

CONTRACT FARMING FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE IN BULGARIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DELIVERING AGRO-ECOLOGICAL PUBLIC GOODS

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study examines the current state and challenges of implementing contractual arrangements in Bulgarian agriculture, with particular emphasis on their potential contribution to the provision of agro-ecological public goods and rural development. Against the background of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy, contract farming represents a promising instrument for strengthening cooperation among producers, processors, and other stakeholders in Bulgaria, where agricultural production is characterized by fragmented farm structures and diverse regional conditions. **Method:** The analysis is based on a review of the scientific literature, existing conceptual models of contract farming, and an assessment of their applicability under Bulgarian conditions. **Results:** The findings indicate that well-designed contractual relationships can improve market access, reduce transaction costs and production risks, facilitate technology transfer, and enhance cooperation within agricultural value chains. At the same time, their successful implementation depends on appropriate institutional support, legal certainty, transparent governance mechanisms, and mutual trust among participants. **Conclusions:** The paper concludes that contract farming and related contractual approaches have significant potential to promote sustainable agricultural development in Bulgaria, particularly when integrated with policy instruments supporting environmental objectives and collective action within the Common Agricultural Policy.

Key words: contract farming, contractual relations, agro-ecological public goods, Common Agricultural Policy, sustainable agriculture, rural development, Bulgaria

JEL codes: D23, Q15, Q18, Q57

INTRODUCTION

The transition toward more sustainable agricultural systems under the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has increased attention to governance mechanisms capable of simultaneously improving farm competitiveness and delivering agro-ecological public goods, including biodiversity conservation, climate resili-

ence, sustainable land management, and rural vitality (Bredemeier et al., 2023; Bradfield et al., 2024a). Achieving these objectives requires institutional arrangements that align private economic incentives with broader environmental and societal goals.

Among such arrangements, contract farming has gained increasing importance as a mechanism for coordinating relationships between farmers, processors,

buyers, producer organizations, and public institutions. Well-designed contractual arrangements can improve market access, facilitate technology transfer, reduce market uncertainty and transaction costs, and strengthen cooperation throughout agricultural value chains (Glover & Kusterer, 1990; Mehla & Kumar, 2023). Beyond these economic functions, contracts can also incorporate environmental commitments, quality standards, monitoring procedures, and incentive mechanisms that support sustainable agricultural practices (Mouratiadou et al., 2024).

Although contract farming and agro-ecological public goods have traditionally been studied as separate research fields, recent developments within the CAP increasingly connect these two perspectives. Contractual governance offers opportunities to integrate private contractual incentives with public environmental objectives by encouraging voluntary cooperation among stakeholders and supporting the adoption of sustainable production practices (Bredemeier et al., 2023; Van der Borgh & Milian Gómez, 2024).

This perspective is particularly relevant for Bulgaria, where agricultural production is characterized by marked structural dualism, fragmented small and medium-sized farms, and considerable regional differences. While contractual arrangements have developed in several agricultural sectors, their potential contribution to the provision of agro-ecological public goods remains insufficiently explored. Existing studies largely examine contractual governance and environmental public goods independently, leaving limited evidence on how different contract farming models may contribute to sustainable agricultural development under Bulgarian institutional and structural conditions.

To address this research gap, the study examines three research questions:

- RQ1. What institutional, economic, and organizational factors influence the development of contract farming in Bulgaria?
- RQ2. How can different contract farming models contribute to the provision of agro-ecological public goods under Bulgarian conditions?
- RQ3. Which contractual arrangements demonstrate the greatest potential to support sustainable agricultural development and the implementation of the CAP in Bulgaria?

Accordingly, the study aims to analyze the current state, opportunities, and challenges of contract farming in Bulgaria and to assess the potential contribution of different contractual models to the provision of agro-ecological public goods. The analysis combines a critical narrative literature review, a contextual assessment of Bulgarian agriculture, and a qualitative comparative evaluation of contract farming models. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework underpinning the study and illustrates the relationships between the policy environment, contractual governance, and agro-ecological public goods.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study is based on a critical narrative review of the scientific literature examining contract farming, contractual governance, and agro-ecological public goods. Relevant publications were identified through searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, covering the period 2015–2025. The search combined keywords including: contract farming, agricultural contracts, agro-ecological public goods, sustainable agriculture, producer organizations, contract governance, and CAP. Peer-reviewed journal articles, international reports, and policy documents were selected according to their scientific relevance, methodological quality, and direct contribution to the research objectives. The literature review provided the theoretical foundation for developing the analytical framework and identifying the principal contract farming models examined in the study.

The analysis combines evidence from the literature with information on the structural characteristics of Bulgarian agriculture, including farm structure, producer organizations, regional characteristics, and participation in agri-environmental measures. Contract farming is analyzed as a governance mechanism linking farmers, processors, producer organizations, advisory services, financial institutions, and public authorities. Particular attention is given to the potential of contractual arrangements to support the provision of agro-ecological public goods through improved coordination, environmental commitments, and institutional cooperation (Olivieri et al., 2021).

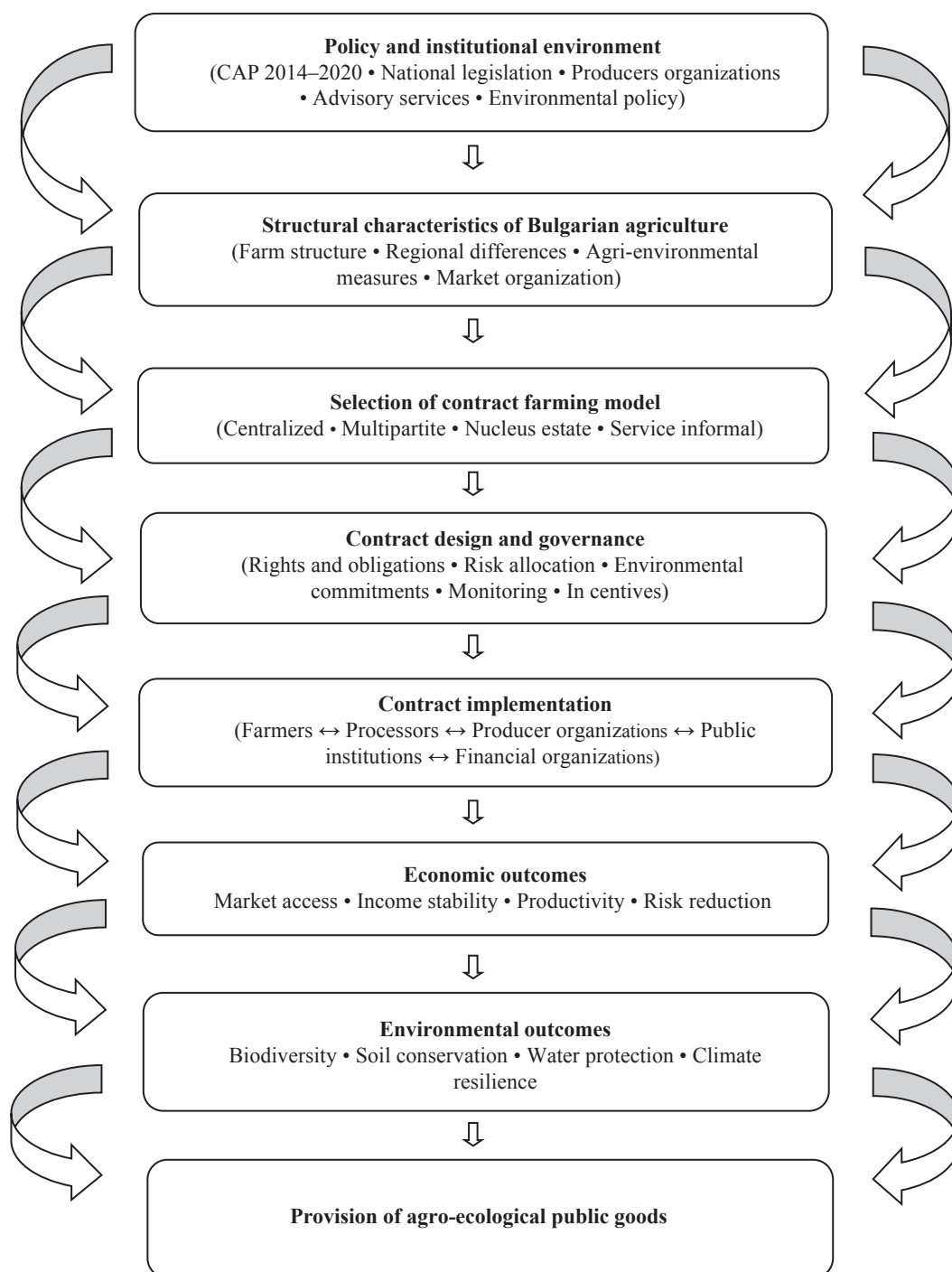


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework linking contract farming governance with the provision of agro-ecological public goods in Bulgaria

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the reviewed literature.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework adopted in the study, while Figure 2 illustrates the interactions among the principal stakeholders involved in contract farming arrangements.

Five widely recognized contract farming models – centralized, nucleus estate, multipartite, informal, and service contract models – were comparatively assessed with respect to their applicability under Bulgarian conditions. The assessment followed a qualitative multi-criteria approach based on evidence from the reviewed literature and the characteristics of Bulgarian agriculture. Four evaluation criteria were considered: (i) organizational characteristics of each contractual model; (ii) economic advantages and operational limitations; (iii) potential contribution to the provision of agro-ecological public goods; and (iv) applicability within the Bulgarian agricultural context. The resulting comparative assessment provides the basis for the subsequent discussion of governance opportunities and policy implications.

RESULTS

Structural characteristics of Bulgarian agriculture, 2014–2023

The structural characteristics of Bulgarian agriculture provide an important context for assessing the applicability of contract farming. The sector is characterized by a dual structure, combining numerous small agricultural holdings with a relatively limited number of large farms managing the majority of the utilized agricultural area (UAA). Farm size, production specialization, and organizational capacity are key determinants of participation in formal contractual arrangements.

The analysis is based on data from the 2020 Agricultural Census (Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Bulgaria [MZH], 2020) and the 2023 Integrated Farm Statistics (MZH, 2023). To ensure comparability, only agricultural holdings above the threshold specified in Annex II of Regulation (EU) 2018/1091 were considered. The selected indicators are presented in Table 1.

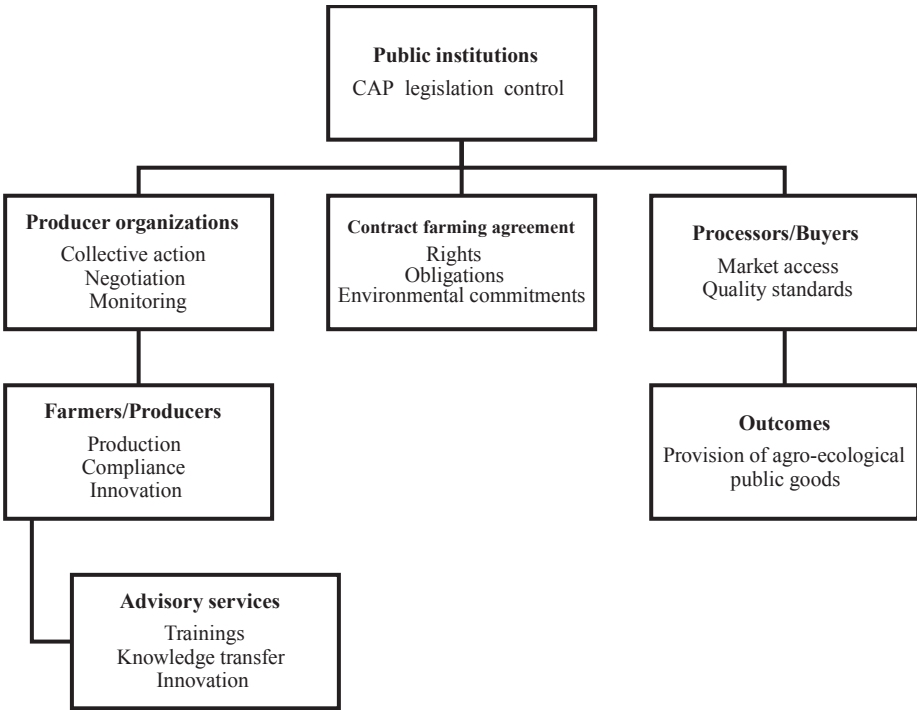


Fig. 2. Stakeholder interactions supporting contract farming and the provision of agro-ecological public goods

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the literature review and the analytical framework developed in this study.

The data indicate an ongoing process of structural concentration. Between 2020 and 2023, the number of agricultural holdings declined by approximately 25%, whereas total utilized agricultural area decreased by only 3%, increasing the average farm size from 49.3 ha to 63.3 ha. A similar pattern is observed in livestock farming, where the number of holdings decreased considerably while livestock units remained relatively stable, indicating a concentration in fewer, larger farms. At the same time, total standard output increased by 13%, reflecting the growing economic significance of commercially oriented holdings.

These structural developments have important implications for contract farming. Larger and more specialized farms are generally better positioned to satisfy contractual requirements related to production volume, quality standards, traceability, and delivery schedules, making them attractive partners for processors and buyers. Conversely, small farms often face difficulties associated with limited production capacity, higher transaction costs, weaker bargaining power, and compliance with contractual obligations. Their participation in formal contractual arrangements, therefore, depends increasingly on collective forms of organization, particularly producer organizations.

Regional disparities further influence the applicability of contract farming. Average farm size varies considerably across Bulgaria, ranging from approximately 31 ha in the South Central Region to nearly 117 ha in the North-West Region. Consequently, contractual arrangements cannot be applied uniformly but should reflect regional production structures and organizational capacity. In regions dominated by fragmented holdings, multipartite arrangements and producer organizations may play a crucial role in overcoming scale constraints and facilitating farmers' participation in contractual governance (Nikolov et al., 2016).

It should also be noted that Eurostat reports a break in the statistical series between 2020 and 2023 due to methodological changes in the survey framework. Therefore, the comparison is intended to illustrate broad structural trends rather than measure precise changes in the agricultural population. Overall, Bulgarian agriculture is characterized by increasing structural differentiation, with important implications for the design and implementation of contract farming. These characteristics provide the basis for the subsequent analysis of producer organizations and the comparative assessment of contractual models under Bulgarian conditions.

Table 1. Selected structural characteristics of Bulgarian agriculture, 2020 and 2023

Indicator	2020	2023	Change 2023/2020 [%]
Agricultural holdings [number]	92,453.0	69,742.0	–25
Holdings with utilized agricultural area [number]	91,768.0	69,249.0	–25
Total utilized agricultural area [ha]	4,522,199.0	4,386,571.0	–3
Average utilized agricultural area per holding [ha]	49.3	63.3	+29
Holdings with livestock [number]	43,735.0	28,960.0	–34
Holdings with grazing animals [number]	36,092.0	23,282.0	–35
Livestock unit [LSU]	1,002,965.0	950,171.0	–5
Total standard output (in thousands) [EUR]	4,002,100.0	4,541,286.0	+13

The data refer to agricultural holdings above the threshold specified in Annex II of Regulation (EU) 2018/1091.

Source: Authors' compilation based on Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Integrated Farm Statistics in Bulgaria 2023 (MZH, 2023).

Institutional conditions supporting contract farming

The development of contract farming in Bulgaria is influenced not only by farm structure but also by institutional arrangements that facilitate collective action, environmental governance, and regional adaptation. Producer organizations, agri-environmental support measures, and regional differences jointly shape the conditions under which contractual relationships can be successfully implemented.

Producer organizations and producer groups play an important role in overcoming structural constraints associated with fragmented production, limited bargaining power, and high transaction costs. By aggregating supply, coordinating production planning, and strengthening farmers' negotiating capacity, they facilitate compliance with contractual requirements regarding product quality, delivery schedules, traceability, and environmental standards. These functions are particularly important for small and medium-sized farms, whose participation in formal contractual arrangements often depends on collective organization rather than individual contracting.

The institutional environment has been further strengthened under the 2023–2027 CAP Strategic Plan, which provides continued support for producer organizations and encourages cooperation, market integration, and value-chain coordination. Such policy instruments create favorable conditions for expanding contractual arrangements while simultaneously supporting sustainable agricultural development.

Participation in agri-environmental and organic farming measures also demonstrates that Bulgarian farmers are increasingly familiar with voluntary environmental commitments. During the implementation of the Rural Development Programme and its transition to the new CAP framework, substantial public support has been directed toward agri-environmental practices, organic farming, and eco-schemes promoting biodiversity conservation, soil protection, climate mitigation, and sustainable resource management. Although these policy instruments differ from private contractual arrangements, they establish an institutional foundation upon which environmental commitments can be integrated into contract farming.

Regional differences further influence the applicability of contractual models. Regions characterized by larger and more specialized farms, such as the North-Western and North-Eastern regions, provide favorable conditions for direct contractual relationships with processors and buyers. Conversely, regions dominated by smaller and fragmented holdings may benefit more from producer organizations, cooperatives, and multipartite contractual arrangements that reduce transaction costs and strengthen farmers' bargaining power.

Overall, the evidence indicates that the successful implementation of contract farming in Bulgaria depends on the interaction between farm structure, collective organization, environmental policy instruments, and regional production characteristics. These institutional conditions provide the context for the comparative assessment of contract farming models presented in the following section.

Comparative assessment of contract farming models

Based on the structural characteristics of Bulgarian agriculture, the institutional framework, producer organizations, and participation in agri-environmental measures discussed above, a comparative qualitative assessment of the principal contract farming models was conducted. The assessment follows the multi-criteria framework and is presented in Table 2.

Overall, the comparative assessment suggests that no single contract farming model is universally applicable across all agricultural sectors and regions of Bulgaria. Rather, the suitability of each model depends on farm structure, production specialization, institutional capacity, and the degree of coordination required to achieve both economic and environmental objectives.

DISCUSSION

Contract farming as a governance mechanism for the provision of agro-ecological public goods

The findings of this study suggest that contract farming should be considered not only as a market coordination mechanism but also as a governance arrangement capable of integrating economic, organizational, and environmental objectives within

Table 2. Comparative assessment of contract farming models and their potential contribution to agro-ecological public goods in Bulgaria

Contract farming model	Market coordination	Transaction-cost efficiency	Support for SME/bargaining power	Monitoring and environmental compliance	Potential for agro-ecological public goods	Applicability in Bulgaria
Centralized model	high	high	moderate	high	high	high
Nucleus estate model	high	moderate	moderate	high	moderate–high	moderate
Multipartite model	high	high	high	high	very high	high
Informal model	low	moderate	low	low	low	moderate (current practice)/low (long-term sustainability)
Service contract model	moderate	high	moderate	moderate	moderate	moderate–high

*Note: high = strong potential (3); moderate = conditional potential (2); low = limited potential (1). Ratings represent a qualitative multi-criteria assessment based on production and market coordination, transaction-cost and organizational efficiency, inclusiveness and bargaining power, monitoring and enforcement capacity, and potential contribution to agro-ecological public goods.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Eaton and Shepherd (2001), Da Silva (2005), Kirechev (2012), and other sources.

agricultural value chains. While traditional approaches emphasize risk sharing, market access, and production efficiency, this study highlights the potential role of contractual arrangements in supporting the provision of agro-ecological public goods.

The capacity of contract farming to contribute to environmental objectives depends largely on the governance structure of contractual arrangements. Models involving stronger coordination, clearly defined obligations, monitoring mechanisms, and stakeholder participation demonstrate greater potential for integrating environmental commitments into production systems. In particular, multipartite models involving producers, processors, public institutions, advisory services, financial actors, and producer organizations can facilitate collective action, improve information exchange, and reduce transaction costs associated with implementing sustainable practices (Harmany et al., 2025).

These findings correspond with the broader literature emphasizing that many agro-ecological objectives, including biodiversity conservation, soil protection, water management, and climate change mitigation, require coordinated action among multiple actors rather than isolated farm-level decisions. Contractual governance can therefore complement public policy instruments by creating market incentives for environmentally beneficial production practices (Donner et al., 2024).

The Bulgarian case demonstrates both the potential and limitations of this approach. While the concentration of production in some sectors creates favorable conditions for contractual coordination, the fragmented structure of agricultural holdings limits the participation of many small farms in formal contractual schemes. In this context, producer organizations and collective governance mechanisms may provide an important pathway for

integrating smaller farms into contractual arrangements and supporting environmental commitments (Wu et al., 2023).

Contract farming should therefore be viewed as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, CAP environmental measures. Public policies provide incentives for voluntary environmental actions, whereas contractual arrangements can strengthen coordination, traceability, monitoring, and long-term cooperation within value chains.

Governance failures, transaction costs, and institutional challenges

Despite its potential benefits, the effectiveness of contract farming depends on the institutional environment, the quality of contractual governance, and the capacity to manage transaction costs. From the perspective of Transaction Cost Economics (Williamson, 1991), contracts reduce uncertainty by defining production requirements, quality standards, delivery conditions, and responsibilities among actors. However, they also generate costs related to negotiation, monitoring, verification, and dispute resolution.

A major challenge concerns opportunistic behavior by contractual partners. Producers may engage in side-selling when market conditions change, while buyers may alter purchasing conditions or reject products based on quality criteria (Weituschat et al., 2023). Such practices undermine trust and reduce incentives for long-term cooperation, particularly where enforcement mechanisms and access to legal support are limited.

Information asymmetry represents another important constraint. Buyers often possess better knowledge of market conditions and quality requirements, which may weaken the bargaining position of smaller farms. In fragmented agricultural sectors such as those observed in Bulgaria, these inequalities can restrict participation in formal contractual arrangements.

The findings indicate that producer organizations can help overcome these governance failures by aggregating production, improving farmers' bargaining position, facilitating information exchange, and reducing transaction costs. Their role extends beyond economic coordination, as they can also support compliance with environmental requirements

through collective monitoring, technical assistance, and knowledge transfer (Zhang et al., 2023).

The inclusion of agro-ecological commitments in contracts creates additional challenges, as environmental objectives require continuous monitoring and verification. However, when supported by producer organizations, advisory services, certification systems, and public institutions, these costs can be shared among stakeholders, improving both efficiency and compliance.

Therefore, the effectiveness of contract farming should be assessed not only through commercial outcomes but also through the capacity of governance structures to build trust, reduce transaction costs, and coordinate environmental objectives among multiple actors.

Policy implications for strengthening contract farming and the provision of agro-ecological public goods in Bulgaria

The findings have important implications for agricultural policy in Bulgaria. Contract farming should be recognized not only as a commercial mechanism but also as a governance instrument supporting environmental and rural development objectives.

Policy approaches should account for differences in farm structures, production specialization, and organizational capacity. In regions dominated by fragmented holdings, strengthening collective forms of organization is particularly important for enabling small and medium-sized farms to participate effectively in contractual arrangements (Sarov & Elenov, 2023).

Producer organizations have a strategic role as intermediaries between farmers, processors, markets, and public institutions. Their development can improve bargaining power, reduce transaction costs, facilitate compliance with contractual requirements, and support the implementation of environmental commitments (Ivanov et al., 2024).

The CAP 2023–2027 provides opportunities for linking contractual governance with existing environmental instruments, including eco-schemes, agri-environment-climate measures, organic farming support, and cooperation interventions. Contract farming can complement these mechanisms by pro-

viding market-based incentives, improving traceability, and encouraging long-term cooperation across agricultural value chains.

Overall, strengthening institutional capacity, contract enforcement, and collective governance mechanisms appears essential for expanding the contribution of contract farming to both agricultural competitiveness and the provision of agro-ecological public goods in Bulgaria.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the literature by providing an integrated assessment of the potential role of contract farming in supporting the provision of agro-ecological public goods under the structural and institutional conditions of Bulgarian agriculture. By combining a structured literature review with a qualitative multi-criteria assessment of contract farming models and an analysis of agricultural structures, the study develops a governance-oriented perspective on contractual arrangements within contemporary agri-food systems.

The study provides clear answers to the three research questions formulated in the Introduction. First, the development of contract farming in Bulgaria is determined by the interaction of structural characteristics of agriculture, producer organizations, institutional support, regional diversity, and the CAP framework. Second, the comparative analysis shows that different contract farming models differ in their capacity to support agro-ecological public goods, depending on their governance structure, monitoring mechanisms, and stakeholder cooperation. Third, multipartite contractual arrangements demonstrate the greatest overall potential for supporting sustainable agricultural development and the implementation of the CAP in Bulgaria, while centralized models may also be effective in selected agricultural sectors.

The findings demonstrate that contract farming extends beyond market coordination by representing an institutional mechanism capable of linking economic, organizational, and environmental objectives. Well-designed contractual arrangements can support sustainable production practices through clearer responsibilities, improved coordination among stake-

holders, and enhanced monitoring and traceability. In this regard, contract farming may complement public policy instruments aimed at promoting agro-ecological public goods.

The comparative assessment indicates that different contract farming models have different capacities to support sustainability objectives. Multipartite arrangements demonstrate the highest potential due to their ability to integrate producers, processors, public institutions, advisory services, financial actors, and producer organizations within coordinated governance structures. Centralized models may also be effective in sectors with established processing industries, while informal arrangements provide more limited opportunities for achieving long-term environmental objectives due to weaker monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

The Bulgarian case highlights the importance of adapting contractual governance to specific structural conditions. The coexistence of large commercial farms and numerous small and medium-sized holdings suggests that no universal model is applicable. Instead, successful contractual arrangements require consideration of sectoral characteristics, regional conditions, and farmers' organizational capacity. In this context, producer organizations represent important institutional actors by improving bargaining power, reducing transaction costs, facilitating collective action, and supporting compliance with both commercial and environmental requirements.

From a policy perspective, contract farming should be viewed as a complementary governance instrument within the CAP framework. The integration of contractual arrangements with existing agri-environmental measures may strengthen incentives for sustainable production, improve coordination along value chains, and contribute to long-term environmental and economic objectives.

The study has several limitations. The assessment is qualitative and reflects current structural and institutional conditions in Bulgaria. It does not include farm-level survey data or econometric analysis of contract adoption and performance. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as an analytical framework for understanding the potential applicability of differ-

ent contract farming models rather than as evidence of causal relationships.

Future research should focus on the empirical assessment of contractual arrangements through surveys of farmers, processors, and producer organizations, as well as the quantitative evaluation of their economic and environmental outcomes across different agricultural sectors and regions. Such evidence would further clarify the role of contract farming in enhancing the competitiveness, resilience, and sustainability of Bulgarian agriculture.

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ROLNICTWO KONTRAKTOWE NA RZECZ ZRÓWNOWAŻONEGO ROLNICTWA W BUŁGARII: WYZWANIA I MOŻLIWOŚCI WSPIERANIA ŚRODOWISKOWYCH DÓBR PUBLICZNYCH W ROLNICTWIE

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Celem badania jest przedstawienie aktualnego stanu oraz wyzwań związanych z wdrażaniem umów kontraktowych w rolnictwie bułgarskim z uwzględnieniem ich potencjalnego wkładu w dostarczanie środowiskowych dóbr publicznych w rolnictwie oraz rozwój obszarów wiejskich. W kontekście wspólnej polityki rolnej Unii Europejskiej (WPR) rolnictwo kontraktowe stanowi obiecujące narzędzie wzmacniania współpracy między producentami, przetwórcami i innymi uczestnikami sektora rolnego w Bułgarii, której rolnictwo charakteryzuje się rozdrobnioną strukturą gospodarstw oraz znacznym zróżnicowaniem regionalnym. **Metoda:** Analizę oparto na przeglądzie literatury naukowej, istniejących modelach koncepcyjnych rolnictwa kontraktowego oraz ocenie możliwości ich zastosowania w warunkach bułgarskich. **Wyniki:** Wyniki wskazują, że odpowiednio zaprojektowane relacje kontraktowe mogą poprawiać dostęp do rynku, ograniczać koszty transakcyjne i ryzyko produkcyjne, ułatwiać transfer technologii oraz wzmacniać współpracę w ramach rolniczych łańcuchów wartości. Jednocześnie ich skuteczne wdrażanie zależy od odpowiedniego wsparcia instytucjonalnego, pewności prawa, przejrzystych mechanizmów zarządzania oraz wzajemnego zaufania między uczestnikami. **Wnioski:** Stwierdzono, że rolnictwo kontraktowe i pokrewne rozwiązania kontraktowe mają istotny potencjał wspierania zrównoważonego rozwoju rolnictwa w Bułgarii, zwłaszcza gdy są zintegrowane z instrumentami polityki wspierającymi realizację celów środowiskowych oraz działania zbiorowe w ramach WPR.

Słowa kluczowe: rolnictwo kontraktowe, relacje kontraktowe, agroekologiczne dobra publiczne, wspólna polityka rolna, zrównoważone rolnictwo, rozwój obszarów wiejskich, Bułgaria