Sowing agroecological seeds of transformation in productivist soil

An exploration of the Dutch agroecological farmers' identity in a polarised and conventional agricultural landscape

by

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Master's Thesis for the Environment & Society Studies programme
Nijmegen School of Management
Radboud University

August 2024

Colophon

Title:	Sowing agroecological seeds of transformation in productivist soil: An exploration of the Dutch agroecological farmers' identity in a polarised and conventional agricultural landscape
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Submission date:	6th of August, 2024
Word count:	25.927
Cover image:	Icon made by Freepik from www.flaticon.com
Colophon image:	Icon made by Max.icons from www.flaticon.com

Radboud Universiteit

Preface

In front of you lies over half a year worth of work into researching the Dutch agroecological farmers' identity within a polarised society and conventional agricultural sector. This master's thesis is the last part of finalising my master's programme in Environment & Society Studies at the Radboud University, with a specialisation in Global Environment & Sustainability. After five years at the Radboud University, this thesis concludes my journey as a student.

Environmental degradation and climate change had not popped into my head until around five years ago, let alone the current focus on agriculture. As a teenager I did not think beyond my own experience and bubble, and that was until I watched the movie Okja. A seemingly normal movie about a fictional 'super pig' left me with crocodile tears, thereby starting my reflections on the livestock industry, underlying power dimensions, and environmental issues. Since then, I was fascinated with the effects and ethics of our foods, as well as broader environmental problems, bringing me to making a switch towards environmental studies. While interested in, and sometimes demoralised by, current agriculture, I had never sought to look beyond the oh-so familiar conventional agriculture. A world opened up when I found agroecological alternatives to conventional agriculture, suddenly giving me hope and child-like curiosity in discovering the world of agroecology. In the last year, I slowly started to explore this different thinking, and this exploration has led to what I can, somewhat proudly, call my master's thesis.

I could not have done this on my own, and have many people to thank. First of all, I'd like to thank my thesis supervisor Adam Calo for inspiring me and pushing me to go the extra mile. My bachelor's degree was fully focused on quantitative descriptive research, and Adam helped me into trying to make this thesis beyond mere descriptive statements. While I've struggled, I think I managed to make some strides, so thank you. I'd also like to thank my fellow students who I've brainstormed and philosophised with, helping in bursting each other's thought bubbles. Thirdly, I'd like to thank Linda Louwissen, my internship supervisor at De Streek op Tafel, in giving me freedom and flexibility in writing my internship assignment, as well as for her helping out in finding adequate interviewees. I thoroughly enjoyed working together. I'd like to thank my girlfriend Ruth for all the emotional support during times of anxiety and feelings of hopelessness in the process of writing the thesis, and in being a beacon of stability and joy throughout. For all my years at university, I want to thank my parents as well, in assisting me emotionally as well as financially into making these five very pleasant years at university. Lastly, my most sincere gratitude goes out to the ten farmers I was allowed to interview for my thesis. I have had pleasant phone calls with some, inspiring online meetings with others, and wonderful visits at some of their farms.

The interviewees have given me hope again regarding the future of agriculture, and I truly believe that the agroecological farmers' identity can do a lot in transforming the status quo of agriculture. It has even made me consider becoming a farmer myself later in life, who knows. I'd like to end on a quote from an interviewee, which shows the amazing motivation and visions of these farmers:

"It's going to be a little paradise, where our little one grows up, where we build a little community, where the trees grow around us, and fertility increases. That's where I get my joy from."

Enjoy reading.

Teun Kemmerling, Nijmegen, 5th of August, 2024

Abstract

The current productivist agricultural sector has led to significant environmental degradation. Praying that innovation and techno-fixes will turn the sector sustainable is naive, and more transformative change is necessary. Agroecological farming offers an alternative through rethinking social, political and ecological relations. However, agribusiness parties and powerful societal stakeholders often pull the strings through political compromises, leading to watered down agricultural policy, stalemates and a continued focus on conventional farming. What underlies this policy are dominant perceptions and identities in what farming should be, and what a 'good farmer' should do. The current article attempted to analyse these perceptions through a discourse analysis of Dutch societally dominant agricultural stakeholders. These were compared to the Dutch agroecological farmers' identity (AFI), as distilled from interviews with ten agroecological farmers. Stryker's Identity Theory (1968) formed the theoretical basis, recognising processes of identity formation and the respective role of social norms, thereby testing whether the AFI manages to escape dominant productivist thinking. Hopwood et al. (2005) their framework was used to categorise these identities and perceptions on change, through pertinence to either maintaining the status quo, reforming, or full transformation. Interviewees perceived the 'good farmer' to be someone that gives back to the local community, the soil and the environment and as someone knowledgeable who produces healthy food rather than abundant food. A farmer's landscape should be diverse in crops, animals and nature, a place to come together with the local community, and a place where nature can thrive. The Dutch AFI is categorised as transformative through criticising capitalist thinking, power structures, and the rethinking of social and ecological relations. The agricultural stakeholders however mostly maintained the status quo, demonstrating a significant gap with the AFI. The AFI appears to manage to diverge from these dominant pressures due to the support from the local community forming a barrier towards negative social pressures, as well as due to an absence of familial pressures and generational conventional discourses. However, the societal pressure of proving financial viability, while criticised by interviewees, remains somewhat of importance in the AFI. The latter is thereby possibly still rooted in economic thinking. Yet the AFI diverges from yield-based thinking, and rather emphasises an identity of financial independence and autonomy, thereby actively rethinking dominant economic relations. Additionally, the AFI still demonstrates to be transformative in prioritising ecological and social responsibilities, thus demonstrating how its economic focus does not hamper the development of the AFI. The AFI has an effective financial way of necessary survival in a capitalist reality, which can possibly appeal to the conventional farmers' productivist thinking. On the other hand, by positioning the AFI as a business case for conventional farmers to subscribe to, the transformative ecological and social potential is being reduced to simple economics. Regarding interactions between identities, the Dutch AFI demonstrates significant potential through interviewees influencing the practices of conventional farmers, seemingly leading to identity change in these conventional farmers. Aside from positive effects of agroecological farmers to their own land, the AFI could thus create positive spillover effects to conventional farmers as well, thereby having potential to change social norms and identities from within. An increased focus on the AFI through providing land access, and valuing their ecosystem services could thus be key for solving the (agri)cultural stalemate and for allowing the blooming of the transformative character of the AFI.

Keywords: *Identity Theory; good farmer; agroecology; discourse analysis; transformative change*

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1. Introduction

"Proud to be a farmer" and "The real plague is The Hague" are some of the signs of the recent farmers' protests against environmental policy in the Netherlands. In the same year, the environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion occupied Dutch highways to protest fossil fuel subsidies, followed by the biggest Dutch climate march to date ("Klimaatdemonstratie in Amsterdam Grootste Ooit", 2023). These diverging perspectives between farmers and environmental activists demonstrate the current polarised Dutch society. Some appeal to the government's inertia in tackling environmental issues, while others want an even more reduced governmental role. With the new Dutch government's highly conservative plans on 'tackling' the various agricultural crises (European Environment Agency, 2019; Bureau Woordvoering Kabinetsformatie, 2024; Assen, 2024; Eurostat, 2023), the transition towards a new agricultural system in the Netherlands poses significant challenges.

After the Dutch farmers' protests that emerged due to plans to reduce nitrogen in the agricultural sector, the last Dutch government conferred with agricultural organisations to reach a political compromise, yet failed ("Landbouwakkoord Lag Voor het Grijpen", 2023). These protests went paired with defensive attitudes and resistance against environmental and governmental organisations, both by farmers as well as by political parties (Willet, 2022). Some Dutch conventional farmers even indicate to see environmental sciences as the enemy, given that increased polarisation has led to some Dutch farmers perceiving nature as a 'direct competitor' of agriculture (Willet, 2022). It is either agriculture or nature. With the rise of right-wing parties in Europe and farmers' protests emerging all throughout Europe (Santhagens & Agarroum, 2024), this situation of political turbulence and increased polarisation around environment and agriculture is applicable to the wider European context as well.

Yet the farmers' protests are not a collection of all Dutch farmers, and the agricultural landscape is highly diverse. While conventional thinking is highly present in societal debate, agroecology offers alternative methods of sustainable food production. The current agricultural sector struggles with high nitrogen emissions, pesticide use and loss of biodiversity. Agroecological farming however minimises losses of nutrients, water and energy, improves soil health, avoids external resources, and introduces a holistic approach to farming, harmonising with the environment and the landscape (Silici, 2014). Agroecological farming can additionally increase gender and social equity and rural economic well-being (Valenzuela, 2016), and rethinks economic, social, political and ecological perceptions through an anti-capitalist and anti-productivist discourse (James et al., 2023). The strong activistic and political dimension of agroecology demonstrates a pathway towards transformative change in the agricultural sector. Yet with agroecological alternatives still experiencing limited coverage in governmental funds and policy in the Netherlands (Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, 2018), this transition has not fully commenced yet. The Netherlands and many other western countries are still dominated by productivist agriculture due to path dependency and the dominance of the agri-food sector, limiting transition choices for individual farmers (Runhaar, 2021). Existing and new policies adhere to this current dominant system, thereby limiting opportunities for alternative agriculture. Changing this regime means changing technology, regulations and markets, but also cultural expectations (Runhaar et al., 2020). Yet societal debate frequently talks about 'the farmer', often referring to conventional farmers rather than agroecologists, thereby failing to include a group and identity of farmers who have significant transformative potential in rethinking agriculture. Dutch agricultural politics is in a stalemate, and a focus on technology and new policy has demonstrated to be insufficient. Changing cultural expectations and frames, embracing transformative identities such as the Dutch agroecological farmers' identity (AFI), might assist in moving pieces to escape this political stalemate. However, Dutch agroecology is in its infancy, and big agricultural stakeholders have significant power through lobbying for policy and possibly influencing (agri)cultural norms and thus identities. This raises the questions of *what themes constitute*

the Dutch agroecological farmers' identity and *how does the Dutch agroecological farmers' identity differ from and demonstrate overlap with the conventional farmers' identity?* These questions allow for researching the transformative potential of the AFI within the Netherlands, demonstrating whether its perceptions are dominated by conventional standards, or whether it retains the movement's anti-capitalist and anti-productivist tendencies. This can additionally unveil identity barriers, the impact of societal discourse, and negative political pressures in fully developing this transformative AFI. While the motivations and values of the agroecological movement are extensively researched, applications of the 'good farmer' concept in defining what it means to be a good farmer demonstrate a more limited application. While used significantly, the concept is primarily researched for conventional and organic farmers (Burton, 2004; Sutherland, 2013 e.g.). Applying the concept to agroecological farmers within the Netherlands, the latter experiencing significant polarisation and identity politics, might result in new contributions to the 'good farmer' concept in understanding identity in turbulent times. While Westerink et al. (2021) has applied the concept to Dutch farmers, and Willet (2022) has investigated recent Dutch agricultural turbulence and developments, the former remains limited to conventional farmers, and the latter appeals to experts' opinions rather than farmers' perspectives.

Global agri-food business and farmers' organisations have experienced significant power in the current productivist agriculture (Jack, 2007), and the former enjoy significant governmental and market financing and subsidies (Algemene Rekenkamer, n.d.). This global power is additionally operationalised in significant influence on policy, through direct and indirect lobbying, financing election campaigns, and examples of lobbyists being appointed into regulatory positions (Clapp, 2022). This policy and regulation can have a significant impact on social patterns (Knouse, 2009), and can often influence and feed back to political preferences rooted in identity (Besley & Persson, 2019). Identity and policy are deeply intertwined (Béland, 2016), therefore the perception of the farmers' identity underlying the choices of societally dominant agricultural stakeholders (SDAS) can have a significant influence on establishing an identity and societal frame of 'the farmer'. Westerink et al. (2021) demonstrated this societal influence, illustrating how Dutch farmer collectives play a significant role in deciding cultural norms, and in adhering to certain discourses. Willet (2022) states how the Dutch farmers' organisation Land- en Tuinbouw Organisatie Nederland (LTO) has historically mostly adhered to serving the needs of productivist agriculture. Yet she additionally demonstrates how the LTO is currently in a difficult situation with part of the members desiring a more sustainable pathway, and part wanting to maintain and protect the agricultural status quo. The conservative agrarian political party BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB) moreover experienced significant electoral gains and is currently part of the government coalition. This all in combination with these SDAS having a seat at the table during discussions of agricultural plans with the government, directly influencing policy, raises the (research) question of these organisations' perspectives and frames on the farmers' identity. *How do societally dominant agricultural stakeholders frame the farmers' identity?* Research on the 'good farmer' conventionally limits itself to individual farmers, yet recognizing the importance of SDAS in identity formation might unveil new influences.

The transformative potential of agroecology displays significant pertinence to rethinking agricultural structures and relationships, often being defined as a countermovement to productivist agriculture (Coolsaet, 2016). Defining agroecological perceptions on problems and solutions for the current Dutch agricultural sector might additionally reveal the potential transformative character of the AFI. *How do agroecological farmers frame the current issues of and possible solutions for the agricultural sector?* The same research question for SDAS might unveil predominant agricultural and identity perceptions as well. *How do societally dominant agricultural stakeholders frame the current issues of and possible solutions for the agricultural sector?* This allows for comparison of perceptions, investigating degree of representation and social influence of certain ideologies. *How do identity portrayals and*

problem-solution statements differ between agroecological farmers and societally dominant agricultural stakeholders?

This paper will aim to answer these questions by reflecting on the literature regarding the farmers' identities, productivist thinking, and deeply entrenched social norms. The results will discuss the Dutch AFI, mainly through the theoretical use of what it means to be a 'good farmer', recognising social and societal pressures of conventional farmers and SDAS in this process. The paper will conclude by discussing the implications of these findings, exploring the transformative character of the AFI, while additionally discussing political and economic restrictions to this transformative potential in the Netherlands. Farmers' organisations, politicians and market parties are highly invited to read current conclusions to obtain a more balanced sense of what being a farmer means, how alternative framing can emerge, and how (absence of) representation of alternative farmers' identities occurs currently.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

Agriculture has undergone significant neoliberalisation during the post-World War II period (Sutherland & Burton, 2011), moving towards a discourse of food security, technological innovation, and an increasing role for external agrifood parties (van der Ploeg, 2021). Due to this new climate of highly technological and automated farming (Alkon, 2014), the farmers' identity could be considered as one of high efficiency and economic viability, focusing on efficiently obtaining a high yield. Economic aspects such as income are of high importance for Dutch farmers (Willet, 2022), yet literature demonstrates how socio-cultural factors and external perceptions additionally play a significant role in identity and therefore in farmers' decision-making processes. Wauters et al. (2010) demonstrated how the perception and judgement of external social actors dominated economic reasons in decision-making regarding applying soil conservation practices or not. Vanclay and Lawrence (1994) similarly explain how often economically nonviable measures are adopted, such as an overuse of pesticides, as well as not adopting measures that are economically viable, such as soil conservation practices. Dessart et al. (2019) confirm aforementioned results, explaining how socio-cultural perceptions are of significant importance in shaping practices. However, these socio-cultural perceptions can additionally be a result of the neoliberalisation of agriculture, demonstrating how economic thinking is thus entrenched in these socio-cultural perceptions of the farmers' identity (Burton, 2004). Yet what are these productivist tendencies, and what other identity traits and socio-cultural influences underlie the farmers' identity? How do these cultural standards positively and negatively influence environmentally-friendly practices?

2.1. The 'good farmer'

Burton (2004) conceptualised these factors through the concept of the 'good farmer', finding its roots in rural sociology. This concept is used to measure and question farmers about these norms and their effect on symbolic perceptions of being a 'good farmer' within agricultural communities. Understanding these pressures, norms, and expectations can help in understanding their positive and negative consequences on decision-making. Burton's (2004) operationalisation called for increasing the scientific focus on socio-cultural agricultural factors, recognising their importance in understanding underlying processes of behaviour in comparison to mere cognitive analyses of decision-making. Starting research at the meaning of a crop to a farmer, rather than directly jumping to 'rational' decision-making, can assist in more deeply understanding farmers' motivations. In practice, these socio-cultural norms might assist in prioritising the health of your livestock, given that ensuring healthy livestock is perceived as being a capable, skilful, and thus 'good farmer' (Burton, 2004). On the other hand, this can additionally lead to negative environmental consequences, given that only certain neat aesthetics and landscapes features fit the dominant discourse on the 'good farmer' (Burton et al., 2008; Fish et al., 2003). Sutherland (2021) reconfirms the methodological application of the 'good farmer' concept, explaining how asking farmers their definition of a 'good farmer' has resulted in understanding of events and decisions which were otherwise difficult to unfold. It is a more natural way for farmers to describe the importance of symbols, social norms, and cultural standards through this colloquial clear question, rather than through explicitly questioning these abstract and academic constructs. In practice, answers to the question of being a 'good farmer' mostly pertain to being an evaluation of competence and skill (Burton et al., 2020), but to a lesser degree also to the morality of farmers' behaviours (Stock, 2007). A few prevalent 'good farmer' discourses and related conventional identity characteristics are discussed below.

2.1.1. A tidy, thistle-free landscape

Landscape practices and the aesthetics of the land play an important role in being a 'good farmer' and having a 'good landscape' (Nassauer & Westmacott, 1987), the latter referring to the farmer's preferred and desired visual dimension of agricultural land. One of the most covered aesthetics is tidiness, often described as having no weeds, full symmetry and straight lines (Westerink et al., 2021), which appears to be an internationally shared common denominator of conventional farming (Burton, 2012). Tidiness additionally reproduces the absence of mere rational economic thinking, given that tiny tidiness mistakes will have little to no economic impact on yield, yet are still corrected and frowned upon (Burton, 2012). Burton (2004) found that the shape, form and aesthetics of the crop define how successful you have 'farmed' as well. Tidiness, straight lines and perfect crops are perceived as a display of how good and skilful the land was 'farmed' and handled by a farmer, as part of a generational productivist focus on a high, efficient and neat yield. Given the high importance that farmers attribute to the opinion of neighbouring farmers (Burton, 2012), this tidiness can lead to positive responses and cooperation with other farmers, but can vice versa also lead to exclusion or a bad reputation. Environmental schemes and practices are often paired with a change in activity, meaning a feeling of farmers losing their demonstration of culturally significant competences (Dessart et al., 2019). An example of an environmental practice going against the (agri)cultural grain is no-tillage. No-tillage entails leaving the soil undisturbed, thereby reducing soil erosion, yet Schneider et al. (2010) demonstrate how the tilling of the soil is seen as one of the most significant activities of the agricultural year. It is a part of the farmers' identity, therefore making adoption difficult. The aesthetics of an untilled field does not match the cultural standard of tidiness, with farmers perceiving this land as resembling 'burned fields' (Schneider et al., 2010). Burton et al. (2008) explain how this focus on tidiness can significantly impact biodiversity, given how wild grasses and various flowers can look shabby, thereby not fitting the standard. Fish et al. (2003) explain this through the eradication of thistles and trimming hedges, which can have a negative impact on local biodiversity. Both natural as well as human-made features that enhance biodiversity often demonstrate a natural absence of tidiness and straight lines, which are therefore often opposed by farmers. Given this established cultural standard, this could damage their status and identity (Westerink et al., 2021; Schneider et al., 2010). Aside from not adopting environmental features, this cultural standard can additionally lead to active environmental damage. While pesticides may be considered a practice of efficiency and quick results, Burton (2004) demonstrates how some conventional arable farmers apply more pesticides than economically viable, given the importance of tidy aesthetics, and wanting to demonstrate this near public roads or to neighbouring farms. The cultural standard of tidiness is therefore not a neutral vessel, but rather one that significantly influences adoption of highly necessary environmental features. This characteristic of the 'good farmer' therefore demonstrates the problematic nature of conventional thinking, and the blockade it poses for a more environmentally-friendly agriculture.

2.1.2. Protecting the family portrait and external pressures of neighbouring farmers

While a feeling of autonomy is of high significance for farmers (Westerink et al., 2021), outsider perspectives play a leading role in influencing the 'good farmer' norms as well. Dessart et al. (2019) explain how the set norm of neighbouring farms has an influence on farmers adopting and accepting environmental schemes and practices. Gillich et al. (2019) confirm this through demonstrating more willingness of farmers for certain new crops if their neighbours participated as well. Burton et al. (2008) explain the importance of not only collective thinking, but of collective learning and doing as well, in discussing and (not) introducing new practices. Farmer collectives play an important role in this thinking,

learning and setting cultural norms (Westerink et al., 2021), yet still illustrate little evidence indicating a change in Dutch (agri)cultural norms (Willet, 2022). Willet (2022) found that collective thinking in the Netherlands has become even more important due to the nitrogen debates, spiralling into more negative and defensive responses to environmental sciences given the falsely framed duality between nature and agriculture.

The farmer's family has historically been of high significance as well in being a 'good farmer', with farm names often being the last name of the family, depicting it as a family symbol and even anthropomorphising these farms (Burton, 2004; Sullivan et al., 1996). Changes to the farm could therefore be perceived as destroying or changing a family portrait and the work of multiple generations. Farmers want to maintain the beauty of their farmland to share it and hand over the beauty to their children (Fish et al., 2003). Societal criticism on Dutch farming is therefore often perceived as a personal, familial and existential attack (Willet, 2022). The defensive and conservative attitudes originating from these farmers' organisations' echo chambers and feelings of personal and familial attacks thereby lead to absence of change in conventional farmers as well, staying stuck in current practices.

2.1.3. Being in control

Being a 'good farmer' is additionally often experienced as having to control nature. This happens for example through the use of chemical substances (Schoon & te Grotenhuis, 2000), given the perceived unpredictability and uncontrollability of nature (Westerink et al., 2021). For conventional farmers, negative environmental effects of their practices are often operationalised through naturalisation. Schneider et al. (2010) describe how soil erosion is often framed as a simple natural side-effect. The authors linked this helplessness frame to the same lost feeling farmers often experienced in society, feeling as if they are the scapegoats for uncontrollable events. Schoon and te Grotenhuis (2000) describe how Dutch conventional farmers feel distanced from society, and these perspectives lead to a societal gap between farmers and non-farmers, often leading to the former mistrusting politics and science (Willet, 2022).

2.1.4. Moving forward or staying put

If all these aspects are not taken into consideration in agricultural policy, then even economically viable transitions can lead to rejection (Burton, 2012), and incongruence between practices and the 'good farmer' identity (Pavlis et al., 2016). If society wants to move the conventional sector from a productivist towards a post-productivist agriculture, then not solely economic reasoning, but the identity of farmers should be taken into consideration as well. Burton (2004) describes how adoption of new roles by farmers could lead to 'new' behaviours as well, but introducing new roles while also respecting farming culture demonstrates a significant challenge. Yet some recent successes in conventional farming can be seen, with Westerink et al. (2021) discussing how a positive shift in cultural norms emerged due to participation in agri-environmental management, similarly to the results of Cusworth (2020), thereby demonstrating possibilities. This is important, recognising on the one hand that these cultural norms are in place and that ignoring these norms and requiring conventional farmers to cold turkey abandon them might be impossible and undesirable. On the other hand, some conventional perceptions of the 'good farmer' marginalise nature and are highly ecologically destructive. Tidiness, collective thinking, controlling nature and the importance of family demonstrate to all be 'good farmer' characteristics which can block change, and specifically environmentally-friendly change. The literature demonstrates how prevalent

these identities and practices can still be, and therefore designing policy around these identities might lead to easier acceptance and adaptation by farmers, but can lead to strengthening conservative practices and identities as well. Agricultural change is highly necessary, yet deciding on where to insert or attempt 'change' poses a significant challenge. Changing policy with sole financial compensation is perceived as insufficient by Burton (2004), suggesting cultural subsidies to counterpoise cultural costs, but this means making concessions to the current (agri)cultural status quo. Operationalising cultural subsidies might be an excuse or opportunity for agribusiness to insert themselves to water down environmental policy. Transformation means significant strides and rethinking current practices, raising the question whether cultural subsidies might not lead to too meagre changes in the status quo. On the other hand, one should recognise the prevalent power dynamics, deep-rooted identity traits and influence of agribusiness in the current agricultural sector. Is transforming this sector and the conventional farmers' identity realistic, or simply wishful thinking?

This might suggest a political stalemate in the current agricultural sector. However, there is great agricultural heterogeneity, demonstrating how some farmers see environmentalists as the threat, while others the agri-business firms (Willet, 2022). The attitude of farmers can vary significantly regarding their stance on nature as well, consisting of the view of seeing themselves as a ruler, partner or steward of nature (Barbour, 1980). Unlike conventional farmers, agroecological farmers for example often take on the steward role, explaining how nature is the overarching process deciding the limits for farmers' practices (Schoon & te Grotenhuis, 2000). Embracing alternative agricultural identities allows for stepping away from destructive practices, yet how different are alternatives to conventional farming? What does being a good organic or agroecological farmer mean?

2.2. Reshuffling and rethinking conventional farming

Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) indicate how adherence to the 'good farmer' norm is a reason for conventional farmers to resist change. Yet given the deeply entrenched neoliberal logic into the 'good farmer' perceptions, the experience of reduced financial viability of a farmer's farm can lead to erosion of the symbols of being a 'good farmer'. While change in identity and norms is difficult, adopting new 'good farmer' symbols is possible, provided that there are viable alternative options to current practices and identities (Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012). While producing organic food might not on its own fit the 'good farmer' image, an increased demand for organic crops translates to increased economic capital, therefore fitting the neoliberal thinking entrenched in the 'good farmer' identity. Within a financially weak agricultural context, weed-free and tidy fields might not remain of utmost importance in being a 'good farmer'. A change to organic farming might therefore become realistic if it is financially viable. Yet what change in identity does this bring?

According to Sutherland (2013) and Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012), organic farmers still largely adhere to production-based values and symbols of being a 'good farmer', such as high-quality livestock and tidy farmsteads. Where organic farmers differ is the importance and prioritisation that they attribute to these values. Environmental care is a value more prominently on the identity agenda for organic farmers for example (Sutherland, 2013). This does not mean that tidiness disappears as a cultural symbol, but that some conventional symbols become secondary or equal to previously less important symbols within the farmer's identity. Where organic farmers differ is in their conceptions of the landscape, favouring a variety of crops and landscape rather than monoculture. Yet bottom line, Sutherland (2013) demonstrates how some of the factors of most importance to organic farmers remain the maintenance of a financially viable farm, and the social norms of the local farming community.

Organic farming is therefore not a shift or transformation from one identity to another, but mostly the reshuffling and reprioritising of the conventional farmer's identity. Large-scale organic farming can assist in preventing the environmental and health impacts associated with pesticides, yet might not change economic thinking, biodiversity damage, nor dominant neoliberal (power) logics.

However, besides great heterogeneity between groups, there is also significant heterogeneity within the group of organic farmers. Stock (2007) interviewed several family organic farmers, portraying an identity which appears to differ more significantly from productivist thinking. Interviewees struggle and fight against the agricultural power structures, do not adhere to tidiness symbols, focus on a healthy landscape and crops for the community to enjoy, and opposing conventional farming constitutes a significant part of their identity. A 'good farmer' is a steward, letting nature thrive on the land, and ensuring environmental healing of the land, rather than destruction. They apply a different operationalisation of being a 'good farmer', moving away from dominant economic relations and thinking, and moving towards creating a healthy and environmentally friendly farm for the local community. Recognising the heterogeneity within the umbrella term of 'organic farmers' is therefore of utmost importance. One end on the spectrum might result in making only minor changes to the status quo, while the other is actively attempting to combat this status quo. Current agricultural and subsidy transitions tend to focus on changing the label without changing the system, yet solely changing the label can lead to both large-scale productivist farming, as well as community-based farming. We need to look deeper than a sole transition from conventional to productivist organic farming.

2.3. Countering industrial agriculture through agroecology

Differently from conventional farmers, agroecologists have often been described as a protest movement, given their focus on environmental protection, quality of life and the transformation of social relations (Morales et al., 2018). In North America, concepts and movements of social justice and health and environmental concerns are often related and studied together with agroecology (Fairbairn, 2012). Concepts of equity and autonomy for food producers and reinventing the ways of treating nature are of importance as well in the agroecological identity (Bezner Kerr et al., 2022). Agroecology is a struggle and countermovement against neoliberal industrial agriculture (Coolsaet, 2016; Bezner Kerr et al., 2022) and a counter-narrative to productivist agriculture and economic growth (James et al., 2023). Gliessman (2018) defines agroecology as an emphasis on the ecology of the entirety of the food system, as well as rethinking the distant relationships between producers and consumers, creating a just, accessible and equitable market system for all. It therefore fosters ecological, as well as social and economic sustainability. James et al. (2023) interviewed agroecological farmers in Brazil on their perceptions and ideologies, revealing a focus on living in harmony with all (non-)humans and leaving room for nature to thrive. Financial autonomy, the local community, accessible prices, and participating in political processes are key. The agroecological movement can therefore be identified as one moving away from dominant productivist thinking and perceptions of conventional agriculture.

For agroecologists, knowledge is of high significance in identity formation, given the scientific basis of many practices (Laforge & Levkoe, 2018) and the participatory methods in learning together. An explicit role of agroecologists is therefore described as knowledge holders. Similarly to conventional farming, agroecologists engage in information sharing through disseminating their techniques, discussing protocols, thereby also creating identity and knowledge through collectivity (Coolsaet, 2016). Other social factors also are of importance, such as the interrelatedness of the entire local food chain, community and local markets (Bezner Kerr et al., 2022). The family feeling however plays a less important role for

agroecological farmers (Schoon & te Grotenhuis, 2000), sometimes even being a barrier given absence of dependence on family acquired land (Laforge & Levkoe, 2018). This often makes access to land more difficult for agroecological farmers. The collective thinking and related pressure of conventional farming can be hard for agroecological farmers in developing an agroecological identity as well, especially in rural areas, given how the agroecological focus is often urban. This leads to agroecological farmers facing exclusion in rural areas, therefore having difficulty in developing, but also maintaining a divergent identity from their neighbours (Laforge & Levkoe, 2018). On the other hand, Westerink et al. (2021) do expect that Dutch nature-inclusive farmers would manage to practise independent decision-making divergent from the dominant agricultural norm, among other things due to the significant divergent thinking and underlying ideology. Van der Ploeg (2021) found that agroecological practices in the north of the Netherlands manage to survive and diverge from conventional practices, yet what identities and ideologies underlie these practices? How do these identities navigate the wider Dutch agricultural context ideologically?

To some degree, agroecological operationalisations could still attract conventional thinking, given that findings from within Europe demonstrate that agroecological farmers enjoy higher levels of income than conventional farms (Van der Ploeg et al., 2019). However, the agroecological identity appears to not focus on yield, income, and traditional perceptions of the 'good farmer' in their identity, rather focusing on criticising these exact capitalistic and productivist ways of thinking. Unlike large-scale organic farmers, the agroecological identity appears to not just reshuffle and reprioritise identity traits, but rather bring significantly different identity traits to the table. However, agroecology is not simply a social movement, but rather demonstrates to often be intertwined with science and practice, depicting its plurality (Wezel et al., 2009). Gliessman (2018) recognises this as well, emphasising how a sole focus on agroecology as a science is insufficient, and that integrating and aligning all three is essential in transforming food systems. Gallardo-López et al. (2018) reviewed European research on agroecology, and revealed that agroecology is primarily perceived as a science in European research, more so than researching and recognising the agroecological social movement and practices. They therefore emphasise the importance of additionally focusing on the practice and social movement to fully understand agroecology in Europe. The question therefore remains whether this transformative character of the movement is replicated in Dutch practices as well.

2.4. Cultural subsidies, organic productivism, or transformative agroecology

Significant change in the agricultural sector is essential. Yet the conventional farmers' practices within the Netherlands have been criticised for long, and their environmental destruction has been prevalent for many decades already. With conventional farmers seemingly becoming more conservative regarding environmental perspectives (Willet, 2022), the question remains whether Burton's (2004) proposed cultural subsidies will suffice in transforming the agricultural sector. Focussing on a shift from conventional neoliberal logics to organic neoliberal logics on the other hand will additionally not save us in the end. Agroecological farming is a promising solution for escaping this political stalemate, yet conventional social pressures are prevalent, and the 'good farmer' perceptions are deeply-entrenched. This therefore raises the research questions of how the Dutch AFI manages to navigate these perspectives. Do agroecological farmers strictly adhere to transformative perceptions of the agroecological movement, or do Dutch practices demonstrate different perceptions and views? Do certain dominant social norms and pressures still translate in the practices and ideology of Dutch agroecological farmers?

2.5. Identity Theory

Multiple scientific lenses are prominent in understanding how identities are constructed, offering possibilities for analysing the construction of the farmers' identity, the 'good farmer', and associated social norms. An early consensus rejects the idea that identity can be formed isolated in the individual, but rather is developed through social relations (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1968; Burke, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Heise, 1979). These early sociological and psychological contributions highlight the importance of the social context or external influences in identity formation. Identity is therefore formed in dialogue between the mind and the world around it, rather than purely independently. This sociological school of thought has developed under the name of symbolic interactionism, with Mead (1934) being one of the founders. It recognises how people's identities are a consequence of social reality, meaning that social interactions and context can influence individual behaviour and influence perceptions of symbolic worlds.

All authors above take a different approach regarding identity formation and the display of identity. Stryker (1968) identified structural symbolic interactionism, theorising how the 'self' emerges from social structures and relationships, and how this affects our social behaviours. This can explain how a farmer's behaviour in applying an overuse of pesticides can be a result of the social structure around them and the expected image and behaviour of a 'good farmer'. Stryker recognises the plurality of identities that people have, and commitment throughout social life to a certain role can increase the salience of that identity, therefore influencing behaviour. Burke (1991) focused on the internal dynamics, recognising how in social situations one's identity is never static, but is rather affirmed through social interaction, thereby influencing related behaviour. Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Heise's Affect Control Theory (Heise, 1979) demonstrate similar assumptions, recognising the impact that social contexts can have in sensemaking and in eliciting specific identities, while also recognising how the meanings of these identities can still be rather stable, given long-term processes of socialisation in society.

Burke's focus on internal processes and Tajfel's and Heise's focus on both societal as well as direct moment-to-moment interactions do not align with the current intention of analysing societal influences rather than contextual ones. Stryker's Identity Theory allows a focus on identity formation and behaviour in the bigger societal picture. Stryker (1980) and Stryker and Burke (2000) explain how there are different social groups in society which have their own understanding of the world, behaviour and identity. Through repeated interaction with a social group, an individual can adopt respective views as belonging to themselves, therefore influencing and moulding one's identity. Farmers willing to incorporate certain practices if this fits the identity of the social collective and standard thereby appears to demonstrate a validation of the role of interaction on identity (Stryker, 1980, cited in Burton, 2004).

This therefore allows the exploration of SDAS and their discourses, investigating how organisations with major societal exposure frame the farmers' identity discourse, as well as comparing this to the identity of less influential individual farmers. This can analyse whether the AFI demonstrates overlap with conventional identities, dominant discourse of SDAS, and social norms. Or does the AFI manage to develop independently, and how so? Agroecology seeks to diverge from productivist thinking. However, Identity Theory recognises the social contexts and pressures, and how these can significantly influence individuals and perceptions, possibly involuntarily. Using Identity Theory allows for exploring the tension between these social influences on the one hand, and the strong politically motivated agroecological thinking on the other. Does the latter allow for agroecological farmers fully ignoring conventional farming pressures, or does the importance and social norm of a tidy landscape and a high yield still permeate in the AFI? Identity theory will help in defining 'the' AFI, but more importantly offers

a vehicle to analyse and reflect on this identity through questioning intrinsic motivations and personal values on the one hand, and social and societal pressures and norms on the other.

2.6. Perceptions on problems of, and solutions for the agricultural sector

Statements such as "The real plague is The Hague" demonstrate how perceptions regarding problems and solutions of the agricultural sector often co-occur with identity statements. The literature depicts this relation between identity and problem-solution statements as well, through the agroecological movement being one of protesting and opposing environmental inertia, actively protecting the environment (Morales et al., 2018; Fairbairn, 2012), as well as being a countermovement to the neoliberalisation of agriculture (Coolsaet, 2016, Bezner Kerr et al., 2022). In defining agroecology, main identity characteristics are already related to agricultural problems and solution directions. The literature review additionally demonstrated how farmers opposed change and possible solutions in their behaviour due to their identity, such as no-tillage or biodiversity measures (Schneider et al., 2010). Moreover, the political party BBB also became big during the farmers' protests, which not only discussed the farmers' identity, but also actively fought for opposing nitrogen and related plans. These are some examples of problem-solution perceptions being an active part of the farmers' identity, demonstrating how identity can often lead to resistance towards certain solutions. Given the influence that identity can have on these problem-solution perceptions, and the importance of the latter in changing the agricultural sector, the current research additionally zooms in on the relation between identity and these perceptions.

To operationalise these perceptions, multiple scientific classifications are available. One possibility is positioning perceptions by their belonging to ecological modernisation theory, or to transformative change (Mol & Jänicke, 2009; Fisher et al., 2022). This respectively frames environmental improvement as possible through the market, economic growth, and innovation, or rather only through systemic and fundamental change, moving away from neoliberal thinking, economic growth, and techno-fixes. Clapp and Dauvergne (2011) classify views into four different characters, through the growth-focused market liberals, the anti-capitalist social greens, the cooperation-focused institutionalists, and the natural science perspective of the bioenvironmentalists. Lastly, Hopwood et al. (2005) offer a framework which researches degree of socio-economic wellbeing and equality, as well as degree of focus on environmental concerns. Through this framework, organisations can be mapped according to whether their frames and statements fit conserving the status quo, fostering reform, or fighting for transformation of the system. Hopwood et al. (2005) operationalise the 'status quo' as those who wish to maintain the current system, stating to not see significant environmental and societal issues. The reform perception does recognise these issues, but seeks to solve them from within current socio-economic structures. The transformative view wishes to solve these issues through actively rethinking current social, political and economic relations in an attempt to abandon and replace the current problematic system. Both Clapp and Dauvergne (2011) and Mol and Jänicke (2009) struggle with including those who disclaim the existence of environmental issues. Hopwood et al. (2005) offers a broader spectrum, therefore allowing more extensive research on society in general, rather than solely on stakeholders advocating for change. Given that the current article will attempt to cover societal views without assuming pertinence to the environmental movement, this framework is most appropriate. The operationalisation of the three main categories can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Operationalisation and adaptation of the framework of Hopwood et al. (2005)

Status quo	**Reform**	**Transformation**
They recognise the need for change but see neither the environment nor society as facing insuperable problems. Adjustments can be made without fundamental changes. Development is identified with growth, and economic growth is seen as part of the solution. They wish to solve issues through an increased role for business rather than government.	They accept that there are mounting problems, being critical of current policies of most businesses and governments and trends within society, but do not consider that a collapse in ecological or social systems is likely or that fundamental change is necessary. They generally do not locate the root of the problem in the nature of present society, but in imbalances and a lack of knowledge and information, and they remain confident that things can and will change to address these challenges. It assumes that large shifts in policy and lifestyle are possible within the present socio-economic structures. Focus on reforming through technology, good science and information, modifications to the market and reform of government. They recognise the important role of government, as well as of democracy and participation.	They see mounting problems in the environment and/or society as rooted in fundamental features of society today and how humans interrelate and relate with the environment. Transformation of society is necessary to avoid a crisis. Reform is not enough, given that problems are viewed as being within the very economic and power structures of society. They see a need for social and political action that involves those outside the centres of power, such as indigenous people, those with less purchasing power, and women e.g. They recognise the intrinsic value of environment and nature, rather than the latter two merely serving human needs. Includes discourses of anti-capitalism, anti-globalisation, feminism and environmental justice.

Incremental change will not suffice in solving current environmental problems, and transformative change, perspectives and identities are necessary to radically transform existing structures to obtain justice, equity, and an ecologically sound, socially just, and economically viable world (Fisher et al., 2022; Scoones et al., 2020; Hopwood et al., 2005; Feola, 2015; Escobar, 2015; Temper et al., 2018). Therefore, discovering whether the Dutch AFI and SDAS meet this transformative perception is essential in analysing the current state, barriers and opportunities of the agricultural sector.

2.7. Conceptual model

The theories and concepts have been combined into the conceptual model, as seen in Figure 1. As recognised by Identity Theory, societal discourses can be of high significance in identity formation, raising the question whether agroecological farmers steer away from this identity or replicate (parts of) it. The left side of the model investigates the perceptions that the interviewed agroecological farmers, the analysed SDAS and the established literature on conventional and organic farmers have on the farmers' identity. The farmers' identity of the conceptual model is mainly operationalised through the concept of the 'good farmer', as well as through investigating problem-solution perceptions, as depicted in the middle of the conceptual model. Lastly, these identity perceptions are compared and analysed to identify overlap and differences between the conventional and agroecological farmers' identity, analysing whether the latter

steps away from dominant thinking and whether this identity is represented in the broader societal debate.

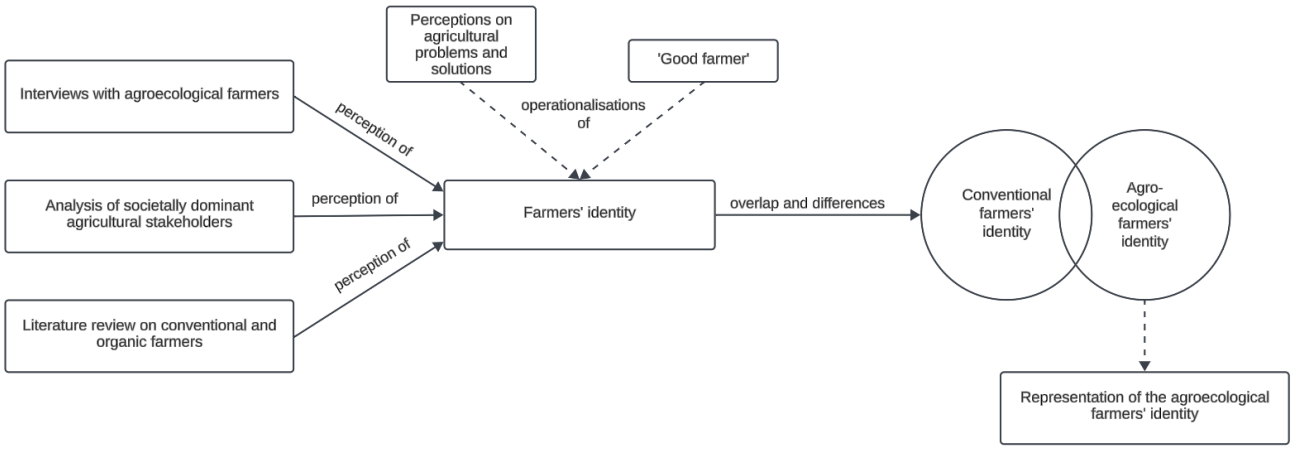

Figure 1. Conceptual model

3. Methodology

3.1. Research strategy and data collection

This research exclusively used qualitative methods given the exploratory character of discovering identities, the limited sample size to make generalisations, as well as given limitations of quantitative methods. Morris (1991) explains how with value-laden research, quantitative methods fail to capture depths of values, richness and nuances, while qualitative semi-structured interviews provide more in-depth opportunities to do so (Knott et al., 2022). In addition to interviews, the use of an exploratory discourse analysis attempted to capture the underlying societal discourses of the SDAS.

3.1.1. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews with Dutch agroecological farmers were held to be able to interview farmers across predetermined themes of identity and problem-solution perceptions, in which interviews can help in giving space to participants to share their social understandings (Knott et al., 2022). Interviews additionally reflect a more natural dynamic of everyday conversations, and semi-structured interviews give freedom to respond to new frames, rather than only respond to known topics (Knott et al., 2022). In developing a respective interview guide, the framework of Kallio et al. (2016) was used to ensure a proper preliminary structure, explaining the steps from analysing and using literature and other knowledge streams, to pilot testing and finalising. Individual interviews with eight farmers were held, as well as one interview with two farmers, coming to a total of ten interviewed agroecological farmers, of whom six male and four female. Four interviews were held on the farm, three online, and two by phone. During the analysis of the ninth and tenth interviews, no significant novelties and divergent identity statements emerged anymore, therefore claiming theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Convenience and network sampling was used to approach farmers (Treadwell & Davis, 2019), and given the researcher's location and the assistance by the local food network internship, the focus was therefore on the province of Gelderland. Moreover, cultural norms in farming can differ between regions and be region-specific (Westerink et al., 2021). Limiting the research to a specific province can therefore assist in limiting confounding variables between interviewees. Descriptive pseudonyms were used throughout the article to assure anonymity and readability, including important information where possible and available, such as the type of produced goods, and size. These descriptions often refer to 'CSA', entailing Community Supported Agriculture, an alternative system in which consumers and farmers share risks through direct consumer subscriptions on the harvest, rather than purchasing via third parties (Cone & Myhre, 2000).

In defining agroecological farming, descriptions of the previous scientific literature review were used, in addition to the definitions of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), and Agroecology Europe, consulted through the Agroecology Info Pool (2018):

> The science and practice of applying ecological concepts, principles and knowledge to the study, design and management of sustainable agroecosystems. It includes the roles of human beings as a central organism in agroecology by way of social and economic processes in farming systems. Agroecology examines the roles and interactions among all relevant biophysical, technical and socio-economic components of farming systems and their surrounding landscapes. (IPBES, n.d., Agroecology definition section)

> As a practice, it is based on sustainable use of local renewable resources, local farmers' knowledge and priorities, wise use of biodiversity to provide ecosystem services and resilience, and solutions that provide multiple benefits (environmental, economic, social) from local to global. (Agroecology Europe, n.d., para. 3)

Given that many agroecological farmers work with volunteers, community supported agriculture, and direct contact with customers, an online presence is necessary. This made selection of interviewees possible through their websites and social media. The researcher's internship at a food network was consulted additionally for possible interviewees. The suitability and pertinence of interviewed farmers to the aforementioned definitions of agroecology was evaluated through descriptions, photos, videos, the internship network and word-of-mouth. Suitability of choice of interviewees was reconfirmed before and during the interviews, either through discussing dominant practices or through direct observation of the farm. Farmers were interviewed on topics found in the literature regarding the conventional farmers' identity, perceptions of nature, problem-solution perceptions and representation by external parties. Given the semi-structured nature, new discourses often emerged and were discussed when relevant. Interview length ranged from 35 to 95 minutes, averaging an hour. The final interview guide can be seen in the Appendix. A limitation of interviews is the possibility of producing a social desirability bias (Fischer & Fick, 1993; Dessart et al., 2019), resulting in farmers giving socially acceptable answers. This results in a possible skewed image of 'reality', which was taken into consideration and acknowledged during analysis where possible.

3.1.2. Discourse analysis

A discourse analysis was performed to obtain a sense of dominant discourses on 'the farmer', and on agricultural problem-solution perceptions within SDAS. Using a discourse analysis allows the recognition of language not solely being a neutral and descriptive vehicle, but rather that choice of words plays a significant role in the construction and perception of social worlds (Gill, 2000). This thereby recognises how wording by SDAS can influence societal perceptions of 'the farmer' as well. In selecting SDAS to analyse, an initial broad selection was made, which was later narrowed down. In employing non-probability sampling, the researcher recognises the possibility of a selection bias (Acharya et al., 2013), yet still proceeds in order to cover societally relevant and dominant organisations. The current methodology additionally recognises how contemporary policies and institutions are not a product of sole government anymore, but that a shift has occurred towards governance (Steurer, 2013), thereby emphasising the societal importance of the three spheres of government, business and civil society. This resulted in the inclusion of one organisation per category, thereby including one governing political party: the BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB), one farmers' organisation: the Land- en Tuinbouworganisatie (LTO), and one market party: Rabobank. The BBB was chosen due to their significant electoral win in 2023, as well as their participation in the new government coalition with significant conservative agricultural plans (Bureau Woordvoering Kabinetsformatie, 2024). Moreover, Willet (2022) describes how one of the initial main interests of the BBB has been reframing the image of farmers, thus being an interesting organisation to analyse the discourse of. The LTO has historically played a significant role in talks with the government about agricultural policy (Willet, 2022), and is the biggest Dutch farmers' organisation with over 35.000 members (LTO, n.d.-a). Lastly, Rabobank is one of the biggest Dutch banks, originally a cooperative agricultural bank (Willet, 2022), and plays an important role in agricultural subsidies (''Veel Geld Voor

Megastallen'', 2022). The election program (BBB, 2023), contributions during the most prominent House of Representatives debate on the nitrogen crisis (Tweede Kamer, 2022) and a blog post on perspectives on the wolf (BBB, 2022) were used to analyse the BBB. The LTO was analysed based on their statement regarding the wolf (LTO, n.d.-b), and on their extensive vision for the future, the 'toekomstvisie' document (LTO, 2022). Lastly, Rabobank was analysed through their 'agrofoodvisie 2040' (Rabobank, 2023), their vision on agrifood, as well as through their nitrogen questions and answers page (Rabobank, n.d.)

3.2. Data analysis, validity and reliability

The SDAS documents were initially analysed exploratively, discovering new topics and discourses to reflect on during the interviews, and were later reread and further analysed. Identified discourses from the literature review and the discourse analysis were used as an initial coding scheme for the interviews, allowing flexibility through an inductive approach for new codes and patterns to emerge (Thomas, 2003). Given the multitude of interviews, Atlas.ti was used to collect all transcripts, allowing analysis across and between interviews. Atlas.ti was initially used to code relevant discourses and topics, and these discourses were consequently ordered into a total of ten visual networks, telling ten different narratives constituting the result section. The initial coding list consisted of 22 codes, but through open coding and axial coding, many categories became refined and various codes were added, resulting in a code list of 26 main codes and 201 sub-codes. Open coding suited the explorative and inductive approach, discovering new codes and categories during the analysis. Axial coding allowed the categorisation of these codes into higher-order categories, creating clarity during network-building (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

During the research design and analysis, ensuring validity and reliability became prevalent. Generalisation can only happen if any external factors and explanations are respectively included and refuted (Payne & Williams, 2005). However, given the dynamic character of identity as well as the selection bias, generalisation is not a primary goal, thereby stepping away from attempting to reach external validity. When talking about 'the Dutch AFI' throughout this article, the reader should be warned that this is based on current interviews and respective findings, and that generalisations about all (Dutch) agroecological farmers is not applicable. However, given readability, the current article will still refer to the findings regarding the agroecological interviewees as 'the Dutch AFI'. In ensuring construct validity, more coverage is possible, given that the operationalised conceptual model and researched topics stem from an established field of literature. Understanding and operationalisations regarding the 'good farmer' concepts derive from qualitative studies having analysed the same concept through interviews, such as Burton (2004) and Westerink et al. (2021). Its usage stems from a rich academic field thereby becoming a common to use concept in rural sociology (Sutherland, 2021). The 'good farmer' concept is according to Sutherland (2021) an opportunity for farmers to express feeling, moral judgement and affect in a manner that might go beyond what can be expressed consciously. This is partially due to the 'good farmer' concept being a colloquial, natural, and familiar term for farmers. Directly asking about 'social norms' or 'cultural scripts' on the other hand might pass over the individualism and sense of independent farming in the West, thereby making reflection for farmers harder. Sutherland (2021) describes the three main operationalisations of the 'good farmer' concept, ranging from including it in the interview guide, appearing directly from farmers' statements, or through interpretation of the interviews by the researcher. Sutherland (2021) calls for including the concept already during the research design and thus during the interviews. The present article explicitly did so, while additionally utilising farmers' statements on the 'good farmer', as well as allowing for the researcher to make academic interpretations of the interviews if aspects possibly relating to 'good farmer' values emerged. Identity Theory has additionally been used by

multiple authors to investigate the farmers' identity, thus illustrating a well-established relationship between the used theory and desired object of analysis (Burton, 2004; Willet, 2022). Operationalising these constructs into analysable interview questions emerged with the assistance of the interview guide of Westerink et al. (2021). Moreover, operationalisations were highly based on previously research topics and farmers' construct, such as the importance of collective thinking and family (Sullivan et al., 1996; Burton et al., 2008, among others), the agroecological social movement (Bezner Kerr et al., 2022, Coolsaet, 2016, among others), and non-economic agricultural decision-making (Vanclay & Lawrence, 1994; Burton, 2004, among others). The present article thereby builds on existing constructs.

Regarding internal validity, an attempt was made to increase the sense of the data reflecting reality by not making claims about a certain group, but rather conversing with that respective group. While talking with representatives from farmers' organisations might give insightful and expert perspectives (Willet, 2022), the current article interviewed independent farmers directly, aiming to move away from possible conflicts of interests and corporate influence. Moreover, the current research philosophy recognises the plurality of realities (Moon & Blackman, 2014), as well as the duality between homogeneity and heterogeneity within farmers (Willet, 2022). Fully embracing internal validity would thereby mean stepping away from recognising this plurality, which is evaluated as an objectionable outcome.

In avoiding methodological errors and ensuring replicability and researcher independence, respectively contributing to internal validity and reliability (Tsang & Kwan, 1999), the section on data collection, data analysis and the Appendix attempt to extensively cover the methodology and documents. This ensures transparency, the use of reliable methods, as well as making replicability possible. Lastly, the researcher has consulted extensive literature sources and reliable theoretical frameworks to operationalise the research. This assists in attempting to distance one's own subjective views and biases, rather allowing the literature and discourse analysis to guide the interview's operationalisation (Noble & Smith, 2015).

3.3. Research philosophy

The farmers' identity is dynamic (Burton, 2004), thereby stating how there is not a single reality. Identity is framed differently by different groups, thereby demonstrating the organisation of certain identities within bounded groups. Willet (2022) illustrates this by some farmer groups seeing environmental studies as the 'enemy', while others seeing agribusiness as the threat. The ontology of the present article therefore positions itself in bounded relativism (Moon & Blackman, 2014), recognising identity as plural, yet collective. This research therefore attempts to capture one of these identities, the AFI, to see whether this overlaps with the more conventional identities.

Identity for many farmers is highly correlated to outsider perspectives and influenced by socio-cultural pressures and organisations. These processes of sensemaking therefore demonstrate the absence of an objective reality. However, given the impact of social interactions on the meaning of the 'object' of identity, operationalised through tangible practices and landscape features, this research additionally steps away from complete subjectivity. This research's epistemology is therefore grounded in a constructionist epistemology (Moon & Blackman, 2014; Burr, 2015). Through the prior statements, the reality of the object of identity is assumed to be a consequence of the symbolic worlds created through social interactions, thereby confirming the belonging to symbolic interactionism (Moon & Blackman, 2014), as described in the theory section.

3.4. Ethics

Prior to the interviews, contact via email regarding anonymity, consent, storage, access to and withdrawal of data, and recording the interview occurred. The request of recording was reconfirmed at the start of the interview, and most interviewees displayed interest in receiving debriefing in the form of the conclusion of the respective thesis after completion. Multiple interviewees indicated negative or aggressive interactions with other farmers and organisations, therefore anonymity demonstrated to be of utmost importance. Two interviewees additionally indicated the wish that an anecdote of the interview was not to be included in the thesis, which were therefore not transcribed.

4. Results

4.1. Long-term care for nature and the community

Similar to the research of Burton (2004) and Westerink et al. (2021), conceptions of what it means for interviewees to be a 'good farmer' were explored. Identifying the interpretations of the 'good farmer' not only allows for direct comparison with the conventional farmers' literature, but additionally explores what social norms have entrenched the AFI, or whether it remains fully divergent.

For interviewees, being a 'good farmer' means selling directly to the consumer, and actively working on rebuilding that relationship with the consumer. Being a member of, and providing to the local community, rather than relationships with third parties or exporting food. Interviewees translate this community sense as obliging them morally to ensure that they cultivate and sell healthy food. This means a total absence of 'poison', as pesticides were described almost invariably in every interview. Aside from mentioning this poison as destroying biodiversity and environmental features, the poison frame mainly returned relating to the health of the community directly around you. "When you apply poison to a plant, and you don't know who it's going to, it feels different then knowing that it's going to the neighbour" (Kasper, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm). Being a 'good farmer' therefore means sufficient nutrients, no poison, and proper knowledge regarding what you are producing and who you are producing it for. Some overlap with the conventional perspective on the 'good farmer' is seen here, such as being a good neighbour (Westerink et al., 2021), yet also divergence regarding the role of crops. Where conventional farming is more concerned with the shape, form and aesthetics of their products, this is never mentioned by the interviewees. This vision of highly aesthetic products (Burton, 2004; Westerink et al., 2021; Burton et al., 2008 e.g.) is rather rejected by interviewees, partially as a criticism of capitalist efficiency thinking, where imperfect crops are often being thrown away.

Being a 'good farmer' means taking care of your environmental surroundings and actively contributing to everything your land touches. Working with the life around you rather than against it, and ensuring no negative spillover to surroundings. "We like to have a lot of life around our garden, above our garden in the trees, and below our garden in the soil. As a farmer you should contribute to everything that that garden touches" (Thijn, urban crop farmer, <1 ha. pick-your-own farm). This ties in with two of the most mentioned characteristics of being a 'good farmer', namely taking care of biodiversity, and ensuring healthy soil. The former often constituted one of the main reasons for becoming a farmer and as the basis that needs to be met before you can become a 'good farmer'. You can only be a good farmer if you increase biodiversity, take care of the bees and ensure sufficient plant life. Healthy soil was additionally seen as the basis of everything, and fully seen as the responsibility of the farmer. The responsibility of a 'good farmer' is not only keeping it healthy, but actively improving soil quality over time and giving back, for example through no-dig methods, or green manure. The soil was framed as a partner, rather than something to be dominated. The soil and land were therefore often not seen as the farmer's property, but rather as something to take care of. Interviewees thereby recognise that a 'good farmer' uses their current actions to not only take care of today, but also of the future. "If a farmer retires and gives the next generation land that is of poorer quality than how he received it himself, that's not good farming" (Bryan, crop farmer, CSA, pick-your-own farms).

A 'good farmer' is someone with a lot of knowledge about a myriad of both agricultural and ecological topics. "A good farmer must spend his life learning to understand nature, and intervene in it responsibly to provide for his food supply... Thus, as a good farmer, you spend your life wondering, and being amazed at what you encounter" (Trevor, crop farmer, 25+ ha. including agroforestry). Agricultural and environmental sciences are embraced as essential, for example in improving soil health. "That connection between farming and science, forming that bridge, being a kind of science farmer, that I find

interesting, important" (Jorick, crop farmer, CSA, 25 ha. including agroforestry). Science and knowledge are seen as necessary to understand how to do things differently from conventional farmers. Others are also sceptical of some capitalist use of science, to maintain large scale farming for example.

The most mentioned motivational aspect, mentioned by almost all interviewees, was that their current work allowed them to operationalise their ecological values through visible results in soil, biodiversity and the environment. "You lose yourself pretty quickly in everything that's going wrong in this world, and the hopelessness around you, but that's not the shit you can control. Right here, here we can make something" (Jorick, crop farmer, CSA, 25 ha. including agroforestry); "Here I have the feeling that I am doing something that really matters, doing it for something else than just myself. Even after two years of farming you already see so much improvement in soil life, that's rewarding work" (Layla, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm including agroforestry).

Questions about the differences with conventional farmers additionally sparked AFI statements. Scale and the need for efficiency played an important role in defining differences, with interviewees indicating how that is part of being a conventional farmer rather than of agroecological farmers. The absence of this system on the interviewees' farms played an important part in defining their practices, both descriptively as well as normatively. "With the prototype conventional farmer, that evokes large, intensive animal husbandry in me. I can't identify with that. The same with the ten acres with corn and intensive pesticides: no, I condemn that rather than identify with that" (Layla, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm including agroforestry). Secondly, taking without giving back to nature and the community was mentioned frequently as an important difference. This was described objectively, as well as through value-laden statements.

> What we don't share with them at all is the desire to just carry on as we've been doing the last decades: focusing on as much production as possible. Getting as much out of the land as possible and giving nothing back to it. (Thijn, urban crop farmer, <1 ha. pick-your-own farm)

For overlap with conventional farmers, there was a less structured narrative. No overlapping characteristics were mentioned more than once, therefore illustrating that differences were more strongly visible and classifiable than overlap. Three farmers explicitly indicate little to no overlap, except that both groups produce food. There seems to be a bigger identity divide between male and female interviewees with conventional farmers, with three of the interviewed women indicating basically 'no overlap' with conventional farmers, and the fourth female interviewee indicating to have a negative connotation with identifying themselves with the title 'farmer'. They had more difficulty with the attitude and stance of conventional farmers as well, mainly pertaining to the aggression and aggressive attitude used in pushing their ways, which was experienced both on a societal as well as personal level. Of the six interviewed men, none indicated 'no overlap', and only one had a negative connotation with being a 'farmer'. The gap between Dutch agroecological and conventional farmers could thus also be gendered, in which this gap appears more significant for female agroecological farmers who fit the traditional image of being a farmer even less.

> When I came back to the Netherlands, you really see: this is real Dutch farming. I see it as the white, 50+ man who figured out how it should be: straight beds, straight lines, especially a lot of straight and efficient, and that also has a reason, but I have everything in round shapes here, bang inefficient, but it also creates a different value. (Katja, crop farmer, 2 ha. including agroforestry)

4.2. Diversity on the land, nature as a partner, and the community as the basis

Community and surroundings did not just appear as part of being a 'good farmer', but also frequently as part of a 'good landscape'. A 'good landscape' includes a group of volunteers, fellow harvesters, and is a place for the local community to come together on the farmer's land to protect that landscape and the environment. A 'good landscape' is additionally described as the inclusion of nature, such as hawthorn and wicker hedges instead of barbed wire. Designing a 'good landscape' is trying to make nature part of agricultural land again. ''We farm nature-inclusively, which means that every animal is welcome. Not only welcome, but also has a purpose. Sometimes a purpose we don't understand, but then that's too bad for us'' (Kasper, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm). The interviewees explain how agricultural land does not just include nature; it also leaves room for nature to thrive without human intervention. A 'good landscape' means a combination of nature and your agriculture, with nature as the dominant factor. This often also means no intervention in weeds around the farm.

> I also let weeds be on purpose, and on the young ones are butterflies that we all like, and if we take away all the nettles, then we have no butterflies, no caterpillars, then no-one and nothing is happy. So let them be. (Kasper, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm)

A 'good landscape' is described as a diverse one, where biodiversity is seen as essential, as well as diverse in colour. Enough diversity on the land to ensure biodiversity in the area, in attracting and helping out species. Not just a monotonous field of potatoes, no straight lines, or bare land when the harvest is done, but constant variation.

Aside from these characteristics, interviewees often did not have an image of what a 'good landscape' entails, and often landed on diversity as the guiding principle. Research on conventional farmers explains the high need to control, have straight lines, and fix every little mistake (Vanclay & Lawrence, 1994; Schneider et al., 2010 e.g.), but the interviewees demonstrate an absence of vision on how their land needs to look. This is partially the case because the AFI demonstrates to not be one of a 'land manager', but rather of working with nature, seeing what nature will do with 'your' land. This is where this identity differs from the conventional agricultural identity, for whom the exact shape, form and aesthetics of the crops and land, as well as straight lines, and a tidy landscape are essential. The AFI appears to not only reject this, but also reject the notion of actively designing, deciding and controlling the land, rather than working together with it. While research into the conventional farmers' identity included farmers applying more pesticides in publicly visible areas of the farm, and positioning machinery such as tractors near the public roads for people to see (Burton et al., 2008), the current interviewees do not indicate the need to demonstrate aesthetics or machinery to the outside world. This translates in the absence of the need to adhere to social norms and standards of surrounding farmers, and rather following intrinsic motivation and values on what it means to be a 'good farmer'.

With 'nature' being the main motivation for many in becoming a farmer, it plays an important role in the AFI. According to interviewees, the only way to protect nature and still feed the planet is working with nature, following the course of nature in deciding on your practices, rather than working against the soil or disposing of other life. Nature is also where a problem comes in according to many interviewees, namely regarding the perception that we have of nature in our western world. We perceive humans as superior to other organisms, feeling the need to manage, seeing our environment as something to shape in our view without caring for it, and seeing nature as something external.

> Because we have started to see nature as something external: you have nature reserves, that's where nature is allowed to be, and in no other places, that doesn't help the current issues. Whereas if

> you just feel connected to nature: I as a human am also nature, then that might change things. (Kasper, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm)

Nature is also where some farmers actively identify themselves as different from conventional farmers, namely as caretakers of nature and biodiversity, as opposed to caretakers of a certain product. These underlying perceptions regarding nature return in the question regarding the return of the wolf in the Netherlands, an event which has sparked many debates. With only a single farmer mentioning the possibility of killing or managing the wolf, a clear precedent was set, with interviewees describing the return of the wolf explicitly as a positive development. When asked how to treat the wolf in the Netherlands, some were very practical, such as farmers simply having to put down better protection for their animals, and governmental financial compensation for killed animals. Others see that the wolf in the Netherlands is a natural process, an animal that farmers here used to live with as well, and that relationship is one that we will have to relearn. One of the most mentioned 'solutions' was giving space to the wolf in order for them to display their natural behaviour. This means that the wolf does not only have to adapt to our environment, but that we should also adapt our environment to the wolf, thereby moving away from anthropocentric thinking and recognising intrinsic values of nature. "That means that you simply can't keep animals in certain places. So be it" (Michell, urban crop farmer, CSA). The current societal discursive treatment of the wolf is also described as an out-of-proportion frame.

> In the heart of the Veluwe (a Dutch area with a lot of nature), between all those chicken and pig barns, there is a big sign saying: the wolf has killed two sheep, away with the wolf. I think that is so hypocritical: there are thousands of animals that die there every day, and then you want to shoot the wolf because it killed two lambs. (Layla, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm including agroforestry)

Being an agroecological farmer thus concludes to additionally shifting your perception on nature, and seeing nature in perspective. "We are simply animals, and that is not a swear word. We have elevated ourselves to human beings because our brains can do certain things that most animals don't have. That's where it goes wrong" (Kasper, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm).

In addition to nature as part of being a 'good farmer' and having a 'good landscape', the importance of the community was mentioned frequently. 'Community' returned as part of being a 'good farmer', as part of the 'good landscape', as part of the solution and as part of the differences with conventional farmers. Rather than family, as often important to conventional farmers, the local community constitutes the social aspect of the AFI. Many of the interviewed farmers are accompanied by teams of volunteers. There is a high sense of connection with these volunteers, who will take off a day in their week to spend on the farm because they believe in the underlying mission. Consumers who buy from the farms often end up volunteering, as they can directly see an alternative way of farming, leading to a will to contribute and connect. The farmers do not only mention these volunteers as great help, but as something which motivates them intrinsically. Working with other people, social farming as it were, is essential in the AFI. Some even frame these volunteers as possibly being the people to hand their farms down to in the future. No family farm, but rather a community farm, with people that have actively chosen to contribute. Interviewees indicate how they are positively received by the local community and residents, therefore obtaining support and a barrier to possible negative or productivist influences. An important part of the community is the farm as a place to host people. Creating a space for people to come and farm together, building a community, a place for people to just 'be'. Inviting the community to come drink soup while catching up and updating them about future plans as an alternative informal way to the

shareholder meeting. Not just inviting people to come pick (up) their vegetables and come to volunteer, but also as a site of activities such as cooking workshops. The AFI has 'hosting' as a central principle. The interviewees mention the importance of community as a perceived difference with these conventional farmers. The former do it for people, to connect people to their food again, to ensure they have healthy food, to be worried about the consumer, to work from a people perspective. The connection with the consumer is gone for the latter, while the former asks what consumers want.

Analysing the perceptions of these first two headings allows for initial identity exploration. The 'good' agroecological farmer seeks to explicitly escape capitalist thinking, moving from an economic to a social and ecological focus. From having yield and supermarkets in the back of their minds, towards the local community, environment, and their health. The AFI thus embraces post-productivist roles (Burton, 2004), moving beyond an individualistic productivist focus. Their intrinsic motivation for ecological farming, rather than following the expected familial course of agricultural events, might explain how they escape this dominant thinking. They are not stuck in a generational discourse or slump, but rather motivated through their own perspective and principles. Through their emphasis on nature as a partner, and their absence of anthropocentric thinking, they move away from patriarchal and conventional discourses of nature domination as well. Natural domination has led to the status quo of the Dutch agricultural sector, where nature is the enemy, and something to oppose rather than embrace. The AFI escapes this false dichotomy, demonstrating visible alternatives to conventional Dutch pressures and techno-fixes as a solution.

4.3. Capitalism as the problem, rethinking socioeconomic and environmental perceptions as the solution

An important aspect of the AFI is the dominant perceptions on problems and solutions of the agricultural sector, given the agroecological movement's roots in anti-capitalist thinking (Coolsaet, 2016), as well as agroecology seeing potential solutions in rethinking social, political and environmental perceptions (James et al., 2023). This raises the question of whether Dutch agroecological farmers adhere to these perspectives.

The so-called 'post Second World War discourse' has been an important pillar in the current agricultural issues according to almost all interviewees. A discourse of never being hungry anymore, becoming self-sufficient as a country through upscaling, the use of technology to expand the scale, pesticides to avoid failed harvests, and billions of euros in subsidies. This responsibility went beyond the Netherlands, thereby starting to produce for other nation states, justified by the fertile Dutch soil and climate. As mentioned by an interviewee, 'no farmers no food' is a frequently heard argument for maintaining the agricultural status quo, yet this ignores the significant percentage of Dutch exported foods. This has led to a prominent discourse of having the responsibility to produce food for the world, which interviewees mention as highly problematic. Multiple interviewees indicated how this became a significant environmental problem, replacing nature and environmental features with a focus on efficiency to adhere to this responsibility through abundant food production.

> Eventually 100.000 kilometres of barbed wire came back from the war, after which we said: yes, that's actually much more efficient. Just take away the hawthorn hedge, and put down some barbed wire. We forgot all the other ecosystem services that the hawthorn hedge provided. (Jorick, crop farmer, CSA, 25 ha. including agroforestry)

The most mentioned problem according to the interviewees is the role of the current economic capitalist system in ecological and social consequences. ″We want to look for the solution within that same system, but you can't solve problems with the same thinking that caused them″ (Jorick, crop farmer, CSA, 25 ha. including agroforestry). Jorick often receives the question whether his practices are economically sustainable. Yet this is exactly the issue according to him, given that it is asking the wrong question. The question should be whether the economic system we are in is sustainable. Many interviewees mention how the current system is only economy-driven, and that that leads to an absence of valuation of other services that agroecologists provide, such as healthy soil and food and clean water. Even if conventional farmers want to stop or de-intensify, this is not facilitated, but rather discouraged by banks. Interviewees additionally explain how banks do not compensate their ecosystem services by for example offering lower interest rates. Interviewees who did receive funds from major banks, indicate how it is experienced as a strategy for greenwashing, through banks trying to justify their current choices by investing change towards the agricultural transition. ″We received some financial help last year, but we notice that they do so mainly so that they can indicate that they are also doing something good with their money″ (Bryan, crop farmer, CSA, pick-your-own farms). Many interviewees indicate how mainly the agribusiness and agrifood market parties keep this economic-driven capitalist system and power imbalance in place, all profiting from the current agricultural system. All these third parties cause for the farmer to have less profit, and make it very difficult to transition.

> They earn the most: the feed industry, the slaughterhouses, the fertiliser factories: these people earn from agriculture, not the farmers, they've gone down in numbers. Yet those exact farmers are now in Brussels protesting, throwing asbestos on roads, to keep that system going that has systematically destroyed them for the last 50 years. (Jorick, crop farmer, CSA, 25 ha. including agroforestry)

The role of the agricultural lobby in promoting conventional attitudes as universal was additionally mentioned frequently as highly problematic.

> I would very much like that the public would see other farms as well, those who instead of protesting are actually in favour of those new laws and new nature-inclusive regulations. It's a shame that that is seen so little. There's a lot of lobbying behind that. (Layla, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm including agroforestry)

An interviewee tells how he feels the divide in the Netherlands between conventional and agroecological farmers, and the role of the lobby industry in actively creating that divide. ″If we want to, next season the whole world will be eating nature-inclusive products. But that's probably not a good economic story for the major parties operating in agribusiness″ (Bryan, crop farmer, CSA, pick-your-own farms).

These economic developments have all led to a reduced responsibility of the government, and interviewees indicate that when they knock on the government's door, subsidies and loans are all according to the rules of large-scale farming, thus adhering to the current economic system. Governmental layers therefore additionally still 'feed' this large scale to farmers, keeping the system in place. The government's inertia in intervening in this system is therefore perceived as highly problematic. More specifically, the conservative lobby of the Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA), the most prominent political agricultural party before the BBB, has played a significant role in this according to interviewees. National and European political parties not having dared to recognise agricultural issues have built the

problematic status quo. The current rise of the political party BBB is additionally mentioned as continuing this absence of change in politics. While also pointing fingers, many interviewees indicate how we are in a system which was democratically chosen, a narrative created by society. The narrative is being governed by the few now and this locked-in system keeps itself in place. When asked about the perpetrators of the current issues in agriculture, none mentioned conventional farmers prominently, and rather demonstrated understanding for their situations. Farmers undergo intense economic stress, see themselves reduced in numbers, are manipulated by banks into continuation of loans and subsidies, and are thus explained by interviewees as victims of the system. Many interviewees are in contact with conventional farmers, and see how they are wishing and willing to change, but are stuck in a system. While understanding is high, the direction and attitude of conventional farmers is often criticised.

> 10 years ago, farmers were still getting millions in loans from Rabobank to put up big barns with nitrogen scrubbers, and two years ago the whole society was shouting again: there have to be fewer cows. Those same farmers went to Rabobank and said: I want 10 fewer cows, and then Rabobank said: yes, just keep on milking, because you simply have a loan that you have to pay, see you. I understand those farmers, but they are focusing on the wrong direction. Those farmers focus on maintaining a system that just doesn't work. Those farmers should focus on: help us move to a new system. The government, the industry, consumers, they all have to be part of that solution. (Jorick, crop farmer, CSA, 25 ha. including agroforestry)

According to the interviewees, all these ideological, economic and political issues have led to the pressing practical issues the agricultural sector is facing right now. The current scale of agriculture, and practices of only taking and not giving back to the soil, nature and the community are seen as prominently problematic. This scale translates to farmers organisations as well, with the LTO being part of this discourse of everything 'big' in agriculture. Downscaling is therefore not only interpreted by interviewees as downscaling monocultures and land use, but additionally as downscaling these farmers' organisations. The current focus on scale additionally translates in a focus on efficiency, high input, high output, leading to total exhaustion and soil erosion, which is often mentioned as the difference between the two groups of farmers. ''That soil life used to be there. Now what are we doing: ploughing through the most important thing there is. You're pretty much cutting your umbilical cord every time'' (Kasper, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm).

Many of the interviewees saw their own practices as part of the solution. Not tilling the soil, no constant intervention, but rather producing with nature instead of antagonising it. Many saw the small scale as part of this solution, including a transition towards more farmers, rather than less. ''The western agricultural lobby wants to make us believe that they are feeding the world, but for a very large part it's just farmers like us, mainly in the non-western world who are just feeding their local area'' (Bryan, crop farmer, CSA, pick-your-own farms). They also emphasised the importance of strip cultivation, as a way of avoiding monocultures and ensuring natural pest control and healthy soil. A frequently mentioned method to achieve this is organising themselves as agroecologists, acting as a collective. Half of the interviewees however also criticise 'themselves', by explaining how their method is not the sole solution, explaining a need for bigger scale to additionally reach conventional farmers.

> These kinds of small initiatives are nice, but you can't expect everyone to come to the farm and pull their own carrots out of the ground three times a week. I do think that a solution lies within a diversity of initiatives. (Layla, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm including agroforestry)

An accompanying solution direction of agroecology is reshaping the organisation of consumption and production, focusing on direct and local consumption. The farmers explain this through no profits being taken by third market parties, a direct relationship with the consumer and their health, and not importing products from far away. This ties in with the importance of community, and the potential of a community that helps you on the land, creating a closer relationship with your food again. The farmers see a need for a cognitive change in citizens, consumers and the system. Consumers have been fed the image of 'perfect food', but education is necessary to relearn consumers to appreciate the 'real' vegetables again. Education on production and food could recreate a closer relationship to the farmer, which additionally allows time for farmers to tell their stories, their vision on agriculture, while informing people about what agroecology can mean for the planet.

> Why are we always walking through the woods, while we can take a nice walk through the strip crops? It's a beautiful sight to see how something grows: a Quercus, an oak, you have that in a forest, well here you think: do Brussels sprouts grow like that? As a farmer you tell a story about it, you charge 5 euros for a tour, and you put a delicious cup of soup with that. People think: a cup of soup also costs 4.50 or 5 euros in the city, this is great! But you have told your story, and you built contact with the consumer. (Kasper, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm)

The importance of small-scale, local, and rethinking production and consumption also returns in the frequently mentioned need for less animals in agriculture and meat consumption, as a way to spare land, reduce emissions, and ensure a sustainable diet for a growing population.

One of the most mentioned solutions was the cooperation and dialogue with conventional farmers individually, while moving away from cooperation through farmers' organisations such as the LTO. Admitting that both conventional and agroecological farmers make mistakes, recognising that food forests are maybe not a panacea, yet discussing agroecology's great applications for conventional farming. Most interviewees do not mention their way as 'the' way, but rather, similarly to the 'good landscape', call for diversity as a key principle.

> I think above all we have to move towards diversity in the agricultural system. You can't have a million urban farmers like me, because the time during which 80% of the population was a farmer is over. (Michell, urban crop farmer, CSA)

While innovation and technology are frequently societally mentioned solution directions, technology did not appear as a solution direction for interviewees, and the frame of techno-fixes was rather criticised by some. A more desirable way is support from politics and the government, rather than antagonising them. Local politics are being mentioned in facilitating land, and in the important role in financing and visibility of agroecological practices. The national government also has a role to play in financing and subsidies to make change happen. Politics and the governments are seen as welcome helpers if they would be willing to move away from productivist neoliberal thinking.

> That means that in part you have to start paying and financing to shape that transition. They (governments) have a lot of power, a lot of land, which can be used to stimulate the agroecological sector a lot. Not à la Rutte (previous prime minister): giving freedom to the sector and seeing how it solves its problems. ... That means maybe daring to make bigger choices. Then you have to introduce certain taxes to bring in money to make sure we can all go forward again. (Michell, urban crop farmer, CSA)

The last frequently mentioned solution direction entails embracing alternative economics. With some putting explicit names such as the doughnut economy or degrowth on it, the majority described a system in which we started to financially subsidise ecosystem services, and not only look at production and yield anymore. One farmer indicates how he already, through a private partnership, is being paid for the ecosystem services that he provides, which has made his financial situation stable and allowed him to continue growing his agroecological practices in acres. Upscaling, but through agroecological beliefs.

Scrutinising the status quo according to the framework of Hopwood et al. (2005), all interviewees agree that the agricultural sector in its social, environmental and economic aspects faces insuperable problems, therefore stepping away from the possibility of adjustments without fundamental changes. Rather than seeing (economic) growth as the solution, is it highly problematised by interviewees, both through criticising the profit driven agribusiness system, as well as through criticising the respective lobby. The discourse of interviewees therefore actively refutes status quo 'solutions'. Reforming the current system is mostly not perceived as satisfactory for solving agricultural issues either. While knowledge and science are mentioned as being essential in constituting a 'good farmer', it is not noted as a solution. Working from within the current socio-economic structures is seen by most as the problem, despite this problem being one to which many of these farmers still need to adhere to earn a living. Reforming through technology and increased information is additionally not prominent. An increased role of the government however is mentioned frequently as a possible solution direction, regarding facilitating land, financing, subsidies and promoting visibility.

All interviewees can predominantly be categorised as transformative. The root of evil in agriculture is perceived as capitalism, therefore explaining the need to step away from the power structures and economic imbalances of the agricultural sector. This means stepping away from big farmers' organisations, as well as shifting attention towards alternative agriculture. Nature is perceived as something to work together with, as something with intrinsic values, rather than something needed for human needs or something to be dominated. Actively rethinking farmers' and citizens' relationship with nature through farm visits and education is therefore seen as necessary by interviewees. With the mentioning of alternative economics such as degrowth and the doughnut economy, as well as the problematisation of globalisation, all interviewees fit into this transformative character. Small within-group differences were found, such as some interviewees more explicitly and directly condemning capitalism, the economic system and the current associated society, while others did so more implicitly. Additionally, some interviewees mainly focused on their local surroundings, influences and practices, while others more explicitly made the connection to bigger societal debates and ideologies. Their perceptions are classified and visualised in Figure 2.

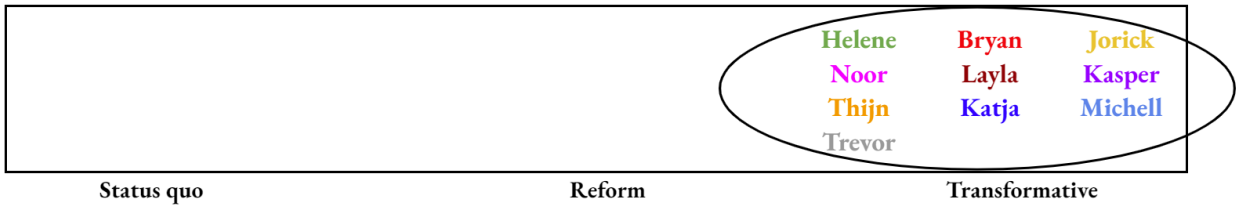

Figure 2. Classification of the interviewees according to the framework of Hopwood et al. (2005)

4.4. Societally dominant agricultural stakeholders' perceptions on 'the farmer' and the agricultural sector

The divergent views between SDAS and interviewees were mentioned frequently. Analysing this overlap and differences can identify the possible gap in SDAS representing 'the farmer', and whether this includes the AFI. Three organisations that emerged frequently throughout the interviews and have prominent positions in (agricultural) society are the BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB, Farmer Citizen Movement), the Rabobank, and the Land- en Tuinbouworganisatie (LTO, Agricultural and Horticultural Organisation).

4.4.1. BoerBurgerBeweging (Farmer Citizen Movement)

The BBB highly positions herself through the familial farmers' identity through frequent generational sentiments and mentioning farmers in combination with their children or partner. The BBB additionally adheres to the problematised frame of the Netherlands having the perfect fertile climate for farming, thereby portraying Dutch farmers as having to take on this responsibility of food production for the world. These identity statements lay the foundation for the BBB protecting the agricultural status quo, rather than nature, downplaying the degradation of the latter through statements such as "because nature would be threatened. The one who is being threatened for real, is the farmer". This thereby reproduces an antagonistic discourse on the false duality of nature and farming, depicting the farmer as the real victim. Rather than embracing environmental policy, the BBB calls the assigned Natura 2000 areas, the European network of protected nature areas, a "monstrosity". The BBB recognises past human intervention in nature, but rather than problematising this, they use this argument as a reason to continue shaping nature by adjusting it to fit local agriculture: "farmer-inclusive nature", rather than nature-inclusive farming. With respect to the wolf, the BBB recognises their protected status, yet encourages to actively "manage" the number of wolves. They demonstrate the wish for killing wolves that repeatedly kill farming animals, which are described as "perpetrators" by the BBB. Additionally, rather than embracing (environmental) science, one of the BBB's key campaign sayings has been on using your internal "farmer's knowledge", translating to using your common sense and logical thinking. This thereby implicitly chooses logical reasoning over scientific claims, which is replicated in further statements. "I always think: the thicker the report, the more words you need to explain something. If you need a lot of words to explain something, you already have to somewhat start questioning it. "

In defining the perpetrator of the current crisis, the BBB to some degree points to the low prices that supermarkets offer farmers, as well as the "garotte" of the financial sector, but mostly defines the nitrogen crisis as a politically created issue. While the financial sector is slightly criticised, it is mostly the government plans resulting in less financial support from this financial sector that is seen as the problem. Through words such as "garotte", the BBB recognises the vicious cycle, yet induces no statements of systemic change or attempting to step out of this path dependency. The Dutch government is portrayed as following EU regulations as a "scared child", only following what "Brussels says we should do", thereby problematising both European and national environmental politics. The BBB states how both the levels of nitrogen and quantity of farmer held animals have reduced in the last decades, and talks about a politically "created nitrogen problem", thereby mitigating real world implications. The latter is replicated in their proposed solution directions, with the wish of redesigning and relocating Natura 2000 areas, instead of recovering existing areas, as well as their focus on innovation as a solution. Innovation fits the neoliberal frame of the BBB wanting to refrain from legally assigning certain quantities of land use, such as biological farming, given that "market forces will arrange that, when there is demand". While interviewees are critical of agribusiness and lobbying influences, the BBB does not problematise the power

that these companies have over the societal debate. "You say the farmers' protest is funded entirely by the cattle feed industry; is that not allowed then?"

4.4.2. Rabobank

Rabobank recognises the impact that the recent nitrogen debates had on farmers, yet in general stays away from normative statements regarding the position of the farmer. They do however repeatedly mention how earning a good living as well as a liveable countryside for farmers should be ensured. They additionally recognise the generational aspect of farmers' families in effectively adapting to change throughout the generations. Rabobank makes no claim regarding the presence of the wolf.

Rabobank recognises that the agricultural sector has reached its environmental limits, and states both willingness in protecting nature, and helping farmers to do so as well through sustainable agriculture. In doing so, Rabobank embraces a vision surrounding innovation, knowledge and technology. While recognising the prior problem, Rabobank claims that innovation has already substantially decreased the current issue. While they claim that more than mere innovation is necessary, they mainly appeal to continuing investment in innovation, for example through developing a biodiversity monitor and innovating towards tools to measure positive environmental contributions.

Rabobank therefore advocates for change, yet does not go much further than techno-fixes. The Rabobank states to help farmers that want to quit their businesses, but do not actively promote extensification nor a decrease of quantity in large-scale farms. They describe the possibility of extensification, but also of "high-productive" companies, therefore demonstrating no homogenous vision. Rabobank often does not push for certain pathways, but rather leaves room for interpretation: "for all transitions: de-intensify, switch, innovate, move or stop". The explicit focus and preference of Rabobank is on "true value business models", which fit these heterogeneous pathways, given that it entails that "agricultural entrepreneurs [are] able to invest in conversion, extensification, innovation and/or relocation", thereby making no appeal to real change or a clear vision. Lastly, the bank frames themselves as following the desires of the public, rather than being an actor with agency who also has (financial) influence: "The extent to which shrinkage takes place ... depend[s] heavily on the choices that government, the chain and consumers will make."

Aside from describing possibilities of applying ecological true pricing, the transformative scope stays limited. Moving around the cattle industry to places where circular cattle feed is possible, and to places where no arable farming is possible are framed as systemic change. However, this mostly demonstrates spatial rearrangement. Importance of systemic change is also explained through the importance of competition in the agrifood sector, therefore making an appeal to a core neoliberal value, rather than criticising this system. While Rabobank occasionally advocates for an increased role of the government, it only does so in the government's neoliberal role of market facilitator, through stimulating the government to introduce a "target policy, with more freedom of choice for companies" and "more space and responsibility for an agricultural entrepreneur". Rabobank states the continued importance of profit in the sector, and rejects change in handing out conventionally focused subsidies to farmers, because "Our savers and customers, but also the regulators, expect a bank to be reliable and stable".

4.4.3. Land- en Tuinbouworganisatie (Agricultural and Horticultural Organisation)

The agrarian entrepreneur and farmer is one who works unbelievably hard for 365 days a year, independent of weather circumstances. Entrepreneurship is of high importance, as well as the respective

freedom of farmers. The economic role of the farmer is repeated by LTO, through statements of a "robust economic sector", as well as mentioning it as one of the last strong Dutch manufacturing sectors, portraying it as a traditionally Dutch sector which is being threatened. Farmers are additionally positioned as people that require platforms and study groups to exchange thoughts. The importance of family is somewhat frequent throughout the report as well, with frequent references to previous and future generations, explaining how farming is bigger than the current generation: "Our farmers and gardeners literally build on the work of their parents and grandparents in order to pass it on to their children". LTO often frames not only the occupation, but also the land as belonging to the farmer and their family, and as caregivers who want to "transfer it as best as possible, if not better, to the next generation". The aesthetics of the land are additionally framed as part of Dutch society, through the "characteristic Dutch landscape" and "cultural landscape" which farmers take care of and manage. Changes to the farmers' practices is therefore again framed as leading to a possible loss for Dutch culture. The LTO strengthens this argument by mentioning that this landscape is one which Dutch people enjoy thoroughly.

LTO embraces the frame of the "fertile delta" as well, framing the Netherlands as one of the best places to grow food. This discourse is used to justify not decreasing nor transforming agricultural land use, given that the fertile potential of the former needs to be protected. However, the LTO claims to recognise the importance of sustainability, and frames it as one offering opportunities rather than being a threat, embracing the threat for nature and the need to meet climate targets. Conversely, the wolf is perceived as a threat, highly antagonising their presence in the Netherlands, describing their presence as incurring damage, animal suffering, and framing some wolves as 'problematic'. An explicit statement is made that there is not always room for the wolf in all places, and that farmers and their animals have a right to constitute the Dutch landscape, therefore taking measures against the wolf where necessary to protect this (cultural) landscape. Where agriculture is prevalent, and the wolf has no room, possible instruments to use are preventive, as well as chasing away the wolf or killing wolves.

The LTO is highly critical of the role of governments in regulation. This includes both the wish for an absence of new Dutch regulation and soil legislation from the EU, as well as framing the shift towards more power for the market instead of government as positive, thereby lobbying for even more wiggle room in the legal framework. Obligatory buy-outs of polluting farmers are explicitly stated as not belonging to the possible transition paths, and the former should therefore be only on a voluntary basis, and not be utilised as a structural tool. LTO rather consistently emphasises the importance of innovation through "sensors, blockchains, data and algorithms", "technology and robotisation", and emphasising the Netherlands as a leading country in boosting agricultural knowledge and innovation. They additionally discuss the importance of research, in developing drought and salt tolerant crops and varieties, as well as developing monitoring programmes and knowledge platforms. LTO is positive about robotics as well: "Robots will take over a large part of the cultivation and harvesting activities by 2030". When explaining ways out of the current agricultural crises, LTO describes mostly transition paths regarding high technology, biological farming, multifunctional areas, which incorporate care and recreation in the agricultural sector, and farmers taking on a role of managing nature. The operationalisation of the latter however maintains broad, possibly adhering to maintenance of the "cultural landscape", as well as possibilities of more biodiverse nature. While partially pertaining to the cultural landscape, the LTO does mention the possibilities of valuing ecosystem services as an additional source of income for farmers.

4.4.4. Fostering the status quo and reaching out for techno-fixes

In conclusion, the BBB advocates a view of conservatism, in explaining the problem as a problem that is discursively created, claiming that the call for change is simply political, and stating that absence of change or incremental steps are sufficient. They thereby question whether the environment is facing problems at

all. Fundamental changes would harm the economy, Dutch culture, and farmers' families. The government should stand back to allow farmers and the market to solve issues themselves. Nature is additionally not seen as something with intrinsic value, and the BBB therefore ticks all boxes of the 'status quo' category, and only reaches out to the 'reform' bracket by focusing on technology for small innovative changes. The BBB thereby appears to mostly serve the needs of the conservative agribusiness discourse, blocking change where possible to ensure that current power relations and the agricultural status quo remains intact.

Rabobank demonstrates a mix of 'status quo' and 'reform' statements, with the former being operationalised through statements of adjusting without changing the system as well as not problematising economic growth. They rather see the market and profits as valuable tools to solve environmental issues. Rabobank also demonstrates a more 'reform' attitude, with high recognition of environmental issues in the agricultural sector, as well as a consistent focus on solving current issues through knowledge, innovation and information. They do not fit any of the 'transformation' boxes. Rabobank additionally remains vague on clear strategies, thereby framing their vision as one which can be interpreted according to the reader's desires, rather than actively calling for changing the future of the sector.

The LTO recognises the importance of sustainability and climate targets, yet highly criticises the role of governments in regulation. It additionally demonstrates little importance for the intrinsic value of the wolf, and of nature which does not fit the agricultural "cultural landscape", thereby mostly fighting for maintenance of cultural symbolic grass rather than biodiverse nature. Changes should be made from within the market, and should not be forced through policy or buy-outs. They thereby adhere to some status quo criteria, while additionally reaching out to reforming, through the high emphasis on innovation, knowledge, technology, and robotisation. The transformative character of LTO is negligible, except for recognising the potential of valuation of ecosystem services. The perceptions of these stakeholders are visualised in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Classification of the SDAS according to the framework of Hopwood et al. (2005)

All three analysed SDAS diverge significantly from the AFI regarding their visions on the Dutch agricultural sector, framing it as either only experiencing small problems, to solving existing issues through techno-fixes and innovation. Criticism on economic and power structures, an increased role for the government, and alternative economics are mostly absent in the analysis, illustrating how the transformative character of the AFI is not accurately represented. These gaps in perceptions towards the agricultural sector are summarised in Figure 4.

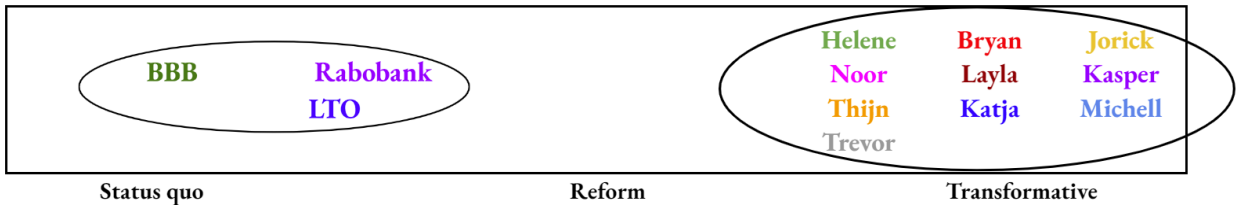

Figure 4. Comparison of interviewees and SDAS according to the framework of Hopwood et al. (2005)

Aside from problem-solution structures, identity statements by the SDAS additionally diverge from the AFI. The BBB mainly appeals to farmers as family, the Netherlands' fertile climate, and using your "farmers' knowledge", while these do not fit the AFI, and even actively diverge from the AFI's scientific discipline and problematisation of this fertile climate discourse. The Rabobank demonstrates a more dynamic picture in (not) appealing to the AFI, through emphasising the generational aspect of agriculture, a liveable countryside, and a good income for farmers, thereby not appealing to the AFI, nor demonstrating significant antagonising discourse. The LTO frames the farmer through entrepreneurship being important, and the importance of collective learning, thereby to some degree appealing to the AFI. However, they fail to embrace other dominant identity traits, rather promoting the "cultural landscape", as problematised by the AFI. This therefore demonstrates how the LTO and Rabobank do not explicitly move away from nor move towards the AFI, while the BBB actively distances itself from the AFI through its identity statements. Yet the LTO is the most mentioned and antagonised SDAS during the interviews, demonstrating how problem-solution perceptions, as well as lobbying and remaining behaviour is of more significant influence in the AFI's feeling of representation than explicit identity statements. While these three organisations are highly present in Dutch (agricultural) society, the AFI manages to steer away from adopting their dominant perceptions. The AFI is therefore able to ignore the identity of the social collective and standard, often described as powerful forces in identity formation according to Identity Theory.

4.5. Absence of representation of the AFI

While the former headings created clarity regarding divergence in identities, the question remains whether interviewees feel heard and represented by these three and other societal parties. These documents are written discourses, but how do these translate to practical agricultural realities? Interviewees overwhelmingly state that they do not feel supported in politics and by the government. Politics is described as representing farmers of a different category and scale, which reflects in absence of practical help and support.

> I only really feel heard the moment that the government shows that there are certain facilities that we can make use of to really support what we do. So do I feel heard: no. We get little to no support for what we do. (Bryan, crop farmer, CSA, pick-your-own farms)

Some also state that this reflects in the agroecological movement, which is defined as a rebelling movement against the political and agricultural status quo. Politics continues to talk about 'the farmer', with interviewees indicating how 'the farmer' does not include them. The left-winged animal party Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD, Party for the Animals) and green party GroenLinks (GreenLeft) received overall positive remarks by interviewees. Yet even this stays tentative, with interviewees recognising ideological overlap, but not experiencing their direct representation of the AFI. "I can imagine a party like PvdD or perhaps GroenLinks supporting such a transition, but if I genuinely know whether they do: no" (Layla, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm including agroforestry). Multiple farmers indicate this feeling of ideologically aligning, but not experiencing actual support. Therefore, even in parties that ideologically align, there is insecurity whether these actively embrace and would represent the AFI. Farmers are more positive about local representation from for example the PvdD, but additionally and unexpectedly, also from conventional farmers' parties such as the CDA. On a national level however, interviewees highly criticise the BBB and CDA, and the role they play in lobbying and the current agricultural problems.

> The [local branch of] CDA are our biggest fans, while in the beginning I thought: I'm not even going to visit them, because they don't like this at all, they align with those farmers across the street. But no, so that's very special: local politics is really a different story. They go beyond the party ideology. (Katja, crop farmer, 2 ha. including agroforestry)

Interviewees have a more homogenous, negative view on representation in farmers' organisations and market parties. They were overwhelmingly negative about the representation by farmers' organisations, through actively distancing themselves from major organisations such as the LTO. While one interviewee indicated possible cooperation with LTO, others see national parties and representation as a whole different category, and as the problem. Interviewees indicate how the LTO does not only fail to represent agroecological farmers, but also actively tries to hamper the broader adoption of agroecology. Not only do agribusiness organisations thus fail to transform and represent the AFI, they actively appear to block and prevent change.

> The large organisations have their finger in the pie. If we have a small agroecological club, then someone from the LTO wants to support us. But what does he do? He tells us that it's not feasible if we do it all like this. (Kasper, crop farmer, pick-your-own farm)

Another farmer indicates how cooperation with LTO cost a lot of time and effort and eventually did not work out, due to the continued status quo thinking, rather than moving towards change. This is despite over 80% of LTO members stating that the LTO should be a representation of all types of farmers (LTO, 2022).

> I spent a lot of time trying to build up some kind of collaboration, but eventually I realised that it's not possible. Every time I saw who became the new director of LTO, my suspicion was confirmed that nothing at all will change. So I realised I should stop flogging a dead horse. (Trevor, crop farmer, 25+ ha. including agroforestry)

Interviewees additionally indicated an absence of representation by the market sector. Among others due to scale, with these parties often representing the bigger scale farmers. While they might demonstrate interest and visit agroecological farms, their expectations and economic mindset differ significantly from the AFI, demonstrating a similar gap as seen between the SDAS and the AFI. As long as this productivist mindset prevails, cooperation between the AFI and market parties will remain difficult.

> Recently we had a visit from a big food supplier. What do they look at with purchasing: efficiency, a consistent product and price. None of those factors help an agroecological farmer. So as long as the market players do not include ecological values in their procurement process, there is nothing they can do or mean for us. (Bryan, crop farmer, CSA, pick-your-own farms)

Interviewees were quite positive about representation from agroecological organisations. However, there is still a sense of fragmentation and absence of professionalisation, as indicated by multiple interviewees. However, many indicate that this is slowly improving.

> When I started, the agroecological movement was very fragmented. Toekomstboeren, CSA Land van Ons, Herenboeren, and some more. Each one had its slightly different ideology, so they said: no, we are unique, our own voice. But then when the minister has to talk to someone, they simply come to the LTO, because that's a unified voice of farmers. (Jorick, crop farmer, CSA, 25 ha. including agroforestry)

The CSA-network, Land van Ons, Herenboeren and Toekomstboeren were all frequently mentioned as positive contributors to the AFI, as well as the less frequently appearing ASEED, Aardpeer and Caring Farmers. Additionally, agroecological representation emerges on a more local scale, through other local farmers using agroecological practices, leading to representation, as well as a feeling of belonging to a social movement.

The interviewees' small-scale practices reflect in their absence of connection to large-scale lobbying, market and political parties. Most interviewees appear somewhat hopeless regarding the role that governance can play in representing the AFI, and rather see many SDAS as the exact problem of the agricultural sector. Chosen political parties, farmers organisations and agricultural market parties have the means and power to put the AFI on the agenda, more so than small-scale individual farmers, yet seemingly insufficiently do so. Rather, they continue to adhere to protecting and representing productivist agriculture, thereby keeping the status quo alive.

The significant differences between agroecological and conventional thinking, as well as a sense of absence of representation by SDAS, have an effect on the job title used by interviewees as well. "Being a 'farmer' has a whole different connotation in my mind: someone who has a very large piece of land, driving his tractor over it. That's not me." (Noor, urban crop farmer, <1 ha. pick-your-own farm). While the current research talks about agroecological 'farmers', during the interviews many refrained from using that title, and rather used different titles to describe their jobs. 'Tuinder' is a frequent alternative for farmer, translating to 'gardener', but which, also according to the interviewees, does not cover the same connotation in English. Some indicated that only in English, they would call themselves 'farmer', due to an absence of a fitting alternative. 'Tuinder' is used as a way to specify and diverge from the conventional image, through an emphasis on no cattle, no big scale, and a focus on vegetables. Another frequent term is 'urban farmer', given that it still emphasises the difference with a traditional farmer, while additionally ensuring clarity for consumers and visitors. 'Part-time farmer' and 'agroecological farmer' are remaining used terms. These terms demonstrated high variation in use, with interviewees indicating to use different terms based on context. For talking with known stakeholders, and fellow farmers, 'tuinder' would be used more frequently to specify their specific practices. Terms related to 'farmer', such as 'urban farmer' or 'agroecological farmer', were used towards the outside world to ensure clarity. This on the one hand explains the title use through a practical lens, ensuring proper specification and clarity for recipients, but a more normative and value laden use of varying titles appears as well. Two interviewees actively indicated a negative connotation with the title 'farmer'. For many, 'farmer' was associated with the conventional image of many acres, big machinery and working with cattle. In politics and societal statements, the interviewees also felt a disconnect with how 'the farmer' is being framed and discussed in public debate. Politics, market parties and farmer organisations make generalised claims and normative statements about 'the farmer', and that image does not fit these agroecological farmers' values.

> All the things that are said about 'farmers', I don't identify with that at all. All the statements of Rabobank about farmers as well, make me think: I'm not a farmer at all, I don't feel that way. No, I really don't feel like a farmer. (Noor, urban crop farmer, <1 ha. pick-your-own farm)

The latter therefore plays an additional role in title choice, and in finding a close alternative to still demonstrate similarity, but also differences. One of the female interviewees however did indicate to use the term farmer, exactly as a way to change this traditional image. "I like the term farmer, because when you think of a farmer you think of a man with livestock, riding on his tractor, so we should also say we are farmers, we exist too" (Katja, crop farmer, 2 ha. including agroforestry). Many of the interviewees indeed emphasise the plurality of types of farmers, yet this plurality misses in public debate. The public debate on 'farmers' often refers to dairy farmers, yet the agricultural scene is not that black and white. "You consistently talk about 'farmer', but you're not talking about me" (Michell, urban crop farmer, CSA). On the one hand, Katja's perception could indeed allow for a bottom-up transformation of what it means to be a farmer. However, Noor's feeling of a significant gap between methods of farming and absence of desire to be identified with conventional thinking appears significant as well. This raises a difficult to navigate issue for the AFI of adhering to the farmer's title and changing the outside affiliated meaning with it, or moving towards alternative titles, attempting to build up a separate understanding and category of agriculture.

4.6. Free from familial pressures, generational discourses, and negative social influences

Yet what explains this transformative identity that the AFI is managing to adopt, and how does it manage to break free from conventional thinking and the SDAS their discourses? Interviewees describe how the post WWII situation in the Netherlands in combination with the upcoming of capitalism has led to conventional farmers being in the system they are in right now, a system in which a high responsibility for the Netherlands to feed the world is ingrained. This responsibility has translated towards a highly productivist, food security and efficiency-based mindset towards farming (cf. Sutherland & Burton, 2011). Conventional farmers still remain stuck in this mindset of what it means to be a 'good farmer'.

> Eventually we just started selling that mantra, and those fourth-generation farmers, who have been hearing that for four generations now, have come to believe that completely: our job is just to get 11 or 12 tons of wheat harvest, or 10.000 litres of milk per cow. And if you're not doing that, then you're really not a 'good farmer', you're not utilising the potential of your land and your resources. And that story, yes that makes it so hard for conventional farmers to get out of that. (Jorick, crop farmer, CSA, 25 ha. including agroforestry)

This internalised discourse is one of the issues that keeps the conventional identity from turning transformative. One of the interviewees has cooperated numerously with conventional farmers, and in those cooperations experienced the tradition and cultural farmer images first hand.

> In the beginning those conventional farmers said: we want to participate in your program, but we don't want to be known by name, and we also don't want you to mention our names on the website. Not even tell where we live, because we don't want to have people coming to the door and asking all these difficult questions. If the neighbour knows that you are working together with such a nature nutjob, then you are no longer taken seriously by those around you. (Trevor, crop farmer, 25+ ha. including agroforestry)

Farmer Trevor indicates how conventional farmers were willing to incorporate environmentally-friendly practices through cooperation with Trevor, yet were not willing to be mentioned by name on the

website. Yet as time progressed, these farmers were willing to demonstrate publicly that they were participating in these environmentally-friendly practices. Reflecting on this through Identity Theory, this example demonstrates how the AFI can possibly assist in changing practices, and consequently changing identities. Initial adoption of cooperation and practices did not go paired with identity change, but eventually these perceptions and worldviews of conventional farmers shifted, allowing them to portray a shifting identity to peers as well. In Trevor's case, the AFI to some degree managed to change the social norm, thereby making alteration of identity easier for conventional farmers. Yet in many cases, this negative social pressure due to familial background is still present.

> My neighbour is a conventional farmer, and his grandfather would drive by with his mobility scooter, and he'd just sit there shaking his head disapprovingly. There was a very nice green manure crop, and I look at that and I think, wow: healthy roots in the soil, a good way to go through winter, good for your soil life, nice going. But his own grandfather, who has farmed there himself all his life, looks at him and says: 'What the hell are you doing! You're just letting your family's land go to shit.' (Jorick, crop farmer, CSA, 25 ha. including agroforestry)

Where conventional farmers often take over the family business, nine interviewees had no background in farming, and became interested in farming later in life. The one farmer who did have a background in farming, had done so in another continent, thus having no external pressures or expectations when starting here. This absence of agricultural background allowed them to think critically and independently about how to shape their practices, how to farm, and thus allowed room in shaping their farmers' identity. No outside pressure and social norms in imposing a certain discourse or practices regarding how to farm, nor generational and familial pressures.

The role of family was significantly different and less important for the interviewees. The farms and businesses of interviewees were never anthropomorphised during interviews, nor displayed as being part of the farmers' family. Family was only mentioned as helping out with making their vision become a reality. One interviewee was currently even training his children to be his successors, and another interviewee mentioned how he felt he could only become a good dad after realising his agroecological wish. Through these (possible) successors of agroecological practices, a possible new generational discourse could pop up in the future regarding how to be a 'good farmer'. A possible new set of beliefs which can reshape the generational discourse which is prominent right now. No grandfather driving by judgmentally, but rather a community that wants to voluntarily help out in realising this mission. No pressure from family, but creating a place for family to reinvent a vision on agriculture. Motivations for their current jobs did not consist of family expectations, nor economic viability, but displayed more intrinsic reasoning, such as enjoying work and operationalising personal values. Identity Theory's social norms and expectations therefore did not permeate the AFI, and the AFI rather stayed protected due to intrinsic motivation and a positively-minded community of local consumers. This raises the question to which degree conventional farmers can escape this identity, given that familial and generational discourses currently seemingly pull harder in maintaining conventional than the pressure to transform their farms and identities. One interviewee however explained how he and his conventional neighbour had helped each other significantly, where the conventional farmer had helped the interviewee with the basics of farming and the use of small machinery, while the conventional farmer was inspired by the interviewee's green practices and applied these to some degree himself as well. This in combination with the identity change perceived in Trevor's cooperation with conventional farmers demonstrates potential. Yet how can you fill the gap between conventional familial pressures and intrinsic motivation towards ecological, economic and social transformation, if even possible? Given that the AFI already embraces this view, is

filling this conventional gap desirable, or a waste of money and effort? Can farmers entrenched in familial conventional discourses become truly transformative, or is the gap too big?

4.7. Economic performance as the root problem, as necessary, or as part of being a 'good farmer'

The AFI appears highly transformative, and the prior section confirms how this is indeed possible due to an absence of negative social pressures. On the other hand, broader societal and economic pressures do appear to influence the development of a fully-fledged transformative AFI. Interviewees demonstrate highly different answers regarding the importance of financial viability and economic thriving. More concretely, a characteristic of a 'good farmer' for multiple interviewees is the importance of entrepreneurship and control. A 'good farmer' is a farmer who is in control of their own finances, organisationally skilled, makes solid financial decisions, and for some interviewees a farmer who can financially live off their land. While the AFI differs significantly from conventional thinking, they are still stuck in a system which is economically driven, and therefore some also indicate that control over finances and a working economic model is still part of being a 'good farmer'. Others on the other hand oppose this, indicating how their farms are maybe not financially viable, but that that is ok, and an issue of the dominant system rather than theirs. Multiple farmers call for moving from a productivist system towards a system in which ecosystem services are valued as well.

> Asking whether it's financially viable is the wrong question. The question is: can we as society continue like this? And the answer to that is also no. Food is a medicine, we eat our landscape, it's a cultural landscape. We create biodiversity here, water regulation, carbon storage, recreation and a place for people to be. All those ecosystem services that we provide are not valued in the capitalist system. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't do it, that means the fucking system has to change. (Jorick, crop farmer, CSA, 25 ha. including agroforestry)

Therefore, some inconsistencies are seen in the AFI regarding the economic component of being a 'good farmer', with some accepting, or being forced to, accept the current system in their operationalisation of farming, while others seek to move away from this dominant thinking. This economic component returns in discussing the differences between conventional and agroecological farmers. Where on the one hand the biggest and smallest farmers who were interviewed indicate that the difference is that they right now have less profit than conventional farmers, all other interviewees illustrate an image of an economic model working significantly better than that of conventional agriculture, enjoying more autonomy and freedom. They explain this due to smaller scale, thus having no loans to pay off, nor a system of loans where they can become stuck in. They are not dependent on third parties where often the highest profits go, therefore leading to a higher income for themselves.

> The conventional farmer produces for the world market, a market where he has no influence, thus being dependent on suppliers. We are in the shortest chain possible, we have a very different revenue model, we share risks with our members. We are ourselves able to shape our livelihood. (Bryan, crop farmer, CSA, pick-your-own farms)

They also indicate how surrounding conventional farmers see this financial viability, and are attracted by it and interested in it as well. However, the economic component is also where there is some overlap with conventional farmers, regarding having to work in a way which is also financially and

economically viable. This is where the AFI might also be influenced by conventional farming and the capitalist system in proving that what you are doing is worth enough money. This external productivist pressure of a wider system, but also of surrounding conventional farmers, can thus indeed have an influence on falling back on economic necessities.

> In the beginning I really felt this social pressure of: you want to do something good, and precisely because you bring something new, you have to do it well, otherwise it becomes a hobby, like everyone says: you can't earn anything with it. So the revenue model became very important instead of pioneering and having fun. Then the fun quickly goes away. (Katja, crop farmer, 2 ha. including agroforestry)

As mentioned before, some farmers embrace entrepreneurship as part of the farmers' identity, others criticise it but still see themselves forced to participate in that respective system to ensure a proper livelihood, and others have found a way, or are searching for one, to step away from this productivist dominant thinking. For many of the interviewed farmers, this financial component was a reflection of reality. Yet differently from expectations of Identity Theory, not all of these farmers therefore embraced this as part of their identity, but rather sought to criticise its very nature.

These societal pressures are reproduced in the matter of access to land. Interviewees indicate to often fall in between the cracks of the system when applying for land access, having to 'choose' between nature or agriculture. This leads to problems with funding, with large-scale non-nature-inclusive farming having led to the government now not fully recognising the interrelation between nature and farming within agroecology. The system is still designed to either practice agriculture on a plot of land, or make room for nature, but not together. One interviewee indicated the desire for a small extra plot for nature to thrive, yet he could only expand when working together with another farmer in buying land, given that the desired plot was of insufficient scale by governmental standards. Therefore not only economically, but spatially the odds are against the AFI at times. They are partially forced to adapt to dominant thinking regarding efficiency, financial viability and scale. The disconnect between the AFI and system is additionally seen in short-term thinking. Acquired land is often handed to agroecological farmers by the (local) government for only a short term, therefore having no security either, while agroecological principles depend on long-term ecological healing and social relations. This in combination with interviewees indicating the skyrocketing of land prices due to big scale farms buying plots for high prices, makes the blooming of the AFI difficult.

Being a 'good farmer' does to some degree means being productive in the AFI. However, interviewees do not directly link it to the conventional frame of having a high yield, given agroecology's absence of focus on selling large quantities to third parties. Nor is the focus profit-based, given that this is rather problematised by interviewees, and given that multiple interviewees work with systems of solidary payment in which customers can choose the prices that work for them. The economic importance is rather often translated to autonomy, and independence, thereby allowing farmers to experience freedom in shaping their practices as well. The absence of government and market assistance in realising their agroecological values leads to a choice of either somewhat focusing on financial viability, or simply not being able to farm. "Without citizens' support, we wouldn't have been here" (Bryan, crop farmer, CSA, pick-your-own farms). While prior quotes demonstrated how financial viability should not play an important role in the AFI, it is one of the main reasons why agroecology in the Netherlands survives. This raises the question of whether financial viability is a good thing to have as an agroecological value under the current dominant thinking and dominant system. In the current practices and mindsets of interviewees, financial viability does not appear to limit operationalisation of other agroecological values,

as demonstrated in the reflection on Hopwood et al. (2005). Some interviewees highly criticising capitalism still value entrepreneurship as part of being a 'good farmer', given that it actually offers a pathway for farmers to move away from toxic agribusiness and capitalist relations. On the other hand, financial viability is far from being the most important societal contribution of the AFI. The AFI's potential lies in rethinking social and ecological relations, transforming agricultural thinking. Should the focus thereby not be on changing the underlying system instead, so that financial viability does not have to be a necessary part for the AFI to survive? Currently, financial viability as part of being a 'good farmer' demonstrates to be a forced necessity for many, for as long as structural support remains absent.

5. Discussion

Farmer identities are heterogeneous, yet public debate on 'the farmer' often still refers to conventional, productivist farmers. The current article investigated the still infant Dutch AFI, exploring how it manages to develop its identity within a highly polarised society with significant power for agribusiness and conventional farming. Moreover, this article explored these SDAS to see what these discourses entail, and if the AFI fits within this conventional thinking. Exploring the Dutch AFI, and comparing it to conventional farmers' literature and the SDAS allowed for recognising the transformative character and potential of the AFI in possibly transforming the agricultural sector.

5.1. The Dutch AFI as transformative, independent and as part of the wider movement

While dominant thinking and conventional practices prevail in the Netherlands, the AFI manages to abandon the vast majority of standards constituting conventional agricultural thinking. The AFI actively steps away from applying an abundant quantity of pesticides (Burton, 2004), extra tilling of the land (Vanclay & Lawrence, 1994), the incorporation of symmetric straight lines (Westerink et al., 2021), and the eradication of all weeds (Westerink et al., 2021). The AFI therefore does not adhere to this standard as a way of demonstrating skilful, aesthetic and the cultural significance of tidy farming (Schneider et al., 2010; Burton, 2012). They rather problematise this behaviour given the negative environmental consequences, and consequently, the AFI attributes little importance to outsider perspectives and opinions on their practices, unlike conventional farmers (Burton, 2012; Gillich et al., 2019; Burton et al., 2008; Willet, 2022). Moreover, the importance of skilful handling of machinery does not return in the AFI either (Burton et al., 2008; Westerink et al., 2021), additionally being explained through the harm it can do in the form of compacting or tilling the soil. Sutherland (2013) and Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) demonstrate how conventional farmers transitioning towards organic farmers solely reshuffle the prioritisation of (agri)cultural symbols, but the current article demonstrates how the AFI actively manages to step away and problematise many of these symbols.

The interviewees perceived the 'good farmer' to be a farmer that actively gives back to the direct community and surroundings (cf. Bezner Kerr et al., 2022). This translates to food and social services, building relationships with customers and citizens, but additionally providing ecosystem services, in caring for nature and biodiversity. A 'good farmer' does not secure an abundance of food, nor provides aesthetic food, but rather ensures healthy food. Maintaining and actively improving healthy soil is perceived as the basis of being a 'good farmer', often operationalised in their practices as well through the use of green manure, no-dig, and absence of (heavy) machinery on land. A 'good farmer' is someone who possesses knowledge about a myriad of topics and embraces environmental science in their practices.

The 'good landscape' is perceived as diverse in colours, crops, insects and animals, rather than monotonous lands with straight lines. A 'good landscape' is additionally a place where nature is highly present, and intrinsically part of the landscape. This means actively increasing biodiversity, soil health, fertility, contributing to everything on and adjacent to the land, and stepping away from the need of constant intervention, but rather allowing nature to be. A 'good farmer' therefore does not actively micromanage the landscape, crops and the soil, but rethinks perceptions of nature through rather working together, and allowing natural inconsistencies and irregularities (cf. Bezner Kerr et al., 2022; James et al., 2023). The AFI takes on a steward and partner role (cf. Schoon & te Grotenhuis, 2000), rather than being a ruler or enemy of nature (Barbour, 1980; Willet, 2022), explaining how nature's limits and capabilities decide the scope of farming. This translates in their visions on the wolf as well, describing their return as a positive development and as natural, stating how the wolf should be given space to roam. The impact of

the wolf should be seen in perspective with human behaviour, advocating for changing human infrastructure to facilitate the wolf, rather than the wolf having to adapt. A 'good landscape' is one where you work together with local citizens on your farm, a place to host people, where consumers can see and help their food grow, where people can either attend activities, or simply for a community to 'be'. Community additionally translates to fostering a learning community with like-minded and conventional farmers, emphasising the importance of knowledge to the AFI (cf. Laforge & Levkoe, 2018). Interviewees differed from conventional farmers in giving back to surroundings, the community and nature, rather than solely taking, as well as normatively stepping away from the scale and associated efficiency of conventional farming. Attitudinal differences emerged as well towards environmental and agricultural policy, with conventional farmers often opposing change, while interviewees highly embrace political change towards a more sustainable agricultural sector. While differences were abundant, consistent overlapping characteristics were absent, demonstrating the significant gap between the conventional farmers' identity and the AFI. This gap in identity does however not translate in antagonisation, as visible through cooperation with and understanding for the position of conventional farmers.

Problem-solution perceptions emerge at the root of the agroecological movement, which is often described as a countermovement towards agricultural neoliberalisation (Coolsaet, 2016; Bezner Kerr et al., 2022), and reinventing agricultural practices of treating nature (Bezner Kerr et al., 2022), as confirmed by this article. The interviewees identify the root of the problem as the current capitalist system and related power structures. Solutions lie in disposing of lobbyists and big farmers' organisations (cf. Coolsaet, 2016), as well as embracing alternative economics such as valuing ecosystem services, the doughnut economy and degrowth. This demonstrates how the AFI actively belongs to the transformative dimension of Hopwood et al. (2005). More practical perceptions regarding solution directions were moving towards smaller scale, and thus more farmers rather than less, strip cultivation, changing our perception of nature, environmental education, increased local consumption, and cooperation and dialogue with conventional farmers.

Comparing the Dutch AFI to international articles, including Brazilian perspectives on agroecology (James et al., 2023), the Dutch AFI seemingly fits these understandings and operationalisations well, thereby adhering to the ideas of the broader agroecological movement. Additionally, Westerink et al. (2021) investigated Dutch conventional farmers, and the Dutch AFI manages to step away from these conventional characteristics as well, demonstrating how social norms appear to be of little influence in the independent development of the AFI. Through these analyses, the claim can be made that the interviewees' AFI mostly manages to step away from dominant discourses and constitute their own new identity. These significant differences already appear in tangible farm practices, but additionally on a deeper level. Agroecological farmers manage to step away from highly productivist thinking in their practices and underlying ideology, not seeing their identity according to the large-scale logics of the post-World War II food security discourse. They rather criticise this scale, and the associated capitalist thinking, explaining the negative effects that it has on the environment, the farmer, perceptions of nature, as well as on the health of customers. A renewed focus on quality, healthy food, and the local community, rather than focusing on quantity, aesthetics, and cooperations with third market parties. Interviewees manage to embrace food sovereignty, focusing on regaining control of the food system and their finances, producing healthy food, as well as producing ecologically sustainable food (Jarosz, 2014). An explanation for the development of a transformative AFI amidst a dominant conventional agricultural sector and polarised society is predominantly the absence of familial and generational discourses on the productivist 'good farmer' perceptions, and additionally due to the support of the local community. The latter financially and physically supports the AFI, functioning as a barrier for conventional and polarising identity influences. These influences are absent in the familial discourse as well, given that no interviewees

continued or inherited their parents' farm. While disapproval was often experienced by surrounding conventional farmers, the community buying products directly and volunteers working on the land allowed for a feeling of social support, thereby protecting the AFI from negative pressures. Criticism by neighbouring farmers was experienced as a challenge and as even more reason to diverge, demonstrating the strength and possibilities of the AFI. This therefore diverges from Laforge and Levkoe (2018), regarding agroecological farmers struggling to maintain a divergent identity in rural areas. While interviewees feel significant pressures in rural areas, this does not hamper the AFI development.

5.2. Economic thinking as problematic, necessary and as an opportunity

While not experiencing negative social pressures, societal pressures are prevalent for most interviewees. The economic system and associated economic thinking to some degrees halts this development of a completely diverging identity from industrial agriculture. The AFI is still somewhat forced to function in a capitalist society, in which land is expensive and owned, and in which land has to be of certain acres to 'acquire' it. However, most interviewees criticised this thinking, seeing the necessity of a shift in economic and societal thinking, seeking need for the valuation of ecosystem services as well for example. Yet for some, financial viability and having control over one's business model rather than being dependent upon third parties was explicitly a part of being a 'good farmer'. For the conventional 'good farmer', this economic thinking is often deeply entrenched in the meaning of being a 'good farmer' as well. The latter is consequently operationalised through productivist-based symbols, thereby focusing solely on high yields and efficient farming. This focus is highly problematic given the negative consequences that this has in conventional agriculture, destroying ecological features to increase efficiency and higher yield.

The AFI however displays a different economic thinking, where economic thinking translates to financial autonomy and independence. This breaks with dominant neoliberal economic thinking, given that efficiency thinking and producing as much as possible for third market parties is replaced with producing for the local community. They thereby rather attempt to break loose from agribusiness and capitalist relations, requiring a focus on autonomy and independence. Breaking loose from this signifies an opportunity to diverge from the rules of the game and dominant thinking of conventional agribusiness. The AFI's ability to diverge is rooted in an intrinsic motivation and independent thinking, which is protected by the local community and consumers promoting this thinking, rather than third market parties influencing neoliberal thought. Interviewees therefore also indicate that they feel no negative pressures from other farmers regarding their operationalisation of the farm. There is no focus on high yield, efficiency and profits, but rather on rethinking these exact economic discourses through financial autonomy and citizen supported agriculture. Even if this economic thinking would be seen as hampering the development of a fully transformative AFI, interviewees appear to have no option but to prove financially viable. There is little governmental support, and rather a system in place which is in the way of agroecological thinking, through absence of subsidies, access to land, and policy which recognises alternative farming paradigms. A financially viable Dutch AFI becomes a way of survival within current capitalist society, and this society appears stuck in its ways and frozen in place, rather than making a move towards alternative economic thinking. For interviewees, there is the choice between somewhat focusing on financial viability, or simply not existing. This is a necessary evil right now, yet not an evil that we should simply accept. The AFI offers a solution to the ecological, social and economic issues of the agricultural sector, and governments and market parties should recognise that in their financing and subsidising, rather than sending money to a self-destructive conventional farming sector. One interviewee managed to already have two fully functioning pick-your-own-farms in place, among other things due to the importance he attributed to financial independence. Unfortunately, the current agricultural sector

and Dutch government will most likely not be pressured into investing in agroecological thinking, given absence in ideological overlap. However, the gap in identity between SDAS, conventional farmers and agroecological farmers could be reduced by demonstrating the viable business case of agroecology, given the neoliberal focus on 'good' economics. This realisation could possibly lead to more access to land and subsidies for agroecological thinking. Yet this additionally poses the issue of a continued focus on economic viability, rather than embracing degrowth or a focus on ecosystem services. Appealing to financial viability could assist in wider adoption of agroecological practices, thereby possibly spreading the AFI and making it more dominant. Yet in a continued appeal to economic thinking, will the agricultural sector manage to adhere to the transformative AFI character, or is broader transformation necessary? The AFI should not have to prove their business case to exist, but the focus should rather be on the ecological and social services they provide in transforming land, social relations and the environment. Some initial developments in valuing the latter are occurring. One interviewee indicated how his land was part of a bigger organisation, which he invoices regularly for the ecosystem services he provides, allowing a model in which his environmental practices were valued in the form of an income. The interviewee indicated that he was the one that initiated this system, depicting how bottom-up ideas can work in transforming systems. While financial viability was an indicator of being a 'good farmer' for some interviewees, it was definitely not a key characteristic, differently from productivist thinking for many conventional farmers. Solely zooming in on the AFI as a business case merely reshuffles 'good farmer' priorities (cf. Sutherland, 2013), thereby neglecting the transformative appeal to social and ecological services of the AFI. Making the AFI appeal to conventional thinking through economic viability could be considered as a compromise. However, the AFI has the solution to many agricultural crises and stalemates, and should therefore not be forced to settle for compromise.

5.3. The AFI as influential spider in the conventional web

The identity gap between interviewees and SDAS confirms that the AFI is able to develop a unique and transformative identity, experiencing little influences by dominant conventional discourses. However, most interviewees still depict understanding for the position of conventional farmers, as well as actively cooperating with these farmers. Multiple interviewees indicate how local conventional farmers changed their minds after a few years regarding the feasibility of agroecological practices, explaining how partnerships arose with conventional farmers. This led to conventional farmers incorporating sustainable practices, demonstrating how leading by example has led to conventional farmers slowly copying small practices from the interviewees, such as the use of green manure. Two highly divergent identities can thus still work together and conventional farmers can thus still learn from the AFI. Burton (2004) defines the prominent agricultural problem as the wish to move towards a post-productivist agriculture, while conventional farmers are still stuck in a productivist identity. While he suggests cultural subsidies as an alternative to unsatisfactory financial compensation, the current study demonstrates how this identity shift could additionally be reached through the presence of the AFI in conventionally dominated areas, where agroecological practices can be seen and experienced. Previous generations' narratives regarding farming, and their current physical and cultural presence has influenced current conventional farmers' opportunities to change significantly. However, despite the judgmental grandfather driving by, multiple interviewees indicate how conventional farmers still changed perceptions, attitudes, and practices thanks to the presence of and cooperation with interviewees in the area. This demonstrates how the AFI can assist in changing dominant cultural norms and discourses. Collective thinking is of importance for both conventional farmers as well as for the AFI, therefore not per se translating to thinking through the status quo, but hereby displaying opportunities for change as well. Facilitating land for these agroecological

practices can thus not only influence that piece of land, but also the surrounding land and farmers, demonstrating the significant effect that the AFI can possibly have in influencing the conventional identity. Many interviewees only started their farms in the last five years, even though this was not a sampling requirement for the study, demonstrating how agroecological farmers could be becoming more present. Despite this short presence, influence on neighbouring farms is already apparent, with conventional farmers warming up to agroecological practices. Some interviewees already discussed their successors, or were training their children as we speak, demonstrating how a new transformative discourse could possibly become even more entrenched as well, only strengthening this diverging and transformative AFI.

For many, diverging from the 'farmer' title appeared logical given the ideological and practical differences, therefore making it clear to outsiders and customers that they are different farmers with different practices. However, through using the term 'farmer', agroecological farmers could also play a role in shifting the farmer's image. Agroecological farmers would thereby not be a phenomenon which exists next to the dominant practices, but simply be an identity in the plurality of farmers, possibly changing the definition of what it means to be a farmer. On the one hand 'agroecological', 'nature-inclusive' and related terms allow differentiation, yet this differentiation could possibly keep the current negative and conventional connotations with 'the farmer' in place. This places a barrier between conventional and agroecological farming, possibly keeping the former as the dominant perception of 'the farmer', rather than transitioning to post-productivist understandings of being a farmer.

Reflecting on these results through Identity Theory demonstrates how social structures and contexts can indeed have significant influences in the agricultural sector, with interviewees experiencing surroundings farmers' judgement and the ingrained generational discourses that are still dominant. It however also demonstrates how this does not hamper the independent development of an AFI. The AFI moves away from familial and social pressures, and manages to influence conventional farmers, rather than vice versa. Prominent societal influences such as the BBB, Rabobank and LTO additionally demonstrate great divergence with the AFI, rather than overlap. This demonstrates how these organisations do not sufficiently include agroecological visions on the agricultural sector, thereby demonstrating insufficient agroecological representation by SDAS. The SDAS adhere to productivist thinking and conventional farming, thereby keeping the status quo in place.

In line with the interviews and current findings, cooperation and dialogue between agroecological farmers and conventional farmers is perceived as a desirable direction towards a more sustainable agricultural sector. An agroecological farmer in the middle of a web full of conventional farmers could effectively spread dominant practices, attitudes, and possibly identities. While the AFI differs from conventional thinking, conventional farmers might still be attracted by the financial viability of the AFI. This insight offers an alternative political route as well, possibly reducing feelings of polarisation and paternalism that conventional farmers often experience, due to the politicians in their 'ivory tower' deciding changes in the family farmers' business. Rather than that, policy investing in the presence of the AFI could lead to cooperation on the ground between conventional and agroecological farmers, possibly leading to changes in identity and practices from within the local agricultural setting. Additionally, if governments started to pay for ecosystem services, not only would this help the AFI, but also appeal to the conventional economic mindset. Yet moving from productivism to financial viability as a motivation to change practices, rather than due to an intrinsic motivation, raises the question of whether this will actively lead to identity change, or rather to the reshuffling of identity traits, as often occurred for the switch from conventional to organic (Sutherland, 2013). This is if conventional farmers even manage to fully switch practices, due to the headlock that SDAS often have these farmers in.

The Dutch AFI is still in its infancy, therefore raising these potential questions, as well as opportunities. Burton (2004) proposed cultural subsidies to partially cater to conventional thinking in agricultural policy, yet should we continue to focus on catering to a self-destructive industry, or rather point the spotlight towards an already transformative existent alternative through actual subsidies? While the question remains whether the Dutch AFI can truly transform conventional farmers, the interviewees demonstrate initial positive spillover effects, even for highly sceptical conventional farmers. The AFI should therefore not be underestimated, managing to make large scale differences through small scale practices. While the importance of dominant discourses and thinking of the SDAS should not be ignored, as stated by Identity Theory, the agency and strong will of the AFI manages to swim upstream. It is important to recognise, address and problematise power-driven and influential organisations in manipulating the public debate, yet the AFI demonstrates that at the same time we can recognise and push an agenda and practices of change. Facilitating the development of the AFI through land access, subsidies, adopting alternative economic thinking and starting to value ecosystem services are all essential. The agricultural crises are piling up, so solely waiting for the AFI to conquer the agricultural sector might be naive, but actively pushing the AFI to replace conventional farming demonstrates to be a significant replacement for current strategies of inertia and techno-fixes.

6. Conclusion

This article aimed to explore the Dutch AFI, comparing it to SDAS and the conventional farmers' identity in seeing how perceptions on being a 'good farmer' and on the agricultural sector differed. This investigated whether the Dutch AFI managed to escape dominant thinking, and how transformative and influential the AFI could be in the agricultural landscape. According to the interviewees, a 'good farmer' gives back to the environment, the local community, and the soil, rather than simply taking from them, provides healthy food and surroundings, has a broad agricultural and ecological knowledge base, and has control over their own financial model. A 'good landscape' is perceived as diverse in crops, insects and animals, as a place to work together with nature, allowing nature to thrive, and as a place of hosting, where a community can help out, attend activities, and can just 'be'. Agroecological farmers are critical of a narrow focus on efficiency, large scale farming, and the associated capitalist system and food security discourse. While the differences with conventional farmers are perceived as abundant, relating to attitudinal and ideological differences, overlap is perceived as less present. The interviewed farmers perceive nature as a partner rather than enemy, and perceive themselves as a steward, thereby respecting natural boundaries, and attempting to increase environmental quality. The AFI can be seen as transformative, according to the model of Hopwood et al. (2005), demonstrating great divergence from the perceptions of SDAS and conventional farmers. Interviewees perceived the current capitalist system, dominant perceptions of nature, power structures, and absence of valuation of ecosystem services as the core problems of the current system. Solution directions were framed as an increased role for governments, different economic thinking, and rethinking social relations. The analysed SDAS however did not criticise the market nor economic thinking, and framed it as part of the solution. They did not fight for systemic change, but rather embraced innovation, technology and knowledge as a panacea, if they even recognised current agricultural issues at all. They therefore mostly adhered to the status quo, while suggesting small techno-fixes.

Interviewees indicated to feel no social pressures in their practices nor identity, due to absence of generational and familial pressures, and positive community interactions. Conversely, interviewees indicated how they noticed changing attitudes of conventional farmers regarding the feasibility of agroecology. While these two identities diverge significantly, influence is therefore still perceived as possible, among other things through understanding of the difficult position of conventional farmers, and through close cooperation. Societal pressures however were prominent for interviewees, emphasising the pressure of adhering to dominant economic thinking and inaccessibility to land. The AFI's inclusion of financial feasibility on the other hand might attract the productivist, economic-based mindset of conventional farmers and SDAS, which could positively contribute to the inclusion of the AFI in agriculture. However, emphasising the economic component of the AFI might strip it of its transformative potential, ignoring the contribution to rethinking social and ecological relations.

The AFI can have a significant positive spillover effect on surrounding areas and farmers in promoting ecological thinking and practices, demonstrating how they could be the gateway to transforming agricultural identities. Many interviewees did not use the title 'farmer', due to practical reasons, as well as due to negative connotations. However, using this title could also shift the image of 'the farmer' from the inside, instead of being a complementary agricultural category. SDAS however do not yet include the AFI in their visions on 'the farmer' either, thereby demonstrating the dominant societal frame of 'the farmer' that is still in place. Increased financing and land access for agroecological farmers could not only have local effects, but can therefore significantly influence farmers' identity discourses as well, changing identities from within the sector. Changing the sector through cooperation between conventional and agroecological farmers appears to be an alternative to techno-fixes and continued investing in a self-destructive industry.

This research has some limitations to be considered during future research. Due to the explorative qualitative nature, sample size and specific region, no generalisations were able to be made about 'the (Dutch) AFI', and the latter therefore solely referred to the interviewed sample. The current research moreover focused on a specific area, rather than applying a more global lens. Cultural farming norms can be regional (Westerink et al., 2021), yet due to absence of including multiple regions, the current article is not able to exclude confounding variables or between-region differences. Future research could explore different areas to test the AFI's universality or differentiation, for example in testing societal and social pressures in other European countries experiencing increasing farmer protests and polarisation around agriculture and environment (Santhagens & Agarroum, 2024). Moreover, the current article demonstrates the possible influence of the AFI in changing practices and identities, yet has no insight into the conventional farmers' perspectives. Using a case study, future research could zoom in on a region with a high agroecological presence, investigating whether it has significantly managed to change local social norms, practices and identities. Rather than interviews with agroecological farmers, this could focus on interviewing conventional farmers, testing whether the agroecological presence has shifted norms away from destructive conventional thinking. This could harvest important results towards realising change in the agricultural sector through seeing what concrete AFI aspects can reach and change conventional farmers. Additionally, the current research investigated three SDAS, recognising how agroecological organisations do not yet have comparable societal coverage to SDAS. However, agroecological organisations such as Herenboeren and Land van Ons appeared popular among interviewees, thus possibly significantly influencing the AFI. Investigating discourses of these organisations might assist in analysing the influence of these organisations on the AFI, or vice versa. Regarding the currently researched SDAS, one interviewee said that political parties can demonstrate verbal support, but that he does not feel represented until there are practical instruments available. Future research could therefore research investments by market parties, voting behaviour by political parties, and lobbying efforts by farmers' organisations to see whether there is overlap between discourse and action, or whether representation of the AFI might be even less present in the behaviour of these SDAS. Lastly, the current sample demonstrated that female interviewees have a significantly more negative connotation with the word 'farmer', and experience less overlap in identity with conventional farmers than male interviewees. One female interviewee explicitly described how the dominant male perception of 'the farmer' does not fit her own image as farmer. Future research could include a gendered variable in researching farmers, exploring if there are differences regarding degree of representation, social barriers, or emphasis on different (transformative) characteristics.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Interview guide
Time estimation: 45 min. (+/- 15 min.)

Translations of the questions are included (between brackets). The topic of interest, or literature claim, which was sought to be explored is sometimes included in *italics* behind the question as a mnemonic for the researcher.

Introduction - 3 min.

- Wie ben ik? (Who am I?)
- Wat onderzoek ik? (What am I researching?)
- Waarom dit interview? (Why this interview?)

Introductory questions (3) - 6 min.

- Kan u zich kort voorstellen? *Hoe prevalent is de boerenidentiteit hierin?* (Can you shortly introduce yourself? *How prevalent is the farmers' identity in the introduction?*)
- Hoe omschrijft u uw baan? *Gebruik van de term 'boer', en wat wordt hier bij geassocieerd?* (How do you describe your job? *Usage of the term 'farmer', and what is associated with being a farmer?*)
- Waarom bent u gaan doen wat u nu doet? *Motivatie.* (Why did you start doing what you are doing now? *Motivation.*)

Questions about topics found in literature (7) - 14 min.

- In uw eigen visie over boeren, wat voor eigenschappen bezit de goede boer volgens u? Zowel in identiteit, persoonlijkheid en visie, als in gedrag? *Perceptie van de 'good farmer'.* (In your own vision regarding farming, what characteristics/features belong to being a 'good farmer' according to you? This can be concerning identity, personality, vision, behaviour? *Perception of being a 'good farmer'.*)
- In uw eigen visie, heeft u een beeld van hoe een goed boerenlandschap eruit moet zien? *Perceptie van de 'good landscape'.* (In your own vision, do you have an image of how a 'good farmer's' landscape should look? *Perception of the 'good landscape'.*)
- Voelt u een positieve of negatieve maatschappelijke en/of sociale druk in de vormgeving van uw manier van boeren? Wat is deze druk/invloed? *De rol van druk vanuit de lokale omgeving, of maatschappelijke stromingen.* (Do you feel a positive or negative societal and/or social pressure in the operationalisation of your manner of farming? Can you define this pressure? *The role of pressure from the local surroundings, or societal narratives.*)
- Voelt u zich een boer? (Do you feel like a farmer?)
- Hoe verhoudt u zich als boer tegenover conventionele boeren? Waar zitten overlap en verschil? (How do you relate in your manner of farming to conventional farmers? What are the differences and overlap?)
- Kijkende naar nu en de toekomst, hoe blijven we de wereld voeden? (Looking at now and the future, how do we continue to feed the world population?)
- Ziet u zichzelf in uw rol als boer als deel van een sociale groep, een beweging? *Agroecologie als een sociale beweging*. (Do you see yourself in your role as farmer as being part of a social group, a movement? *Agroecology as a social movement.*)

Nature (2) - 4 min.

- Wat is natuur voor u? (What is nature to you?)
- Hoe moeten we omgaan met de wolf in Nederland? (How should we deal/cope with the wolf in the Netherlands?)

Problem-solution perceptions (3) - 6 min.

- Is er volgens u problematiek in de Nederlandse landbouwsector? Zo ja, wat ziet u als prominente problemen? (Are there problems in the Dutch agricultural sector? If so, what do you perceive to be the prominent issues?)
- Zijn daar bepaalde partijen in het bijzonder schuldig aan? Wie of welke? Of is het een collectief gecreëerd probleem? (Are there particular stakeholders to be assigned 'guilty' in creating these problems? If so, who? Or is it a collectively created problem?)
- Wat zijn oplossingen en bij wie liggen die? (What are solutions, and who should be responsible for them?)

Science (1) - 2 min.

- Wat is de rol van wetenschap in uw manier van boeren? (What is the role of science in your manner of farming?)

Representation (4) - 8 min.

- Voelt u zich als boer vertegenwoordigd door boerenorganisaties? Waar wel en waar niet? (Do you feel represented by farmers' organisations, in your role as a farmer? Where do you, and where don't you?)
- Voelt u zich als boer vertegenwoordigd door politieke partijen? Waar wel en waar niet? (Do you feel represented in politics, in your role as a farmer? Where do you, and where don't you?)
- Voelt u zich als boer vertegenwoordigd door grote marktpartijen? Waar wel en waar niet? (Do you feel represented by big market parties, in your role as a farmer? Where do you, and where don't you?)
- Moeten we ervoor zorgen dat de agroecologische identiteit, belangen en manier van boeren beter op de maatschappelijke radar terechtkomt? Zo ja, hoe? (Should we try to promote the agroecological identity, interests, and methods of farming, make it more visible in society? If so, how?)

Concluding (1) - 2 min.

- Is er nog iets niet aan bod gekomen wat u graag zou willen delen? (Is there anything else you would like to share?)