

## Actions towards a more sustainable European food chain

With the simultaneous rise in global demands for food, feed, fuel and fibre, and a reduction in natural capital to sustain current agriculture and yield levels<sup>1</sup>, it is imperative to decouple European growth from resource use and significant environmental impacts, in particular in view of the potential impacts of climate change. This has to be done against a backdrop of increasing urbanisation, an ageing population in Europe, and global population growth. Access to safe and nutritious food as part of an adequate standard of living is a fundamental human right<sup>2</sup>; therefore providing a healthy and balanced diet, in an equitable and sustainable manner, to a growing world population will be one of the major development challenges of the next decade. Moreover, food, water, and energy security are inextricably linked and actions to improve only one of them might impact on the others<sup>3</sup>. In parallel, the economic and financial crisis, with an important social dimension, has impaired the purchasing power of many consumers and driven up unemployment levels. These interrelated challenges could impact upon the sustainability of food systems in years to come. As a result, there is an urgent need to develop an holistic approach to safeguarding the sustainability of food systems for future generations.

On the basis of the Foresight (2011) and FAO (2012) reports<sup>4</sup>, we define the sustainability of food systems as “*The continuous engagement of food chain stakeholders to achieve “low environmental impacts while contributing to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations”<sup>5</sup>. These systems should be “protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources”<sup>6</sup>. Last but not least “sustainability means ensuring human rights and well-being without depleting or diminishing the capacity of the earth’s ecosystems to support life or at the expense of others well-being”<sup>7</sup>”. This definition encompasses the three pillars of sustainability (social, economic and environmental dimensions) all of which need to be simultaneously addressed, in a global context, if the sustainability of food systems is to be ensured.*

The food chain<sup>8</sup> plays a key role in each of these three pillars. In the economic pillar, the EU food chain is central to growth across all EU Member States and generates economic activity including in rural areas. In the social sphere, as well as providing consumers in Europe and on global markets with a large choice of safe, nutritious, tasty and affordable food, the EU food chain is a major employer offering a wide variety of job opportunities. Food production and consumption is also a vital part of Europe’s cultural heritage and its diversity and plays an important role in social cohesion. In the environmental domain, the food chain has significant environmental impacts related to resource use and emissions<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, conscious of the responsibility to reduce the environmental impact of their operations, food chain actors have proactively undertaken numerous initiatives to use resources more efficiently and render their businesses more sustainable. These ventures represent the important first steps towards tackling the challenges facing the food systems.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-future-of-food-and-farming>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.water-energy-food.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/foresight/docs/food-and-farming/11-546-future-of-food-and-farming-report.pdf>,

<http://www.fao.org/nr/sustainability/home/en/>

<sup>5</sup> Burlingame and Dernini, 2012, in <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3300e/i3300e01.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3300e/i3300e01.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.fao.org/nr/sustainability/home/en/>

<sup>8</sup> Food chain: any actor involved in the production, distribution and consumption of food

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.eea.europa.eu/soer/synthesis/>

However, action by one part of the food chain alone is not enough and there is still significant potential for further cross-sector initiatives in this domain. Partnerships - private, between the public and private sector, along the food chain and across the whole of society - and life cycle thinking are essential to improve sustainability across the food chain and in view of achieving more sustainable consumption patterns.

In light of this, we, the undersigned, have joined forces to provide practical recommendations for an EU policy framework fit for purpose. These proposals represent important steps with a view to achieving concrete results towards making the European food chain more sustainable by 2020.

## **Actions towards a more sustainable European food chain**

### ***Horizontal Approach***

- Taking forward the **EU's commitments on food sustainability agreed at Rio+20**, by setting up ambitious targets and cross-cutting initiatives on food sustainability for example in the framework of the UN's post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals and the 10 Year Framework Programme on Sustainable Consumption and Production;
- Ensuring food security through increased food **affordability, availability and accessibility** across the food chain, for example, by taking measures addressing extreme price volatility, by promoting public-private partnerships to increase investment, research and innovation;
- Encouraging a '**circular economy model**' to drive more sustainable consumption and production of products throughout their life cycle and across the food chain;
- Improving the **coherence among different food-related policy objectives and instruments taking into account the three pillars of sustainability**, starting from EU agriculture and fisheries, health and consumers to waste management and energy policies, and among EU stakeholder platforms;
- Supporting an **holistic approach** to the European food chain by ensuring a **permanent dialogue** for example through the **High Level Forum** for a Better Functioning Food Supply Chain, benefitting all actors along the food chain;
- Ensuring proper **implementation and effective enforcement** of existing EU legislation;
- Increasing R&D funding, both at EU and Member State level, encouraging **innovation, knowledge transfer, training, and investment** in resource efficient technologies and sustainable production methods and distribution processes, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises, developing efficient authorisation procedures;
- Gearing **existing EU policy and funding structure to deliver on sustainability** through, for example: strengthening public procurement guidelines, further phasing out environmentally harmful subsidies (EHS) and encouraging the use of European Structural Funds - including the European Social Fund - in the food sector;

- Providing a **predictable regulatory framework**, as well as science and evidence-based decision-making in order to unlock the innovative capacity to meet societal evolutions (e.g. urbanisation, digitalisation, non-traditional family structures and ageing) and related changing demands from our products and services;
- Establishing a common EU definition as well as a scientifically-reliable harmonised EU methodology for assessing food wastage, **raising awareness about food wastage** and encouraging cross-sector and sector-specific initiatives to reduce waste and use natural resources more efficiently<sup>10</sup>;
- Promoting the **sourcing of sustainably-produced agricultural and fisheries products** at both EU and global level by increased technical assistance to farmers (in particular smallholders) and fishermen through, for example, further promotion of third party certified production standards and guidelines for primary production;
- Promoting **higher animal welfare standards at international level** to increase the overall welfare of farm animals worldwide and to avoid competitive disadvantage to EU producers;
- Helping consumers to make **sustainable and healthy lifestyle choices** including by strengthening **public educational campaigns and providing information** which is scientifically reliable, consistent, as well as understandable and not misleading. Communicating information is best achieved through a multi-pronged approach, including digital technologies;
- Strengthening **education for children**, including physical activity and nutrition education (for example through the EU's school fruit and milk scheme);
- Promoting **healthy diets and lifestyles**, such as by recognising the best practices already existing, for example through community based programmes<sup>11</sup>, voluntary commitments under the EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health and/or national public-private partnership platforms;
- Encouraging more **environmentally sustainable food consumption patterns** for example by developing science based voluntary guidelines, conducting further consumer behavioural research and developing awareness raising initiatives.

### ***Economic Pillar***

- Ensuring a well-functioning EU **Single market for goods and services** through the removal of intra-community barriers to trade;
- Improving the **global competitiveness** of the European food chain and, inter alia, **assist SMEs and cooperatives to** become more competitive including facilitating access to finance and technical assistance;
- Securing, in the framework of international trade negotiations, **better market access** opportunities for EU food and drink products and raw materials, and distribution services particularly in emerging markets;

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<sup>10</sup> Such as the joint [Every Crumb Counts](#) Declaration, the Euro Coop "[EFFORTS](#)" project, the EU FUSIONS Platform, the Retail Agreement on Waste, [REAP](#)

<sup>11</sup> For example EPODE; <http://www.epode-international-network.com/>

- Enhancing **competitiveness on the world market**. Producing according to European standards should not lead to additional production costs or regulatory burden;
- Ensuring a fair, proportionate and **non-discriminatory fiscal environment** for all food operators and food products;
- Ensuring **fair trading practices along the food chain** based on the Principles of Good Practice for Vertical Relationships in the Food Supply Chain<sup>12</sup>.

### **Social Pillar**

- Attracting more workers to **the agro-food sector**, with more and better jobs, including through **skills development** based on improved quality and availability of education and training; as a shared responsibility of the public and private sectors;
- Tackling **unemployment**, particularly among **young people** through food-specific educational programmes, including apprenticeships, and qualifications developed, in a harmonised manner at both public and private sector level;
- Raising awareness of the importance of the food chain and **encouraging and supporting entrepreneurship**;
- Involving the **social partners** at EU and national levels to link education, training and skills development with employment and economic growth;
- Strengthening EU<sup>13</sup> and **global corporate social responsibility** throughout supply chains by means of sustainable sourcing practices, adherence to internationally recognised principles and guidelines on human rights, labour, employment and fair trading practices.

### **Environmental Pillar**

- Supporting the **reduction of GHG emissions in line with international agreements** and implementation of the EU's climate and energy package ensuring a fair but ambitious target and strategy for 2030;
- Ensuring that upcoming EU **environmental footprint methodologies** are internationally aligned<sup>14</sup>;
- Maintaining and restoring **biodiversity and ecosystems** by increasing and disseminating knowledge on how biodiversity and ecosystems ensure and are influenced by agricultural productivity, and better integrate their value in the economic assessment of agro-food systems;
- Ensuring **reliable evidence on the impact of EU food consumption and production abroad**, and ensuring both contribute to the conservation of biodiversity hotspots and carbon sinks of global significance, such as the tropical rainforests of South America and South East Asia;

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<sup>12</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/food/files/competitiveness/good\\_practices\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/food/files/competitiveness/good_practices_en.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> COM(2011) 681 final: A renewed EU strategy 2011-14 for Corporate Social Responsibility

<sup>14</sup> for example through the voluntary uptake of the ENVIFOOD Protocol, a scientifically-reliable harmonised EU methodology for the environmental footprint of food and drink products, <http://www.food-scp.eu/>

- Strengthening efforts to **improve environmental performance across various production systems** and worldwide. In today's complex and globalised economy, environmental impacts may differ, but a common challenge is the need to, eliminate wastage, maximise resource efficiency, re-use, recycling and energy recovery.

***We will continue to work with food chain members in the High Level Forum for a Better Functioning Food Supply Chain to take these recommendations forward in 2014 and beyond.***

The **Stakeholder Dialogue Group on Food Sustainability** is a voluntary group established in September 2013 entailing organisations from across the EU food chain, which are also members of the High Level Forum for a Better Functioning Food Supply Chain. For more information on the High Level Forum please visit; [http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/food/competitiveness/high-level-group/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/food/competitiveness/high-level-group/index_en.htm).

