability transitions differ or align between countries with relatively similar environmental farming conditions. Additionally, broadening just agrifood transition studies to cross-country comparisons, so far lacking, is critical for two reasons. Understanding similarities helps identify areas of concern where cross-country learning, information and experience exchange, and research collaboration could significantly foster just transition research and policy processes. Furthermore, understanding differences between otherwise relatively similar agrifood systems highlights the politico-socio-cultural features, which might help others alleviate or resolve similar just transition challenges.

To address these research gaps, this study presents, to our knowledge, the first cross-country comparison on food system actors' justice perceptions related to agrifood sustainability transitions. Increasing understanding of actors' own justice perceptions beyond predefined normative justice criteria is essential as these perceptions ultimately form the basis for transition support or protest (Markard et al. 2020; Martin and Islar, 2020; Rothmund et al. 2016; Wieliczko et al. 2021). Deepening understanding of these perceptions is, therefore, a key step towards more socially acceptable, and arguably more just, transition processes and, therefore, the successful governance of sustainability transitions (de Boon et al. 2023). This was seen, for example, in farmer protests in Europe in 2023–2024 that demonstrated the need for better understanding perceptions of justice to advance sustainability transitions (Finger et al. 2024).

We compared two countries, Finland and England, where less favourable climatic conditions significantly restrict the opportunities of farmers, animal-based agriculture dominates production, and discussions on the agrifood sustainability transition have received significant attention and at least some initiatives and policy planning. Beyond these similarities, the special point of interest is that while both were long-term EU members, Brexit in 2020 radically transformed the political landscape in England. As such, England provides an exceptional comparative viewpoint to a still-EU country. With this comparison, we aim to understand the commonalities and differences in views of just transition between countries (with relatively similar climatic and topographic yet different political conditions) and draw lessons from these insights to promote more successful just agrifood transitions. Our work proceeds as follows. We first introduce the context and conceptualisation of just agrifood transitions and the case countries. Then we present the data, methods, and analytical framework. Under Results, we first outline the country-specific findings and then present the results of the cross-country comparison. Important differences emerged concerning justice issues, considerations of what makes certain arrangements just, problem diagnosis, and proposed or claimed solutions. These findings and their implications are reflected upon in the discussion, where we consider their lessons for realising just transitions.

[2] There are countries (in South America, for example) where political and trade reasons have led to the dominance of animal production yet climatic and topographic conditions would be favourable to diverse plant cropping.

Conceptualising just transition in agrifood system contexts

Transforming agrifood for environmental sustainability implies radical changes (Campbell et al. 2017, p. 7) that involve disruptive policies and potentially unintended or even harmful repercussions (Kaljonen et al. 2024). Achieving *just* transition is therefore a central concern. However, just transition oriented policy documents neither define a just transition in different sectoral contexts nor how to achieve it (Jenkins et al. 2018). This reflects the diverse origins and incohesive theorisation of current just transition scholarship: claims and ideas from the labour movement have been connected to concepts sourced from climate, energy, and environmental justice in political theory (McCauley and Heffron 2018; Jenkins et al. 2018; Ciplet and Harrison 2020). This literature commonly predefines 'just transitions' descriptively and in some normative respects: examinations of the 'justice' expressed at face value (without any predefined notions of justice) are rarely undertaken (de Boon et al. 2023).

Common conceptualisations of justice in just transition research distinguish between three analytically separable yet interlinked and overlapping dimensions of justice: distributive, procedural, and recognitional justice. This distinction was adopted from environmental political justice theorising (Schlosberg 2004, 2007), which understands justice as a relational concept, requiring parity of participation (Fraser 2009). Distributive justice regards considerations of the distribution of various benefits and burdens including rights, opportunities and the costs and responsibilities for transitions (the 'what'). Procedural justice regards the considerations of participatory opportunities and power relations in decision-making (the 'how'). Recognitional justice includes the considerations of socio-cultural recognition and questions regarding whose status should receive particular attention in transition process-planning and implementation (the 'who'). The bipartite distinction between distributive and procedural elements has roots in a Rawlsian understanding of justice. Yet, the centrality of recognition as a distinct dimension of justice has become increasingly important in theoretical discussions that engage in questions regarding the status of marginalised groups and indigenous communities (Whyte 2011; Schlosberg 2007) as well as socio-culturally sensitive issues, including multicultural matters (Fraser & Honneth 2003) or dietary practices (Kaljonen et al. 2021).

Recent theoretical developments have nuanced the conception of just transition in food systems and clarified the perceived justice-determining evaluative features for distributional, procedural, and recognitional justice. The evaluative features have been clarified by analysing the underlying normative criteria used as a base in claims of justice: equality, equity, need, entitlement or merit, as thematised in diverse political, philosophical, and psychological theories of justice (de Boon et al. 2023). In addition, the classic three-dimensional conceptual framework has been expanded by adding capacities, cosmopolitan, and ecological/nonhuman dimensions (Tribaldos and Kortetmäki 2022). The addition of capacities highlights proactive *ex-ante* prevention of injustices alongside the compensation and restoration claims as typically expressed in distributional and recognitional justice in just transition. Cosmopolitan and ecological/nonhuman dimensions as explicitly visible justice recipient categories, according to Tribaldos and Kortetmäki (2022), are important additions to support the visibility of justice recipients who are outside the traditional state-territorial framing of justice and may therefore often get misrecognised and remain invisible (Fraser 2009). Frameworks supporting public deliberation and decision-making on just transition in food systems would benefit from going beyond the currently narrow framings (Huttunen et al. 2024) with the inclusion of less-visible aspects and groups increasing nuance and inclusivity.

Here, we build on these theoretical groundings to conceptualise justice in agri-food transitions that will guide our exploration of justice perceptions at face value (Fig. 1). We use multiple justice dimensions as a tool to categorise expressed perceptions according to their main topical focus, without predefining what justice ought to be through the deployment of normative justice criteria. While maintaining the classical distinction between distributive, procedural, and recognitional justice, we add capacity, recipients and enactors, and residual dimensions (de Boon et al. 2023; see Appendix 3 for the codebook). We have considered 'capacities' as an additional dimension, rather than treating it as part of distributional justice, to enable a clearer distinction between those perceptions relating to (in)justices of distributions as a consequence of external transition processes and those perceptions relating to circumstances from which actors go into the transition. The recipients and enactors dimension cuts across all other dimensions and captures perceptions as *to whom justice should be given* and *who is responsible for creating justice*. In our analytical framework, this general recipient/enactor dimension replaces the more specific cosmopolitan and ecological/nonhuman aspects (Tribaldos and Kortetmäki 2022) to avoid predetermined assumptions regarding recipients or enactors. Finally, the residual dimension covers any additional perceptions that express feelings of or claims for (in)justice that do not fit into other dimensions.

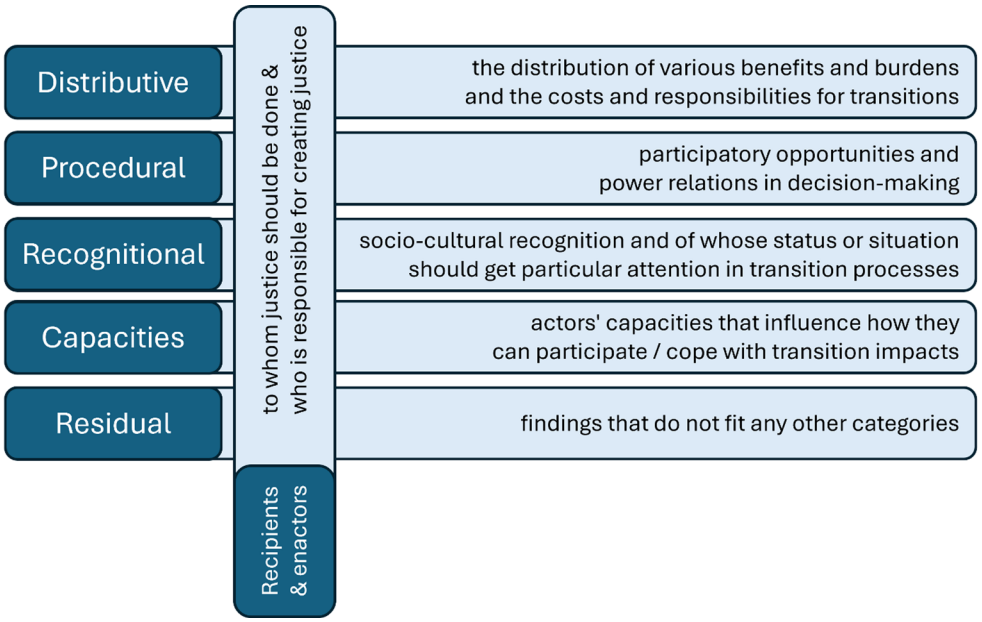

Fig. 1 The analytical framework: conceptualisation of justice perceptions in agri-food transition contexts

Data and methods

Case countries

Finland is the northernmost agricultural country in the world. It has a relatively cold climate (annual average around 5.5 °C in the southernmost regions) yet is self-sufficient in major agricultural products. Finland has the biggest managed area of peatland-cropland (organic soil) in the EU after Germany and over 50% of the Finnish agricultural GHGEs originate from their cultivation although they comprise only 11% of the cultivated land (Huan-Niemi et al. 2023). Organic soils, as well as dairy production, are predominantly located in the east, north-west, and north, highlighting great regional differences. Finnish farming is based on small and mid-sized family farms and the Finnish food industry is mainly composed of SMEs. In ten years, the average farm size has grown from 41 to 51 hectares (Luke 2021).

Food production and consumption is animal dominated. Animal products are mostly of domestic origin and from Finnish agricultural cooperatives (with 97% market share in milk and 80% in meat). Finnish food companies have the overall export value of ~€2B annually. The collapse of Russian trade several times (most notably in 2014 and 2023) has forced the Finnish food industry to find alternative export markets and substitutes for imports of Russian feed, fertilizers and energy. The two largest retail chains account for over 83% of the grocery trade (grocery duopoly) (PTY 2023).

The EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) determines most Finnish agricultural policy as food production remains heavily subsidised. CAP's direct payments and rural development subsidies are complemented by national subsidies with differential region-specific targeting that differentiates Finland's two agricultural regions. For agricultural income, farms highly depend on subsidies that create over 50% of agricultural income in cropping farms and 23–36% in beef and dairy farms. However, on average, only 22% of farm income comes from agricultural production: other entrepreneurship, work outside the farm, and forestry are significant contributors to a diversified income mix. The exceptions to this are dairy farms where more than 60% of farm income comes from production. (See Appendix 2 for details.)

Finland still lacks comprehensive climate- and/or environmental sustainability focused food or agricultural policies. The first attempt was the Climate Food Programme, a white paper initiated by the 2019–2023 government to support low-carbon transition. However, it was never published, primarily due to disagreements over the program's demands for reducing meat consumption. A long-term strategy for food production is currently being developed and is expected to be completed by the end of 2025.

England (part of the UK) is among the northernmost European countries with an oceanic climate (temperate in global terms, similarly to Southern Finland). National variations in England's climate have promoted geographical agricultural specialisation: croplands in the East, livestock in the North, and dairy in the Southwest. England had 104,476 farm holdings in 2023, of which 51% were predominantly devoted to animal-based production (Uberoi et al. 2023). The average English farm in 2022 was 87 ha, although 60% of farm holdings were less than 50 ha. Animal production and consumption is high across the whole of the UK. Regarding exports, the value for the whole of

the UK food exports was ~£24,4B (~€29B at current rates) (Defra 2023). The English grocery sector is dominated by three large supermarkets who held 56% of the market as of November 2024. This marks a recent change from the 'big four' (Tesco, Sainsburys, Asda and Morrisons) with consumers increasingly switching to discount retailers such as Aldi and Lidl from late 2022 (Statista 2024).

England left the EU as part of Brexit in 2020. Before that, the agricultural subsidy system was like the Finnish one. Before Brexit, 58% of England's average farm business income came from CAP Direct Payments. 75% of farms were profitable but two-thirds were so only due to additional income from diversification, agri-environment schemes, and Direct Payments. In particular, mixed, lowland grazing livestock, and cereal-focused farms made agricultural losses (See Appendix 2 for details). The English Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (Defra) used Brexit as an opportunity to transition from basic payments towards subsidising only for the provisioning of public goods such as clean water and air and thriving wildlife. The transition started officially in 2021 and is set to be completed by 2028. Throughout the transition period, Direct Payments were planned to be gradually rolled back and replaced with a set of environmental schemes. This is within a context of wider policy changes, including those in the *Environment Act 2021*, *Agriculture Act 2020*, and trade agreements, that are still undergoing potentially significant changes.[3]

For an expanded description of current agricultural policy status and developments for both countries see Appendix 2.

Data

Our data combines data from 57 informants from Finland (18 semi-structured interviews and the rest from focus group discussions) and 41 informants from England (semi-structured interviews). All qualitative datasets were already collected before the agreed collaboration in the present research (sampling approach and informant group details in Appendix 1). In each country, the interviews focused on themes related to environmentally focused agrifood sustainability transitions, although guided by the research questions of the original projects. We utilised a qualitative interview-based approach to data collection. Interviews as 'social practices', enable opening, dynamically switching, and modifying the themes during the interviews (Roulston 2019). This allowed for our subsequent cross-country exploration through providing rich, contextualised data that goes beyond the descriptive 'what' questions of a quantitative approach. Using data that also answers to 'why' questions increases data richness and possibility of revealing information that was not originally asked for. It also helps seek 'whys' beyond 'whats', deepening knowledge on meaning-construction (Merriam & Grenier 2019), supporting learning across cases, and providing room for new justice considerations to emerge (Robson and McCartan 2016).

From these multiple datasets with differential origins, we included those that we found comparable i.e. having a sufficiently similar data collection setting. Our research team frequently reflected about the feasibility and limitations of combining datasets during the analysis and triangulation (see also Section 'Methodological reflections and limitations'). As such, the present research also offered a valuable opportunity to test cross-project dataset combination and gives methodological insights into best practice for future cross-country studies with, for example, openly accessible qualitative datasets. Detailed data descriptions are provided in Appendix 1.

The Finnish stakeholder data includes interviews with 18 farmers and focus group discussions with 39 participants divided into seven groups. Farmer interviews were conducted in 2020 and ranged from 90 to 120 min. These focused on farmers' justice perceptions of a transition to a carbon neutral milk chain within a Finnish dairy co-operative, in which some informants had engaged, while others had not. Focus group participants discussed the justice of public and private policy means to promote climate-smart and health-supporting food systems. Different groups focused on different transition pathways. Of the analysed groups, three focused on land use and peatlands, two on agricultural technology-driven transition, one on dietary transition, and one on food technology-driven transition. Thus, they paid varying attention to diverse aspects of transition measures and their justice. Participants represented agricultural/business interest groups, administration, farmers, private companies, R&D organizations, food services, advisory organization, health associations and consumer associations. The 2-hour long focus groups were conducted in 2021.

The English stakeholder data includes interviews with 16 farmers across England, 11 representatives of eight organisations who had supported more than 5000 farms across England in the early stages of the transition (through assignment by Defra), and 14 interviews with representatives of other stakeholder organisations representing environmental, social, economic, agricultural, and wider rural interests. The interviews with farmers and farmer-supporting organisations focused on their perceptions of their and other farmers' adaptive capacity in relation to the transition, the influence

[3] After our data collection, the UK policy scheme has started to change again and might significantly switch from the environmental-orientation to more profitability-oriented policies https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/farming-profitability-review-terms-of-reference (visited May 29, 2025). As our study focuses on stakeholder perceptions rather than policy processes, this does not influence our analysis as such.

of institutional aspects on these adaptive capacities, and willingness to adapt to the transition. Stakeholder organisation interviews focused on the perceptions of legitimacy in relation to the proposed transition plans. The 27–90-minute interviews took place online, by phone or in-person, and were conducted in 2021/2022. While the interviews focused on agriculture and the proposed post-Brexit policy changes, wider agrifood system issues also emerged. Although the interviews did not explicitly focus on justice and different topics formed the point of departure for discussions, topics related to all dimensions of justice of our conceptual framework were discussed extensively in all interviews, even if they were not the explicit focus. We see this as a strength, as this enables identifying justice issues that are most salient to participants themselves, as bringing topics up out of one's own account signals their importance.

The datasets represent different transition stages: England has decided and started to implement a transition while Finland remains at the discussion and strategy-debating stage. Implications of this difference, especially to cross-country learnings, are reflected in Sections 'Core similarities and their implications on just transition solutions' and 'In and after the EU: lessons from the cross-country comparison'. In both countries, one dataset concerns explicitly farmers and in England also their interest organisations. This is because farmers are key actors who have to make the transition happen on the ground. Moreover, farmers have been identified as particularly vulnerable to injustices in agrifood transitions, at least in the European context. European farmers are globally relatively small-scale,[4] often highly subsidy-dependent and, due to low profitability, lack resources to adapt to sustainability transition demands (e.g., Puupponen et al. 2022; Murphy et al. 2022; de Boon et al. 2024). As such, the existing injustices that have created current disadvantages make it harder for farmers to engage in transition.

Our analysis is based on the above-described stakeholder datasets. Additionally, we read public policy documents regarding the identified transition policies to contextualise our results against recent policy developments and processes. These offered insights into the institutionalised values, perceptions, and conceptions perceived as legitimate by the majority in a democratic community. The English agricultural policy data reflects post-Brexit developments, aiming to build new policy 'from scratch'; even if path dependency and policy legacy have weakened the originally rather radical ideas for structural change, it remains a particularly interesting comparator to an EU country with relatively similar climatic and topographical agricultural challenges.

Analytical approach and coding process

We analysed the data with an abductive analytical approach through qualitative, comparative content analysis. Our explorative purpose would be difficult to fulfil with a quantitative approach that focuses on descriptive 'what' questions and tends to decontextualise responses. Moreover, it would largely close down the extent of the analysis without providing room for new justice considerations to emerge (Robson and McCartan 2016). We used a two-level coding process. Level 1 coding was guided by the conceptual framework as described in section 'Conceptualising just transition in agrifood system contexts'. While an analytical framework is useful for research categorisations, justice dimensions overlap. Thus, some findings 'moved between categories' depending on the context or perspective. Categorisation was supported by a codebook that was co-developed with all co-authors and through discussions during the coding process. Level 2 codes were data-driven, letting the data 'speak for itself' instead of assuming a certain organisation for the themes that arose from the data.

We used an inclusive approach during the analysis: instead of coding only explicit references to 'justice' or its interpretations such as 'fairness' or 'equality', we also coded implicit mentions. These included both statements on aspects that were valued or aspirational and aspects that were perceived as unacceptable or worth preventing/alleviating. In addition, we included statements that could be linked to distributional, procedural, recognition, or capacities considerations, following our conceptual framework (Fig. 1; for the Codebook, see Appendix 3). An inclusive coding approach does not guarantee that all identified findings would be considered by informants themselves as justice matters. The importance and interpretation of different findings were discussed collectively. To minimise oscillation regarding the threshold for which sections of the interview transcripts would be included, all datasets were pre-coded before Level 1 coding by a single researcher, person A, who is native in Finnish and has full competence in English. Pre-coding identified sections of the interview transcripts in which justice related topics were discussed.

Two researchers, B and C (native in Finnish, fully competent in English) undertook Level 1 and 2 coding that were conducted simultaneously for a document being coded. The coding was theory-guided (abductive), giving also room for revising Level 1 framework if needed. Level 2 coding provided data-driven nuancing. Data-driven coding is unavoidably influenced by the researcher's cognitive horizon and understanding. Thus, coding processes and results were

[4] In studied countries, average farm size is 51 hectares in Finland and 87 hectares in England. Agrifood systems and farm size differ greatly around the high-income world. For example, the US average farm size is nearly 190 hectares and in Australia c. 4.7 thousand hectares.

discussed and iteratively refined in an ongoing exchange between coders during the first part of the process that coded the Finnish documents. This was followed by the coding of English documents done by C. The order of coding was not perceived to influence findings except for allowing the more intense iteration when both B and C worked with the Finnish data. Next, discussions and reflections about coding choices and the interpretation of findings took place between all co-authors, to further refine the coding and conduct triangulation. After this stage, similarities and differences between countries were compared by comparing the previously identified topics revealed in the analysis of the individual countries and to identify where they were (almost) identical, notably similar, or notably different. Identified similarities and differences were discussed in several author group meetings to understand their significance and their relation to the differing contexts in the two case countries. In the comparative findings, we excluded those cross-country differences that were clearly explained by data collection contexts.[5] We could not separate farmer voices from the Finnish focus group data due to recording and transcription technology, yet farmers represented a minority of participants (8 out of 39). First, we did only cross-country comparison without additional comparison between farmers and mixed stakeholders. However, after checking the initial findings, we considered that this additional analytical aspect is worth adding and scientifically plausible.

An inclusive coding process and qualitative, comparative content analysis are suitable for characterising the diversity and variation in perceptions of, and connections to, just transition. This allows the identification of concerns that are broadly shared and those that are only addressed by some informants, but more quantitative distinctions are beyond the scope of this approach. It should also be noted that while thematic interviews enable the identification of common concerns, broadly shared views, and points of disagreement, they can only imply the possibility of consensus.

Results

In sections 'Justice perceptions in the context of Finnish agrifood transitions' and 'Justice perceptions in the context of English agrifood transitions', we compare similarities and differences with respect to two informant groups: (i) farmers or those speaking directly about farmer interests, and (ii) mixed stakeholders (non-farming, except for 8 farmers in the Finnish focus group data); in section 'Cross-country comparison of findings', we extend this comparison to between countries.

Justice perceptions in the context of Finnish agrifood transitions

Distributive justice findings were most prominent in the data. Informants linked them especially to farmer livelihoods, payments and subsidy allocation, compensation, and the distribution of costs. For just distribution of payments, views were mixed. Both groups preferred a market-driven (including co-op-steered) redistribution of cost-bearing and reward for carbon actions: public policy interventions were less favoured. Notably, the interviewed dairy farmers belong to a large co-op company; crop producers do not have similar co-operatives. Otherwise, some favoured payments relative to work done, others relative to environmental achievements. Mixed stakeholders called for allocating subsidies to active farmers producing food, rather than paying for environmental action only, while some emphasised that farmers are active environmental goods providers. A big issue was who should bear the costs of transition: government, markets, farmers, or consumers? Payment-statements were often linked to actual costs of transition actions and ensuring regional equality was considered important especially for areas dominated by peatland farming and animal production. Food price impacts were discussed from both farmer (implications to farm income) and consumer (implications to affordability) perspectives, which were noted to partly conflict. Regarding trade impacts, concerns of greenwashing and competition from less sustainable yet cheaper overseas producers were raised. Mixed stakeholders also suggested that Finland's responsibility to global food security requires domestic production and so prioritised the national security of supply in transition policy design. In terms of policy instruments, stakeholders preferred market-driven transitions, soft policies and self-regulation by companies, and voluntary measures. However, they agreed that policy interventions are needed to level the playing field for different types of sustainable businesses, such as small startups.

In procedural justice, appropriate and fair use, and the availability of sufficient knowledge in decision-making processes were positioned as critical. Mixed stakeholders called for evidence-based procedures relying on scientific and comparable data as well as fair data use regarding data ownership rights (in farming and retail companies, for example). Farmers perceived better representation and participation as important: they considered that too few policymakers had a background in farming. Opinions on whether farmers' voices are heard in policymaking were, however, divided. For some, the presence of the farmer interest

[5] Three excluded topics were: information provision to consumers; consumer preferences and capacities; and data justice (fair use, access, data sovereignty). In our original list of comparative findings, these points comprised 3 out of 23 thematic findings.

organization MTK signified the presence of farmers' voice while for others MTK does not represent farmer diversity. Strengthening trust between farmers and policymakers was considered essential for more just participatory processes with time-scale suggested as critical. Mixed stakeholders proposed that sufficient time, clear messaging, and space for flexibility would make procedures more just.

Recognition-related issues were prominent and concerned the blaming of farmers and polarization in public discussions; mixed stakeholders also expressed concern about the blaming of consumers. Farmers made claims for better public acknowledgement of the positive impacts of existing farming activities. Within this, public recognition of the 'realities' of food production and the sustainability of domestic animal production compared to other countries was considered critical. Overall, farmers argued that their lived knowledges of local conditions and environmental matters were insufficiently recognised. Both groups challenged the national framing of low-carbon transition that depicts agricultural activities as a significant source of GHGEs and emphasised allocating responsibility to foreign actors. The argument was that Finland already performs environmentally better than many other countries, so justice requires demanding action from others instead of pressuring Finnish producers. Especially farmers doubted whether public discussion about GHGEs from agricultural land use was based on appropriate knowledge and suggested more attention on urban emissions. Mixed stakeholders questioned definitions for 'food system transition', 'fair transition', 'peatland' and 'healthy diet'.

Capacity-building was mentioned frequently, albeit quite generally, by farmers as important. Both groups highlighted knowledge building as important, but farmers considered financial resources as key due to the investment demands of transformation. Informants emphasised that capacities to engage in transition demands differ regionally depending, for example, on land availability. Stakeholders also identified consumers as important recipients for capacity-building support by carbon footprint knowledge provision that requires the standardisation and harmonisation of carbon accounting methods.

Enactors and recipients of justice were discussed little by informants explicitly. Justice to farmers in general was called for, and active, domestic and peatland farmers were named as more specific groups. Mixed stakeholders occasionally mentioned consumers generally or low-income consumers in food price considerations. The state was identified as the main enactor of justice, and dairy farmers identified the dairy co-op as responsible too. Research and development, food services, and retail actors came up a few times, but these other references were vague regarding who should be responsible and how.

Justice perceptions in the context of English agrifood transitions

Distributive justice themes were prominent for both groups and included farmers' livelihoods and profitability concerns, which also linked to food price and the criteria for payments to farmers. In the farmer interviews, two different views emerged on how payments should be made: either relative to actions or to verifiable outcomes (environmental or biodiversity improvements). Payment relative to actions was considered as fairer by many, if not all, farmers with the argument that farmers cannot always control the consequences of their actions. Others perceived payments relative to outcomes as better reflecting how public money should be distributed and this public goods perspective also included access to nature, the securing of which was seen as important. Other stakeholders focused on the just and effective arrangement of the new payment scheme and the distribution of the costs of new environmental actions. Informants often made sense of the new environmental land management schemes as a matter of paying for public goods rather than income support, resulting in a preference for payments relative to environmental outcomes. Furthermore, other stakeholders expressed concerns about regulative equality related to livelihoods and international trade. They feared that the environmentally more regulated English sector will suffer from competitive disadvantage compared to foreign production. This was feared to create a double disadvantage: export opportunities and the viability of domestic production in domestic markets may both become threatened by less sustainable foreign production. Some informants, including farmers, also positioned this as a risk to food security. Farmers were particularly concerned for the potentially detrimental impacts of environmental policy and linked this to access to land, greenwashing, and how the new policies differentially impact farming capacities in different circumstances.

Participation and representation were the most prominent themes that both groups raised regarding procedural justice. Predictability and anticipation were central and more important to the farmer-group than to other stakeholders but raised by both groups. Farmers perceived that the concrete implications of the new policies were impossible to predict which severely hampers their possibilities to anticipate and adapt to forthcoming changes. Both groups strongly criticised policy processes for the lack of transparency; despite many stakeholder inclusion events, it remained unclear whether or how this had influenced policies. Many of the informants had engaged in the new agricultural policy-planning processes and perceived the opportunity to participate as good in principle but were disappointed about the lack of genuine impact. Some stakeholders also felt representation

had relied on the 'usual suspects' and excluded other voices; representation issues were linked to power disparities, created by differences in access to information (e.g. government plans and closed-cabinet decisions) that made certain actors significantly more influential. These factors eroded trust in governmental policy processes. Farmers also criticised how knowledge was created for, and used in, policy processes; Defra was perceived as dismissing relevant information, leading to poor decision-making about agricultural matters.

In terms of recognition, farmers criticised the environment-focused problem definition grounding the new English agricultural policy plans for disregarding actors' views of the biggest problem(s). Regardless of this criticism, some stakeholders brought up respect for nature with an emphasis on holism to support ecological health, ecosystem processes, intrinsic value of nature, and the regeneration of resources. Environmental concerns were shared between farmers and other informants, which differed from the commonly made polarising assumption of 'environmentalists vs. farmers'. Suggested alternative problem framings varied, yet were often linked to the cheap food problem, which was seen as a national issue. Relatedly, recognition of farmers' contributions to society was seen as important with calls made to ensure the price of food both recognises farmers' contribution to society, reflects the (re)valuation of food, and guarantees the profitability needed to support domestic farming and sustainable practices. Several informants felt that consumers misrecognise farmers by desiring to spend on luxury goods instead of acknowledging the real value and importance of food production. Both groups called for better recognition of farm-specific conditions and the resulting differential possibilities to engage in the environmental schemes. Flexibility and manoeuvring space were positioned as critical for farmers to seek farm-specific solutions. The recognition of differential circumstances and capacities also urged tailored capacity-building and support services, instead of one-size-fits-all models of consultation and information services.

Capacity-building for farmers was another major theme alongside distributive justice and linked strongly to recognition of difference, highlighting knowledge provision, training, and service tailoring. Services that support collaboration, help farmers make sense of the new operating environment and explore farm-specific actions amidst time pressures and bureaucracy were highlighted by both groups as essential to transformative capacities. Stakeholders located root problems for capacity disparities in the lack of institutional support and coordination, and cultural factors where the emphasis on individual self-sufficiency and geographical fragmentation have not promoted a culture of collaboration.

Enactors and recipients of justice were little discussed, except for general statements that farmers need particular support in the transition and a few references to nonhuman nature. Only single mentions for particularly support-needing groups (e.g. young farmers) were found. The state was occasionally explicitly mentioned as an actor who should address transition problems, and it was also criticised for injustices, but there was otherwise little attribution of responsibility.

Cross-country comparison of findings

Distributive justice

The most widely shared cross-country concern was farmers' livelihood and profitability. This also included the distribution of transition-induced costs and burdens. In England, this often emerged as a demand that all environmental actions should have 'rationale' from the livelihoods viewpoint and linked to concerns that essential subsidy-income streams were being lost in the new environmental schemes. In Finland, livelihood concerns related to general hardship in the sector. In both countries, these challenges were also perceived as manifesting material misrecognition: measured by pay, farmers' work is inadequately valued. Beyond agreeing that just transition requires better livelihoods for farmers, views on the most just form of payments were divided except for a general endorsement that market-based rewards for environmental action would be best. Additionally, the distribution of risks brought by policy changes was discussed in England, especially by farmers, but less so in Finland.

Transition policy impacts on farmers' access to land were discussed in both countries but invoked two unique issues in Finland. Finnish actors highlighted the importance of regional considerations and support measures. This linked to the peatland-rich regions, since the agricultural use of peatlands must decline to achieve emission reductions. However, farmers lack access to alternative fields and agricultural subsidies are capitalised into land prices, which makes acquisition of new non-peaty farmland (to secure profitability by expanding farm size) challenging for many. Peatlands were not discussed at all by English informants, although English lowland peat soils account for 3% of all anthropogenic GHGEs in England.[6]

Shared concerns about transition policy impacts on the trade dynamics and anticipation of greenwashing (externalizing emissions by importing from less-regulated producer countries) were common to both. For example, trade

[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lowland-agricultural-peat-task-force-chairs-report-government-response/eeff32ff-4800-4134-a03f-4e517c0028d6.

dynamics influenced informants' concerns that national self-sufficiency, linked to food availability and thereby food security, might be undermined if environmental regulations made domestic production less competitive. A difference between countries was that stakeholders in England were anxious about environmental policy impacts on trade and food sector export competitiveness due to the disadvantage caused by stricter regulation compared to other trading countries. These concerns were largely absent in Finland.

Food price was a tension-laden topic (affordability vs. fair price to farmers) in both countries with direct bearing on the problem framing. However, affordability concerns were more prevalent in the Finnish data, with mixed group actors showing concern for the price, especially when the discussion focused on the dietary and technology-driven aspects of agrifood transitions.

In terms of distributional justice mechanisms, informants in both countries favoured positive incentive-oriented policy strategies over negative disincentives or stricter regulative enforcement: 'carrot, not stick' was the shared preference for policies. A notable difference related to policy instrument types and spheres was that Finnish actors have a more positive perception of the market-driven distribution of transition burdens and responsibilities, which linked to the criticism of unfair policy restrictions distorting subsidies. English actors, instead, often perceived the market as a core issue (the cheap food problem), resulting in little faith that markets would serve as a well-functioning arena for just agrifood transitions. However, informants in both countries saw that, ideally, markets should give farmers adequate pay for their work without having to rely on subsidies.

Procedural justice: anticipation, trust, and timescales

In the English data, policy anticipation and decision-making transparency were among the most prominent procedural justice topics, in contrast to Finland. Actors highlighted the difficulties faced by farmers in preparing for the forthcoming changes in England due to the longstanding ambiguity about the concrete impacts of policy processes in different circumstances. This means that predicting even short-term future operative environments for diverse farms is difficult. While Finnish actors called for sufficient timescales for adapting to transition demands, anticipation of the overall policy process was not a major topic. This was likely the case because although the dairy co-op had initiated carbon-neutrality policies, agrifood climate policies had not yet started to realise otherwise and the previous climate food program process created a program that was neither accepted nor implemented by the corresponding ministry.

Farmers' lack of trust in government was common to both countries. Trust was often discussed as an antecedent to positive perceptions of just decision-making. Whereas in Finland trust was discussed in explicit terms among farmers, in England the trust deficit manifested via criticism around the transparency deficit in policy processes. Trust was also linked to representation, listening, and the use of knowledge in policy processes. Appropriate knowledge use was seen as critical to just decision-making, and a shared concern was that policymaking processes proceed with insufficient knowledge, dismiss lived knowledges, or misuse knowledge.

Recognitional justice

Problem framing answers what a transition is primarily required for and who defines the transition agenda. Actors challenged the definition of the problem as a low-carbon and environmental sustainability transition. The shared call was made for more holistic transition approaches that keep food production and the viability of farming at the forefront with environmental considerations subordinate to them. Yet, in England, calls for holism also involved access to nature as a public good that needed to be protected or better supported in the forthcoming changes. By contrast, in Finland a similar discussion was missing. Many English informants identified cheap food policy as the core systemic problem that should be addressed. English farmers, especially, criticised the post-Brexit policy scheme as unjustly narrow. The EU-CAP was replaced with a policy scheme that lacks an element equivalent to the basic income in CAP, clearly shifting policy focus towards a more environmentally oriented payment system. In Finland, mixed informants called for creating a joint purpose and vision at the EU and national levels instead of the proposed national low-carbon agrifood transitions.

Calls for the recognition of difference among farmers arose in both countries. They referred both to the acknowledgement and consideration of the differential circumstances, vulnerabilities, and support needs of different farms, and to the recognition of farmers' knowledge about their local operating environments and so most appropriate environmental measures. In Finland, regionality was also emphasised. Beyond peatland-rich regions, Finland is also regionally divided in production (north-east 'cattle-Finland' and south-west 'crop-Finland'). Differences influence the transition impacts that different regions face, with action essential to alleviate differential region-specific burdens.

Actors in both countries argued for better recognition of farmers' positive societal contribution, as food producers and environmental benefit creators. This call, and its link to polarisation, was however more prominent in Finland where actors reported perceptions of misrecognition through the perceived blaming of farmers for 'climate problems'. The

polarized public debates were criticised as being misrecognitive, disrespectful, and preventing constructive collaboration for just climate action. Simultaneously, polarization was also employed, for example, to reject the researchers' framing of low-carbon transition, with arguments that Finnish livestock production is already so sustainable that dietary transition is unnecessary.

The countries differed in proposed means for delivering the recognition of difference. English informants expressed the need for more tailored services to farmer where one can have person-level encounters and support. In Finland, the ProAgria advisory organisation already provides individually tailored, no-cost services and in-person encounters to such support, helping deliver recognition and support capacity building. On the other hand, while Finnish stakeholders emphasised regionally differential actions and policies, England already has regionally focused transition-support schemes, for example for upland farms that are perceived as facing greater challenges under the new policy system. Finland is divided into agricultural subsidy differentiation (higher support to northern areas with harsher climatic conditions) but lacks a system for regionally differentiated transition-support measures. In Finland, regional development policy has been a strong policy issue at the national level for decades, which might explain high expectations in terms of regionally specific policies in the transitions context.

Capacity building

Both countries shared the perceived importance of capacity-building to making transitions more just. Farmers in both countries shared capacity-related concerns including knowledge, collaborative capacities, and financial resources and they perceived transition-related resource and skill deficits at a more concrete level than mixed informants. A notable difference was that English actors frequently discussed services in terms of tailoring them to differential farmer needs (also linking this to the recognition of difference) to help farmers understand new policy requirements, deal with new administrative burdens, and make environmental impact calculations. In-person services and human contact for farmers was also positioned as essential in England, contrasting to Finland where discussions focused on making information and data available to all farmers with data sharing, for example, generally embraced as a 'benefit-to-all-parties' solution.

Recipients and enactors

Specific discussion on the recipients and enactors of justice was largely missing, except for two views regarding recipients: firstly, justice to domestic farmers is at the heart of just agrifood transitions. Secondly, while farmers gained most attention, other domestic food system actors and their burdens or risks for (usually economic) losses in transitions must also be considered, as well as the position of socio-economically disadvantaged consumer groups. In England, environmental organizational actors called for the recognition of nature in agricultural and environmental policies, describing that actions should be made for nature's sake, not only for human dependence on its provisioning. This was missing from the Finnish data but may be explained by the absence of environmental NGOs, despite invitation, from the Finnish focus group discussions. As the findings in this analytical domain were so scarce compared to others, these results are excluded from Table 1 that below summarises the findings.

Comparing farmers' views to those of other stakeholders was a valuable exercise and revealed some differential or additional concerns (Table 1). Some of the other stakeholder groups had more specific topics or concerns they brought forward: these were most notable in the case of environmental organisations bringing in the nonhuman perspective (in line with multispecies sentient, or multiple justices: see, e.g., Coulson and Milbourne 2021; de Bruin et al. 2024), and retail and food industry who highlighted the consumer perspective (related findings were left out from this study due to their highly context-specific origin that explained the difference). However, it was notable how the majority of concerns we identified came up across different informant groups. Future studies could test and enrich this further by including 'ordinary consumers' as another stakeholder group (cf. de Boon et al. 2023).

Discussion and implications

Findings from both countries revealed more similarities than differences. Below, Section 'Core similarities and their implications on just transition solutions' discusses the lessons and policy implications from two core similarities between countries: the centrality of problem framing contestation and the recognition of farmers, including livelihood concerns. Section 'In and after the EU: lessons from the cross-country comparison' discusses differences and lessons related to the EU vs. ex-EU status of the countries. Finally, Section 'Methodological reflections and limitations' reflects upon the learnings for other countries as well as methodological reflections and limitations.

While our discussion focuses on lessons between the studied countries, these can be read and reflected in relation to other countries too, and many of the identified solution-proposals and policy implications are likely applicable to

Table 1 Cross-country comparison with a keyword summary

Justice Dimension	Keyword summary of topics raised by the participants	FINLAND Farmers[a]	FINLAND Mixed focus groups[b]	ENGLAND Farmers + supporting NGOs[c]	ENGLAND Other stakeholders[d]
Distributive	Livelihoods and profitability	x	x	x	x
	Greenwashing	x	x	x	x
	Payment criteria	x (*)	x (*)	x (*)	x (*)
	Food price	x (*)	x (*)	x (*)	x (*)
	Costs and compensation	x		x	x
	Access to land	x		x	
	"Carrot not stick" policies		x	x	
	Burdens: regional equality	x			
	Responsibility is somewhere abroad	x			
	Burdens: peatlands	x			
	Market-driven distribution		x		
	Extra support for small businesses		x		
	Food security (as availability)			x	
	Capacities to farm			x	
	Risks			x	
	Public goods incl. access to nature				x
	Regulative equality (internationally)				x
Procedural	Representation	x (*)		x	x (*)
	Trust (deficit towards government)	x		x	x
	Appropriate knowledge (use)	x	x	x	
	Participation	x			x
	Timescale of implementation	x	x		
	Transparency of processes			x	x
	Predictability			x	x
	Fair data use		x (*)		
Recognition	Problem framing	x	x (*)	x (*)	x (*)
	Esteem: valuing farmers' work	x	x	x	
	Farm differences	x		x	x
	Farmers' knowledge	x		x	
	Blaming and polarization	x	x (*)		
	Respect for nature			x	x
	Regional differences	x			
	Valuing food			x	
Capacities	Knowledge support	x	x (*)	x	x
	…To engage, generally	x		x	x
	Collaboration	x		x	x
	Money	x		x	
	More tailored services			x	x
	Regional differences	x			
	Standardization		x		
	Data sharing (farmers/administration)		x		

(*) marks aspects where within-group views differed on how these should need to take shape

[a] Interviews focused on farmers' justice perceptions of a transition to a carbon neutral milk chain within a Finnish dairy co-operative

[b] Focus group discussions focused on the justice of public and private policy means to promote climate-smart and health-supporting food systems

[c] Interviews focused on perceptions of farmers' adaptive capacity, the influence of institutional aspects on this, and willingness to adapt to the transition

[d] Interviews focused on perceptions of input, output, and throughput legitimacy of the proposed transition plans

other societies whose agricultural systems and transition demands sufficiently resemble those of our case countries.

Core similarities and their implications on just transition solutions

Contested problem framing is nurtured by existing injustices

The contested problem framing discloses the plural and even conflicting views about the system and required transformations. Contestations indicate that food system transitions are value-laden processes that challenge existing conceptions and identities (Huttunen et al. 2024; Murphy et al. 2022). Unpacking how the problem or solution is defined, and by whom, can also give insights into the power structures within agrifood systems. Powerful or privileged actors may attempt to define just transition debates to serve their interests (e.g. Moussu 2020; Maluf et al. 2022; Huttunen et al. 2024). However, even the environmentally transformative targets that do not represent the interests of the currently powerful or privileged actors, among whom, stakeholders in this study often counted the large businesses and multinational corporations, can become contested (Huttunen et al. 2024). While our data originates earlier, contestation motivations are in line with some of the common themes identified in European farmer protests by Finger et al. (2024): income concerns, burdens from tightening environmental regulations, and perception of unfair import competition. This type of contestation was particularly highlighted in the Finnish focus groups focused on dietary pathways to agrifood sustainability transitions: these called for future research that pays more attention to the animal question, i.e. the moral status of animals and their ethically justifiable role in a sustainable food system. This question is a focal issue for agrifood sustainability transitions (Blattner 2020; Kaljonen et al. 2021; Herzon et al. 2024) and has already polarised public discussions across Europe. Questioning and challenging the problem framing brings forward recognition-aspects of justice (e.g. Hobson 2003; Fraser 2009).

We see the contestation as linked to a trust deficit and, in the case of farmers, perceived mis-/nonrecognition. Stakeholders' lack of trust towards government, policy processes, and knowledge producers can make it very hard to embrace the proposed transition measures and their justificatory framing(s). A trust deficit has been attributed to just transition failures (Aklin 2024), which highlights the importance of trust-generating processes in agrifood system decision-making and communications. Interestingly, in both countries, broadening problem framing reflects the calls for moving from reactive to active and even emancipatory policy measures (Turnheim 2023; Kaljonen et al. 2024). This supports previous suggestions that successful just transitions need to go beyond transition policy impacts and look deeper into the existing injustices in the system (Kaljonen et al. 2024).

Existing socio-economic problems and the insufficient support for securing domestic food production were proposed as the primary problem needing attention, even if the existence of environmental issues was acknowledged. Some actors suggested shifting environmental focus on to the commitment of other countries. Both Finnish and English informants frequently contended that domestic food production is already sustainable in global terms and further pressure for national actions can be too costly unless other countries are guaranteed to take the same path. Perceived domestic superiority is a known phenomenon (e.g. Huttunen et al. 2024 for Finland) but it posits a continuous challenge to gaining public acceptance for environmental policies. This also relates to concerns about agrifood carbon leakage, one form of greenwashing that has been noted as a risk (see Arvanitopoulos et al. 2021 for the OECD; Zech and Schneider 2019 for the EU). Understanding better what would make regulative enforcement just would be important, given the concerns surrounding the 'freeriding' of irresponsible players in global markets. This serves as a reminder of the expansive networks within which agrifood systems are entangled and so, in addition to asking the 'what', 'who' and 'how' of justice, participants ask *where* is this justice situated? These questions reflect the different aspects of Nancy Fraser's relational justice concept (Fraser 2009). What impact do choices in one space have on achieving just transition in the diverse and multiple places to which it connects through socio-cultural, economic, political, and environmental relations?

The transition contestation is connected to many other concerns and comes with several implications. Firstly, the comprehensiveness of existing food system problems makes it unlikely that solely environmentally focused plans could gain the broad societal support and trust that is needed for successful transitions (de Boon et al. 2022). Trust is also foundational for transition policies to be considered just in the first place. Thus, improved participatory processes (see also Little et al. 2024; Murphy et al. 2022), are arguably critically important to enacting more just transitions. Research on the connections between participatory processes and trust-creation between different actor groups, especially between farmers and policymakers but also beyond, would generate valuable lessons with international applicability. Secondly, the purpose and importance of environmental actions needs better communication. Environmental impact calculations that include all consumed food regardless of origin are important to create transparent emission accountability that addresses the fears of greenwashing. There is

also a pressing need to agree on international mechanisms to reduce carbon leakage and prevent economic freeriding. Thirdly, more discussion is needed about sustainability and justice considerations in the international food trade. In both studied countries, the perceived environmental superiority of domestic food production calls for future research to better understand the 'domestic superiority' belief and its implications. These views are not specific to the countries studied. Future research should thus focus on what grounds such argumentation and how such conceptions can be overcome when they are empirically ill-informed or, even when empirically correctly grounded, how to make the discourse internalise the point that 'more sustainable' is not synonymous to 'sustainable'.

Despite major similarities, country-specific political conditions and legislation impact on the type and variety of issues raised. For example, English informants raised access to nature as an important and under-considered concern in the new policy processes. In Finland, in contrast, the everyman's rights legally confirm the right of people to access nature in the countryside and forests regardless of ownership. This system, established across Scandinavia, has a century-long history highlighting that earlier institutional arrangements can prevent certain concerns that actors link to just agrifood transitions.

Recognising farmers

Our key findings suggest that the recognition of farmers is at the heart of just agrifood transitions. Materially, this links to distributive justice: livelihoods and a fair payment to farmers. Immaterially, it links to respect, social esteem recognition to farmers as recognising their positive contributions to society (Jütten 2017), and recognition of their knowledge. Recognition was also strongly linked to the acknowledgement of particularity: that farmers face transition demands and impacts in very different positions and, thus, require differentiated solutions. Here, reflection on the 'where' of justice is also critical as the context, in environmental and stakeholder terms, enforces local adaptations to the broader discourses of both 'justice' and 'transition'. Policy documents that we reviewed acknowledged the material-distributive aspects of recognition quite well but not the immaterial aspects.

Calls for the recognition of differences among farmers echo earlier research where farmers call for greater flexibility and plurality to achieve environmental goals and the recognition of their local knowledges (Puupponen et al. 2015; Coolsaet 2016). It also links to Fraser's (2009) notion of recognition justice as status equality, which would position diverse farming practices as equally valid solutions (Coolsaet 2016). English policy documents acknowledged the issue and outlined participatory mechanisms for a more dialogical post-Brexit agricultural transition, striving for more flexible and simple standards to enable greater farmer autonomy for environmental measures. However, such mechanisms were described by informants as unquestioned and lacking the critical unpacking to promote their success.

Mediating material and immaterial recognition to farmers can help the achievement of voice, which many producers feel is currently lacking (Murphy et al. 2022; Puupponen et al. 2022). The studied countries demonstrated different success points and learning opportunities in this respect. In Finland, the ProAgria advisory organisation currently provides individually tailored encounters that were called for in England and that help deliver both the much-prized recognition of differences among farmers in policy implementation and support capacity building for farmers. While this was perceived valuable by farmers, it remains unclear whose recognition-giving would be most needed to alleviate their felt blaming and polarisation. In England, public discussion and policy processes have not generated the polarisation and blaming of farmers that was a big issue in Finland. The data suggests that the spaces of peatland and animal producers contributed to farmers' perception of being particular targets due to the negative public attitudes towards their specific production spaces. Otherwise, our study was unable to track the factors that might explain this difference. However, since blaming is not unique to Finland (see e.g. Olausson 2017 for Sweden), studies to understand this phenomenon would be valuable.

In and after the EU: lessons from the cross-country comparison

Building trust and increasing policy anticipation, while fostering more effective agrifood sustainability policies, exemplifies tensions between social and environmental sustainability goals (Ciplet and Harrison 2020). Different facets of this tension were visible in England and Finland. In Finland, the EU CAP brings more stability to farmers but has also been criticised for path-dependencies that impede effective environmental sustainability policy changes. The post-CAP status of England implied an interesting potential for cross-country comparison and lessons.

In England, the post-Brexit environment was presented by Defra as providing an opportunity for a complete structural change and it was widely regarded as providing opportunities for a transition to a more just agricultural system. However, harnessing these opportunities have, to date, largely failed. Original transition plans have been scaled back, the CAP basic payments safety net has disappeared, and farmers feel increasingly less positive about the future of farming (Defra 2025). While the Environmental Land Management

planning process increased participatory engagement, it was criticised for superficial and ineffectual participation. This marks the difference between participation and *meaningful participation* (de Boon et al. 2022) and mismatch between the principles and practices of co-design in these processes (Little et al. 2024). Government instability after Brexit further eroded trust in Defra. English policy development demonstrates how the trust-transparency-involvement 'triangle' (Drews and van den Bergh 2016) failed to build during the process. The linkage of knowledge, trust, and transparency demonstrates how procedural and recognitional justice intersect in ways that make it impossible to promote one without attending to the other.

Lessons from this include the importance of governments meeting the commitments they make and a degree of stability in transition plans even through changes, to ensure transparency in decision-making processes, and meaningful stakeholder inclusion. Post-Brexit England also demonstrates the problems of wholesale system abolition before new policies are sufficiently developed. The post-Brexit context and its impact on trade, as well as geopolitical instabilities, and uncertainty due to increasing climate change impacts often occupied farmers as more immediate challenges. Transition processes added further challenges to the 'polycrisis', aggravating the perceived instabilities. Finding balance between predictability and effective transformation in agrifood systems is the core challenge for successful transitions. The post-Brexit context demonstrated how the changing trade environment might aggravate the economic impacts of the transition, which are among the main triggers in the recent European farmer protests (Finger et al. 2024). In England, food exports comprise a big market despite post-Brexit stagnation and both stakeholders and policy documents discussed competition management in a post-Brexit trade environment, raising questions regarding the role of the state in 'levelling the playing field'. In Finland, exports have less economic significance. Furthermore, having experienced frequent export disruptions due to geopolitical reasons (EU sanctions against Russia), Finnish actors are already oriented towards seeking diverse export opportunities with food quality, rather than price, as the competitive asset. In England, the 'cheap food problem' intertwines with the environmental transition as both a problem and adding to the perceived economic risks of environmental sustainability transitions. This creates a paradox in England: getting rid of the current cheap food paradigm is both demanded and feared. The more recent policy developments, unfolded after our data collection, suggest that the new policies might give more attention to the profitability and trade competitiveness issues; whether or how much that happens at the cost of environmental subsidies that are facing significant cuts is to be foreseen.

Methodological reflections and limitations

The applied analytical framework served the general analytical process well; its comprehensiveness meant the 'residual' category was not needed. However, the data showed clearly how justice dimensions intersect, as often the same topic links to different analytical categories depending on the context. This highlights the need for careful and dialogical attention to the role and impact of interpretation in the analytical process and subsequent results. In our case, we benefitted from a scientifically, contextually and ontologically diverse team, which supported a shared critical reflection on interpretation. Our experience suggested that future studies could benefit from including 'spatial justice' as a separate analytical category to engage with the 'where' of justice and explicitly focusing on cross-category linkages. However, this would also need further critical elaboration first to see whether the addition would have real additional value or dilute analytical clarity.

Cross-country data comparison was an interesting exercise: it showed that the major justice concerns expressed by the informants were notably similar, even if context-specific differences emerged in further details. Even with separately collected data sets, this highlights that this kind of cross-country comparison is a meaningful and scientifically justifiable exercise but does require an analytical framework to ensure the shared organisation for findings. Moreover, it was critical that each of the case studies was familiar to at least some of the research team, as combining the 'beyond-data' contextual factors with an 'outsider' perspective was significant to the holistic and critical interpretation and understanding of various findings. The multidisciplinary and multinational team background was therefore an asset to this kind of study. Thus, we also recommend the diversity of researchers and a reflexive, rather than 'maximally streamlined', research process for similar types of research problems.

The main limitations of this study relate to dataset differences. The group-specific starting points in Finnish focus group discussions influenced topics that arose in each group. Thus, groups cannot be compared to each other. Moreover, insights offered by focus groups are based on collective and consensus-seeking processes, which make the nature of the data different to that of individual interviews. Group dynamic interactions influence responses and often lessen the richness and details of data provided by focus groups. Hence, future research could benefit from using one method for data collection. However, treating the focus group data as a whole revealed the broader spectrum of concerns and, we argue, succeeded in revealing issues that interviews with less particular thematisation would have brought forward. Conducting focus groups online rather than in-person,

however, allowed for a more open and honest exchange of opinions due to lower level of social pressure. Overall, seven focus groups provided an opportunity for 39 different participants with national geographic reach to express their justice concerns surrounding just transition in the Finnish food system.

Other limitations of this study relate to the research scope and analytical approach. This kind of qualitative study is not representative, even though we ensured data saturation, and the data illustrates the perceived challenges at the moment of collection. Future research could revisit both cases to see if, and in what way, perceptions changed and why. This could be particularly exciting for England due to the new policy developments that might significantly change the previously created policy packages and post-Brexit subsidy systems. Future research could also compare several countries with similar kinds of environmental challenges in agrifood systems but greater differences in agrifood sustainability transitions initiatives to disclose how differential solutions produce or alleviate various just transition concerns.

Conclusion

While stakeholder studies and case examinations for just agrifood transitions are increasing, comparative perspectives are few but could promote just agrifood transitions and learning in two ways. First, understanding similarities helps identify topics for cross-country learning and policy diffusion. Second, finding explanatory factors for differences can disclose political or socio-cultural features, the dispersal of which might help other countries or regions resolve similar challenges. To address these knowledge needs and test the possibility of cross-country comparison, this study compared two countries, England and Finland. Using interview and focus group data, we examined how justice related issues are described and claimed in the context of agrifood system sustainability transitions in these countries and the extent to which they differ.

Findings from both countries revealed more similarities than differences. The similarity of many concerns, especially among farmers, implies that just agrifood transitions would greatly benefit from increased cross-country exchange: comparative research, learning, experimentation and knowledge exchange. The identified similarities also demonstrate the importance of a holistic framing of agrifood sustainability transitions and, despite increased complexity, attention to similarly comprehensive policy planning processes.

We also uncovered relevant differences concerning concrete issues under the themes of justice, considerations regarding what makes certain arrangements just, and differences in problem diagnosis as well as proposed or claimed solutions. These differences also suggest potential spaces for cross-country learning and knowledge/solution diffusion. For example, the Finnish system of personal and tailored services to farmers can address calls for the recognition of difference among farmers, and the Finnish system of public access to nature helps secure the provision of particular public goods separately to land use policies. The more effective implementation of agricultural environmental schemes in England demonstrates the critical pitfalls that might emerge on this type of transition pathway. The impossibility of anticipating forthcoming changes can create strong resistance towards new policies and worsen concerns about the viability of farming and food production in the future. On the other hand, the lack of polarisation and 'farmer blame' in the English data, compared to Finland where these themes were prominent, especially among farmers, suggests the importance of improved understanding of the dynamics of perceived (mis)recognition of farmers in different societies, their political processes, and public discourses. Understanding reasons for these, and other differences between countries would support building more just and effective agrifood sustainability transitions in the future.

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Data availability The data used in this study cannot be made publicly available due to confidentiality.

Declarations

Consent to participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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