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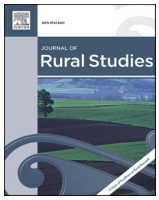

Beyond metrics: Corporate governance and the reordering of rural power in regenerative agriculture

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A B S T R A C T

Corporate regenerative agriculture programs are transforming the governance of sustainability in rural areas. Through contracts, incentive schemes, and monitoring systems, agrifood corporations now influence farming practices that were once guided by public institutions or local knowledge. While these initiatives claim to promote ecological regeneration, they also redefine how power, trust, and responsibility are distributed across the countryside.

Drawing on comparative analysis of forty-five corporate regenerative agriculture programs and thirty-four interviews with farmers, agronomists, and sustainability managers, this study examines how these programs are designed and governed, and how they affect rural autonomy and legitimacy. The analysis identifies four main governance logics: compliance, experimentation, partnership, and branding. Each reflects a different balance between corporate control and farmer participation, from audit-driven oversight to collaborative learning.

The findings show that compliance and branding-driven models often strengthen corporate authority while offering only symbolic participation. In contrast, partnership and experimentation models allow limited spaces for negotiation and trust-building. Across all cases, the alignment between corporate timelines and the slower rhythms of ecological and social change determines whether regenerative transitions deliver real transformation or remain performative.

By viewing regenerative agriculture as a form of rural governance reordering, the paper connects institutional design with questions of justice, autonomy, and legitimacy. It argues that the success of regeneration depends not only on ecological practices but on how democratic and inclusive the governance structures behind them become.

1. Introduction

Across global agri-food systems, sustainability transitions are increasingly driven not by public institutions but by corporate governance initiatives. Among these, regenerative agriculture (RegenAg) has emerged as a flagship initiative through which multinational firms seek to demonstrate environmental responsibility and rural commitment. While RegenAg is widely used, it remains challenging to define, with no single agreed set of practices or outcomes (Fraser et al., 2024). In the literature, it is generally described as an approach guided by principles such as improving soil health, enhancing ecological resilience, sequestering carbon and reducing environmental harm, while drawing on a flexible set of practices that may include reduced tillage, cover cropping, crop diversification, or agroforestry, depending on context (Giller et al., 2021; Fraser et al., 2024).

Despite this ambiguity, RegenAg has rapidly entered corporate sourcing programs, sustainability-linked finance, and ESG reporting frameworks (Cusworth et al., 2022; Gordon et al., 2023). As a result, corporate actors now influence large areas of farmland, shaping the practices, risks, and expectations of farmers worldwide (Bless, 2025; Clapp et al., 2025).

Yet, despite the promise of regeneration, evidence of deep rural transformation remains limited. Most corporate assessments privilege surface-level indicators, such as hectares enrolled, carbon tons avoided, or farmers "trained", while overlooking how institutional architectures organize authority and responsibility in rural spaces. The governance design of these programs - how incentives are structured, contracts defined, and verification conducted - determines who holds power, who bears risk, and whose knowledge counts in defining "regeneration."

Recent work in rural sociology and agri-food governance emphasizes that sustainability transitions are also governance transitions (Gretter et al., 2018; El Bilali, 2019; Elsner et al., 2023). Corporate sustainability programs increasingly function as private governance regimes that redistribute decision-making away from local and public institutions toward global supply-chain systems (Bless, 2025). Within this shifting landscape, RegenAg is not merely an agronomic innovation but a new

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mode of rural governance, where power operates through metrics, incentives, and verification technologies that shape farmer behavior and legitimacy claims.

From a systems perspective, these governance architectures connect ecological processes with corporate and financial imperatives (Belmin et al., 2022; Buckton et al., 2023). Yet, these programs also create control and dependence in rural areas: they are made to satisfy audits and investors, which often means farmers take on more risk and are rewarded for following rules instead of trying new ideas. On the other hand, models based on collaboration and sharing risk can build trust, help people learn together, and make communities stronger, but they are hard to grow within market systems (Michler and Wu, 2020; Manevska-Tasevska et al., 2021). Therefore, the way governance is designed - including its timelines, rewards, and methods of involving people - impacts both environmental outcomes and how rural communities maintain their way of life.

Building on these insights, this paper examines how corporate regenerative agriculture programs reconfigure power, risk, and agency in rural systems. It asks.

RQ1: How do corporate actors design and govern RegenAg programs, and what governance logics and trade-offs structure these designs?
RQ2: How do these governance architectures influence farmer autonomy, trust, and the social legitimacy of sustainability transitions?

The analysis draws on 45 RegenAg initiatives launched between 2015 and 2025 and 34 semi-structured interviews with farmers, agronomists, and corporate sustainability managers. By comparing institutional architectures - contracts, incentive systems, monitoring rules, and program narratives - it identifies four recurring governance logics: compliance, experimentation, partnership, and branding.

While these configurations differ in scale and form, all reveal a tension between corporate temporalities and rural realities. Corporate programs operate on annual ESG reporting cycles and investor timelines, while regenerative outcomes, such as soil restoration, biodiversity recovery, and trust-building, unfold over multiple years (Hastings, 2016; Parkhurst et al., 2022). This temporal mismatch can contribute to governance arrangements that prioritize short-term reporting requirements, while longer-term environmental improvements remain uncertain or uneven (Power, 2000; Boonstra and de Boer, 2014; Nugraha et al., 2024).

By interpreting these architectures as forms of rural governance, the paper reframes RegenAg as part of a wider transformation in the regulation of rural life. The privatization of sustainability standards and the spread of corporate-led incentive systems mark a shift from state-centered agri-environmental governance to market-mediated ecological governance (Darnhofer, 2020; Gretter et al., 2018). These systems not only reshape how environmental value is produced but also how rural legitimacy and autonomy are defined. Farmers, in this sense, become governed not only by agronomic norms but by the institutional architectures of corporate regeneration.

This framing aligns with emerging scholarship that explores how agri-food transitions produce new forms of dependency, surveillance, and selective participation (Vermunt et al., 2020; Hebinck et al., 2021; Elsner et al., 2023). It contributes to debates on the governance of rural sustainability by showing that design parameters - such as contract duration, monitoring intensity, and risk distribution-act as levers through which corporate systems exert influence over rural adaptation pathways (Cheyns and Riisgaard, 2014).

Accordingly, the paper advances three interrelated contributions.

First, the study introduces a governance framework that connects how programs are designed to different forms of corporate power and rural experience.

Second, it defines design alignment as a kind of institutional fit - not just between ecological and economic cycles, but also between governance systems and the everyday rhythms of rural life.

Third, it shows that the credibility of corporate regenerative agriculture depends less on scale or performance metrics, and more on how democratic its governance structures are.

Overall, the study presents RegenAgas a space of institutional experimentation, where the boundaries between public, private, and rural governance are being redefined. Understanding these processes is key to determining whether regenerative agriculture truly drives rural transformation or simply continues corporate environmental governance under new, regenerative terms.

However, it is important to note that RegenAg is not limited to corporate initiatives. Many farmers pursue regenerative practices independently or through cooperatives, alternative value chains, and place-based networks that operate largely outside corporate governance structures. These niche and grassroots actors play an important role in experimentation, learning, and value creation within broader sustainability transitions.

This paper focuses specifically on corporately sponsored regenerative agriculture programs because they represent a distinct and increasingly influential form of private governance, closely linked to supply-chain management, sustainability reporting, and climate disclosure. While non-corporate pathways are critical to regenerative transitions, they fall outside the analytical scope of this study.

2. Conceptual background: RegenAg and the governance of rural transitions

The growing interest in RegenAg marks a wider shift in how sustainability transitions are governed across rural landscapes. Instead of relying primarily on public policy, sustainability goals are now being pursued through private and hybrid governance arrangements that link corporations, farmers, and financial institutions (Bacon, 2010; Konefal et al., 2022; Hackfort, 2023). While private sustainability governance in agriculture is not new, the current wave of regenerative agriculture initiatives is embedded in a different institutional context. In recent years, sustainability metrics have become increasingly coupled with emissions accounting, climate targets, and supply-chain disclosure requirements, particularly around Scope 3 emissions (Hettler and Graf-Vlachy, 2024). These metrics are no longer confined to voluntary reporting, but increasingly inform procurement decisions, supplier risk profiling, access to finance, and regulatory compliance (Bless, 2025; Fernandez-Vidal and Alarcon, 2026). As a result, regenerative agriculture programs now operate at the intersection of environmental standards, financial valuation, and contractual governance. This expands the latent capacity of corporate actors to shape production decisions in ways that were less pronounced in earlier generations of sustainability programs (Fernandez-Vidal and Alarcon, 2026).

Thus, these new architectures of control and coordination embed environmental management into global supply chains and investment frameworks, effectively turning corporations into key arbiters of what counts as “sustainable” or “regenerative” farming. In this sense, RegenAg is not only a set of agronomic practices but also a new institutional regime shaping rural life, authority, and legitimacy (Buckton et al., 2024; Bless, 2025; Fernandez-Vidal and Alarcon, 2026).

Agricultural systems are complex socio-ecological networks, where ecological processes, market forces, and social norms interact through feedback loops (Lescourret et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2023). Yet the governance of these systems increasingly follows corporate temporalities and reporting logics, rather than ecological rhythms. Corporate programs often operate within short-term ESG cycles that demand visible outcomes and auditable metrics, such as the number of hectares enrolled or tons of carbon sequestered, while ecological regeneration is naturally slow and uneven (Hastings, 2016; Power, 2000; Parkhurst et al., 2022). As a result, temporal misalignment becomes a structural feature of corporate environmental governance, producing what Power (2000) calls “audit societies” where the act of verification displaces substantive environmental improvement (Bebbington and Larrinaga,

Table 1
Empirical sample: Corporate regenerative agriculture programs.

Company	Scale/Reach	Financial Model	Main Geographies & Crops	Distinctive Features/Notes
PepsiCo	3.5 million acres (2024) to 10 million (2030)	$276M + $216M + $60M partnerships; low $/acre	US Midwest; soy, corn, potatoes; pilots in LatAm & SE Asia	Strong partnerships (now STEP UP with global players); clear practices; low financial depth per acre
Nestlé	21% ingredients under regen (2024); 50% by 2030	CHF 1.2 B/5 years (unclear structure)	Global; major crops: dairy, coffee, cocoa, cereals	Largest public funding; detailed KPIs and framework
Danone	39% of key ingredients "in transition"	Mix of pilot & USDA grants ($70M)	20 countries; dairy, oats, almonds, soy	Farmer knowledge centers; regionally adapted model
Mars	>1 million acres target by 2030	Part of $1 B decarbonization plan	27 initiatives/>10 countries; rice, wheat, cocoa	Small pilots; partner-driven (ADM, GIZ, Horta); limited public information
McCain	71% "onboarded" (2770)/24% "engaged" (930)	Financing partnerships (Rabobank, BNP, USDA, etc.)	Global; potatoes only	Model farms; 4-tier farmer system; very strong reporting & loans
Unilever	1 million hectares by 2030 (130k hectares so far in 23 projects)	Funded via Unilever Climate & Nature Fund (€1B by 2030, but covering projects beyond RegenAg)	Global, 23 initiatives in 11 countries now across the world excluding Africa	Partnership driven (including STEP UP with PepsiCo); Very strong level of KPIs and annual reporting
General Mills	1 million acres by 2030 (500k acres "engaged in workshops" so far)	Grants, co-investment, partnerships	North America (wheat, oats, dairy)	Pilot workshops, personalized coaching per farm (built with farmers' help); educational fellowships; joint initiatives with Walmart, Ahold Delhaize; limited transparency on performance, but detailed disclosure on pilot metrics to track around soil health, economics and biodiversity
McDonald's	4 million acres (U.S. cattle ranches)	$200 million investment over 7 years in grants/assistance	U.S. (ranch hag, in 38 states)	Grant program via National Fish & Wildlife Foundation; partner funding complementing program (e.g., Cargill, Golden State Foods, Lopez Foods, etc.); regenerative grazing, water & wildlife conservation goals (just launched in September 2025, so no results so far)
Mondelēz International	100% European wheat under "Harmony Regenerative Charter" by 2030/"Coca Life" sustainability program	Charter/sourcing standards, unclear financial terms	Wheat (Europe, ~1300 farmers in 7 countries), global sourcing of ingredients	Harmony is longstanding sustainability program now pivoting more explicitly to regenerative practices includes a broad training program (Harmony Academy) and third-party audits; Cocoa Life program covers multiple aspects, including RegenAg; metrics reported high level
Coca-Cola	Goal: 100% of priority agricultural ingredients sustainably sourced (but not necessarily RegenAg)	Principles for Sustainable Agriculture (PSA) guiding suppliers, "leader/improver/mover" categorization, third-party verification	Sugar (cane & beet), fruit (citrus, apple, grape, mango), coffee, tea, soy, pulp & paper	Emphasis on continuous improvement rather than final state; integrates human rights, ecosystem & soil, transparency and supplier engagement; very limited performance data

Sources: Compiled from Corporate Websites, Press Releases, Annual Reports, Press Clippings.

2024).

While many studies have focused on the biological or economic impacts of RegenAg, such as soil carbon levels, yield changes, or cost efficiency, a growing body of research shows that institutional design is equally decisive in shaping long-term outcomes (Newton et al., 2020; Giller et al., 2021; Bless, 2025; Fernandez-Vidal and Alarcon, 2026). Incentive mechanisms, contract duration, and monitoring systems influence farmers' capacity to adapt, share risks, and sustain new practices over time (Piñeiro et al., 2020; El Bakali et al., 2023; Manevska-Tasevska et al., 2021). When governance structures reward short-term compliance rather than learning, they tend to reproduce dependency and discourage experimentation (Vicol et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2022). Conversely, arrangements based on shared investment and multi-year commitment enable trust, knowledge exchange, and resilience (Fernandez-Vidal and Alarcon, 2026).

These differences reflect a tension between bureaucratic modernization and everyday rural practice: corporate programs seek legibility through standardization, while farmers navigate diverse ecological and social realities that resist simplification (Hatanaka et al., 2006; Cheyns et al., 2017; Forney and Epiney, 2022). The governance of regeneration thus involves not only technical management but mechanisms of recognition and control: who defines "good farming," who verifies it, and whose knowledge counts (Cheyns and Riisgaard, 2014; Elsner et al., 2023; Bless, 2025). Thus, such interventions can depoliticize rural transformation by framing sustainability as a technical challenge rather than a question of justice or power.

The rise of corporate-led regeneration also exemplifies broader patterns of neoliberal environmental governance, where responsibilities for environmental care are shifted from states to markets and private actors (Ciplet and Roberts, 2017; Clapp, 2020; Ba, 2021). Under these arrangements, farmers are governed through contracts and performance indicators rather than through collective deliberation or public policy (Adams et al., 2019; Vicol et al., 2022). This produces new forms of dependency and selective participation in which only those able to meet corporate criteria gain access to markets or financial support.

At the same time, regenerative agriculture creates spaces for experimentation and hybrid forms of cooperation. Pilot projects and partnerships with NGOs or research institutions often become areas of co-adaptation, where corporate standards meet local knowledge (Konefal et al., 2022; Tittonell et al., 2022). These initiatives can strengthen social learning and ecological understanding, but they remain fragile if not embedded within durable institutional frameworks (Buckton et al., 2023). The contrast between short-term visibility and long-term continuity thus becomes a defining feature of contemporary rural governance.

Seen through this lens, RegenAg can be understood as a reordering of rural governance, a process in which corporations, farmers, and intermediaries negotiate new rules, risks, and responsibilities for ecological change (Bless, 2025). Governance design determines how feedback moves through the system: whether learning and adaptation occur, or whether information flows upward to satisfy reporting demands. When these designs align with ecological and social timeframes, they can sustain genuine regeneration; when they do not, they generate symbolic participation and performative legitimacy (Al-Kaisi and Lal, 2020; Gordon et al., 2022; Buckton et al., 2023).

This perspective situates regenerative agriculture within broader debates on institutional fit, adaptive governance, and rural justice (Young, 2002; Folke et al., 2005; Shucksmith, 2018). It highlights that

Table 2
Overview of study participants.

Group	Number	Crops/Livestock Represented	Geography	Program Affiliation
Farmers	19 [F1-F19]	Wheat, barley, corn, soy, rapeseed, oats, rice, potatoes, cocoa, coffee, berries, mixed cropping-livestock (dairy and beef)	Europe, North America, Latin America	Multiple programs (average of 1.4 programs per farmer)
Corporate representatives	10 [C1-C10]	N/A (program design & governance)	Global HQs (EU, US)	10 separate companies
Advisors (technical/agronomic)	5 [A1-A5]	N/A (advice & monitoring role)	Europe, N. America, Latin America	Contracted externally by 16 companies in total

Sources: Authors' own work.

ecological transitions depend not only on agronomic innovation but on the democratization of the governance systems that shape them. Ultimately, the question is not only whether agriculture can regenerate ecosystems, but whether the institutions that govern it can regenerate themselves, realigning incentives, responsibilities, and authority in ways that empower rural actors and sustain long-term ecological integrity.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative research design to understand how corporate RegenAg programs are structured and how their institutional arrangements shape rural experiences, risks, and legitimacy. Rather than testing hypotheses, the analysis follows an interpretive logic aimed at uncovering the social and institutional mechanisms through which governance design influences everyday farming practices (Wiesner, 2022). The approach combines documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews to trace how corporations translate the idea of regeneration into concrete forms of governance.

The analysis builds on two complementary sources of evidence. First, a structured review was conducted of 45 RegenAg programs launched by multinational food and beverage corporations between 2015 and 2025 (see Table 1). These programs span major row crops such as maize, soy, and wheat, as well as specialty commodities including coffee, cocoa, wine grapes, and potatoes. Data was collected from corporate sustainability reports, investor disclosures, program guidelines, and third-party evaluations, allowing a systematic reconstruction of each initiative's design parameters. These documents reveal not only the technical contours of program operation but also the narratives of justification and legitimacy that accompany them.

Second, the study draws on 34 semi-structured interviews with corporate sustainability managers, agronomists, supply-chain advisors, and participating farmers across North America, Latin America, Europe, and Asia (see Table 2). Interviews were designed to elicit participants' experiences with program design, implementation, and outcomes, with a particular focus on how contractual and monitoring arrangements influenced decision-making and risk perception at the farm level. Recruitment employed purposive and snowball strategies (Parker et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2020), starting with identified corporate initiatives and expanding to associated stakeholders. Access to farmers occurred primarily through agronomic advisors, farmer organizations, NGOs, and independent intermediaries involved in program implementation, rather than through corporate nomination. The interviews, conducted both in-person and remotely, explored how participants perceived the design and implementation of RegenAg initiatives, focusing on how contracts, monitoring systems, and incentive mechanisms affected decision-making, autonomy, and trust at the farm level.

Data analysis proceeded iteratively, combining qualitative coding with system-oriented mapping. In the first stage, transcripts and documents were coded line by line using participants' own language, following the Gioia methodology for building grounded theoretical categories (Gioia et al., 2013). The aim was to capture first-order concepts that reflected how actors themselves described governance design, motivation, and trade-offs. In the second stage, these codes were grouped into higher-order themes reflecting recurring configurations of control, participation, and learning. The final stage involved cross-case comparison to identify governance logics, recurring patterns in how corporations organize incentives, monitor performance, and distribute risk across farmers and supply chains.

Accordingly, the analysis does not pursue systematic comparisons between countries, crops, or production systems, but focuses on governance design features that operate across regions within transnational corporate programs.

It is important to note that the study does not evaluate the effectiveness of individual regenerative agriculture programs. Instead, it

Table 3
Institutional design dimensions in regenerative agriculture programs.

Governance Logic	Core Mechanism	Temporal Horizon	Dominant Actor & Mode of Control	Spatial Configuration	Rural Effects (trust, autonomy, legitimacy)
Compliance (~47–56%, n = 21-25)	Standardized metrics, audits, and short-term incentive contracts that link farmer payments to measurable outputs.	Short-term (typically annual)	Corporate sustainability teams and third-party verifiers exert control through data reporting and certification.	Highly centralized and scalable (100k–1M + ha); data and decisions flow upward from dispersed farms to corporate headquarters.	Produces procedural compliance and visibility but limited trust or learning; farmers remain data providers rather than decision-makers.
Experimentation (~22–31%, n = 10-14)	Pilot or demonstration projects co-implemented with NGOs or researchers to test regenerative practices and collect data.	Medium-term (1–3 years)	Joint coordination between corporate agronomists and local partners; temporary project teams.	Spatially bounded learning sites ("islands of innovation") often disconnected from supply-chain geography.	Encourages local innovation and dialogue but weak institutional continuity once projects end.
Partnership (~7–9%, n = 3-4)	Multi-year contracts and co-investment schemes that share costs, risks, and benefits between firms and producers.	Long-term (3–5 years or more)	Co-governance among firms, cooperatives, and technical advisors; relational accountability.	Territorialized and enduring; tied to specific sourcing regions where mutual dependence exists (e.g., denominations of origin).	Builds stable relationships, deeper ecological engagement, and trust; most effective but resource-intensive.
Branding (~16–22%, n = 7-10)	Public regenerative pledges and acreage or carbon commitments oriented toward external communication.	Very short-term (months to 1 year)	Corporate communications and marketing departments define narratives; minimal operational oversight.	Global and deterritorialized; representation of "regeneration" occurs in media rather than on farms.	Delivers rapid reputational gains but erodes credibility over time; farmers' roles largely symbolic.

Sources: Authors' own work; Note: Because several initiatives combined elements from more than one logic -for example, pilots that later incorporated partial cost-sharing or multiyear contracts-, these proportions are expressed as ranges rather than fixed shares.

analyzes how corporate initiatives translate regenerative ambitions into recurring governance architectures, and how these architectures condition feedback, risk, and temporal alignment across cases.

To enhance robustness, findings from interviews were cross-validated against documentary data, ensuring consistency between formal program designs and stakeholder perceptions. The triangulation of data sources allowed for identifying not only the formal architecture of programs but also the lived experience of those subject to them. The analytical aim was therefore not to estimate causal impact but to elucidate the design-performance relationships within RegenAg systems, that is, how different architectures condition the feedback loops between corporate goals, farmer practices, and ecological processes. Claims regarding trust, autonomy, and legitimacy are derived through institutional inference: that is, by examining how contract length, levels of monitoring, and how risk is shared shape how much freedom farmers have over time. These results are seen as effects of how the system is designed, not as a summary of what individuals think or feel.

Finally, programs were coded by dominant governance logic to enable comparative analysis; classifications are heuristic rather than definitive, and hybrid forms are explicitly acknowledged. Reported proportions therefore represent approximate ranges.

4. Findings

Corporate RegenAg programs organize sustainability through a variety of governance designs that shape how risk, learning, and legitimacy circulate across rural spaces. Table 3 summarizes these configurations, outlining how feedback mechanisms, temporal horizons, and incentive structures co-produce contrasting system behaviors (see Table 8 for further details).

Two broad contrasts are visible in Table 3. Compliance and branding systems privilege auditability and visibility, while experimentation and partnership systems embed learning and ecological continuity. This divide between short-term legibility and long-term alignment recurs throughout the empirical material.

4.1. Compliance: governance through metrics and audit

The most widespread configuration was compliance, characterized by short-term, audit-oriented contracts that reward easily measurable outcomes such as hectares enrolled or reductions in fertilizer use. In these systems, authority flows upward: data travel from farms to corporate headquarters to meet investor reporting requirements, while little feedback returns to farmers. Financial incentives are typically offered as per-acre payments, verified through receipts or remote sensing methods, which make reporting easier but disconnect rewards from real ecological outcomes.

Managers described compliance-oriented programs as a pragmatic response to investor and ESG reporting demands. “Investors don't want complexity,” one sustainability director explained. “They want a clean metric: X hectares under regenerative practices, verified by satellite” [C4]. Farmers and agronomists, however, emphasized the distortions this logic introduced. An agronomist involved in several initiatives noted: “We were measuring cover crop acreage instead of soil health. It was less about agronomy and more about what could be counted and signed off” [A3].

By privileging auditability over learning, these programs encouraged compliance behaviors - minimal engagement, superficial adoption, and risk avoidance. “They offered me ten dollars per acre for cover crops,” a farmer observed. “That's not enough to take on risk. If you're already doing it, fine. If not, ten bucks won't start you” [F9].

In systems terms, the compliance model creates shallow feedback loops: information moves quickly to corporate offices, but there is little feedback from actual field conditions. The timing is also misaligned: annual reporting cycles conflict with the multi-year pace of soil regeneration. As one corporate respondent admitted, “You can't regenerate land in twelve months, but ESG reports are annual, so everything becomes a race to show numbers that don't mean much ecologically” [A4]. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle where corporations satisfy short-term legitimacy goals, but the ecological system shows little real change. Over time, these structures can erode trust and diminish farmers' adaptive capacity, as they prioritize managing paperwork over managing ecosystems.

Finally, it is worth noting that some compliance programs showed minor adaptations over time, for instance, extending payment cycles or adding agronomy advice in response to farmer criticism. However, these tweaks rarely shifted the underlying logic: the emphasis on legibility and auditability remained intact.

4.2. Experimentation: governance through pilots and learning niches

A second governance logic, experimentation, emerged in a smaller but significant group of cases. These programs took the form of short-term pilots - often conducted in collaboration with NGOs or universities - and focused on local innovation, data collection, and demonstration farms. They generated reputationally safe “islands of excellence” that reassured stakeholders without altering mainstream procurement.

Their feedback structures are intensive but localized: farmers receive technical support, data are collected systematically, and results are used to signal innovation to external stakeholders. As one executive explained: “They loved calling it their lighthouse farm. Journalists came, policymakers came, everyone saw it. However, inside the company, we knew it was a proof point, not a supply chain shift” [C9].

For participating farmers, pilots provided rare opportunities for genuine agronomic engagement. A grower recalled, “It was the first time anyone from the company asked us how we did things. We tried new mixes, looked at soil samples, learned a lot” [F17]. However, a farmer in the same program lamented the short duration: “After two years, they packed up and left” [F18]. These temporary arrangements produced high learning potential but low system continuity. When pilots ended, the feedback loop collapsed, and knowledge rarely diffused beyond the initial participants.

Corporate executives acknowledged the structural limits of this design. One explained, “Agriculture is place-specific. You cannot simply issue a recipe and expect it to work everywhere. Pilots help us understand, but moving from pilot to widespread adoption requires long-term contracts and real investment. We are not doing that yet” [C8].

Geography shaped the trajectory of pilots. In territorially restricted products (e.g., wine denominations of origin, specialty coffee), pilots were conceived as stepping stones toward systemic adoption. In contrast, pilots in fungible commodities were more easily abandoned once reputational benefits were captured.

From a governance perspective, experimentation logics promote localized learning and trust but remain structurally peripheral. They work as safe spaces of innovation separate from the wider production network. It shows that certain practices can work technically but lack the financing, long-term market commitments, and farmer networks needed for large-scale change. As a result, it promotes local adaptation without driving an effective socio-ecological transformation.

4.3. Partnership: governance through risk-sharing and Co-adaptation

A smaller number of programs followed a partnership logic, characterized by multi-year contracts, shared investment, and risk-distribution mechanisms. These included co-financing for equipment, partial insurance for yield losses, and stable purchase agreements over several seasons. Such arrangements aligned corporate and ecological timeframes, allowing regenerative practices - like reduced tillage, agroforestry, and cover cropping-to mature.

Farmers consistently described these arrangements as transformative. “The long-term contract was a game-changer,” said one

participant. "Normally, you live year to year, but with something guaranteed, I could finally invest in practices that take time to show results" [F12]. Another noted, "They split the cost of the drill with me, and even offered partial reimbursement if yields fell. That's what partnership looks like" [F15]. By extending temporal horizons, such programs synchronize economic incentives with ecological timeframes, enabling practices like reduced tillage, cover cropping, or agroforestry that require multiple seasons to mature.

From a governance perspective, these partnerships function as co-adaptive governance structures. They create a long but reinforcing feedback loop between ecological health and economic returns - improved soil leads to more stable yields, which supports the value of shared investment. However, these models are often costly to maintain and politically sensitive. Executives themselves acknowledged both the promise and difficulty of this model. A procurement lead explained: "Multi-year contracts, shared risk, agronomy support … it's expensive. We could only roll it out to a handful of suppliers" [C3].

Partnerships were disproportionately found in supply chains tied to geographically specific crops or single crop sourcing (coffee varieties, cocoa in microclimates, grapes under denominations of origin, specialty potatoes). Territorial anchoring constrained corporate exit options and incentivized long-term, risk-sharing designs.

Still, within their domain, partnership logics most closely approximate the principles of a just and resilient transition, aligning corporate incentives with ecosystem regeneration and social stability. However, this alignment primarily concerns procedural elements such as participation, dialogue, and shared decision-making, and does not in itself imply equitable or inclusive outcomes. If participation in such programs remains limited to farmers who already possess the resources, capabilities, or institutional positioning needed to engage, their broader transformative and distributive potential may remain constrained.

4.4. Branding: governance through symbolic performance

The fourth logic, branding, represents the most performative and least durable form of regenerative governance. These initiatives often begin with high-profile public commitments - such as "one million hectares under regeneration" - announced before any operational mechanisms exist. Monitoring is minimal, incentives are largely symbolic, and farmers are often enrolled retroactively for practices already in place. A former corporate communications executive admitted, "The million-hectare pledge was written in the press release before the contracts even existed. It was headlines first, substance second" [C7].

These branding programs tend to generate highly visible feedback loops: they appear to be oriented toward public communication and reporting, while ecological and social effects remain limited or short-lived. Most information flows outward - to media, investors, and consumers - rather than inward to support learning or adaptive management. Farmers' experiences of such programs were characterized by frustration and mistrust. "I was already no-till," explained one grower. "They came and said, 'Great, now you're part of our regenerative program.' I didn't get anything out of it - they just wanted my acres in their report" [F3]. In most instances, there was little trace of sustained implementation once the initial launch period had passed.

Branding systems represent the most fragile form of regenerative governance. They appear to generate short-term external visibility, but erode trust among farmers and NGOs, fueling skepticism toward future efforts. They function as symbolic governance: it manages perception rather than performance. These programs reinforce corporate legitimacy in the short term but weaken the credibility of regenerative agriculture more broadly, crowding out initiatives that demand deeper change.

4.5. Cross-cutting pattern: fragmentation and the absence of collective feedbacks

Across all four models, a common challenge was the fragmentation of regenerative efforts. Companies often ran multiple overlapping programs in the same areas, targeting the same farmers but using different metrics and payment structures. This duplication led to what participants called "initiative fatigue" - farmers overwhelmed by audits and reporting demands, with little genuine collaboration taking place. As one sustainability manager noted, "There are companies doing spectacular work, but nobody talks to each other. Everyone runs their own pilots, sometimes with the same farmers, but in silos" [A1].

This lack of coordination limits cumulative learning and landscape-level change. While competition for visibility can drive innovation, it also limits shared learning and weakens collective impact. Some newer initiatives - like the STEP Up for Agriculture coalition led by several global food companies - aim to address this by aligning measurement systems and supporting local advisory networks (Yates, 2025). It is expected that these collaborative platforms could improve learning and resource use, but their long-term success will depend on continued corporate commitment beyond pilot phases and on the strength of independent verification systems to maintain trust among stakeholders.

Together, these findings suggest that governance design plays a key role in shaping the depth and durability of regenerative transitions, by influencing how technologies and practices are adopted, sustained, and scaled over time. Compliance and branding models privilege legibility and speed, whereas experimentation and partnership models cultivate deeper learning and social legitimacy but remain costly or marginal. The tension between visibility and continuity, and between corporate timelines and ecological rhythms, defines the current moment of corporate-led regeneration in rural areas.

5. Discussion

The typology developed in this study - compliance, experimentation, partnership, and branding - reveals the diverse ways corporations now govern sustainability in rural areas. Each configuration reflects a different balance between visibility, participation, and control. From a governance perspective, these models represent not just managerial choices but distinct institutional arrangements that redistribute authority, responsibility, and learning across agri-food systems. Together, they illustrate how regenerative agriculture functions as a new regime of rural governance, where ecological transformation and corporate accountability are deeply intertwined.

At the core of these designs is a fundamental tension between institutional and ecological timescales (Hastings, 2016). Corporate systems run on annual budgets and quarterly reports, while soil recovery, biodiversity gains, and carbon sequestration occur over years or even decades (Parkhurst et al., 2022; Neuenkamp et al., 2024). Compliance and branding models try to compress ecological time into financial time, making regeneration measurable within short-term reporting cycles. Short-term indicators are not inherently problematic and can play a useful role in tracking early progress, particularly when embedded within a coherent theory of change (Taplin et al., 2013). The challenge arises when such indicators become dominant or stand in for longer-term outcomes, without credible baselines, adaptive feedback, or commitments to sustained monitoring (Schreefel et al., 2024).

This temporal compression creates misaligned feedbacks, information moves quickly but superficially, generating visible metrics without real adaptive learning or impact (Fernández-Vidal and Alarcón, 2026). Such systems may appear stable in terms of reputation, yet remain unstable ecologically (Boonstra and de Boer, 2014). These dynamics can shape governance arrangements that align closely with external reporting expectations, while offering more limited space for deeper learning or adaptation within farming systems. In such settings, RegenAg programs are oriented less toward generating demonstrable reputational gains than toward signaling legitimacy within prevailing sustainability reporting and disclosure regimes.

Across the programs analyzed here, this pattern is visible in a strong emphasis on auditable activities, standardized metrics, and short

Table 4
Institutional trade-offs across governance logics.

Dimension	Compliance	Experimentation	Partnership	Branding
Legitimacy Source	Derived from auditability and conformity with ESG or certification standards; external and procedural.	Based on scientific validation or NGO endorsement; relational but fragile.	Rooted in long-term reciprocity and demonstrated impact; relational and cumulative.	Generated through visibility and narrative control; symbolic and volatile.
Learning Dynamics	Minimal; data flow upward for reporting, not reflection.	High at project level; learning remains localized and project-bound.	Continuous co-learning and adaptation across partners; institutionalized feedback loops.	None; emphasis on messaging, not monitoring.
Risk Distribution	Risk transferred to farmers through short contracts and performance conditions.	Shared temporarily via project funding; corporate risk minimal.	Risks co-managed through contracts, insurance, and stable purchasing.	Risks externalized to farmers and NGOs; reputation shielded by communication.
Temporal Fit	Short-term cycles (annual audits) misaligned with ecological processes.	Medium-term experiments partly aligned with ecological change.	Long-term alignment between agronomic and contractual timeframes.	Ephemeral; focused on campaign or investor reporting cycles.
Spatial Reach	Uniform and global in scope; scalable but detached from place.	Localized sites of innovation; low scalability.	Rooted in specific territories and supply regions; medium scalability.	Global, deterritorialized representation of regeneration.
Equity & Inclusion	Smallholders often excluded; participation limited to compliance.	Selective inclusion of "model farmers."	Broader participation through co-design and shared governance.	Tokenistic inclusion to enhance corporate credibility.
Outcome Stability	High visibility, low durability.	Episodic improvements; discontinuous scaling.	Durable outcomes with embedded local capacity.	Unstable; rapidly abandoned when attention shifts.

Sources: Authors' own work

reporting cycles, combined with relatively limited mechanisms for farmer feedback, shared risk, or long-term adaptation. 020240.

By contrast, the partnership logic suggests more collaborative and adaptive forms of governance, in line with findings from other studies (Manevska-Tasevska et al., 2021; May, 2022). Multi-year contracts, shared investments, and yield-loss protection extend decision-making timelines, building mutual trust, and enabling farmers to adopt practices that take several seasons to deliver results (Michler and Wu, 2020; Shi and Wang, 2023) These designs lengthen feedback loops between ecological improvement and financial returns, turning short-term transactions into co-adaptive relationships.

This finding supports broader research on resilience and adaptive governance, which shows that systems able to absorb shocks and learn over time depend on flexible institutions and shared risk (DeCaro et al., 2017).

The experimentation logic, meanwhile, shows the double-edged nature of innovation. Its feedback loops are deep but narrow, strong in experimentation and learning, yet limited to small pockets within the system. In transition theory, pilots act as innovation niches - protected spaces where new ideas can develop but rarely expand into mainstream practice (Schot and Geels, 2013). Their main weakness is the lack of institutional links that connect local learning to larger structural change. Without long-term market commitments or supportive policies, pilots remain temporary, leading to "innovation without institutionalization" (Van Doren et al., 2020). They show both the promise of adaptive learning and its fragility when disconnected from wider incentive and governance structures (Van Assche et al., 2022).

The four configurations identified in Table 3 differ not only in their immediate operation but in the structural trade-offs they represent. Table 4 synthesizes these trade-offs across six key dimensions -legitimacy, learning, risk, temporal fit, spatial reach, and equity and inclusion-revealing how institutional design choices shape system behavior.

As Table 4 indicates, compliance and branding architectures optimize for short-term legitimacy at the expense of ecological fit, while partnership models achieve temporal and informational balance but remain costly to scale. The table makes clear that design alignment - not program size - is the critical determinant of regenerative effectiveness.

The typology also contributes conceptually to the study of rural legitimacy and power. Compliance and branding models reproduce hierarchical relations: corporations define the rules, monitor adherence, and appropriate reputational gains. In contrast, partnership and experimentation models introduce elements of relational governance, where credibility emerges from co-investment, dialogue, and learning.

Yet even these more participatory models remain vulnerable to what Li (2007) calls the will to improve: the tendency of expert institutions to frame transformation primarily as a technical challenge. In several partnership-oriented programs examined here, adoption barriers were defined mainly in terms of knowledge gaps or agronomic practices to be corrected through training and advisory support. Issues such as land tenure insecurity, price volatility, or farmers' debt exposure were rarely addressed within program design. As a result, questions of justice, redistribution, and voice risk being sidelined, even in initiatives that formally emphasize collaboration.

Seen in this light, the significance of regenerative agriculture lies less in its immediate coercive effects than in the way it integrates sustainability metrics more directly into procurement, finance, and regulatory frameworks, thereby expanding the latent capacity of corporate actors to shape rural production decisions over time.

This analysis therefore situates corporate regenerative agriculture within the broader context of neoliberal environmental governance (Fletcher, 2010; Higgins and Larner, 2017). By shifting environmental responsibility from states to private actors, corporations acquire both the authority and the legitimacy to define sustainability. Farmers, in turn, navigate a hybrid governance field that blends contractual obligations with moral expectations. RegenAg programs thus become mechanisms of rural ordering, establishing who counts as a "responsible" farmer from a corporate perspective, which serves as a condition for access to contracts, programs, or recognition within corporate governance systems.

From a policy standpoint, the findings underline that institutional design - not scale or technology - determines the transformative potential of regenerative agriculture. Multi-year contracts, shared risk instruments, and participatory monitoring foster alignment between ecological and economic temporalities, whereas short-term, audit-driven schemes entrench volatility and mistrust (Piñeiro et al., 2020; Barkley et al., 2024). Public policies that reward long-term collaboration and co-financing could amplify the regenerative potential of private initiatives. Likewise, independent verification and data interoperability are needed to turn fragmented corporate projects into learning-oriented governance systems (Schreefel et al., 2024).

Theoretically, this study extends existing work on rural governance. It shows that regenerative outcomes depend not only on technical or ecological innovation but also on the alignment of governance temporalities: how institutional time (budgets, audits, contracts) interacts with ecological and social time (soil recovery, community trust). When these temporalities diverge, regeneration becomes symbolic; when they converge, it gains depth and continuity.

Finally, the patterns identified in this study contribute to understanding the social dynamics of corporate sustainability. They highlight

Table 5
Multi-level outcomes of governance logics.

Level of Analysis	Compliance	Experimentation	Partnership	Branding
Farm Level	Administrative burden; farmer seen as data provider. Incentives short-term and narrow.	Temporary technical support and learning; limited continuity once pilot ends.	Long-term investment capacity and autonomy strengthened through shared risk.	Symbolic participation; inclusion mainly for storytelling.
Supply-Chain Level	Centralized monitoring; information extracted upward for reporting.	Fragmented learning; pilots rarely integrated into procurement routines.	Stable procurement and coordination through multi-year contracts; trust develops.	Coordination via marketing rather than production; weak supply integration.
Ecosystem Level	Environmental benefits shallow and volatile; practices likely reversed when payments stop.	Localized ecological improvement around pilot sites; little landscape-scale change.	Measurable regeneration outcomes and adaptive management sustained over time.	No ecological monitoring; focus on claims rather than outcomes.
Policy/ Governance Level	Aligns with corporate ESG compliance and investor disclosure frameworks.	Intersects with public research or subsidy schemes; potential for co-funding.	Compatible with territorial or cooperative governance; encourages policy learning.	Exploits voluntary reporting regimes; limited accountability.

Sources: Authors' own work

Table 6
Evolution of governance logics in corporate regenerative agriculture.

Initial Configuration	Likely Evolution Pathway	Dominant Feedback Mechanism	Enabling Conditions	Constraining Conditions	Illustrative Example
Compliance	Occasionally evolves toward partnership; often static.	Negative legitimacy feedback from farmer discontent or NGO criticism.	Reputational risk, external regulation, farmer mobilization.	Investor short-termism, symbolic reporting incentives.	European grain programs shifting from per-acre payments to multi-year soil credits.
Experimentation	Evolves into partnership when institutional anchoring occurs.	Learning feedbacks institutionalized via cooperatives or regional scaling.	Public-private co-funding, strong local organizations, NGO mediation.	Short-term project framing, lack of integration into procurement.	NGO–corporate pilots in cocoa evolving into sourcing partnerships.
Partnership	May stabilize or regress toward compliance under cost pressure.	Trust feedbacks reinforcing continuity.	Stable sourcing dependence, demonstrated outcomes, multi-actor governance.	Leadership turnover, cost constraints, lack of verification.	Long-term coffee sustainability programs maintaining regional partnerships.
Branding	Typically collapses or reverts to compliance under scrutiny.	Reputational feedbacks triggered by audits or media exposure.	Strong civil-society monitoring, cross-company coalitions.	Weak accountability, shifting media attention.	Carbon-acreage pledges re-labeled after NGO investigations.

Sources: Authors' own work

how governance arrangements that align closely with external reporting frameworks may not always translate into durable change on the ground. Addressing these tensions may involve strengthening participatory and relational elements within program design, including clearer roles for farmers, cooperatives, and rural organizations in shaping and evaluating initiatives. As DeCaro et al. (2017) suggest, credible governance emerges not from tighter control but from distributed authority and reflexive learning.

In sum, regenerative agriculture's potential to transform rural sustainability depends less on adopting new practices than on reconfiguring the governance architectures that organize them. Compliance and branding may satisfy the need for speed and visibility, but only partnership and co-adaptive experimentation align corporate, ecological, and rural logics. Whether regeneration becomes a genuine pathway toward ecological justice or remains a new vocabulary for corporate control will depend on how these governance designs evolve, and whose voices are allowed to shape them.

5.1. Implications for governance design

To trace how design architectures cascade through the agricultural system, Table 5 links each configuration to outcomes at multiple levels - farm, supply chain, ecosystem, and policy/governance.

The table demonstrates that system outcomes are path-dependent: architectures emphasizing short-term metrics generate fragile, reversible change, whereas those embedding multi-year reciprocity foster durable ecological feedbacks. Importantly, the rightmost column translates these observations into actionable design and policy levers,

Table 7
Institutional design levers for aligning corporate and ecological temporalities.

Design Dimension	Current Limitation	Proposed Institutional Lever	Expected Effect	Policy or Governance Mechanism
Contract Duration & Stability	One-year contracts misaligned with multi-year ecological cycles.	Require minimum 3–5-year commitments or rolling baselines.	Strengthens learning, investment, and long-term soil recovery.	Integrate temporal criteria into public subsidy and ESG disclosure standards.
Risk Distribution	Financial and production risk externalized to farmers.	Mandate co-investment or downside protection.	Improves equity, adoption, and climate resilience.	Public–private insurance and tax incentives for shared risk.
Monitoring & Verification (MRV)	Metrics track activity, not outcomes.	Develop adaptive MRV based on soil and biodiversity trends.	Enables learning-oriented governance and credible reporting.	Fund shared MRV infrastructure and require open-data standards.
Collaboration & Data Sharing	Fragmented initiatives and duplicated audits.	Build pre-competitive data and training platforms.	Increases efficiency and landscape-level coordination.	Support multi-firm coalitions with public oversight.
Farmer Agency & Participation	Top-down program design; limited local voice.	Include farmer/co-op representation in program governance.	Enhances trust, relevance, and adaptive capacity.	Tie ESG recognition to participatory-design standards.
Ecological Temporal Fit	Reporting cycles too short for observable regeneration.	Introduce "ecological lag" periods before performance disclosure.	Reduces premature claims; aligns incentives with ecological time.	Embed temporal-alignment metrics in ISSB/EU taxonomy frameworks.

Sources: Authors' own work

Table 8
Data structure: From interview data to Archetypal program design logics.

Aggregate Dimension	Second-Order Themes	First-Order Quotes
Compliance	**Auditability and investor assurance**	"Our ESG team needed something that ticked the boxes. Investors don't want complexity - they want a clean metric: X hectares under regenerative practices, verified by satellite. It doesn't capture everything, but it's what the auditors and shareholders understand" [C4]. "When I asked why we were measuring cover crop acreage instead of actual soil health, the answer was: "Because it's what we can verify". It was less about agronomy and more about what could be counted and signed off" [A3].
	Compliance culture and shallow incentives	"They offered me ten dollars per acre. That's not enough to take on risk. If you're already doing it, fine. If not, ten bucks won't start you" [F9]. "You start thinking about what paperwork will make them happy, not what practices make sense for your soil. That's the danger … the program turns farmers into accountants, not innovators." [F1].
	Short-termism vs ecological cycles	"The soil takes years to respond. But every year, I get asked the same: 'How many acres this year?' The accounting cycle and the biological cycle are speaking different languages." [A2]. "You can't regenerate land in 12 months. But ESG reports are annual, so the whole thing becomes this race to show numbers that don't mean much ecologically." [A4].
Experimentation	**Pilots as innovation platforms**	"They loved calling it their lighthouse farm. Journalists came, policymakers came, everyone saw it. But inside the company, we knew it was a proof point, not a supply chain shift. It reassured stakeholders without requiring the business to change its procurement model" [C9]. "We worked with a university on carbon measurement pilots. It was genuinely interesting … really great science. But everyone knew it was boutique. The real supply chain wasn't touched" [C5].
	Localized collaboration, limited reach	"It was the first time anyone from the company actually came to the farm and asked us how we did things. We tried new seed mixes together, we looked at soil samples, we learned a lot. But then the pilot ended, and that was it. The rest of the community never saw those lessons" [F17]. "We got agronomists, lab tests, drone imagery … the kind of support you never get otherwise. But it was like winning a lottery ticket. After two years, they packed up and left, and nothing was built into the long-term contract" [F18].
	Symbolic containment	"I asked why they didn't expand the project, and the answer was, 'If we scale it, we'll be accountable for the results and we do not have the resources to control this at scale.' Keeping it small made it safer. A pilot that fails can be spun as learning, but a scaled program that fails is reputationally toxic" [C10]. "It was a test tube. Useful, interesting, but contained. No one thought it was going to change mainstream procurement" [A4].
Partnerships	**Multi-year commitments**	"The long-term contract was a game-changer. Normally you live year to year, but with something guaranteed, I could finally invest in practices that take time to show results" [F12]. "We knew they wouldn't just walk away if yields dipped. That stability made me trust them in a way I never had before" [F4].
	Cost-sharing and downside protection	"They split the cost of the drill with me, and even offered partial reimbursement if yields fell. That's what partnership looks like. Without that, it's just risk pushed onto farmers" [F15]. "I've worked with a dozen programs. This was the only one where they said, 'If you lose, we lose too.' That's when I realized they were serious" [F6].
	Trust-based relational governance	"They weren't just buying a commodity anymore … they were buying into our farm. It felt like we were on the same side, finally. And that changed how I saw them, not just as a buyer but as a partner" [F8]. "It built a different kind of relationship. We had open conversations, not just checklists. That's rare in these corporate schemes" [A5].
	Resource intensity and equity limits	"It costs a lot to do it this way. Multi-year contracts, shared risk, agronomy support … it's expensive. We could only roll it out to a handful of suppliers" [C3]. "It felt a bit unfair. Some farmers got all this support, and others in the same region got nothing. That creates resentment" [F7].
Branding	**Headline-driven commitments**	"The million-hectare pledge was written in the press release before the contracts even existed. It was about headlines first, substance second" [C7]. "It sounded huge, but most of it was just counting farmers already doing the practices. Nothing new, just repackaging" [A3]
	Symbolic enrollment	"I was already no-till. They came to me and said, 'Great, now you're part of our regen program.' I didn't get anything out of it - they just wanted my acres in their report" [F3]. "It's smoke and mirrors. They need the numbers, so they sign up farmers who've been doing regen for a decade and claim credit" [F2].
	Marketing-led governance	"This was run by comms, not agronomy. You could tell … it was all beautiful statements and goals, without clear metrics or guidelines" [A2]. "Frankly, it was designed for Wall Street, not for the field. The language was about 'carbon-positive brands,' not about soil or biodiversity" [C6].
	Erosion of trust	"Farmers aren't dumb. When you promise transformation and then just count existing practices, they stop believing you. The next time you come with a program, the door is shut" [F5]. "What some companies do damages credibility. It's easy short-term wins, but long-term, it makes the company look cynical, and they do not do much to hide it" [F10].

Sources: Authors' own work

reinforcing the need for temporal alignment and shared risk frameworks.

Lastly, it should be acknowledged that corporate programs are not static and they evolve over time. Table 6 traces that potential evolution, identifying feedbacks that push designs toward or away from regenerative alignment.

The trajectories summarized in Table 6 suggest that negative legitimacy feedbacks and public scrutiny can sometimes catalyze evolution from compliance to partnership models, while weak oversight perpetuates branding-first systems.

Likewise, there are several levers (summarized in Table 7) that can address the key shortcomings of existing programs and improve the alignment between institutional and ecological temporalities, which is critical to ensure an effective agroecological transition.

Across all models, institutional design emerges as a critical conditioning factor shaping regenerative transitions. The findings reveal that the depth and durability of regenerative transitions depend, to a large extent, on how governance systems handle three critical tensions: 1)

temporal alignment, between corporate reporting cycles and ecological time; 2) risk distribution, between corporations seeking stability and farmers absorbing uncertainty; and 3) legitimacy, between symbolic credibility for investors and material credibility for those who work the land.

Where these dimensions align - through long-term contracts, co-investment, and participatory monitoring - regeneration becomes cumulative and socially embedded. Where they diverge, it becomes performative.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how corporate RegenAg programs are designed and how their institutional arrangements shape rural adaptation and legitimacy. By comparing 45 programs and drawing on 34 interviews across regions and commodities, the analysis shows that the design of corporate initiatives - their incentive structures, contract duration, and monitoring mechanisms - plays a decisive role in determining the depth and durability of regenerative outcomes. Rather than focusing solely on hectares enrolled or tons of carbon sequestered, understanding the performance of RegenAg requires examining how governance design organizes feedbacks between farmers, corporations, and ecosystems.

This study contributes to rural studies in three ways.

First, they recast corporate sustainability programs as instruments of rural reordering, showing how power, knowledge, and responsibility are redistributed through private governance.

Second, they highlight the role of institutional temporalities, the rhythm of budgets, audits, and reporting in shaping ecological transitions.

Third, it develops a governance typology (compliance, experimentation, partnership, and branding) that shows how different program designs shape the depth, durability, and practical implementation of regenerative initiatives in rural contexts.

From a policy and practice perspective, the study suggests that public frameworks must accompany corporate efforts if regeneration is to extend beyond pilot projects and symbolic metrics. Governments and farmer organizations can play a critical role by creating blended-finance mechanisms, long-term procurement commitments, and shared monitoring systems that reduce duplication and strengthen accountability. Without such coordination, the proliferation of private programs risks deepening inequality and “initiative fatigue” in farming communities.

Ultimately, the challenge is not only to regenerate soils but to regenerate governance itself, to design institutions that are slower, more inclusive, and more attuned to the rhythms of the countryside. Regenerative agriculture will only fulfill its promise when the farmers who enact it participate meaningfully in defining its rules, measuring its outcomes, and sharing its rewards. Regeneration, as examined in this study, is as much about fostering trust and institutional credibility as it is about restoring land.

6.1. Research limitations

Methodological limitations must be acknowledged. The focus on large, corporately sponsored programs implies a bias toward more visible and better-resourced initiatives, leaving aside many grassroots or cooperative-led experiments that also contribute to regenerative transitions. Moreover, the comparative and qualitative nature of the study precludes generalization in the statistical sense. Instead, the typology is proposed as a conceptual diagnostic tool, an interpretive framework that can complement quantitative modeling efforts in agricultural systems research by highlighting the institutional dimensions that structure system behavior.

6.2. Future research direction

While this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to uncover system-design logics, future research could employ Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to systematically test how combinations of design parameters -such as contract duration, risk-sharing, and monitoring intensity-shape outcomes across corporate initiatives (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009; Ragin, 2014). Such configurational approaches would complement the typology developed here by identifying causal pathways linking design alignment to ecological and social performance. Corporate disclosures remain too heterogeneous to permit robust cross-case quantification of design conditions (e.g., comparable financial volumes or verification depth); however, as disclosure practices deepen, scholars could build upon this conceptual framework using QCA or more quantitative-oriented methods.

Beyond QCA, additional work could: a) trace comparative trajectories of regenerative programs across regions and governance models to understand how local institutions influence adaptation; b) integrate quantitative ecological data with institutional design variables to assess how alignment affects measurable soil or biodiversity outcomes; c) examine policy–corporate interactions, exploring how disclosure frameworks and subsidies (e.g., EU CSRD, SBTi-FLAG) shape private design choices; d) investigate farmer agency and equity dynamics, focusing on how participatory structures affect trust, learning, and long-term adoption; and e) examine how these governance designs are mediated by national institutions, crop characteristics, or farming systems, which may shape how programs are implemented and experienced on the ground.

Collectively, these avenues extend the analytical reach of this paper and could build a coherent research agenda linking institutional design, system resilience, and regenerative transformation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jorge Fernandez-Vidal: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft. **Silverio Alarcon:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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