



# Faith-Based Organizations and European Food Policy

a Research Summary Report

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## Introduction

Food policy is one of the most important policy areas of the European Union. About one-third of the Multiannual Financial Framework<sup>1</sup> is dedicated to agriculture, primarily through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). 40% of the total area of the EU<sup>2</sup> is agricultural land which has a significant impact on the planet by habitat change, chemical pollution and emission of greenhouse gases<sup>3</sup>. Households in the EU spend 14% of their budget on food<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, food policy has significant social implications too. Access to excellent quality and healthy food is the privilege of the middle class in many regions. Food environments often do not allow consumers to choose what they would need to stay healthy and that is appropriate to their culture.

Food production and consumption is therefore a fundamental aspect of our lives, and our politics too. Agriculture was one of the main forces that allowed humans to form a planetary civilization, to build cities and cultures around the globe. Food production changed multiple times significantly over the millennia, it expanded the cultivated area and increased productivity in each case. In the past, for a growing humanity we needed growing food production. Today, the question is different: while the global population is still growing, absolute food shortage should not be expected due to increasing demand. If for any reason we may face significant challenges in food security, it will happen due to the degradation of soils, water systems and ecosystems.

Solidarity with the poor and marginalized has been a cornerstone of Christian social teaching for centuries and in the last decades caring for our Common Home became another central issue of faith and ethics. The publication of the encyclical *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis was an important milestone in the thinking of the Catholic church about the planetary crisis, and it had a significant impact on the protestant world too.

Yet, despite all these, we do not see a strong Faith-Based Advocacy in European politics, where many of the important decisions are made on food policy and land use today. We started this research project with the motivation of uncovering which Faith-Based Organisations work on issues related to food policy, and what are the prospects of building a network advocating for sustainable agriculture in the EU. We have found diverse groups, new and old friends who are doing impressive work in a wide range of communities, often reaching out beyond the borders of Europe. In this study, we show our results and share our vision for a potential future collaboration.

<sup>1</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/financing-cap/cap-funds\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/financing-cap/cap-funds_en)

<sup>2</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.AGRI.ZS?locations=EU>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/DDN-20230201-1>



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## **Executive Summary**

Our research addressed five critical questions to ascertain the involvement of FBOs in food-related issues, their main work areas, methods and resources, perspectives on EU food policy, and their motivation for advocacy work. The methodology involved creating a comprehensive database of FBOs that meet specific criteria related to Christian denomination influences, EU operation, and engagement in sectors like agriculture and food provision. This database was assembled with input from JESC contacts and partners, supplemented by extensive online searches, resulting in 151 FBOs being catalogued.

Geographically, the research identified FBOs in 24 of the 27 EU member states, highlighting a significant absence in the Baltic region, potentially due to historical and demographic factors. Countries like France, Austria, and Sweden were notably active, with their number of FBOs possibly influenced by larger populations, higher church attendance, and a robust NGO sector. A pattern emerged where larger populations correlated with more FBOs, though there were exceptions, such as Romania, which, despite its religious inclination, had fewer FBOs, possibly due to historical parallels with the Baltic countries.

In terms of work areas, FBOs were predominantly engaged in community and parish support, reflecting a 'bottom-up' organizational structure. Rural and international development also featured prominently, with many FBOs integrating these efforts into their parish activities. Direct land use was another key area, closely linked to the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, while a smaller but significant number of organizations were involved in research, turning their attention to food systems.

Communication strategies of FBOs heavily relied on social media, using platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn to reach audiences. The research highlighted the substantial collective reach of these organizations, with some having over 100,000 followers, suggesting a powerful potential for networking and advocacy.

Regarding their views on sustainable agriculture, FBOs often referenced 'agroecology,' reflecting both a Christian ethos of community and a response to the call for environmental stewardship outlined in *Laudato Si'*. The term encapsulated a blend of ecological principles like biodiversity and ecosystem restoration, which align with the broader ethical and social justice themes central to Christian teaching.

The motivation for FBOs to network and engage in advocacy is multilayered. The study found that FBOs not only offer a concern for food systems but also possess a unique perspective that resonates with the social teaching of Christianity. The diversity of the FBOs, their geographical spread, and their varying sizes and influences in terms of audience and inspiration create a rich tapestry of potential contributors to the European food policy debate.

The research showed a mixed landscape of advocacy experience among FBOs, with some having a history of high-level advocacy, particularly those based in Brussels. Others were identified as having no advocacy experience, suggesting an opportunity to introduce new voices to the EU policy arena.

In-depth interviews with FBOs reinforced the five primary work categories and highlighted a prioritization for food systems, with a focus on ethics and lifestyle changes, including diets, and an emphasis on solidarity with the Global South. The interviews uncovered a diversity of

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### Faith-Based Organizations and European Food Policy



connections and relationships within the FBOs, from internal networks to church affiliations and secular collaborations, each offering different pathways for advocacy.

The study also noted that while many FBOs are part of significant existing networks, there is an apparent lack of engagement with secular networks, indicating a potential area for growth. Inspiration for action among these organizations varied, with many citing the influence of *Laudato Si'* and other theological principles.

Conclusively, the research suggests that FBOs are well-positioned to form a network that can bring a distinct voice to discussions on sustainable agriculture in the EU. Their rootedness in community, expertise in various areas of work, and a shared commitment to environmental and social justice place them as a significant force in shaping future food policies towards sustainability.



## Methods

In the research process we answered five interconnected questions.

1. Which FBOs work on food-related issues in Europe?
2. What are the principal areas of work?
3. What are their methods, resources and audiences leveraged to achieve their goals?
4. What is their perspective on European-level food policy?
5. What would motivate them to work on advocacy in the EU?

### Mapping the FBO world

The mapping process was essentially the development of a database of Faith-Based Organizations that satisfy all these criteria: (1) explicitly inspired by one of the main Christian denominations, (2) have their headquarters or have significant operations in the European Union, (3) their operations cover at least one of the following areas: agriculture, land-use, biodiversity, food provision, land management, social care related to food, development work related to agriculture, rural development, advocacy relevant to land-use policy.

The database development work was started with the immediately available contacts of JESC. We asked our partners in the Jesuit networks, European Laudato Si Alliance (ELSiA), Laudato Si Movement, Caritas Europa, CIDSE, and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development in the Vatican to give us advice on candidates and potential databases. This was supplemented by an extensive online search that involved scanning large NGO databases, Google search and searching social media. Additionally, as we contacted the early additions to the database, most of those who responded also provided contacts to their allies and partners. The full database consists of 151 FBOs.

After developing a list of FBOs, we collected additional information on them based on their webpages and social media. This includes their location, contact information, description of their activities, basic information on their social media audience, their areas of work and finally their advocacy activity.

### In-depth interviews

In parallel with the database building, on a rolling basis we contacted all the FBOs in the database. 30 FBOs were available for discussion. The interviews were conducted by the authors and two interns following an interview guide developed at the beginning of the process. The guide is available in the annex, we preserved notes of the discussions, but we did not use recording or word-by-word transcription and coding of the interviews as the analysis focused on the factual information they provided. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and with a few exceptions they were conducted in English.

## Recognised FBO database

### Geographical distribution

This project's significant task was recognising FBOs, working on food systems and agriculture, in each EU member state. We were able to recognise at least one FBO in 24 countries (out of 27). The Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are absent. Only one of the countries has a significant Christian population (Lithuania) and it is possible that the historical context of being former USSR countries, together with their small size, will have hindered the development of FBOs in the Baltic region.

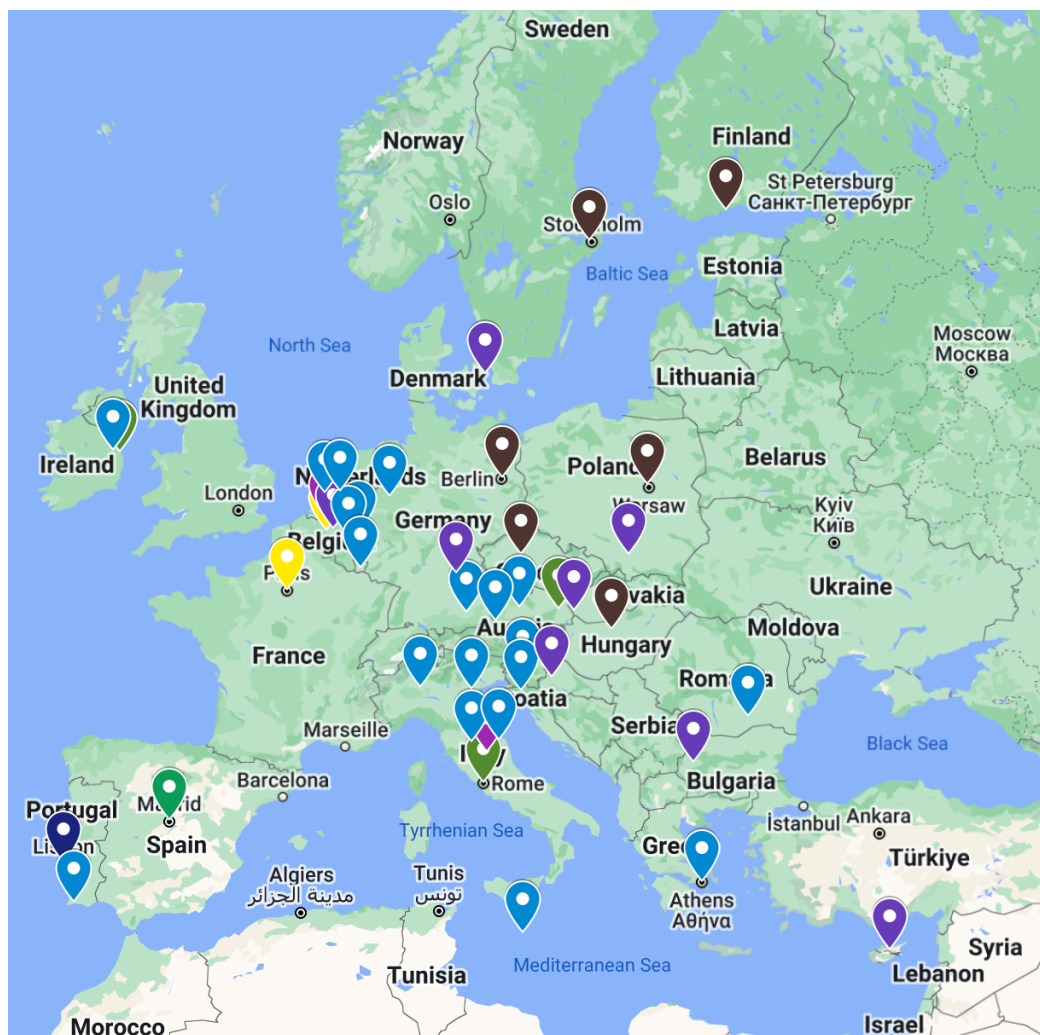


Table 1: Faith based organisations recognised across the EU.

Some FBOs are international organisations and so are multi-national in their approach. These organisations, often based in Brussels, are network coordinators themselves (e.g. Act Alliance) and therefore connected to FBOs in the EU27.

France, Austria and Sweden have the most FBOs on our list. This might be explained by France's high population, Austria's high church attendance and the fact that Sweden has a large number of NGOs generally. Countries with small populations have the least with



Romania having the least. This may be surprising because it is considered Europe’s most religious country, but it also shares some similarities in history to the Baltic region.

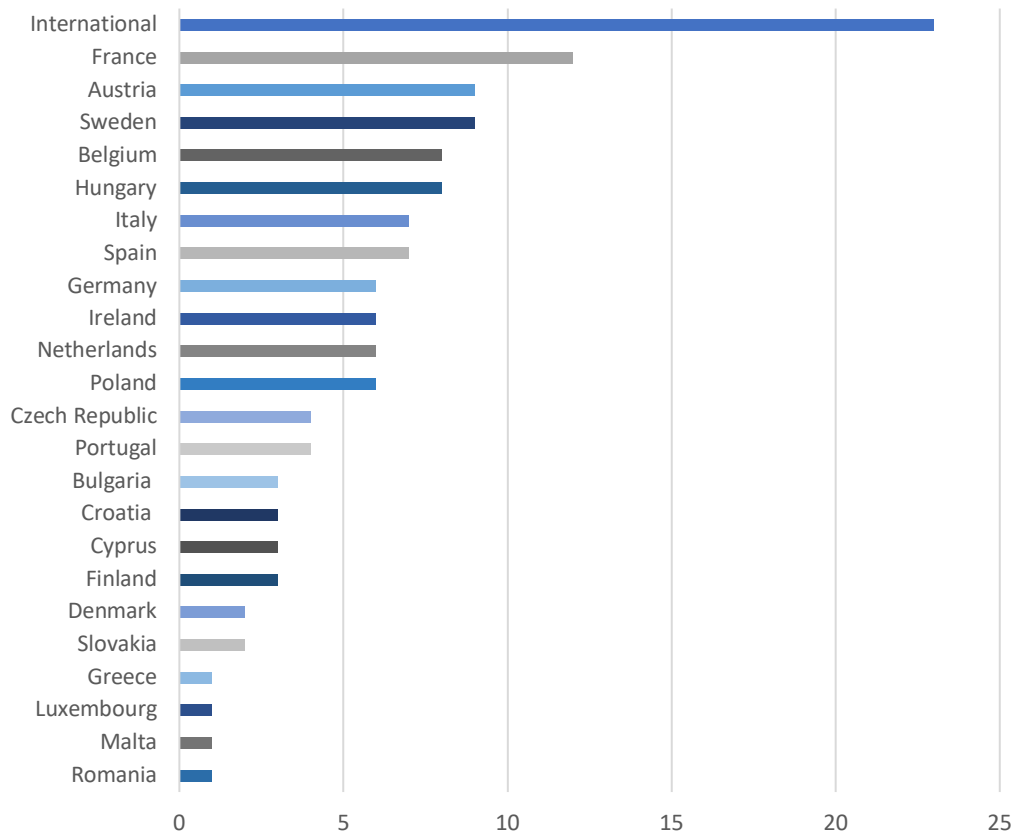


Table 2: Countries of the recognized Faith Based Organisations

Of those FBOs which were interviewed, the following countries were represented; Austria (1), Czech Republic (1), Belgium (2), France (3) Germany (2) Hungary (4), Ireland (2), Italy (2), Poland (3), Slovakia (1), Spain (2), Sweden (1) and five organisations which defined themselves as ‘international’. This is weighted heavily towards those FBOs working in Western Europe.

As a general pattern, the general amount of population seems to coincide with the number of organisations found. It must be noted that there is an underrepresentation of Eastern European countries in EU advocacy, but this study has found many FBOs working in this region. This offers our prospective network a comprehensive geographical reach which will offer to the debate on food systems many insights from across the continent.

**Work areas**

Five distinct categories emerged amongst the work areas of the FBOs, with many falling into multiple categories. *Communities and parishes* were the top work area and represents the church structure which revolves around local parishes and community hubs. This demonstrates the dominance of ‘bottom up’ type organisations in this study. Some FBOs like *Katholische Jugend Oberösterreich* (the youth work coordinating body of the Catholic Diocese of Linz in Austria) exist entirely to serve the parish structure.





The theme of community is continued with the next two largest work areas, *Rural Development* and *International Development*. For example, *Jezsuita Jelenlét Arló* in Hungary works with disadvantaged minority groups in rural areas whilst also performing many of the functions involved in normal parish life. In *International Development* an organisation like *Misereor* has its primary work supporting overseas projects but its fundraising and supporter base revolves heavily around the parish communities in Germany.

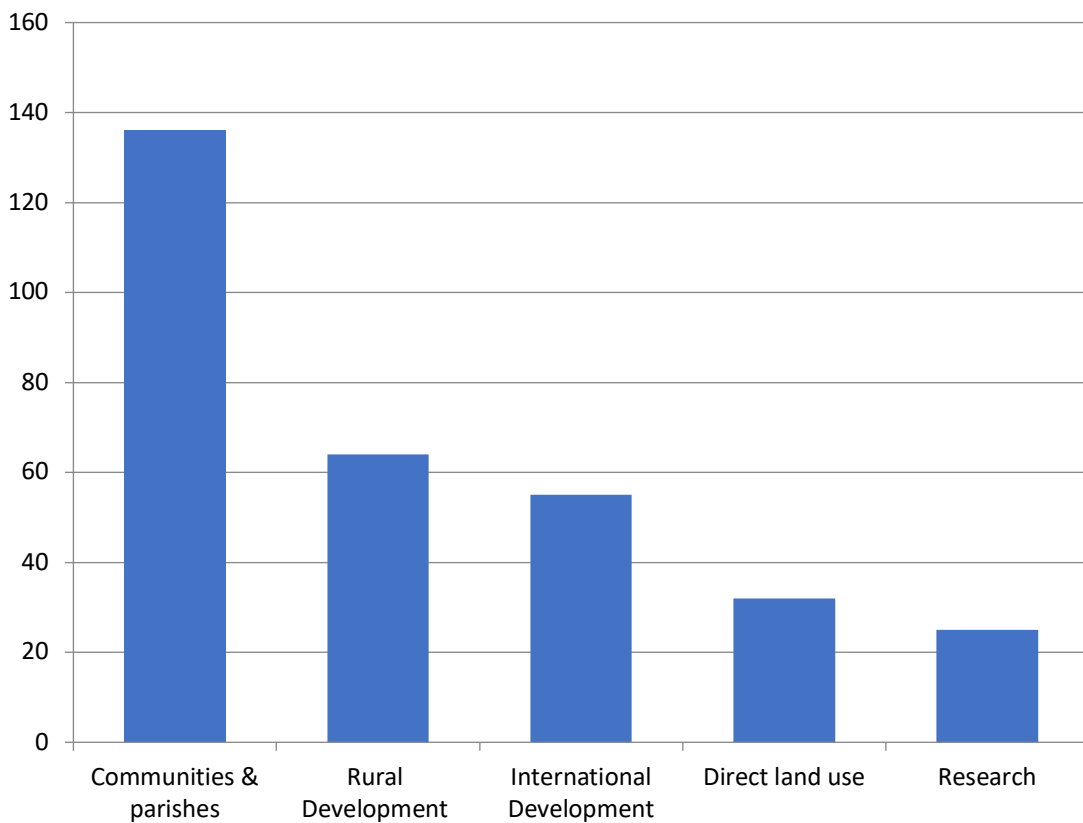


Table 3: Faith Based Organisations' work areas (one FBO could belong to multiple categories)

This link to communities is strengthened by the fourth largest category which is *Direct land use*. *Grzybow* in Poland runs a training programme in agroecology alongside ecumenical spiritual formation but also serves as a community hub in the local area. This link to the land gives a significant contribution to this study because of its direct link to the EU's Common Agricultural Policy.

The smallest section is on *Research*. Whilst church organisations have a rich heritage of educational institutions and work in the fields of philosophy, theology and traditional sciences, it is encouraging that we found 25 organisations also turning their attention to food systems.

**Communication channels and audience**

The FBOs in our database used the typical communication channels found in most NGOs. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn still dominate as are methods of communication through social media and this influenced our approach in measuring the audiences of each FBO.

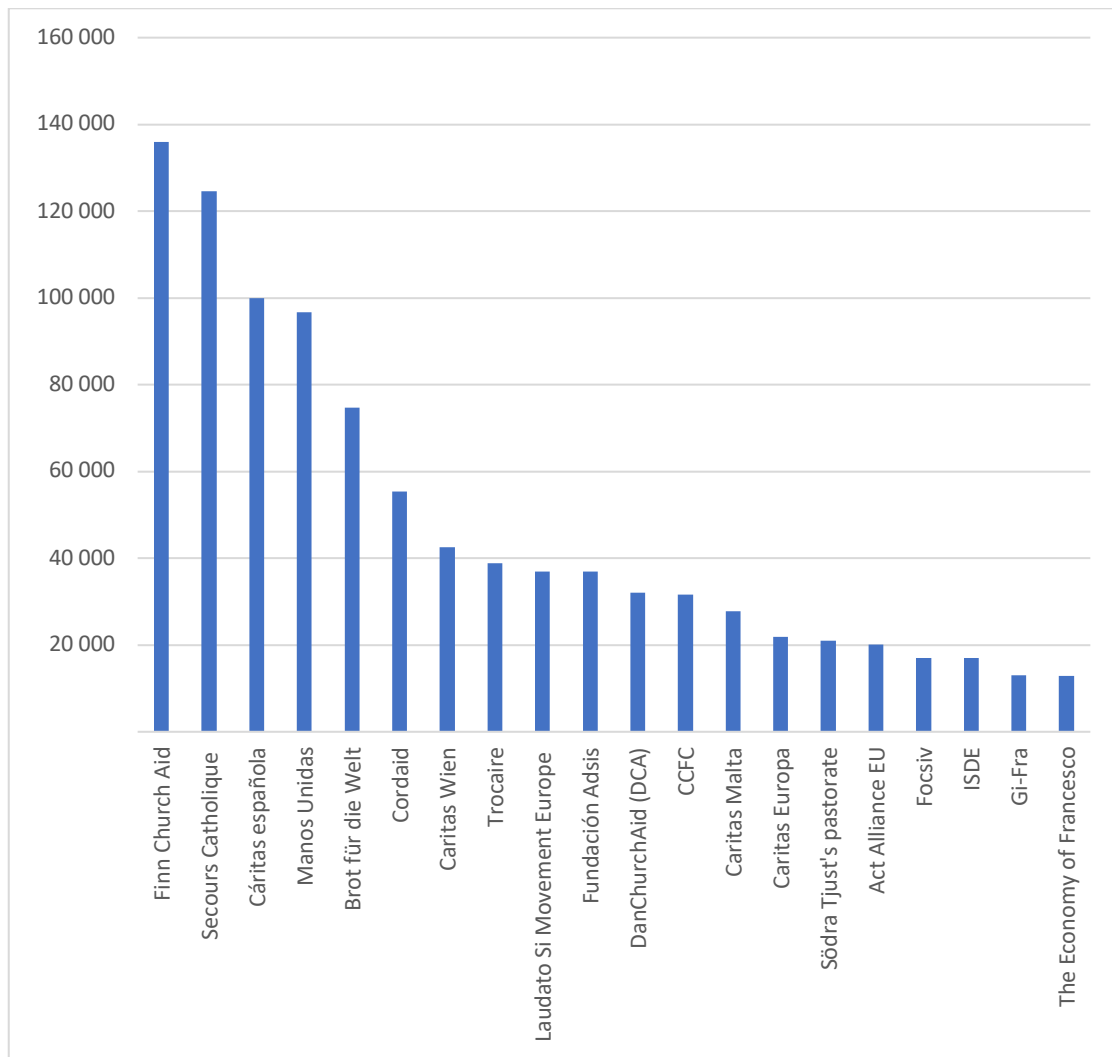


Table 3: Top 20 FBOs with the most followers (the chart shows the number of followers on best channel, usually Facebook)

From the database we examined each FBOs most followed social media platform to discover their reach. This reach is significant with four organisations having one platform with over 100,000 followers. The accumulated number of the most followed platform across the database is 16,134,630. Even if this number may not represent unique followers, as many may follow more than one organisation, it's still impressive, amounting to more than the population of 20 of the 27 EU countries.

The diversity of this list is notable because whereas CCFD-Terre Solidaire has 173,994 Facebook followers, another French Organisation on our list with the least is Chrétiens unis pour la terre (Christians United for the Earth), with 46 followers. This helps us understand that our database contains both large organisations of either national/ international recognition as well as grassroots ones which might be newer or locally concentrated. The most typical social media audience is between 2000 and 4000 followers. Most often the strongest channel is Facebook.

The diversity of this database indicates the potential power of our proposed network. Whilst having the resources of major organisations which have a large reach, we also see a significant group of smaller grassroots initiatives which voice may easily be unheard.



**Advocacy activity**

The advocacy activity of the FBOs in this database is varied. Of all those recognised, 90 have engaged in advocacy activities at some point in their history. Of these organisations, some are primarily advocacy focused and these are often Brussels-based. For example, Caritas Europa represents a European wide network of organisations and coordinates in practise the advocacy activity of its members from an EU perspective.

Additionally, 57 were recognised to have no experience in advocacy. This might be seen as a ‘gap in the market’ with an opportunity to bring unheard voices to the EU on a single-issue level. These organisations are often small but with an interesting link to land use and grassroots involvement in food systems that offer unique testimonies to the debate.

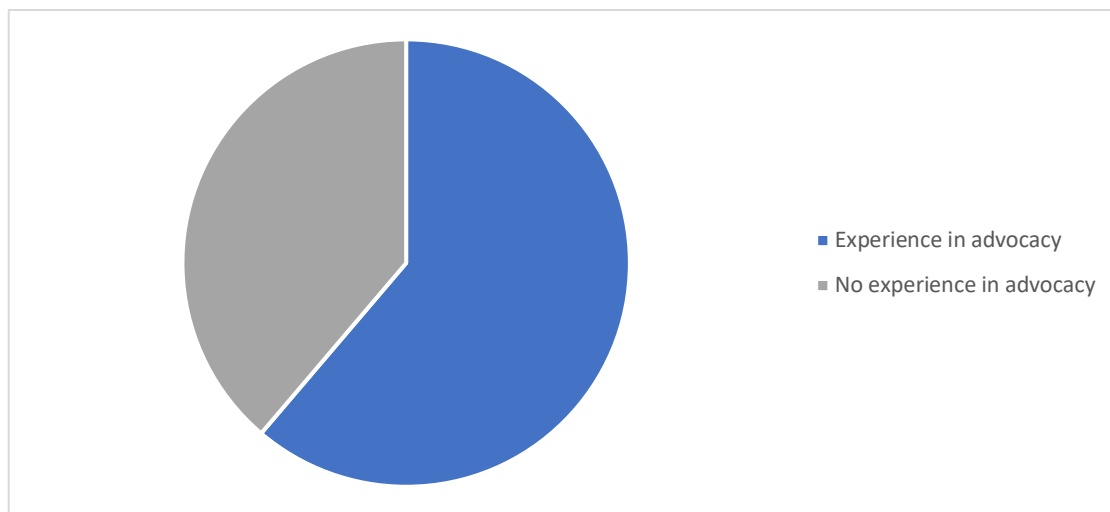


Table 4: FBOs with advocacy experience

The campaigning outcomes of the FBOs engaging in advocacy varies. Some produce interesting reports from their direct work such as [Fixing the Food System, Farmers First](#) by Trócaire (Ireland) which promotes their idea on sustainable agriculture. Others are light hearted and focus on awareness raising like MIJARC’s (Belgium) [Grow it Yourself](#) campaign. Whilst many follow a traditional political approach to campaigning through activities like petitions (e.g. Broederlijk Delen’s [Forks up for Diversity](#) campaign), FBOs like COMECE on the other hand don’t engage in campaigns per se but accompany EU activities [such as the recent farmers protests](#).

What we see in terms of advocacy experience is mixed. Over half of the organisations have at least some experiences in it. Of these we see some high-quality research, awareness raising and political campaigns. Again, this experience can be seen as an encouraging foundation on which to build a network.

## In-depth interviews

### Areas of work

The areas of work seen in the in-depth interviews reflected the five basic categories of *international development, research, communities & parishes, rural development* and *direct land use* that we have chosen for this study, as a way to organise the FBOs in a useful and systematic way after some initial work.



Table 5: Word Cloud for work areas of interviewed FBOs

When asking the interviewed FBOs to elaborate on their work area we witnessed a strong prioritisation for the theme of food systems. Others chose keyword like food policy, supply chain, diets and agriculture to characterise their focus. For some organisations, like *MIJARC* and *Le Cedre*, the description of their work areas exclusively concerned food systems. For others a concern for food systems was part of a broader work on Ecology.

An interesting combination with eco-spirituality was noted, and for Christian FBOs food is symbolic of the broader climate crisis. As the title of this project suggests, *Our Daily Bread*, the theme of food motivates campaigning with EcoKerk in Belgium choosing food systems as a focus for its campaign groups in the Flanders region. This focus on ethics emphasises a concentration on lifestyle change too, with diets also being mentioned. Global South solidarity was strong with seven of the organisations emphasising its connection to agricultural policy.



Whilst some of these organisations have considerable advocacy activities, we found that EU affairs are not mentioned as much. A unique perspective in areas of work were seen in technical areas of food systems and supply chains, but it was often in conjunction within a wider debate on ethics. This indicates an advantageous perspective where the FBOs are able to connect with the debate on food systems at an existential level, which might open some advocacy corridors.

**Definition of Sustainable Agriculture**

An important part of our study was to ask these FBOs what their definition of 'sustainable agriculture' is. The purpose of this was to see how strong their technical knowledge was and if the organisations shared a similar outlook. What we found was that many gave keywords instead of a full definition. This indicates that this is a new topic for many of these organisations.

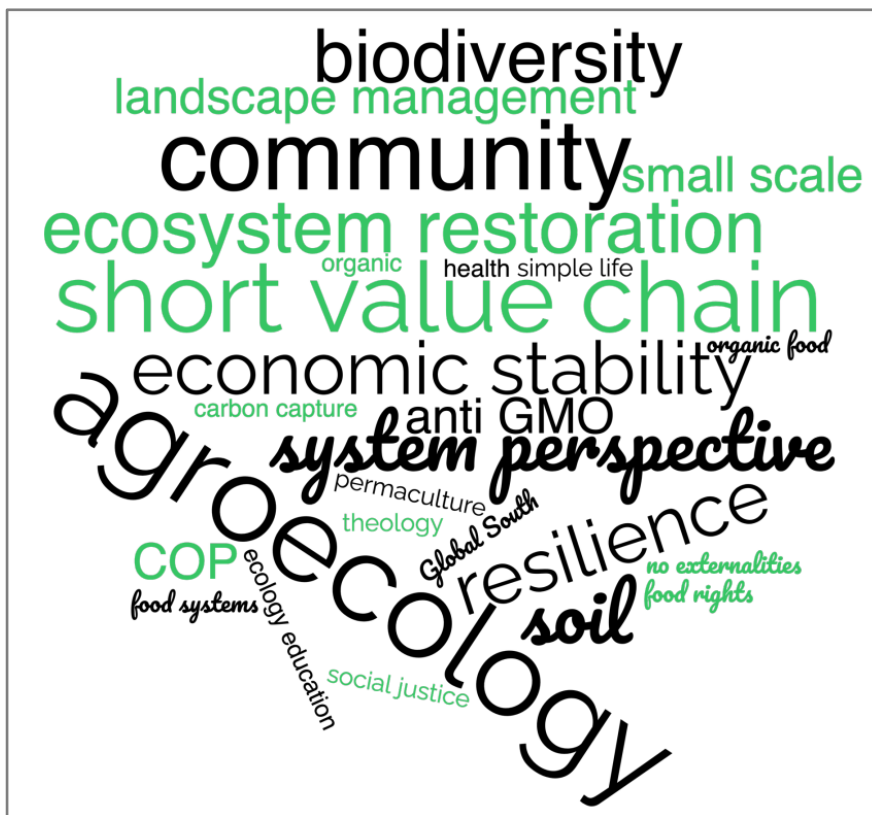


Table 6: Word Cloud of definitions of sustainable Agriculture

The keyword which featured the most was 'agroecology'. Considering the umbrella nature of this term, it is interesting to note the other terms which were also mentioned and what are seen as principles of agroecology. 'Community' for example is an element of agroecology but also an integral part of Christianity. The elements to build a community were also mentioned in their definitions. Key words such as 'small scale' and 'short value chain' often followed. So did 'ecosystem restoration' and 'biodiversity' and this indicates a clear connection between the answers we received and the [Papal Encyclical of Laudato Si](#). This document made a significant impact on the Catholic Church and encouraged many organisations to act on climate action, sponsoring fraternity and localism. It is therefore encouraging that this study suggests that agroecology is being adopted by Christian communities as their own.



In addition to agroecology, we see that social justice, food rights and system perspective are also important. This brings forward an overwhelming theme of fairness in agriculture which these groups care most for. A sense for climate justice and a Christian search for community put forward a powerful argument for agroecology which can contribute meaningful to debates on food systems.

### Audience

	Internal / Members	Church	Secular	Decision makers
Ararát	1	1	0	0
Broederlijk Delen	1	1	1	1
Caritas Slovakia	2	2	1	1
CIDSE	2	2	1	1
COMECE	0	2	0	2
Comisión Episcopal para la Pastoral Social y la Promoción Humana	1	2	0	0
Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe/ Brot für die Welt	2	2	2	2
EcoKerk	1	2	0	1
Église Verte	2	2	0	0
European Christian Environmental Network	2	2	0	0
Foundation Pablo VI	1	2	0	1
Grzybow	1	1	1	0
HFPH	0	2	2	1
Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice	0	2	1	0
Jezuita Jelenlét Arló	1	2	0	0
Katholische Jugend Oberösterreich	2	2	0	0
Koridori	2	1	0	0
Laudato Si Movement (LSM) Europe	2	2	0	2
Le Cedre	0	2	1	0
LSM Czechia	1	1	0	0
LSM Polska	0	1	0	0
MIJARC	1	1	0	1
Naphimnusz Teremtésvédelmi Egyesület	2	2	0	1
Opowiedzwwierze	0	1	2	0
PMU	0	1	1	2
Teremtésvédelmi Kutató Intézet	1	1	0	1
The Economy of Francesco	1	1	0	1
The Farm of Francisco	1	1	1	1
Trocaire	1	2	2	2

Table 7: Audiences of interviewed FBOs (the table shows if a certain audience is targeted by the organization: 0-no, 1-yes, 2-yes with priority).

We asked those we interviewed about their own audiences. We measured this by asking them how strong they felt their connections and working relationships were within four categories.



What their 'internal' connections were in terms of having their own network. With the 'church connections', how much do they cooperate with their respected hierarchy and influential religious groups? 'Secular connections' refer to cooperation with non-religious NGOs and national networks. 'Decision makers' refer to their influence and relationship with governments and politicians.

The top three organisations are those which are also amongst the largest NGOs in their country, namely Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe/ Brot für die Welt (Germany), Trocaire (Ireland) and Caritas (Slovakia). Those organisations which are network coordinators themselves like CIDSE and Laudato Si' Movement also rate highly. The bottom half of the list is dominated by smaller organisations which are very local. The exceptions are the Economy of Francesco and MIJARC which are both networks but still building their capabilities.

We find from those we interviewed a powerfully diverse group with varying connections. This group of organisations has strengths in connecting to politicians, the church as well as their own followers. These connections balance each other and mean that within this group, each organisation can bring something different. This is a strength because it allows multiple paths for advocacy.

**Significant existing networks**

We asked each organisation if they were a part of any existing networks and each interviewed were part of at least one. An interesting outcome is that a quarter of these organisations were themselves coordinators of networks. One example is CIDSE, which coordinates the advocacy of Catholic aid and development agencies across Europe and who two of their members we also interviewed, Broederlijk Delen (Belgium) and Trócaire (Ireland). CIDSE itself forms part of another network, ELSiA which also includes Laudato Si' Movement, COMECE and JESC. Both CIDSE and ELSiA are concentrated around Brussels based advocacy and this gives our potential network valuable tools to build on.

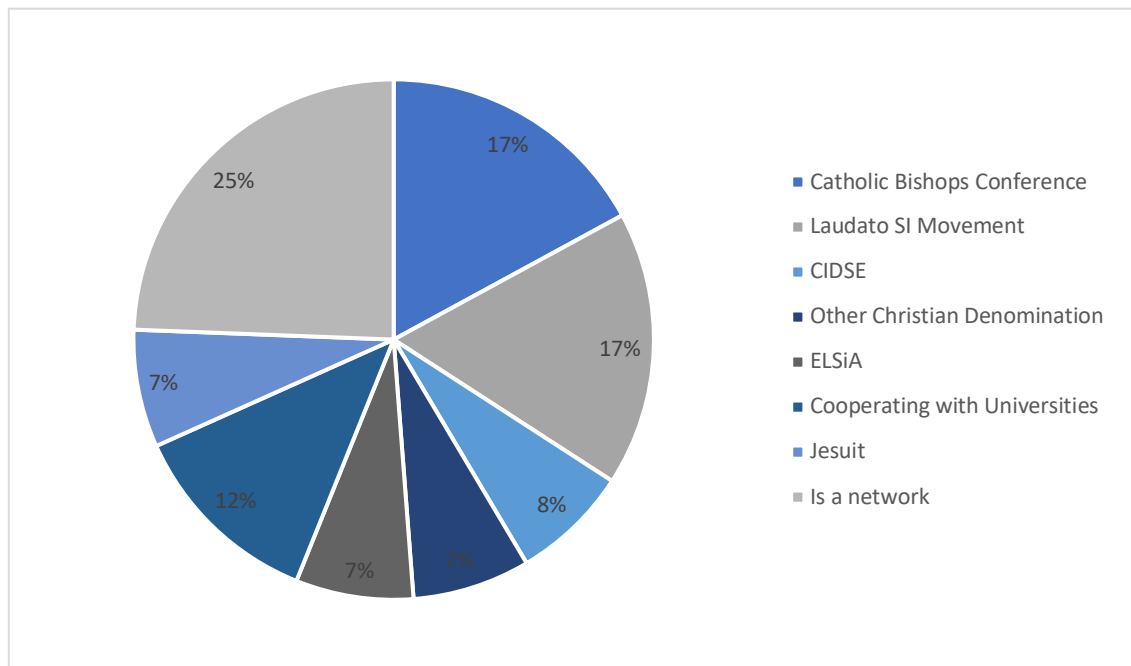


Table 8: Networks of interviewed organisations



These other networks are often coordinating smaller grassroots organisations. EcoKerk coordinates Justice and Peace groups in Catholic parishes across the Flanders region of Belgium, an entirely voluntary operation. However, Laudato Si Movement is a multi-layered organisation. It has members which pre-existed the organisation (e.g. Opowiedzwwierze in Poland) but also has chapters which are more directly founded by the network (in Czech Republic and Slovakia). LSM has good connections with the Vatican, and this offers the prospect of internal church advocacy.

Some organisations are the direct work of the Catholic hierarchy as they are connected to bishops' conferences, in the case of COMECE on a European level but also for example the Comisión Episcopal para la Pastoral Social y la Promoción Humana, which is an office of the Spanish Bishops. There is also overlap with some of these organisations. For example, Trócaire is both a member of CIDSE and a work of the Catholic Irish Bishops.

The prominence of networks already in our study indicates a professionalism that can work to this project's advantage. The knowledge of how to cooperate within a network means that we can start working towards goals soon and efficiently. In addition, the number of those institutions which are network coordinators can share their existing network-building knowledge, which could prove to be valuable.

Finally, it is important to see the divide between some members which deal with secular organisations extensively, and those which do not at all. The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice (Ireland) considers its most valuable climate network to be [Stop Climate Chaos](#) where it is in a minority of religious organisations. Likewise, Caritas Slovakia has recently formed a network of 8 NGOs working on food waste but is the only organisation which has a faith background. This is in contrast to the majority of these organisations which don't belong to any secular networks.

A further look at these networks opens up a potential. While some of these networks are geared to advocacy on a parliamentary level, others are directed more towards participation within the confines of the church. As ever throughout this study we find a mix of grassroots and larger organisations. A significant conclusion is the lack of cooperation with secular networks, and this opens up an opportunity from us to connect these two worlds.

### Inspiration

An important part of this study is investigating how faith-based organisations differ in their inspiration to act on these themes because this is where we find a distinct difference with their counterparts.



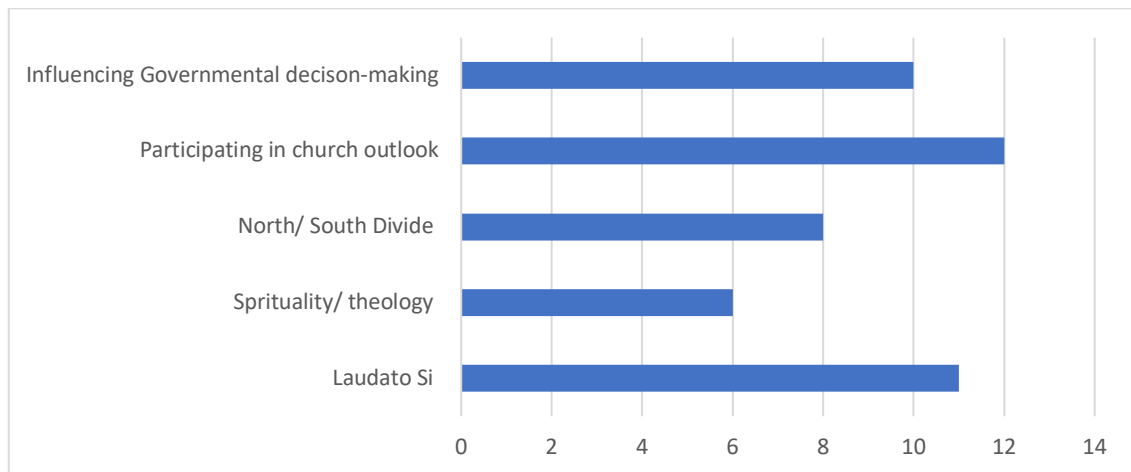


Table 9: Influences of interviewed FBOs

Firstly, we see the most obvious difference being the influence of spirituality and religion. Almost a quarter of the interviewed organisations recognised that the Papal encyclical of Laudato Si’ was an inspiration. This document argued that climate change is a moral issue, and that Catholics have a moral obligation to protect the environment. It was a landmark document that helped to raise awareness of the climate crisis and to mobilise action to address it. The knock-on effect of this encyclical is shown in this study as several organisations exist directly because of it. This is especially true of Laudato Si’ Movement and its two-chapter organisations which were interviewed.

Other theological influences were particularly prominent amongst the non-Catholic interviewed organisations. This was often intertwined with the term ‘justice’ and this often accompanied the concerns around the divide between the Global North and Global South. This reflects not only the historical context of missionary activities within the Catholic church but also the true international element of it. With [17.67% of the world being Catholic](#), it is no surprise that this global context is influential on the activity of its organisations.

The most surprising outcome was how much advocacy itself was an influence on the work of these FBOs. For some of these organisations their main drive is advocacy within the church. They find participating in church decision making and processes around climate engagement influential in their activity. Opowiedzzwierze in Poland for example is highly influenced by a lack of animal rights featured in Papal documents, and so focuses on the church. The prospect of bringing the church’s often unique message and as a way of informing government policy is also very influential. COMECE, the Catholic Church’s official EU office for example, is influenced heavily by bringing the message of the church to the EU institutions.

What we see from these diverse influences is a level of spirituality, especially through the influence of Laudato Si’ that can be used as a point of difference in regard to EU advocacy. Some parliamentary groups who are not influenced by conventional climate theories might be persuaded through eco-spirituality. In addition, we also see that this group is highly influenced by the motivation to make changes through advocacy. This existing belief in change making on a political and church level brings significant clout to food systems advocacy.



## **Motivation for networking and advocacy**

The findings of this study have been encouraging, and we have learnt that the strengths in creating Our Daily Bread offer a chance to build a network for three reasons: the unique perspective of FBOs, the already considerable experience of some, and importantly the grassroots activity of most.

We discovered that FBOs do not only offer a concern for food systems and sustainable agriculture, but also have a unique perspective on these themes which are perfectly in tune with the European Green Deal. The FBOs we recognised were representative of all of Europe and included perspectives from Eastern Europe which is vitally important in building unity on these issues. As well as being geographically spread, these organisations are diverse and span from large multinational organisations to some specific and small FBOs. This is seen in their audiences as well as what inspires them. The Christian lens is an uncommon yet unique perspective in ecology but one that can appeal to those parliamentarians and organisations which might not always be so supportive of the European Green Deal.

The group of FBOs we recognised and interviewed have a considerable yet varied experience between them. Much of those we interviewed were experienced in their participation and leading of networks which is a useful foundation for building a focused and effective network. We also found an important knowledge base on the issues behind food systems and sustainable agriculture. In the work areas of international development, rural development, and research we saw a wide range of experience and numerous experts that can contribute to this debate. Importantly, we see a clear connection between the principles of agroecology and the Christian perspective. The future building of such a network can offer an enthusiastic energy to the encouragement of agroecology in EU discussions.

Finally, the FBOs we have recognised form an impressive grassroots movement. Community and faith are intertwined, and this creates a unified group. Many organisations work directly with the land and with farmers on the issues of food systems, and this brings forward interesting testimonies which can strengthen our arguments. Likewise, we see a large following of these organisations which both are numerically large and internationally extensive, and this element further reinforces the potential of the possible next steps of this project.