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Responses to land-use and extreme weather events

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PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Soil microbial diversity in agriculture

Responses to land-use and extreme weather events

KATJA KOZJEK

DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY | FACULTY OF SCIENCE | LUND UNIVERSITY



Soil microbial diversity in agriculture

Agricultural land-use intensification and increased occurrence and intensity of extreme weather events like droughts are two of the main threats responsible for soil biodiversity declines and further changes in their ecosystem functions. Microbial diversity is an essential key for the understanding of ecosystem functioning, however the diversity of functions performed by soil microorganisms and how they are linked to ecosystem functions like carbon cycling remain largely unexplored. This thesis provides a deeper understanding of how the diversity of soil microorganisms is influenced by agricultural land-use intensification and drought. These findings highlight that modified agricultural land-use practices have the potential to reduce the negative effects of drought on soil microorganisms, soil functions and further soil ecosystem processes.



Soil microbial diversity in agriculture

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Responses to land-use and extreme weather
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Katja Kozjek



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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Faculty opponent

Professor George Kowalchuk

Utrecht University, Institute of Environmental Biology, Department of Biology

Organization LUND UNIVERSITY Department of Biology Sölvegatan 37, 22362 Lund, Sweden Author: Katja Kozjek		Document name: Doctoral dissertation
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Abstract Land-use intensification of agricultural soils and increased occurrence and intensity of extreme weather events like drought periods are two of the main threats responsible for soil biodiversity declines. These changes in soil biodiversity can alter ecosystem functions performed especially by soil microbial communities that could further contribute to those threats. Microbial diversity is an essential key for the understanding of ecosystem functioning, however the diversity of functions performed by soil microorganisms and how they are linked to ecosystem functions like carbon cycling remain largely unexplored. The aim of this thesis was to understand how the taxonomic and functional diversity of soil microorganisms in agriculture are influenced by agricultural land-use intensification and extreme weather events, specifically short-term drought. Thus, a combination of field experiments across Europe and glasshouse experiments along with different molecular methods, specifically high-throughput sequencing-based omics approaches was used. Different land-use types (grassland and agricultural soils) affected soil microbial communities, particularly their response in relation to soil organic matter degradation. It was found that crop management practices, i.e., crop residue incorporation promoted gene expression in these soils, particularly in agricultural soils. These findings support the notion that careful land-use practices have the potential to mitigate losses of soil organic carbon in traditionally carbon depleted soils and can thereafter promote the functioning of soil microorganisms. Further, interactive effects of long-term agricultural management and short-term drought on the communities of plant-associated arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF) were studied. Organic and conventional long-term farming systems influenced the taxonomic composition of AMF, while the effects on their diversity were negligible. No effect of short-term drought on the diversity and composition of AMF was found. To further explore how short-term drought influence the functional diversity of soil microorganisms in agricultural soils, particularly on the gene level, functional genetic diversity was assessed. By studying the diversity of extracellular enzymes related to soil organic matter degradation, it was found that functional and taxonomic gene composition significantly differed between European agricultural fields (Sweden, Germany, and Spain). However, the effect of short-term drought was only observed in Germany. These results indicate that soil microorganisms are differently adjusted to short-term drought, either due to (a) regional adaptations of microorganisms to already dry environments or (b) differences in soil physicochemical properties like soil organic carbon content, as it has the potential to buffer drought effects. Finally, the short-term drought also affected the response of soil microbial communities in these soils, especially in their gene expression towards degrading soil organic matter. Altogether, these findings show that soil microorganisms respond differently to agricultural land-use intensification and extreme weather events such as drought. Careful land-use practices like the incorporation of crop residues, specific farming systems and increased levels of soil organic carbon have the potential to mitigate the negative effects of drought on soil health and soil microorganisms. Moreover, these findings demonstrate the importance of studying microbial responses to drought at different diversity levels, with the necessity to link taxonomic and functional diversity to soil ecosystem functions.		
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Katja Kozjek



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Verjel sem v pot in dosegel cilj, ki ga sploh nisem imel.
~Nejc Zaplotnik

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List of Papers

- I. **Kozjek, K.***, Manoharan, L.*, Urich, T., Ahrén, D., Hedlund, K. *Straw addition promotes microbial activity in agricultural soils comparable to grasslands*. Manuscript.
- II. **Kozjek, K.**, Kundel, D., Kushwaha, S.K., Olsson, P.A., Ahrén, D., Fliessbach, A., Birkhofer, K., Hedlund, K. 2021. *Long-term agricultural management impacts arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi more than short-term experimental drought*. *Applied Soil Ecology* 168, 104140.
- III. **Kozjek, K.**, Manoharan, L., Ahrén, D., Hedlund, K. *Microbial functional genes influenced by short-term experimental drought across European agricultural soils*. Manuscript (submitted).
- IV. **Kozjek, K.**, Manoharan, L., Jørgensen, H.B., Ahrén, D., Hedlund, K. *Microbial responses to short-term experimental drought in agricultural soils*. Manuscript.

* These authors contributed equally to this work.

Author contributions

- I. LM, DA, KH conceptualized and designed the study. LM performed the laboratory work and bioinformatic analyses. **KK** contributed to bioinformatics and was responsible for the statistical analyses. TU contributed with inputs to the laboratory work. **KK** outlined and wrote the manuscript with inputs from all authors.
- II. **KK**, PAO, DA and KH designed the AMF study. **KK** conducted the molecular laboratory work, the bioinformatical and statistical analyses. DK conducted fieldwork, provided plant- and soil-related data and contributed to the statistical analyses. SKK contributed to the bioinformatical analysis. The design of the experiment was a part of a larger European project where KB was responsible for the rainout shelter design and overall experiment. **KK** outlined and wrote the manuscript with inputs from all authors.
- III. **KK** and KH designed and carried out the study that was a part of a larger European wide experiment, with the input from DA. **KK** performed the laboratory work, bioinformatic and statistical analyses. LM contributed with inputs to the bioinformatic analyses. **KK** wrote the paper with contributions from all authors.
- IV. **KK** and KH designed the study. **KK** performed the experiment and HBJ the soil PLFA analyses. **KK** conducted the laboratory work, bioinformatic and statistical analyses. LM contributed to the bioinformatic analyses. DA and KH provided overall guidance throughout the work. **KK** wrote the manuscript with inputs from all authors.

KK – Katja Kozjek

LM – Lokeshwaran Manoharan

DA – Dag Ahrén

KH – Katarina Hedlund

PAO – Pål Axel Olsson

DK – Dominika Kundel

KB – Klaus Birkhofer

TU – Tim Urich

HBJ – Helene Bracht Jørgensen

SKK – Sandeep K. Kushwaha

List of abbreviations

AA auxiliary activities
AMF arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi
ASV amplicon sequence variant
BIODYN biodynamic
CAZymes Carbohydrate-Active enZymes
CBM/CBMF carbohydrate-binding module
CCS circular consensus sequence
cDNA complementary deoxyribonucleic acid
CE carbohydrate esterase
CONMIN conventional
DOK trial (biodynamic, bioorganic and conventional [konventionell])
DNA deoxyribonucleic acid
GH glycoside hydrolase
GT glycosyltransferase
ITS internal transcribed spacer
LSU large subunit
mRNA messenger ribonucleic acid
PCR polymerase chain reaction
PL polysaccharide lyase
RNA ribonucleic acid
rRNA ribosomal ribonucleic acid
SOC soil organic carbon
SOM soil organic matter
SMRT single-molecule real-time sequencing
SSU small subunit
WHC water holding capacity

Abstract

Land-use intensification of agricultural soils and increased occurrence and intensity of extreme weather events like drought periods are two of the main threats responsible for soil biodiversity declines. These changes in soil biodiversity can alter ecosystem functions performed especially by soil microbial communities that could further contribute to those threats. Microbial diversity is an essential key for the understanding of ecosystem functioning, however the diversity of functions performed by soil microorganisms and how they are linked to ecosystem functions like carbon cycling remain largely unexplored.

The aim of this thesis was to understand how the taxonomic and functional diversity of soil microorganisms in agriculture are influenced by agricultural land-use intensification and extreme weather events, specifically short-term drought. Thus, a combination of field experiments across Europe and glasshouse experiments along with different molecular methods, specifically high-throughput sequencing-based omics approaches was used.

Different land-use types (grassland and agricultural soils) affected soil microbial communities, particularly their response in relation to soil organic matter degradation. It was found that crop management practices, i.e., crop residue incorporation promoted gene expression in these soils, particularly in agricultural soils. These findings support the notion that careful land-use practices have the potential to mitigate losses of soil organic carbon in traditionally carbon depleted soils and can thereafter promote the functioning of soil microorganisms. Further, interactive effects of long-term agricultural management and short-term drought on the communities of plant-associated arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF) were studied. Organic and conventional long-term farming systems influenced the taxonomic composition of AMF, while the effects on their diversity were negligible. No effect of short-term drought on the diversity and composition of AMF was found. To further explore how short-term drought influence the functional diversity of soil microorganisms in agricultural soils, particularly on the gene level, functional genetic diversity was assessed. By studying the diversity of extracellular enzymes related to soil organic matter degradation, it was found that functional and taxonomic gene composition significantly differed between European agricultural fields (Sweden, Germany, and Spain). However, the effect of short-term drought was only observed in Germany. These results indicate that soil microorganisms are differently adjusted to short-term drought, either due to (a) regional adaptations of

microorganisms to already dry environments or (b) differences in soil physicochemical properties like soil organic carbon content, as it has the potential to buffer drought effects. Finally, the short-term drought also affected the response of soil microbial communities in these soils, especially in their gene expression towards degrading soil organic matter.

Altogether, these findings show that soil microorganisms respond differently to agricultural land-use intensification and extreme weather events such as drought. Careful land-use practices like the incorporation of crop residues, specific farming systems and increased levels of soil organic carbon have the potential to mitigate the negative effects of drought on soil health and soil microorganisms. Moreover, these findings demonstrate the importance of studying microbial responses to drought at different diversity levels, with the necessity to link taxonomic and functional diversity to soil ecosystem functions.

Popular science summary

Soils are material on which we build roads, construct buildings, walk and grow plants. However, soils are much more than this. Soils harbour an extraordinary portion of the biodiversity on our planet, including tiny living things called microorganisms. They are too small to be seen by the naked eye and are visible only through a microscope. Despite their size, they are extremely important for our health, industries and environment. A single handful of soil is home to more microorganisms than there are stars in the universe. These microorganisms form communities, different microorganisms together, and are involved in different ecosystem functions such as nutrient cycling through degradation of soil organic matter that comes from plant residues, animal manure and compost. During the degradation process, soil microorganisms degrade these organic materials and provide nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus, and sulphur to plants. On the other hand, these microorganisms obtain organic carbon that gets stored in soils. High levels of stored organic carbon can improve soil structure, reduce erosion, promote soil biodiversity, and have the potential to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Due to the growing human population and the need to produce enough food, agricultural practices worldwide are being intensified. Farmers need to increase crop production, either by application of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, or modification of existing farming practices. In combination with global climate change, specifically increased occurrence and frequency of extreme weather events such as drought, this can cause several environmental problems and can reduce soil biodiversity. Losses of soil biodiversity can further lead to a reduction of soil functioning and soil services carried out by soil microorganisms, such as climate regulation, nutrient cycling, and food production. High microbial diversity is important for supporting ecosystem functions and services, therefore, the need to protect soil biodiversity and functions performed by soil microorganisms is essential. To find a way towards more sustainable agriculture in the long run, it is thus critical to understand how anthropogenic factors influence the diversity of soil microorganisms and how this is linked to ecosystem processes.

The diversity of soil microorganisms determining the functioning of the soil ecosystem is enormous, and thereafter challenging to study. The majority of soil microorganisms cannot be cultivated in the laboratory, however researchers have developed new methods that allow studying the full extent of soil microbial diversity directly from soils. Collection and analysis of genetic material (DNA or RNA) from

soils and targeting of soil microorganisms and their specific functions like those related to the degradation of soil organic material allow us to establish relationships between soil microbial diversity, their functions and soil ecosystem processes.

In this thesis, I studied how the intensification of agriculture and extreme weather events, especially droughts, affected the diversity of soil microorganisms and their functions.

First, the effects of different land-use types (grassland and agricultural soils) on the active microorganisms were studied. The results of this study showed that the overall gene expression related to organic matter degradation differed between the two land-uses. Moreover, the addition of organic materials, i.e., crop residues promoted the expression of genes in traditionally carbon depleted soils like agricultural soils. With time, the gene expression of these microorganisms seemed similar to that of the carbon rich soils, i.e., grasslands. This suggests that the addition of organic compounds can increase the activity of soil microorganisms in soils with lower amounts of organic carbon content and indicate the potential way towards healthier soils and increased productivity.

Second, I wanted to understand how different farming systems and drought simultaneously affect arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi. These fungi are of crucial importance in agriculture, as they colonize the roots of plants, such as cereals, including wheat and barley. They transfer water and nutrients from the soil to the plants and in return they receive carbon. Additionally, this association could enhance plant tolerance to environmental stress like drought. I showed that the drought did not influence the diversity and community composition of these fungal communities. While different farming systems altered their community composition but not the diversity. These findings suggest that these soil microorganisms are capable of coping with drought, however more attention should be paid to how current agricultural practices could affect them. As agricultural practices can potentially enhance the resistance of these fungal communities to drought and possibly maintain high crop production levels under drought periods.

Finally, I wanted to understand how drought affects the diversity of soil microorganisms in agricultural soils across Europe, specifically on their functional gene level. By studying the genetic information of different soil microorganisms that carry out specific biological processes, we can obtain information of their genetic potential and their response to changes in environmental factors of only active microorganisms. It was found that functional genetic diversity differed between European agricultural fields, furthermore drought effects had varying effects on soil microorganisms. Some microorganisms better tolerated drought, which was probably due to regional adaptations of these microorganisms to already dry environments or because of increased soil organic carbon content that can reduce the effects of drought. Additionally, I also showed that drought affected active soil microbial communities in these soils.

In summary, this thesis provides a deeper understanding of how the diversity of soil microorganisms is influenced by agricultural land-use intensification and drought. Agricultural land-use intensification and physicochemical properties are important factors determining the diversity of soil microorganisms in agriculture. These findings highlight that modified agricultural land-use practices have the potential to reduce the negative effects of drought on soil microorganisms, soil functions and further soil ecosystem processes.

Introduction

Agricultural intensification and extreme weather events caused by the changing climate are strongly affecting soil ecosystem and soil biodiversity (Cavicchioli et al., 2019; de Graaff et al., 2019; Geisen et al., 2019). Soils harbour a large portion of biological diversity on Earth, including microorganisms (e.g., bacteria), micro- (e.g., nematodes, tardigrades), meso- (e.g., collembolans, mites) and macrofauna (e.g., ants, earthworms) (Orgiazzi et al., 2016). These soil organisms are crucial for multiple ecosystem functions and services, including nutrient cycling, carbon sequestration, climate regulation, and food provision (Wall et al., 2012; Bardgett and van der Putten, 2014). Despite the importance of soil biodiversity for ecosystem functioning, we still face major challenges in understanding the ecology of soil microorganisms, their diversity and relationship with soil ecosystem. Particularly, the question remains on how the agricultural intensification and extreme weather events influence links between specific soil microbial taxa and soil processes.

Soil ecosystem

Soils as a microbial habitat

Soils represent a complex and highly dynamic ecosystem on our planet, serving as the main reservoir for distinct microorganisms, including bacteria, fungi, archaea, protozoa, and viruses (Fierer, 2017; Jansson and Hofmockel, 2020). Although these tiny organisms are largely invisible to the naked eye, they drive crucial ecosystem functions such as nutrient cycling, and the degradation of soil organic matter (SOM). They also form symbiotic relationships with plant roots and thereby play an important role in the maintenance of soil fertility and plant productivity (van der Heijden et al., 2008; Crowther et al., 2019). Given the importance of soil microorganisms for soils, less is known on how the disturbances (natural and anthropogenic) affect their diversity and consequently the ecosystem processes they mediate.

Carbon cycling and soil organic matter degradation

SOM represents one of the largest reservoirs of organic carbon and nitrogen on our planet and its turnover plays a crucial role in global element cycling (Batjes, 1996; Schmidt et al., 2011). Soil organic carbon (SOC) is the main source of carbon nutrients required for microbial life and plant productivity. SOC can regulate physicochemical soil properties, can improve soil stability, water holding capacity, provide more plant nutrients and increase soil biodiversity (Lal, 2016; Minasny et al., 2017). However, as the pool of SOC is sensitive to global climate and land-use changes this can lead to limited carbon sequestration capacity (Zomer et al., 2017). Amounts of SOM and carbon influence soil fertility, health, and functioning, therefore a better understanding of biological mechanisms and players involved in carbon cycling is crucial. Abiotic factors, like moisture and temperature are considered as primary determinants of SOM degradation and carbon cycling, but soil microorganisms are greatly responsible for it (Nielsen et al., 2011). Soil microorganisms, particularly fungi and bacteria, produce enzymes that then catalyse specific reactions that are part of SOM degradation and are responsible to gain nutrients and energy for soil microorganisms that they use for enzyme production (Sinsabaugh and Follstad Shah, 2012; Burns et al., 2013). Thus, the production and activity of enzymes are directly linked to ecosystem functioning. Among all these enzymes, there has been particular interest in the role of extracellular enzymes, broadly produced by soil microorganisms. They have been proposed as proximate agents of processes related to SOM as their activity is crucial for ecosystem functioning, particularly degradation and mineralization of SOM (Sinsabaugh et al., 2008). Most soil microorganisms have extracellular enzymes to degrade labile carbon sources such as simple carbohydrates, but others have enzymes to degrade complex carbon substrates such as hemicellulose and lignin (Eichorst and Kuske, 2012). The phenotypic and genotypic microbial diversity help microorganisms to degrade different substrates (Ettema and Wardle, 2002; Crawford et al., 2012). The production and efficiency of extracellular enzymes in soils mainly depend on the substrate and energy availability for the microorganisms and soil physicochemical properties (Wallenstein and Burns, 2011). However, how biological, chemical and physical properties of soils and consequences of climate change and agricultural disturbances affect soil microorganisms and their extracellular enzyme production, is still poorly understood.

Threats to soil biodiversity

Agricultural intensification and extreme weather events as the consequence of the ongoing global climate change present major threats to soil ecosystems, leading to losses of SOC, soil biodiversity and consequently to reduced agricultural production (de Graaff et al., 2019; Geisen et al., 2019). With a need to produce enough food to

feed the world, a greater level of understanding of how interactive effects of agricultural intensification and extreme weather events affect soil microbial diversity, and the ecosystem functions they mediate, is required. This knowledge will contribute to the understanding of how agriculture could be adapted to mitigate the adverse effects of climate extremes, preserve soil biodiversity in the long-term and ensure sustainable agricultural production.

Agricultural land-use intensification

Soils are sensitive to changes in land-use and agricultural management practices. Indeed, these practices then modify soil properties and lead to soil biodiversity losses (Foley et al., 2005; Tsiafouli et al., 2015). Grasslands and agricultural soils are two common land-use types in agriculture, that among others act as important reservoirs of carbon and soil biodiversity. Land-use has been identified as one of the main factors affecting soil microorganisms, their diversity, and functions (Oehl et al., 2010; Manoharan et al., 2017a; Madegwa and Uchida, 2021). Land-use either has a direct effect on soil microorganisms or indirectly influences soil physicochemical properties and plant diversity (Lauber et al., 2008; Thomson et al., 2015; Delgado-Baquerizo et al., 2016; Manoharan et al., 2017a; Kardol and De Long, 2018). Compared to grasslands, agricultural soils are traditionally depleted in their SOC content and are also more prone to further losses of SOC, due to agricultural practices they are commonly associated with (Lal, 2013).

Direct effects of land-use on soil microbial communities are the result of chemical disturbances like crop protection strategies, e.g., application of pesticides, and fertilizers, and mechanical disturbances like tillage (Yang et al., 2021). A large body of research suggests that for example application of mineral (NPK) fertilizers have negative effects on soil microbial communities, including the diversity of arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF, phylum Glomeromycota) (Smith and Read, 2010; Lin et al., 2012; de Graaff et al., 2019). However, on the other hand, mineral fertilization increases crop yields (Yousaf et al., 2017). Mechanical soil disturbances such as tillage typically alter the structure and functioning of AMF communities, resulting in the breakdown of hyphal networks, reduced abundance of spores, lower taxonomic diversity, and reduced biomass (Helgason et al., 1998; Jansa et al., 2002; Schnoor et al., 2011).

To prevent arable soils from becoming poorly productive in the long run, and to mitigate the drought effects, different aspects of land-use and agricultural practices should be considered. Consequently, different agricultural implications with a goal to improve nutrient cycling, promote SOC storage, and ensure the right amounts of nutrients to soils, have been suggested (Bolinder et al., 2020; Lessmann et al., 2021).

Crop residue incorporation

Practices such as crop residue incorporation have been commonly used to promote carbon sequestration, particularly in agricultural soils (Powlson et al., 2008; Bolinder et al., 2020). Crop residue such as straw from cereal crops represent an important carbon and nitrogen source in agriculture, thus its application results in multiple benefits for arable soils (Liu et al., 2014). It aims to increase SOM, with resulting positive impacts on soil structure, reduced evaporation, increased soil fertility, higher crop yields, and improved other physical and biological properties (Rengel, 2007; Lal et al., 2011). This should potentially create favourable conditions for microbial growth, as well as sufficient carbon, nitrogen supplies and energy which could improve microbial diversity and activity (Jin et al., 2020).

Farming systems

To reduce the negative effects of agricultural land-use intensification on the soil microbial communities, alternative farming systems such as organic farming have been proposed (McLaughlin and Mineau, 1995). Organic farming aims at obtaining high-quality crop yields while maintaining soil biodiversity in the long-term (Birkhofer et al., 2016; Rundlöf et al., 2016). However, the beneficial effects of organic farming on biodiversity often come at the cost of lower crop yields (Seufert et al., 2012). Numerous studies have shown positive effects of organic farming on soil fertility (Mäder et al., 2002), SOC content (Gattinger et al., 2012; García-Palacios et al., 2018) as well as microbial biomass and diversity (Esperschütz et al., 2007; Hartmann et al., 2015; Lori et al., 2017). Potential advantages of organic farming compared to conventional have also been associated with enhanced AMF diversity (Verbruggen et al., 2010; Manoharan et al., 2017b). However, the question remains if organic farming, aiming at buffering extreme drought events through promoting SOC levels, also can enhance the drought tolerance of AMF communities.

Extreme weather events

Climate change factors that include increased occurrence of extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, higher levels of CO₂ and temperature extremes are unavoidable phenomena that are and will affect soil ecosystems and soil biodiversity globally (Cavicchioli et al., 2019; Jansson and Hofmockel, 2020). In many European regions, the frequency and severity of extreme drought events are expected, particularly during the growing season (Spinoni et al., 2018; Vogel et al., 2019; Masson-Delmotte, 2021). Drought-induced changes can lead to shifts in soil microbial communities, their taxonomic and functional diversity and consequently lead to alterations of ecosystem functions driven by soil microorganisms (Hueso et al., 2012; Deveautour et al., 2018; Ochoa-Hueso et al., 2018; Schimel, 2018). The drought effects on soil microbial communities largely depend on the duration,

frequency and intensity of drought events or the historical precipitation regimes (Hoover and Rogers, 2016; Meisner et al., 2018; Preece et al., 2019).

To survive harsh conditions in dry soils, microbial communities have developed different strategies. Generally, soil microbial communities in arid and semiarid environments are better adapted and known to be more drought tolerant (Acosta-Martínez et al., 2014; Maestre et al., 2015). Some of these important survival strategies include the ability to adapt to changes in water potential and low resource conditions, thicker cell walls and high resistance to desiccation (Sharma and Gobi, 2016; Barberán et al., 2017; Schimel, 2018). Among all soil microorganisms, fungal communities and fungal based food-webs are generally thought to be more drought tolerant (de Vries et al., 2012; de Vries et al., 2018). Fungi such as AMF that have symbiotic relationships with plant roots in agricultural systems, including cereals (Schüßler et al., 2001) form filamentous structures called mycorrhizal hyphae. These extended hyphal networks can exceed several meters in diameter and can also enter water-filled soil pores inaccessible to root hairs and enhance the drought tolerance of their symbiotic partner, plant roots (Marulanda et al., 2003; Ruiz-Lozano, 2003). These characteristics allow them to survive better in dry environments (Allen, 2007; Manzoni et al., 2012).

The adverse impacts of drought on the microbial life in soils can also be mitigated through improved land-use, particularly through increased SOC levels. SOC has the ability to increase the capacity to hold water and nutrients, enhance soil biological and physical properties such as aggregate stability, improve soil structure, minimize degradation risk and soil erosion (Lal, 2013; Iizumi and Wagai, 2019). Higher SOC levels promote soil microbial diversity and activity and can buffer the negative effects of drought events on crop yields (Birkhofer et al., 2012; Droste et al., 2020). Even though promoting SOC levels can increase the resistance of soil microorganisms to drought and lead to higher crop yields, arable soils are under considerable risk due to agricultural intensification that reduces SOC content and limits carbon sequestration (Lal et al., 2011).

Taxonomic and functional diversity

An essential attribute of soil microorganisms is their diversity, as it enhances soil ecosystem functions and their tolerance to disturbances such as land-use or fertilizer application (Griffiths and Philippot, 2013; Bender et al., 2016). Every gram of soil contains thousands of microbial taxa and kilometres of fungal hyphae, however, they are not equally abundant (Fierer, 2017). A high degree of taxonomic diversity and high relative abundance of microbial taxa make soils one of the most complex and unexplored ecosystems, hence far less is known about the functional capabilities of microorganisms found in soils (Torsvik and Øvreås, 2002; Maron et al., 2011).

Microbial ecologists have only recently started recognizing the importance of soil microbial functional diversity, i.e., diversity of all functions carried out by microorganisms (Escalas et al., 2019). Precise functional characterization of soil microbial communities could fill an essential but still largely missing link between soil microbial diversity and microbially-mediated processes important for soil functioning (Fig. 1). At present, the functional diversity of soil microorganisms is mostly derived from taxonomy-based studies, however, this information can be misleading. As such, taxonomically distinct groups like bacteria and fungi competing for the same nutrient sources could share very similar functions or closely related microbial taxa could possess different functions (Philippot et al., 2010; Martiny et al., 2013; Bahram et al., 2018). To understand microbial functional capabilities at the highest level of resolution, and how they are linked to ecosystem functions such as carbon cycling, studying genes within the soil environment was suggested (Manoharan et al., 2017a). These genes, the so-called functional genes, are coding for key enzymes in biogeochemical processes, such as the degradation of organic matter in soils (Prosser, 2002).

Approaches to study soil microbial diversity

One of the main challenges in soil microbial ecology is to understand the taxonomic, functional, and ecological characteristics of soil microbial communities more precisely. Until a few years ago, it has been difficult to obtain precise functional information from microbial communities and to consequently predict microbial functional responses to disturbances such as agricultural intensification or extreme weather events. However, the continued development of high-throughput molecular tools (high-throughput sequencing-based omics approaches) allows us to study functional diversity at a high resolution and link it with ecosystem functions.

Microbial taxonomic diversity

One of the most widely and affordable methods for the characterization of soil microbial communities is based on the amplification and sequencing of specific highly conserved taxonomic marker genes (Fig. 1). The most commonly used marker genes are 16S for bacteria and archaea (Langille et al., 2013), ITS for fungi (Schoch et al., 2012) and 18S for microbial eukaryotes (Popovic and Parkinson, 2018). The ITS region is often used to describe fungal communities, however it is too variable for AMF. As previously suggested, ideal markers for fungal communities, including AMF should have high interspecific but low intraspecific variation (Lindahl et al., 2013). Thus for AMF, a more conserved region, that is of 1.5-kb long fragment comprising parts of both the large (LSU) and small subunit (SSU) rRNA genes and the complete ITS region has been proposed (Stockinger et al., 2010). This aims to provide a better resolution even at lower taxonomic ranks, i.e., species level. Moreover, the development of high-throughput sequencing

technologies such as long-read sequencing using PacBio or Nanopore platforms, can greatly increase taxonomic identification of microbial communities like AMF (Tedersoo et al., 2018; Nilsson et al., 2019). These platforms operate at the level of single DNA molecule, i.e., SMRT methodology (single-molecule real-time sequencing) and offer longer read length, require lower number of sequencing read to cover AMF diversity compared to short-read sequencing technologies and allow differentiation of closely related AMF taxa (Schlaeppli et al., 2016).

Although these marker genes are frequently used to characterize the taxonomic composition and phylogenetic diversity of specific microbial groups, these studies display several shortcomings. They focus on only one or a few universal genes and therefore it is not possible to extract accurate information of functional capabilities based on the taxonomy of all microorganisms in a complex environment like soils.

Microbial functional diversity

Ongoing advances in sequencing technologies such as high-throughput sequencing-based omics approaches allow us to obtain multiple information about the soil microorganisms. This information includes their taxonomic profile (marker-gene based sequencing), their functional potential (metagenomics) and also the active microorganisms in the soil (metatranscriptomics) (Fig. 1) (Urich et al., 2008; Prosser, 2015). Briefly, metagenomics involves the extraction of DNA from soil samples and provides information about which microorganisms are present and what their functional potential is. On the other hand, metatranscriptomics is based on the extraction of RNA, followed by the synthesis of cDNA, amplification and sequencing or direct sequencing of mRNA. Metatranscriptomics provide information on the expression status of the genes, which gives insights into what microorganisms actually do at the time of sampling (Fig. 1).

Although the amount of information yielded from these methodologies is large, these molecular tools have some limitations. Particularly, ultra-deep sequencing is needed to achieve comprehensible information on microbial diversity in a complex environment like soils. Moreover, the functional genes are diverse and form a small portion of the nucleic acid pool, which is usually the case in soils. To overcome these issues, a probe-capture enrichment technique has been developed and applied in metagenomics studies ('captured metagenomics') (Manoharan et al., 2015; Manoharan et al., 2017a). It is based on the enrichment and sequencing of several thousand functional genes of interest, like sequences coding for enzymes involved in different ecosystem functions. Studying soil microbial genes coding for specific enzymes related to an ecosystem process can enhance our understanding in describing the microbial functional potential in soils and can help us to establish a link between community structure and ecosystem functions, such as carbon cycling (Manoharan et al., 2017a). However, to date, most studies focus on the functional microbial potential, though they do not provide information about active microorganisms (mRNA). In order to understand microbial responses, RNA-based

studies are needed, however, there are many challenges when working with RNA, particularly from soils. The main obstacles are difficulties in RNA extraction due to the presence of RNases and ineffective cell lysis (Carvalhais et al., 2012). Further, the total RNA pool consists mainly of ribosomal RNA (rRNA), while mRNA is found in low amounts (1-5%) (He et al., 2007; Mettel et al., 2010). Therefore, soil samples should be quickly inactivated to prevent mRNA turnover and prior sequencing, enrichment of mRNA is required. The enrichment of mRNA could be done using enrichment of polyA-tailed mRNA or by removal of rRNA (Poretsky et al., 2005; Bailly et al., 2007). However, challenges remain as poly-A based enrichment only works for mRNA from Eukaryotes and also the rRNA removal is seldom efficient in environmental samples like soils. Hence, the above-mentioned probe-capture enrichment technique has the capability of enriching cDNA libraries obtained from reverse transcribing RNA molecules for expressed regions of interest. Based on these efficient molecular methodologies, it should be possible to better understand the functional groups of the soil microbial communities involved in different ecosystem functions (Fig. 1).

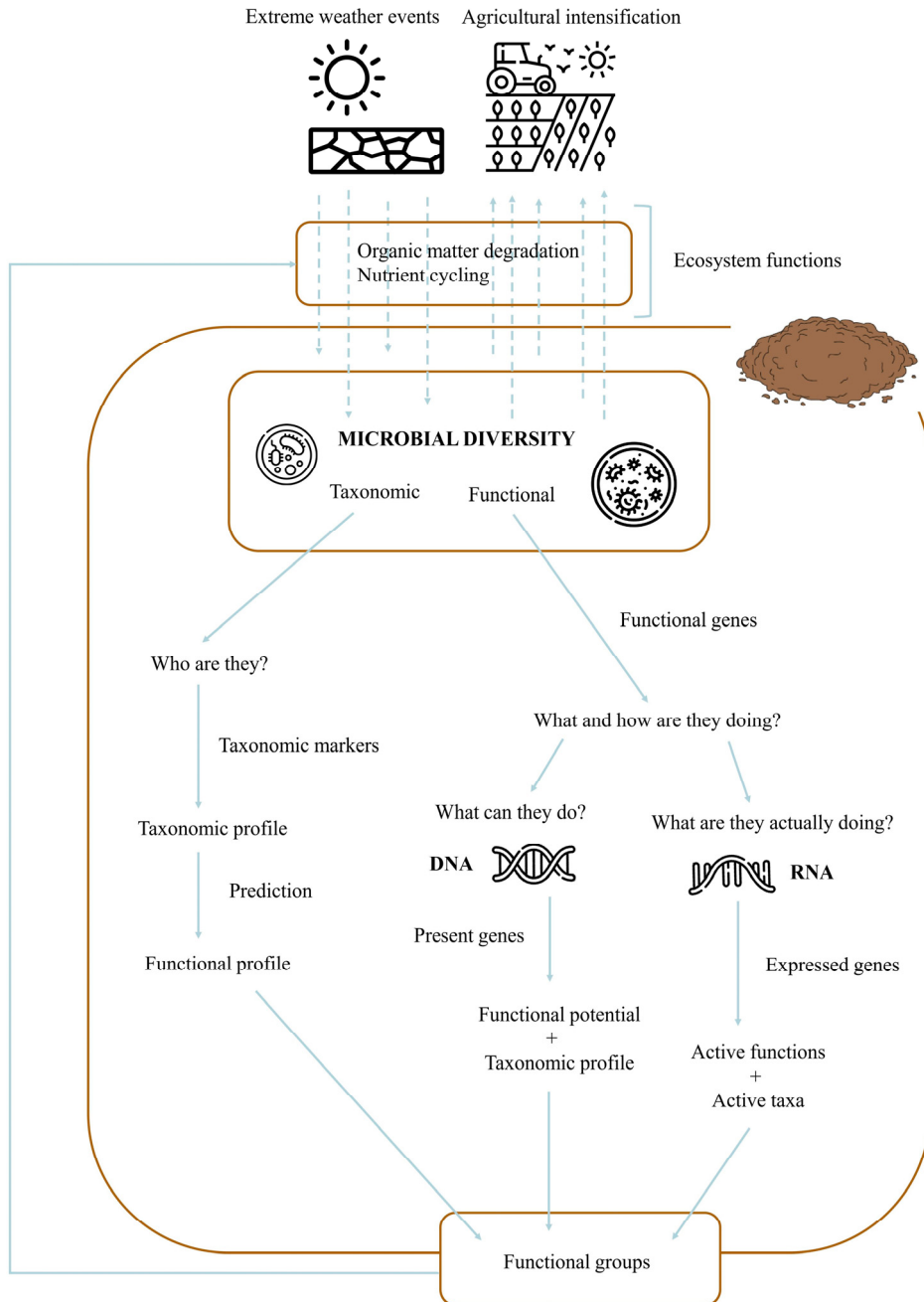


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the main strategies to study soil microbial diversity affected by the anthropogenic climate change factors.

Aims of the thesis

In this thesis, I explore how agricultural intensification and extreme weather events, specifically short-term drought can influence the taxonomic and functional diversity of soil microorganisms in agriculture. Specifically, the following aims were addressed:

- How do agricultural land-use and crop residue incorporation influence the activity of soil microorganisms involved in SOM degradation? (**Paper I**)
- How does long-term organic and conventional farming practices influence the taxonomic diversity and community composition of AMF? (**Paper II**)
- How does soil organic carbon in agricultural soils influence the functional diversity and composition of genes involved in SOM degradation? (**Paper III, IV**)
- How does short-term experimental drought influence microbial diversity and their functioning? (**Paper II, III, IV**)

Methods

The following section outlines the experimental set-ups and methodological approaches used in this thesis. A combination of field (**Paper II, III**) and glasshouse (**Paper I, IV**) experiments along with different molecular methods, specifically high-throughput sequencing-based omics approaches was used.

In **Paper I**, I studied how the expression of microbial functional genes related to SOM degradation differs between different agricultural land-uses and also how the addition of organic substrates influences their gene expression. To achieve this, the 'captured metatranscriptomics' technique, based on the sequence probe-capture enrichment technique that was previously applied in metagenomics studies ('captured metagenomics') (Manoharan et al., 2015; Manoharan et al., 2017a) was used. This technique is used to sequence a large number of genes, with the ability to enrich the genes that are either lowly abundant or expressed in the total gene pool. The enrichment of genes is done by using the custom-designed, hybridization-based oligonucleotide probes generated through a MetCap probe-designing pipeline (Kushwaha et al., 2015). This pipeline allows users to design probes for targeting functional genes involved in different microbial processes, like carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus cycling. Generated probes are hybridized with extracted nucleic acids (DNA or cDNA) and only the probe-bound nucleic acid fragments are sequenced.

Soils from two land-uses, managed as grasslands (G) and conventional farming for winter wheat (W), from Southern Sweden were collected and a glasshouse experiment was established. Experimental units (pots) were filled with fresh soils, resulting in eight soils in total (four from each land-use). Of them, in each of four pairs consisting of two land-uses, one experimental unit was used as a control, i.e., without straw addition and the second as the one to which pre-dried wheat straw was added. Throughout the one-month experimental period, bacterial and fungal growth rates using leucine and acetate incorporation methods were measured at different time points. The amount of leucine incorporated into extracted bacteria ($\text{pmol Leu incorporated g}^{-1} \text{ SOM hr}^{-1}$) using the homogenisation/centrifugation technique (Bååth, 1992, 1994; Bååth, 2001) with few modifications (Meisner et al., 2013) was used as a proxy for bacterial growth. As a proxy for fungal growth, the amount of acetate incorporated into extracted ergosterol ($\text{pmol acetate incorporated g}^{-1} \text{ SOM hr}^{-1}$) was used (Rousk and Bååth, 2011). Based on bacterial and fungal

responses to the straw addition, three sampling times T1, T3 and T6, corresponding to 4, 13 and 26 days after the straw addition were selected and soils were collected for the total RNA extraction. The extracted total RNA from all samples was processed for cDNA synthesis and further for the probe-capture enrichment technique. Capturing on these samples was performed using the unique oligonucleotide probes based on the gene sequences coding for enzymes responsible for the SOM degradation such as carbohydrate-active enzymes (CAZy (Cantarel et al., 2009)) and secretory proteases (MEROPS (Rawlings et al., 2012)). A local sequence database of the selected nucleotide sequences of these genes used for designing the capture-probes, here called targeted database (TDB) was set-up. Captured cDNA libraries were prepared as described by Manoharan et al. (2017a) and sequenced on a single lane of the Illumina HiSeq 2000 system (paired-end mode, 125bp read length). Finally, the gene expression in different land-uses and after the addition of organic substrates was determined based on the annotations matching the TDB.

In **Paper II**, I tested the effects of a short-term experimental drought on the diversity and community composition of AMF in organic and conventional farming systems. The experiment was conducted within the DOK (biodynamic, bioorganic and conventional [konventionell]) long-term agricultural experiment (Therwil, Switzerland) (Fig. 2) that compares organic and conventional farming systems. These systems differ in fertilization and plant protection practices but follow the same seven-year crop rotation (Mäder et al., 2002; Krause et al., 2020).

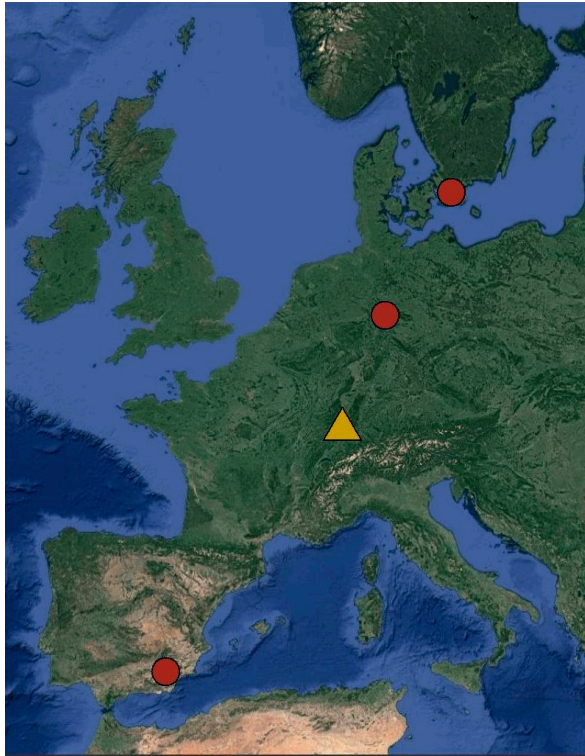


Figure 2. Overview of the agricultural areas across Europe in **Paper II** and **III**. The triangle (yellow colour) marks the DOK (biodynamic, bioorganic and conventional [konventionell]) long-term agricultural experiment in Switzerland. Three circles (brown colour) mark the three agricultural areas ranging from Northern to Central and Mediterranean Europe (Sweden, Germany and Spain). In **Paper IV** soils from the agricultural areas of Sweden and Spain were used.

In two farming systems, biodynamic (BIODYN) and conventional (CONMIN), a drought manipulation experiment with rainout-shelters to impose a drought by reducing the ambient precipitation (Kundel et al., 2018) was established in mid-March and ended in June 2017. To determine the drought effects by the fixed location rainout-shelters the three drought treatments consisted of: I) a rainout-shelter reducing 65% of the precipitation (Roof treatment, R, Fig. 3), II) a control treatment with modified rainout-shelter to quantify potential rainout-shelters artefacts (Roof-Control treatment, RC), and III) an unmanipulated control without a rainout shelter (Control treatment, C). Throughout the spring and summer winter wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L., cv. Wiwa) growing season, soil samples for the DNA extractions were collected at two occasions: 4 and 13 weeks after the rainout-shelter establishment. To describe AMF communities, 1.5-kb long fragment of the nuclear rRNA gene, comprising the entire ITS, parts of SSU and LSU subunit (Kruger et al., 2009) was amplified using the two-step PCR protocol. These AMF amplicons were sequenced using the SMRT methodology (PacBio). From the raw sequencing reads, circular consensus sequences (CCS) were generated and clustered into amplicon sequence variants (ASVs).

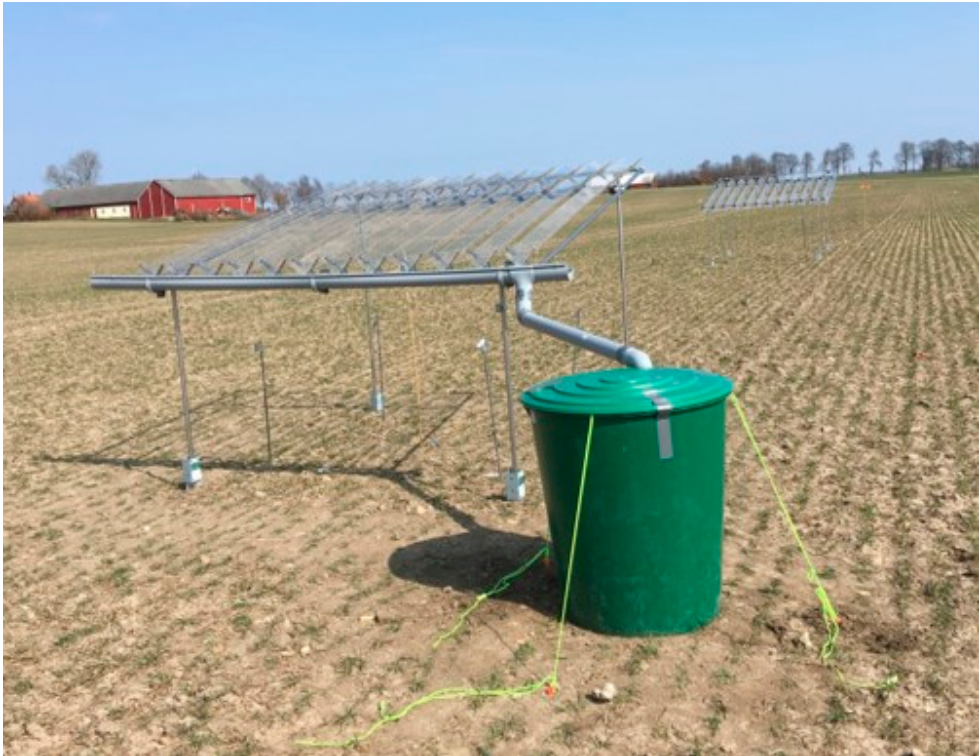


Figure 3: Drought manipulation experiment in **Paper II** and **III**. Fixed location, partial rainout-shelters to impose a drought by reducing the 65% of the precipitation (Roof treatment, R) across the spring and summer winter wheat growing season. Photo: María Ingimarsdóttir.

In **Paper III**, I studied how short-term experimental drought and contrasting SOC levels influence the diversity and composition of functional genes in agricultural soils over a range of different climatic conditions and soil properties.

An agricultural experiment was set-up across Europe (Fig. 2), ranging from Northern to Central and Mediterranean Europe. In three agricultural areas; in Southern Sweden (region Scania: SE), Northwestern Germany (region Lower Saxony: DE) and Southeastern Spain (region Almería: ES) agricultural fields with contrasting levels of SOC (i.e., “low” (~1%) and “high” (~3%) categories) were selected and the three drought treatments (as in **Paper II**, Fig. 3) installed. At the mature stage of winter wheat, soil samples for DNA extractions were collected and the 'captured metagenomics' technique (Manoharan et al., 2015) was applied to the extracted DNA. A probe-capture enrichment technique used in this study was similar to **Paper I** but capturing the functional genes coding only for extracellular enzymes responsible for the degradation of SOM. Unique oligonucleotide probes designed based on the genes coding for carbohydrate-active enzymes (CAZy) with excretory signal peptides were used for the enrichment. Based on these selected

nucleotide sequences a database; exTDB - extracellular targeted database was set-up. Soil DNA libraries were hybridized with custom-designed oligonucleotide probes, and finally captured DNA libraries were sequenced (paired-end mode, 150 bp read length) on Illumina HiSeq 4000 system. Functional genetic diversity, the functional and taxonomic gene composition were evaluated based on the annotations matching the exTDB.

To identify microbial responses to short-term experimental drought in agricultural soils, a glasshouse experiment was established in **Paper IV**.

Soils from two agricultural areas (Fig. 2), i.e., Southern Sweden (region Scania: SE), and Southeastern Spain (region Almería: ES) with the most contrasting soil properties (e.g., SOC content, soil pH, soil texture) exposed to different climatic conditions from **Paper III** were chosen. Experimental units (pots) were filled with fresh soils and by manipulating soil water content, i.e., 60% of water holding capacity (WHC) (control) or 30% WHC (drought) a short-term experimental drought was established and maintained throughout the barley (*Hordeum vulgare* cv Bonus) growing period (Fig. 4). During the drought experimental period (eight weeks in total), soils were sampled every second week (five sampling occasions in total) and used for different measurements. For example, microbial respiration, a measure of the metabolic activity of the soil microorganisms was measured. In addition, soil samples for the analysis of phospholipid fatty acids (PLFAs) and neutral lipid fatty acids (NLFAs) used for biomass estimates of bacteria and fungi (PLFAs) and AMF (NLFAs) were also collected. To identify how gene expression is affected by short-term experimental drought, soil samples were collected at two sampling occasions, before the drought period started (T0; zero weeks) and at the end of the drought period (T4; eight weeks). In total, at each of these two sampling occasions, 20 soil samples were collected, resulting in a total of 40 soil samples for the total RNA extraction. From the total RNA extracts, libraries were prepared and subjected to sequencing on NovaSeq 6000 System (paired-end mode, 150 bp read length). The obtained sequence reads were screened for rRNA, and only non-rRNA sequences were then mapped (in-silico) to the exTDB that was established in **Paper III**.

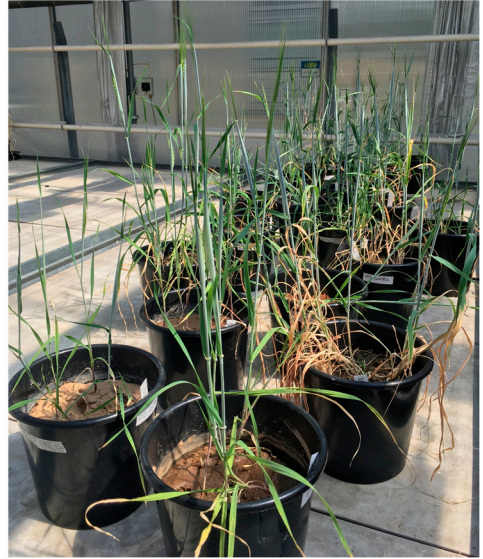


Figure 4: Glasshouse drought manipulation experiment in **Paper IV**, at the beginning of the drought experimental period (left picture) and at the end of the drought experimental period (right picture). Photo: Katja Kozjek.

Results and discussion

Effects of agricultural land-use intensification

Land-use effects

Land-use practices have been identified to alter soil microbial community composition (Jangid et al., 2008; Kaiser et al., 2016; Madegwa and Uchida, 2021), their functional genetic diversity (Manoharan et al., 2017a), and also their gene expression (Nacke et al., 2014). As expected, in **Paper I** the overall expression of genes related to organic matter degradation was mainly affected by their land-use practices (grassland and agricultural soils). Grassland soils were similar, while agricultural soils displayed higher variability in their gene expression (Fig. 5). These differences could be explained by soil disturbances (physical and chemical) caused by land-use practices. Agricultural soils are commonly exposed to tillage and crop protection strategies, i.e., the application of fertilizers (Madegwa and Uchida, 2021; Yang et al., 2021), while grasslands remain undisturbed. Further, in **Paper I**, it was found that the diversity of differentially expressed genes in agricultural soils was higher compared to grasslands. This difference was further enhanced by the straw addition. The majority of differentially expressed genes in agricultural soils belonged to the families of the GH class, known for the degradation of multiple substrates like cellulose and hemicellulose (Henrissat and Davies, 1997). Many differentially expressed genes in grasslands also belonged to the families of the GH class. However, the majority of differentially expressed genes belonged to the GT class, especially enzyme family GT2, even after the straw addition. This suggests that many of these genes in grasslands were involved in the biosynthesis of carbohydrate molecules rather than their degradation as observed in agricultural soils.

In contrast to grasslands, amounts of SOC in agricultural soils are generally lower, moreover agricultural soils are under considerable risk due to practices like tillage and intensive fertilization. They negatively influence soil quality, including losses of SOC (Lal, 2013). In **Paper I**, enzymes CDA1 and XynA were highly differentially expressed in grasslands while comparing control samples of both land-uses. However, these two enzymes were then highly promoted in agricultural soils when straw was added. Downregulation of these enzymes and upregulation of the

above-mentioned GTs due to straw addition in grasslands suggest that straw addition led to carbon storage or sequestration. However, the straw in SOC poor agricultural soils was used as a source of carbon and energy. Altogether, the addition of straw triggered microbial responses similar to grasslands which indicates that with careful land-use practices agricultural soils have the potential to become more productive.

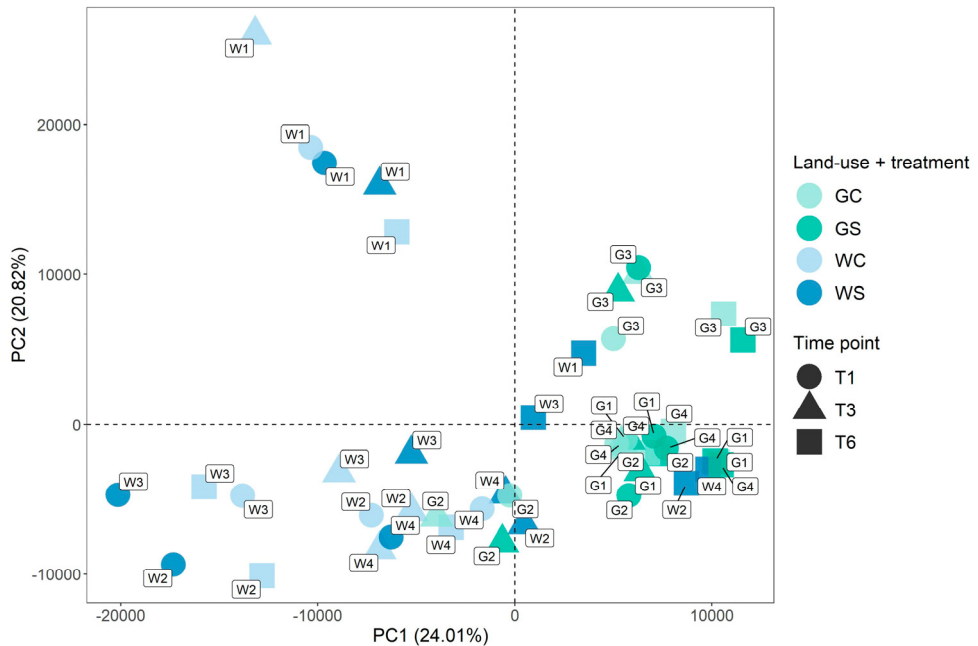


Figure 5. Principal component analysis of the TMM normalized counts. Samples are categorized by land-use and treatment condition (as colour) and sampling time (as shape). Text labels represent the location of each field (W – winter wheat, G – grasslands). Abbreviations: GC – grasslands without straw addition; GS – grasslands with straw addition; WC – winter wheat without straw addition; WS – winter wheat with straw addition (**Paper I**).

Crop residue incorporation

Paper I reported a promoted microbial activity and gene expression across both land-uses when fresh organic material, i.e., wheat straw was added to grassland and agricultural soils. Due to low SOC content in agricultural soils and consequent starvation of microorganisms, the addition of straw that contains a high amount of organic carbon (Liu et al., 2014), particularly enhanced gene expression in agricultural soils compared to grasslands. Furthermore, with time, even though the gene expression patterns among agricultural soils differed, the straw addition made them similar to that of grassland soils. These findings together with previous literature show that improved crop residue management has the potential to promote SOC levels in agricultural soils (Lessmann et al., 2021) and promote the functioning of soil microorganisms, especially their carbon cycling genes.

Straw addition mainly upregulated different enzyme families in agricultural soils compared to grasslands, where there were also many enzyme families that were downregulated. Enzyme families GH13 and GH23 were the major ones that were upregulated by the straw addition in both land-uses (Fig. 6). Typically GH13 acts on multiple carbohydrate substrates (Stam et al., 2006) while GH23 degrades peptidoglycan and chitin (Scheurwater et al., 2008; Liao et al., 2019). As mentioned earlier, many genes that belonged to these two enzyme families were downregulated by the straw addition especially in grasslands (Fig. 6b). Genes of enzyme family GH43 that degrade hemicellulose (Mewis et al., 2016) were upregulated by straw addition in both land-uses but were especially highly upregulated in grasslands (Fig. 6b). Whereas enzyme families like GH6, 8 and 9 that are mainly characterized with cellulolytic activities (Brumm, 2013) were highly upregulated in agricultural soils (Fig. 6a).

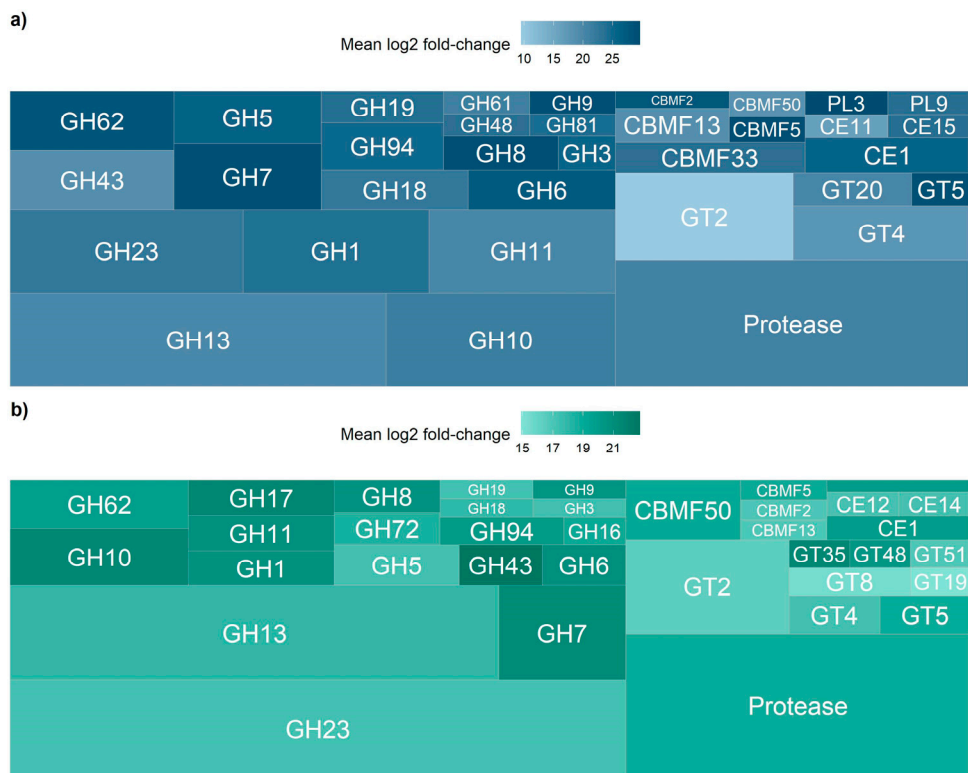


Figure 6. The significantly upregulated transcripts by the straw addition in wheat (a) and grassland soils (b). Each box represents a CAZy or the protease enzyme family with their area representing the number of differentially expressed transcripts and the colour gradient represents their mean fold-change values of those transcripts. The boxes are sorted based on each enzyme family's area and also the enzyme class that they belong to. Abbreviations: auxiliary activities (AA), carbohydrate-binding modules (CBM), carbohydrate esterases (CE), glycoside hydrolases (GH), glycosyltransferases (GT), and polysaccharide lyases (PL) (**Paper I**).

Farming systems

The effects of different farming practices, such as organic or conventional farming on soil microbial communities have been widely studied (Xue et al., 2013; Hartmann et al., 2015; Lori et al., 2017). However, there are contrasting results of how different farming practices influence communities of AMF. Results in **Paper II** showed that long-term organic (biodynamic) and conventional farming systems did not affect the diversity of these important root-associated fungal communities, while the AMF community composition was significantly affected (Fig. 7). Contrary to expectations, organic farming did not promote the diversity of AMF. In line with previous findings (Birkhofer et al., 2012; Xiang et al., 2014; Manoharan et al., 2017b), AMF community composition differed significantly between the farming systems and also across the growing season of winter wheat (Fig. 7). Taken together, several lines of evidence highlight changes in the community composition of AMF in contrast to AMF diversity due to different farming systems. This suggests that the same taxa are present across the farming systems with shifts in abundance rather than AMF diversity changes.

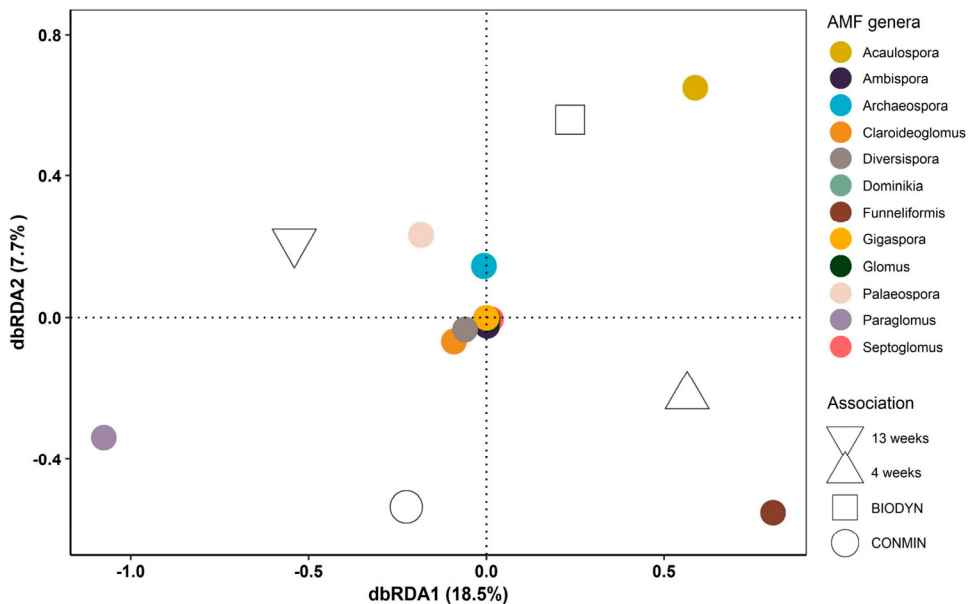


Figure 7. Distance-based redundancy analysis (db-RDA) of arbuscular mycorrhizal fungal (AMF) community composition at the genus level, constrained for the farming systems and the sampling time. The different shapes represent the association with one of the farming systems (BIODYN, CONMIN), and the sampling times (4 and 13 weeks after the rainout-shelter establishment) and colours represent the AMF genera (**Paper II**).

Effects of short-term drought on soil microbial diversity

Agricultural land-use intensification in combination with increased occurrence of extreme weather events such as drought, could impact soil microbial communities, their diversity and functioning and consequently limit their capacity to provide crucial ecosystem services to humanity. Negative effects of drought on soil microorganisms were reported (Zhou et al., 2020), however the studies addressing these effects on the taxonomic and functional diversity at a high resolution in agricultural soils are limited. This thesis (**Paper II, III and IV**) provides more insights on how the above-mentioned threat influenced the taxonomic and functional diversity of soil microbial communities.

Effects on the taxonomic diversity

The short-term experimental drought did not influence the AMF diversity or their community composition (**Paper II**). The resistance of AMF to drought periods is probably due to their filamentous structures with the ability to form complex hyphal networks which allow them to survive in environments with limited water availability (Allen, 2007; Manzoni et al., 2012). An alternative explanation for AMF communities being able to cope well with short-term drought could be high SOC content in these soils. Generally, high levels of SOC can improve the soil quality, enhancing soil infiltration and soil water retention (Rawls et al., 2003; Lal, 2016) and can potentially act as a buffer to drought effects (Lal et al., 2011). SOC content in both farming systems influenced soil water content, however it was not possible to conclude if high levels of SOC had a direct influence on the AMF communities. To better understand if SOC content has beneficial effects on AMF communities under drought, factors influencing SOC dynamics in soils should be studied separately. Although no effects of the short-term experimental drought on AMF communities were detected, some AMF taxa were identified as indicators for drought conditions. Particularly, we found drought indicator taxa represented by ASVs in the family Archaeosporaceae. So far only a few studies have investigated AMF responses to drought and have found *Glomus* and *Diversispora* species (Yang et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2016; Deveautour et al., 2018) being tolerant to drought. Thus, it remains to be further explored if fungi from the family Archaeosporaceae are particularly resistant to drought conditions.

Further, in **Paper II**, the identification of AMF communities at a fine level of resolution, the ASV level, displayed some shortcomings. AMF have a high intraspecific genetic variation, within a species and also within a single spore (Sanders, 2004). Each ASV represents a unique DNA sequence of an organism (Callahan et al., 2017; Glassman and Martiny, 2018), here AMF taxa, but since current taxonomic databases lack detailed information on AMF intra- and interspecific variation, assignment of AMF ASVs to a genus or species level is

challenging. Altogether, these observations along with the challenge to infer microbial functions from taxonomy highlight the need to study the microbial functional genes. That way it is possible to better understand the behaviour of soil microorganisms.

Moreover, based on the taxonomy obtained from the functional genes in **Paper III**, the short-term experimental drought did not have an impact on the taxonomic composition of the microbial communities in soils similar to **Paper II**. In both cases, taxonomic compositions were mainly explained by their regional differences, i.e., country of origin. When comparing soils between countries in **Paper III**, compared to Spain, Proteobacteria was more abundant in Sweden and Germany (SOC rich soils) while in Spain (SOC poor soils) Actinobacteria was prevalent. This trend was also observed in **Paper I**, where Actinobacteria was more active in SOC poor agricultural soils compared to SOC rich grassland soils, where Proteobacteria was more active. When straw was added to agricultural soils the abundance of Actinobacteria started diminishing. In **Paper IV**, Proteobacteria was downregulated by drought in SOC rich soils of Sweden, while Actinobacteria was upregulated by drought. Based on findings from **Paper I, III and IV** and previous studies (Bouskill et al., 2013; Mohammadipanah and Wink, 2016; Canarini et al., 2021), it is clear that Actinobacteria are more resistant to disturbances (nutrient or water availability) in soils compared to Proteobacteria. However, it is important to keep in mind that there were some Proteobacteria upregulated by drought that could potentially be specialists (**Paper IV**) (Spain et al., 2009).

Effects on the functional diversity

The drought effects on soil microorganisms have primarily been addressed to study changes in community composition and taxonomic diversity (Bouskill et al., 2013; Ochoa-Hueso et al., 2018; Canarini et al., 2021). In **Paper III and IV**, we investigated the effects of drought on soil microbial communities at their functional genetic level, specifically on their ability to degrade SOM. The diversity and composition of genes encoding for extracellular enzymes were determined on the DNA level in **Paper III**. Whereas in **Paper IV**, the expression of genes from **Paper III** was analysed on the RNA level, based on the glasshouse experiment simulating drought.

While there were differences in their functional genetic potential to degrade SOM between the three European agricultural areas, Sweden, Germany and Sweden, the drought effect was only observed within agricultural fields in Germany (**Paper III**). The functional genetic composition in Sweden and Spain seemed resistant to short-term drought (**Paper III**), however drought affected the microbial responses in their ability to degrade SOM (**Paper IV**). Resistance to short-term drought in Spanish soils based on their functional genetic potential (**Paper III**) might be explained by the regional adaptations of soil microorganisms to already dry environments, such

as arid and semiarid environments. Soil microorganisms in these environments developed different strategies to survive drought periods, such as thicker cell walls, ability to form spores, accumulation of osmolytes or production of extracellular polymeric substances (Schimel, 2018). However, it was interesting to note that the diversity of these enzymes in Spanish soils was higher compared to Swedish and German soils (Fig. 8). On the other hand, the resistance to drought in Swedish soils could be explained by the extreme drought of the experimental year (Di Liberto, 2018) and the potential buffering ability of SOC (Lal et al., 2011). In contrast to Spain and Germany, Swedish soils contained high levels of SOC, therefore the drought effect on the functional gene composition might be overshadowed by higher SOC levels. Most likely high levels of SOC buffered the soil water levels to a degree that made the composition of functional genes resistant to water shortages.

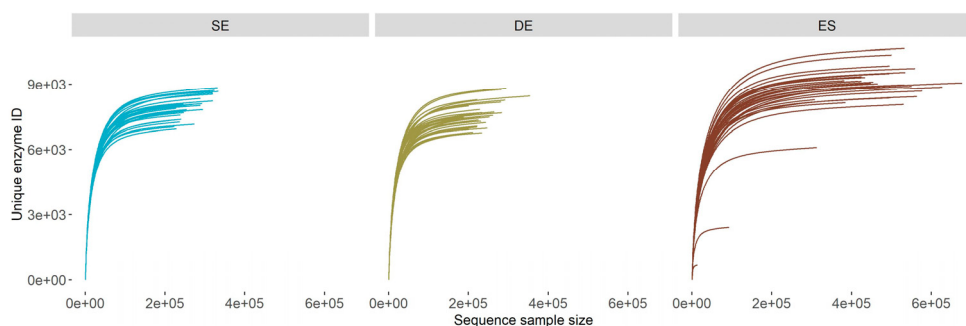


Figure 8. Rarefaction curves of the unique enzyme IDs obtained from random sampling of on-targets from the DIAMOND blastx matches against exTDB in the three countries (SE – Sweden, DE – Germany and ES – Spain). The x-axis represents the number of sequence reads, and the y-axis represents the number of captured unique enzyme IDs (**Paper III**).

The drought resistance of microbial communities in Spain was even more evident when their response to drought on the RNA level was studied (**Paper IV**). The number of differentially expressed genes due to drought was much lower in Spain compared to Sweden (Fig. 9). Although the diversity of enzymes on the gene level in Spain was the highest (**Paper III**, Fig. 8), the diversity of expressed enzymes affected by the drought was much lower than in Sweden.

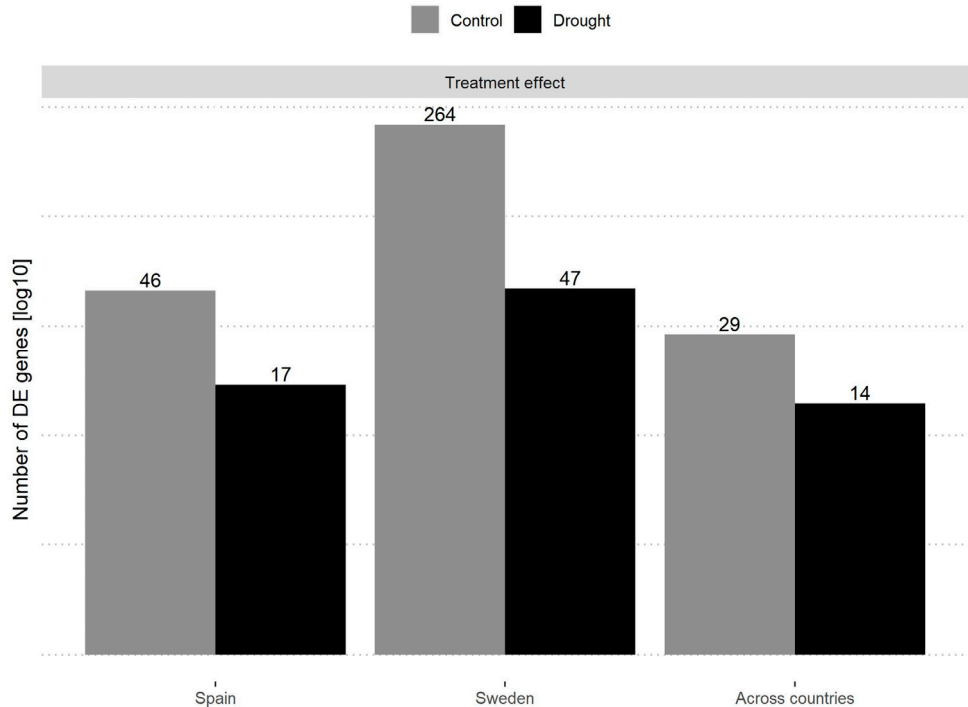


Figure 9. Bar plot showing the number of significantly ($p_{adj} < 0.05$) differentially expressed (DE) genes up- (drought) and down- (control) regulated by the treatment in each country (Spain and Sweden). The y-axis is scaled at log10 for visualization (**Paper IV**).

Links between taxonomic groups and functions

One of the main advantages of studying functional genes, present or expressed, is the ability to obtain information of the microbial taxonomic composition and their functional capabilities simultaneously. While studies focusing on only taxonomic diversity are primarily limited to describing taxonomic changes. In this thesis, links between microbial taxonomic groups and functional genes helped to better understand the microbial mechanisms behind SOM degradation.

Class AA, a key class for the decomposition of lignin (Lombard et al., 2014), has been found in **Paper III**, and **IV**. More specifically, on the DNA level (**Paper III**), enzyme family AA10 has been found in all three countries and linked to Actinobacteria. However, this enzyme family was evidently more abundant in drier and SOC depleted soils of Spain. It was not surprising that this enzyme family was found in high abundance in these soils, because Actinobacteria are adapted to these harsher conditions (Acosta-Martínez et al., 2014; Mohammadipanah and Wink,

2016). On the other hand, on the RNA level (**Paper IV**), in the same soils, this enzyme family has been found to be promoted by the drought but linked to Proteobacteria. Therefore, this enzyme family could be a specialist for these soil types (Spain et al., 2009; Islam et al., 2020). In Swedish soils, AA10 was also promoted by the drought and found in Actinobacteria. Since AA10 is responsible for the degradation of complex carbohydrates and has been promoted by the drought in both countries, these results may indicate that due to low water availability simpler sugar molecules were not accessible and microorganisms were forced to search for complex carbohydrates. The enzyme family CBM50 was upregulated by straw addition in both land-uses (**Paper I**, Fig. 10), and mainly from Actinobacteria in agricultural soils and from Proteobacteria and Firmicutes in grasslands. In **Paper III**, on the DNA level, CBM50 was negatively correlated to SOC. In Sweden and Spain CBM50 was found in Actinobacteria and Proteobacteria, while in Germany this enzyme family was only of proteobacterial origin. Interestingly drought upregulated this enzyme family only from Proteobacteria (**Paper IV**). Observation on CBM50 is similar to that of AA10 in the sense that Actinobacteria are generally more adapted to drier and SOC depleted soils (Mohammadipanah and Wink, 2016), while there might be some Proteobacteria adapted to drought conditions (Spain et al., 2009). Among other CBM families, CBM13 has been found in **Paper I, III** and **IV** and linked to Actinobacteria. Interestingly, drought upregulated only Actinobacteria in Swedish soils, while it was only downregulated in Spanish soils (**Paper IV**). Actinobacteria perform well in dry soils (Acosta-Martínez et al., 2014; Maestre et al., 2015), but it might also be that the drought did not differentially affect Actinobacteria in Spanish soils. The same trend was also observed for CBM2.

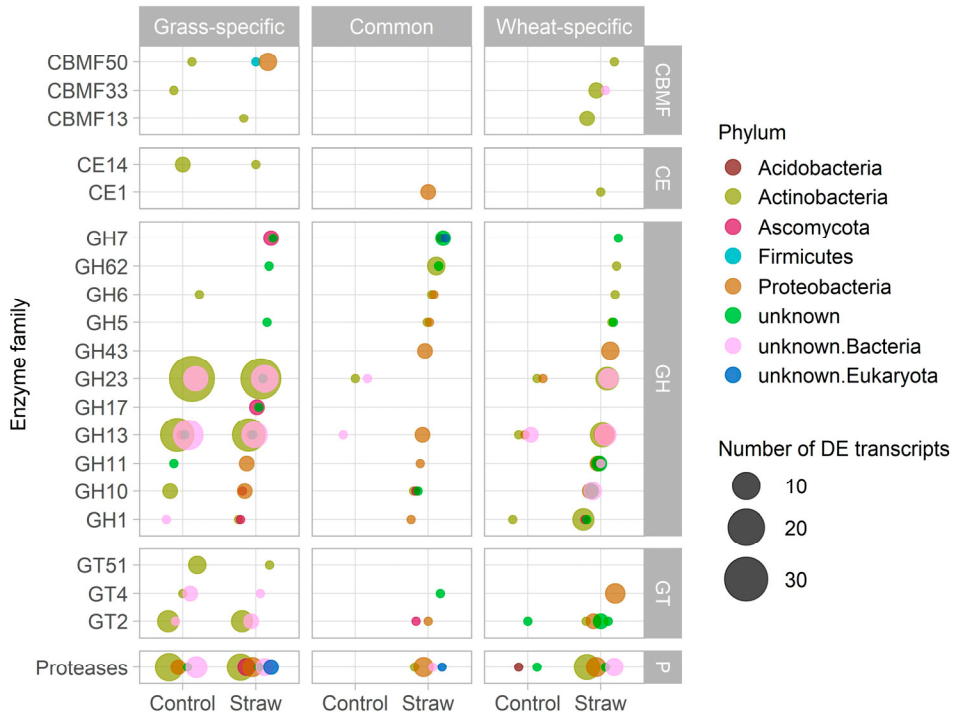


Figure 10. The differentially expressed (DE) transcripts by the straw addition in both land-uses. These DE transcripts were sorted based on if they were common or specific to a particular land-use and also if they were up- (straw) or downregulated (control) by the straw addition (x-axis). Further they were sorted based on the CAZy or protease enzyme family they belong to (y-axis). The size of each point represents the number of DE transcripts in each category and the colour represents their taxonomy at the phylum level. Abbreviations: auxiliary activities (AA), carbohydrate-binding modules (CBM), carbohydrate esterases (CE), glycoside hydrolases (GH), glycosyltransferases (GT), polysaccharide lyases (PL), and proteases (P) (**Paper I**).

Families CE1 and CE4 were positively linked to SOC on the DNA level (**Paper III**) and were predominantly downregulated by drought in Sweden and Spain (**Paper IV**). Limited water availability upregulated Actinobacteria and Ascomycota of CE1 in Sweden (**Paper IV**). These findings suggest that higher levels of SOC content could act as a buffer to drought by promoting upregulation of actinobacterial CE1 (Lal et al., 2011). Links between CE1 and SOC were even more evident in **Paper I** (Fig. 10), as they were upregulated by the addition of straw in both land-uses. CE4 was strongly linked to Proteobacteria in Swedish and German soils, while in Spain it was mostly linked to Actinobacteria (**Paper III**). Proteobacteria, Firmicutes, Actinobacteria and Ascomycota harbouring CE4 were downregulated by drought in Swedish soils, while Firmicutes were the only phylum that was upregulated by drought in these soils (**Paper IV**). In line with previous studies (Bouskill et al., 2013; Hartmann et al., 2017) Firmicutes are resistant to desiccation and can perform well in dry environments, therefore not surprising they were upregulated by drought in Sweden (**Paper IV**). Among GTs, GT2 was found to be upregulated by straw in

grasslands and agricultural soils, however found in different taxonomic groups. In grasslands mainly in Actinobacteria and in agricultural soils mainly in Proteobacteria (**Paper I**, Fig. 10). Drought did not upregulate any specific GT2, while downregulation in Spanish soils was found for Firmicutes and Proteobacteria, and Proteobacteria and Acidobacteria in Swedish soils (**Paper IV**). As found in **Paper I** (Fig. 10), proteobacterial GT4 was strongly upregulated by straw addition in agricultural soils. Enzyme GT51 was negatively correlated to SOC (**Paper III**) but downregulated by the drought in Spain and Sweden (**Paper IV**). Moreover, the addition of straw downregulated most GT51 of actinobacterial origin in grasslands, while there was no effect on agricultural soils (**Paper I**, Fig. 10). As discussed earlier, GT class is mainly involved in building carbohydrate molecules (Schmid et al., 2016) and as expected enzyme families from this class were mainly upregulated by the addition of organic material but were downregulated by drought. In many GH families, such as GH7, 17, 10 and 1 Ascomycota was found to be upregulated by straw addition, but only in grasslands (**Paper I**, Fig. 10). Interestingly, none of these enzyme families was found in **Paper III** and **IV**. It is also worth mentioning families GH13 and GH23, as they were both up- and downregulated by straw addition in both land-uses, but strongly in grasslands (**Paper I**, Fig. 10). Across all three European countries, GH13 was linked to Proteobacteria in Sweden and Germany, and to Actinobacteria and Proteobacteria in Spain (**Paper III**). Drought upregulated actinobacterial GH13 in Sweden, while proteobacterial GH13 was upregulated in both countries. In the case of GH23, Sweden and Germany shared the same trend, with Actinobacteria and Proteobacteria in similar proportions, while in Spain the proportion of Actinobacteria compared to Proteobacteria was higher. In contrast to Sweden, where none of the GH23 taxa was upregulated by drought, but Proteobacteria was upregulated by drought in Spain. However, both Actinobacteria and Proteobacteria were upregulated by drought across both countries (**Paper IV**).

Conclusions and future perspectives

Functional diversity of soil microorganisms is the essential link between soil microbial groups and ecosystem functions, which provides new insights in understanding soil biodiversity. There is an increasing recognition that in contrast to taxonomic information and inferring functions from taxonomy, functional diversity may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the functioning of microbial systems (Escalas et al., 2019). The advantage of studying functional genes, present or expressed, can enable the identification of soil functional groups in the ecosystem.

This thesis gives further insights into how agricultural land-use intensification and extreme weather events, especially drought affect soil microbial communities, their taxonomic and functional diversity and how this is linked to ecosystem processes. In this sense, **Paper I** showed that different land-use types altered microbial responses, particularly in relation to SOM degradation. Then, it was further explored how different agricultural practices could prevent traditionally carbon depleted agricultural soils from becoming poorly productive in the long run and if some of these practices have the potential to mitigate the effects of extreme drought (**Paper I**, and **II**). **Paper I** showed that the addition of organic compounds enhanced the expression of carbon cycling genes, particularly in agricultural soils. Organic farming did not promote the diversity of AMF communities, however high levels of SOC in this farming system may have a positive effect on the resistance of AMF communities against drought (**Paper II**). Taxonomic diversity of soil microbial communities, specifically AMF was not affected by drought (**Paper II**), while functional gene composition across Europe was affected in one out of the three countries (**Paper III**). These results suggest that soil microbial communities respond differently to short-term drought due to (a) their structure, like filamentous structures and hyphal networks (**Paper II**), (b) regional adaptations to survive harsh conditions in dry environments (**Paper III**), (c) differences in soil physicochemical properties, like SOC (**Paper II** and **III**). Even though some microbial communities across Europe displayed higher resistance to drought (**Paper III**), results of **Paper IV** clearly showed that short-term drought affected expressed genes involved in the degradation of SOM. Taken together, results in this thesis suggest that careful agricultural practices, including crop residue incorporation, specific farming systems and increased levels of SOC have the potential to mitigate the effects of drought on soil microorganisms and can lead towards more sustainable agriculture.

However, the results and observations in this thesis opened several interesting questions that could be addressed in the future.

For example, short-term experimental drought in **Paper II, III and IV** influenced soil water content, but soil microbial communities displayed a certain degree of resistance. As European and global climate models forecast higher occurrence and intensity of short-term drought periods (Masson-Delmotte, 2021), the verification of these results under even more extreme and repeated drought conditions should be studied. Additionally, microbial resistance to drought conditions should be further explored under an extended range of environmental conditions, including both, soil properties and climate conditions.

In **Paper II** the potential of AMF to mitigate drought effects was found. However, it would be important to include plants, specifically roots in these studies, because AMF colonizes plant roots and helps them to obtain water and nutrients from places that roots would not be able to reach. That way it would be possible to unlock the potential of AMF communities to protect and help plants survive drought periods. Such knowledge may contribute to the development of sustainable land-use systems to remain productive in long-run and maximize crop yields even under extreme drought periods.

There is potential in further using the collected data in this thesis, specifically metagenomics and metatranscriptomics from **Paper I, III and IV**. This information could be used in the integrative analysis, the so-called multi-omics as these data was obtained from the same soils. This approach may provide more comprehensive insights into soil microbial systems, both short- and long-term, and how these systems are influenced by different factors, either climate change or direct human activities. For example, the results from Manoharan et al. (2017a) showed land-use effects on the soil microbial DNA could be linked to their RNA from **Paper I** where straw was added. This way we could understand the long-term effects of land-use on the short-term effects of straw addition at a higher resolution. Similarly, linking results from **Paper III and IV** will provide a better understanding of how short-term drought periods could affect soil microbial communities involved in the degradation of SOM.

New sequencing technologies lead to larger amounts of high-quality data, with the potential to study even more specific microbial functions and increase the taxonomic resolution of soil microbial communities. This may further lead to the expansion of current references databases, for example fungal databases. This could (a) offer a better representation of fungal communities, which was limited in **Paper I, III and IV**, (b) help to better understand the intraspecific variation of AMF communities highlighted in **Paper II**. Captured approaches (metagenomics or metatranscriptomics) used in this thesis (**Paper I, III and IV**) present a way forward to better understand the functioning of complex soil ecosystems, especially carbon cycling. However, to have a better representation of fungi, who are important players in the degradation of SOM (Magdoff and Weil, 2004), a more specific probe-capture enrichment technique targeting only fungi could be used.

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