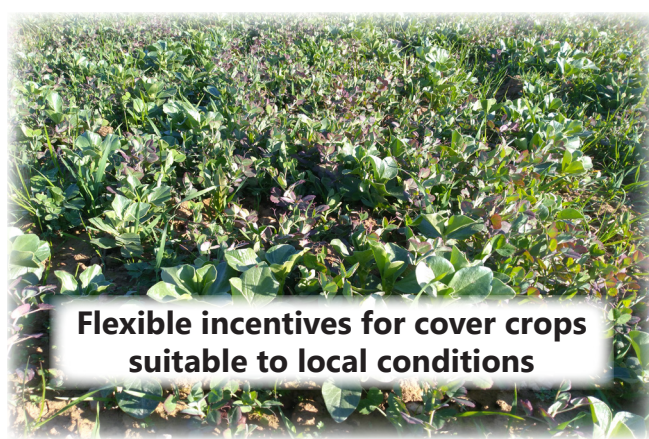


SUMMARY

There is a growing consensus that agricultural practices in Europe must change to remain both profitable and sustainable, something which is also reflected in numerous policy initiatives at the European level over the last decade which directly or indirectly promote existing beneficial agricultural practices. Most recently, the European Green Deal sets out the roadmap for making the EU's economy sustainable and formulates several key actions which will be crucial in advancing land and soil protection in Europe. With this shift comes increasing pressure on agricultural producers to change how they operate and adopt new techniques and practices, not only due to the described changes in policies, but also their own environmental concerns, private industry standards, and increasing consumer awareness.



Training for empowerment



Flexible incentives for cover crops suitable to local conditions

The SoilCare project

The overall aim of SoilCare is to identify, evaluate and promote promising soil-improving cropping systems (SICS). SoilCare defines SICS as specific combinations of crop types, crop rotations and management techniques aimed at halting soil degradation and/or improving soil quality cropping systems that improve soil quality (and hence its functions), and that have positive impacts on the profitability and sustainability of agriculture. Such cropping systems have then been tested in 16 study sites as part of the SoilCare project, located in both EU and non-EU countries. Based on the analysis of the policy framework at EU, national, and sub-national level, and feedback collected from European and national stakeholders, we can formulate a set of overarching recommendations for actions to facilitate the wider uptake of SICS across Europe.

Read more here: <https://soilcare-project.eu>

and here: SoilCare Deliverable 7.2 "Report on the selection of good policy alternatives at EU and study site level <https://soilcare-project.eu/downloads/public-documents/soilcare-reports-and-deliverables/186-report-13-d7-2-milieu-full-v2/file>



Barriers to Sustainable Soil Management

Knowledge / information

Availability of information, fragmented services, adviser expertise / quality, costs, continuity of funding for advisory services

Policy / institutional

Adverse policy effects, lack of coherence / policy conflicts, weak monitoring / enforcement top-down policies, unstable policy frameworks, lack of soil legislation / targets

Socio-cultural

Awareness / value of soil, peer pressure, demand for sustainably produced products, traditional practices

Economic

Transition costs, time lag between change of practices and benefits, market demands, holistic approaches

How could EU and national/regional policy facilitate actions to promote the uptake of SICS?

Recommendation I: Define long-term ambitions and targets

The protection, maintenance, and improvement of land and soil at EU level and Member States relies heavily on sectoral and environmental policies. At the EU level, specific long-term targets for different pressures affecting soil functions/causing soil threats need to be integrated in new policy initiatives, such as the ongoing revision of the Soil Thematic Strategy, or the planned Zero Pollution Action Plan. In addition, EU-level advice on Eco Schemes as well as Commission recommendations issued to the Member States within the context of the formal review and approval process of the new Strategic Plans of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) could contribute to a wider uptake of SICS.

At the country level:

- Relevant SICS could be incentivised through measures in the CAP Strategic Plans, and particularly the Member States' Eco Schemes.
- Stakeholders, particularly farmers should be involved in the development of national and sub-national policy instruments. The Farm to Fork Strategy explicitly calls for strengthening the position of farmers in the supply chain, and the procedures for drafting national CAP Strategic Plans ask for a wide consultation process.



@SoilCare_eu

The SoilCare project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, under grant agreement No. 677407.



How could EU and national/regional policy facilitate actions to promote the uptake of SICS?

Recommendation 2: Increase coherence between policies and policy objectives

Policy conflicts and synergies need to be carefully analysed and aligned, so as not to discourage the transition to sustainable farming practices. The new CAP improves the overall coherence with environmental legislative instruments. However, potential conflicts with other sectoral legislation, such as energy and waste, may remain. Mechanisms to ensure coherence between different pieces of EU legislation and policy may include future looking impact assessment which integrates soil health as a fundamental element. This means all relevant legislation would go through a set of criteria to determine whether they have an adverse impact on soil either directly or through encouraging unsustainable farming practices. Such a mechanism would recognise the cross-cutting nature of soil as a mediator of multiple land-based services, providing higher consideration in policy evaluation.

At the country level:

- Provide farmers with clear, unambiguous information on the legal conditions they need to comply with – especially if they are tied to subsidies - and those that may be rewarded.
- A two-way communication between the policy makers, the farmers and the neutral advisory services would help to create a constant feedback loop, overcoming some of the clarity issues and avoid top-down policy design.



@SoilCare_eu

The SoilCare project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, under grant agreement No. 677407.



How could EU and national/regional policy facilitate actions to promote the uptake of SICS?

Recommendation 3: Design targeted economic instruments

The CAP, as the main financial instrument shaping farming across Europe, should strive to be less prescriptive, avoiding one size fits all approaches but provide the farmers with a general direction, clearly defined by targets and empowering them to take steps towards these targets in a way that is best adapted to their unique circumstances. At the EU level, the new set-up proposed for the post 2020-CAP give Member States a higher degree of freedom when it comes to defining the new CAP Strategic Plans.

At the country level:

- Financial incentives need to be more targeted, both tied to specific actions and region (or environmental/geographic conditions) to result in the desired change. Priority should be given to regionally prescribed SICS that are able to be a source of food production that is both profitable and sustainable. Here, the regional and EU-level applicability maps developed by the SoilCare project for broad SICS clusters can provide important guidance.
- Financial instruments need to facilitate the transition to long-term changes in practices rather than finance one-off interventions. In addition, confidence in long-term arrangements (>7 years) enabled in policy frameworks is essential to win trust from influential farmers.
- Taxation for unsustainable products and techniques at consumer level is a way of internalising the costs on the environment and wider society and would also influence consumers' choices, creating more demand for sustainable products, giving them the price advantage. An innovation award could be an effective instrument to create awareness for sustainable producers and production methods amongst consumers and farmers alike.
- Schemes for sharing equipment and/or collective buying which would be otherwise expensive can be created, encouraged and promoted among farmers. Stakeholders from the industry can be encouraged to take part in these schemes to promote their equipment/material.



Policies supporting long-term changes



@SoilCare_eu

The SoilCare project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, under grant agreement No. 677407.



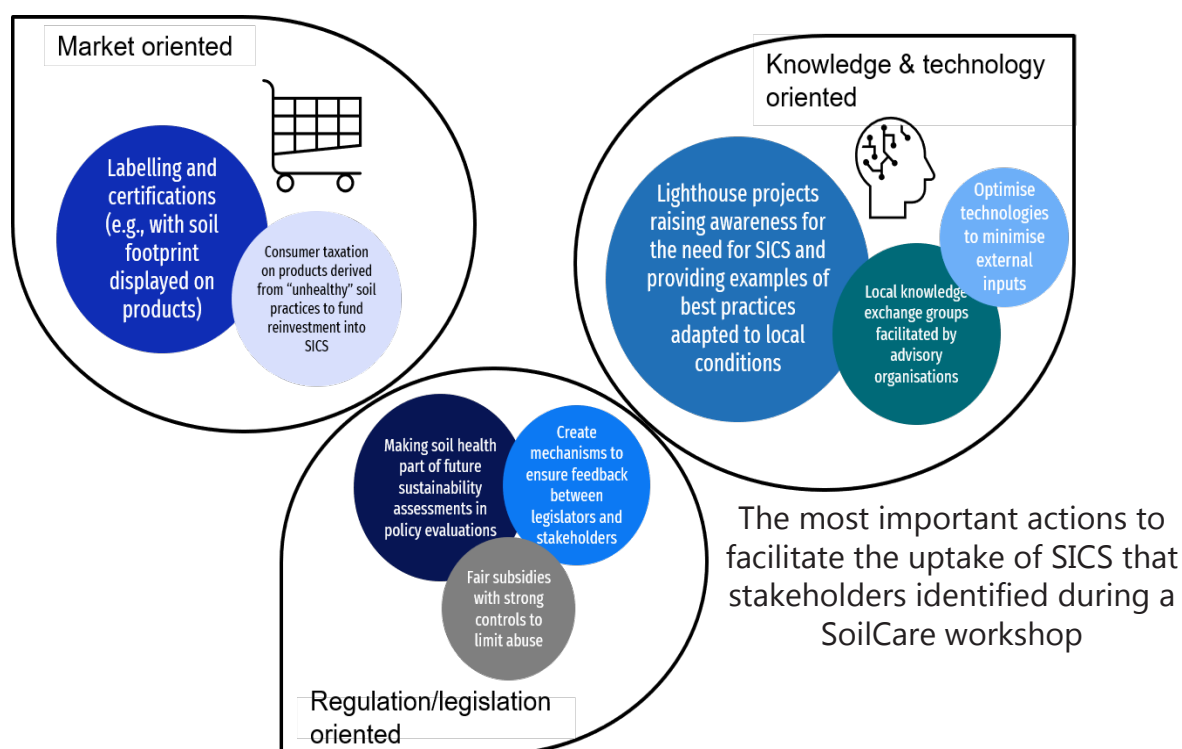
How could EU and national/regional policy facilitate actions to promote the uptake of SICS?

Recommendation 4: Strengthen policy monitoring and enforcement

Ambitious but flexible policies can only be successful if monitored and enforced properly. Whilst the new CAP proposal includes a detailed set of indicators, they mainly focus on establishing target areas/proportions which should be covered by a specific measure rather than define environmental improvements that should be achieved.

At the country level:

- Complementing the proposed CAP indicators with indicators that focus on environmental performance which assess the benefits delivered at farm level.
- Streamlining different monitoring and reporting systems set up for different pieces of EU legislation to enhance reliability and reduce administrative burden on public authorities.
- Farm inspectors are important elements of the monitoring mechanisms. Their training should be designed and updated to equip them with the latest knowledge available regarding the legislation and scientific developments.
- Setting up dedicated government units or agencies, specifically focusing on monitoring the impacts of different policies on soil health would be an additional tool to improve the implementation and monitoring.



@SoilCare_eu

The SoilCare project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, under grant agreement No. 677407.



How could EU and national/regional policy facilitate actions to promote the uptake of SICS?

Recommendation 5: Strengthen opportunities for learning and knowledge exchange for farmers

Financial incentives such as those established by the CAP may be less effective than other types of instruments such as provision of information and advisory services, as they do not consider factors relating to farmer views and attitudes. Support of Fam Advisory Services, e.g., through CAP instruments, needs to continue.

At the country level:

- Make soil health a stronger component of vocational training and continued education of farmers. It should underline the basic principles of sustainability such as generational fairness, the importance of soil health for all other systems on the planet and the impacts of unsustainable practices.
- Establish regular training; some of the practices benefitting soil will require farmers to learn about these techniques, their application to different conditions as well as their benefits in order to change any misconceptions about these methods. Stakeholders suggest that well-organised and continuous interactions with farmers such as free group talks are successful in bringing change in attitudes and beliefs.
- Engage with farmers and trusted organisations to deliver advice and training. Peer to peer learning and bottom-up initiatives are powerful tools to deliver knowledge to farmers as they put a great degree of trust in their fellow producers. Partnering with farmers willing to pioneer new techniques or trusted organisations, will ensure that target audiences are reached, and new information is heard.
- Collaborate with scientists and other researchers to promote innovation which would optimise technologies to allow farming to become more sustainable across the board and to make research findings accessible and ensure their wide dissemination
- Consider the establishment of a network of model farms demonstrating how to use and adapt different SICS in the region.



Advice sharing



@SoilCare_eu

The SoilCare project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, under grant agreement No. 677407.

