



EAPF contribution to the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of Agriculture

Brussels, 05 April 2024

Background

As EAPF, the European Alliance for Plant-Based Foods, we believe that a shift towards more plant-based food production and consumption can offer substantial benefits in transitioning towards sustainable food systems. From our perspective, it is imperative to recognize the positive impact such a shift could have on economic competitiveness, food security, the health of European citizens, mitigating climate change, and preserving biodiversity.

As we participate in the Strategic Dialogue, our responses are framed by the opportunities inherent in plant-based food systems. We advocate for a holistic food system approach, that recognizes the integral role of farmers, consumers and value chain stakeholders. Currently, working in isolated silos hampers collaboration and potential solutions. To truly transform agriculture, all stakeholders must collaborate. Only through alignment across the entire food chain can we achieve a future where farming in Europe thrives sustainably.

EAPF welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this pivotal forum and acknowledges the significance of a farmer-focused approach. However, we emphasise the critical need for a holistic perspective that encompasses the entire food system for optimal success.

1. How can farmers, and the rural communities they live in, be given a better perspective, including a fair standard of living?

Economically sustainable agriculture depends on environmentally sustainable agricultural practices. While the EU's current food policy boasts ambitious sustainability and economic viability goals, current rules are working against these objectives, fuelling dietary imbalances and excessive animal-based food consumption. This in turn creates a competitive disadvantage for plant-based foods due to the lack of a level playing field, fuels uncertainty, and sends the wrong signals to consumers and producers.

Support Farmers in Adopting Plant-Based Farming for Crops Dedicated for Human Consumption

[Studies](#) show that the transition towards more plant-based diets can be economically beneficial for most farmers across the European Union. Crop farming for human consumption tends to be more [resource-efficient](#) than the production of animal-based products. Promoting and supporting agri-environmental practices can help [increase productivity](#) without expensive and intensive farming methods. Diversifying crops and re-balancing our intake of animal proteins can help farmers [build resilience](#) against growing pressures like climate change, flooding and droughts.

According to the [European Commission](#), legumes produced for food consumption usually offer EU farmers higher profit margins. Moreover, pea, oats, soy, wheat and even fungi are key ingredients in plant-based meat alternatives, representing a high-value added opportunity for European farmers. Despite this, pulses account for only around [2% of farmland](#) and have received less funding than other major crops. We call on the EU to uphold a new legislative framework that incentivizes a switch to plant-based foods and supports farmers who grow legumes and plant-based food crops. This entails creating financial and administrative support systems that encourage plant-based farming practices, reward sustainable agricultural methods, and establish robust R&D incentives to enhance profitability. It also involves supporting farmers through technical assistance, facilitating information sharing, and aiding in connecting them to producers, retailers, and consumers interested in their products.

Additionally, there's a crucial need to address the demand side to ensure a sustainable market and fair prices for plant-based food crops. This requires supporting policies such as establishing a level playing field so that plant-based foods can compete on fair terms (through equal CAP funding, fair access to the use of denominations and other labels etc.), investing in research and innovation for plant-based foods, promoting education and awareness, and setting plant-based food targets in public procurement.

Restructure and Replace Inefficient Funding and Subsidy Programmes

Income support for farmers is [currently based](#) on farm size, which encourages large intensive production, monocropping and other unsustainable practices at the expense of small and medium farms. Coupled income support ([CIS](#)), holds great potential for driving agricultural production towards sustainable crop production, but its current application highly contributes to promoting unsustainable farming, namely intensive livestock production, which receives [70% of the total budget](#) of CIS. In addition, at least [71% of the EU's farmland is used to feed livestock](#). This not only increases the environmental footprint of the agricultural sector but also represents an ineffective use of raw materials and works against the strategic priority of increasing the EU's food security.

A revision of EU [subsidy schemes](#) via re-structuring the financial allocation of funding to consider environmental and social factors (e.g. biodiversity loss, water use, carbon emissions, farmers' livelihoods) would help encourage such a transition and boost EU autonomy in the production of plant-based food crops. This would in turn make plant-based foods more accessible and affordable, better reflecting environmental externalities of food products in their final price.

We therefore call for EU policy to replace current income support models with sustainability-focused rewards, which would incentivise sustainable practices and create a level playing field for small and medium sized farms. We also call on the EU to shift CAP subsidies towards climate-aligned agricultural practices, as well as using funding programmes to support farmers in this transition. One option is to create markets for regional, sustainable plant-based foods. Finally, we call for a deeper focus on the Cohesion Funds and Just Transition Mechanism in agriculture. This is necessary to support farm conversion and training, but especially in those cases where transitioning to other productions might not be feasible due to land management constraints.

2. How can agriculture be supported within the boundaries of our planet and its ecosystem?

The transition towards more sustainable, healthy and resilient food systems is an essential part of the European Union and global efforts to urgently address current and future environmental, health, and socio-economic challenges. In the European Union, agriculture [accounts](#) for more than 10% of all greenhouse gas emissions, with 70% of these emissions originating from the livestock sector alone.

Our agricultural practices, particularly in livestock farming, are also driving biodiversity loss and deforestation. Food systems are a major driver of the challenges we currently face worldwide, such as climate change and food insecurity. When factoring in emissions from animal feed production and [land use changes](#), the livestock sector's contribution to the EU's overall greenhouse gas emissions can reach up to 17%. This places animal agriculture at the forefront of climate impact over [various time horizons](#). To address these challenges, we must reshape our food systems. European agriculture can only operate within the boundaries of our planet and ecosystems by gradually shifting away from emission-intensive agriculture towards more sustainable farming practices and a shift towards sustainable (plant-rich) diets.

Advocating for Plant-Based Solutions

We call on the EU to advocate for increasing the proportion of plant-based foods in citizens diets as a key solution to fix our flawed food system. That being said, the transition towards more sustainable, healthy and resilient food systems cannot be realised by a single stakeholder group. If we collectively work towards a 60/40 by 2030 target (60% plant-based and 40% animal-based consumption) we could mitigate the agri-sector's greenhouse gas emissions, decrease land use for agriculture and cut water usage - all while ensuring food security.

If we do not rebalance our food systems, it will be increasingly difficult for the EU to meet its 2030 and 2050 Paris Agreement targets. According to Greenpeace, meat consumption in Europe would need to [decrease](#) by 81% to align with these targets. The [New Nordic Nutrition Recommendations](#) (2023) also make clear that reducing our meat consumption is good for our health, and the environment. Therefore, the EU must implement measures to support plant-based foods as a complement to conventional agriculture to ensure that we operate and consume within the limits of our planet. Promoting a shift towards more plant-based diets at all stages of the value chain, from farming, processing, retail to consumption, can significantly contribute to meeting our climate targets.

Legislative Framework for Sustainable Food Systems

To create a more climate-, and biodiversity-friendly environment, we call on policymakers to establish comprehensive legislation on the sustainability of food systems. A sustainable food system for the EU is one that provides and promotes safe, nutritious and healthy food of low



environmental impact for all current and future EU citizens in a manner that itself also protects and restores the natural environment and its ecosystem services. The upcoming [European protein report](#) should also prioritise the development of the diversification of the EU's food crops, setting progressive targets for rebalancing our protein intake which is currently 60% animal-based vs 40% plant-based, to 60% plant-based by 2030.

Prioritising the Plant-Based Sector

Addressing the disproportionate support for industrialized meat and dairy industries compared to the plant-based sector is also crucial for promoting agriculture that respects the environment. The potential of the plant-based sector to contribute to sustainable, healthy and resilient food systems is hindered by regulatory and market powers. Between 2014 and 2019, the EU [spent](#) 200 million euros to encourage the consumption of animal products. Redirecting some of this funding towards promoting more sustainable and diversified diets will inevitably make sustainable food more accessible to consumers. On this point, EAPF urges the Commission to endorse the nutritious and sustainable option of including plant-based foods in the EU's School Scheme.

Several strategies can help make the necessary shift towards environmentally sustainable, competitive food systems, such as applying the "polluter pays" principle to account for product externalities and adjusting subsidy schemes under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to actively support farmers in diversifying into the production of crops for human consumption. In addition, fair fiscal policies through standardized EU VAT rates ([many plant-based foods have higher VAT](#)) is crucial and we call on the Commission to support member states in implementing VAT regimes that align with healthy, sustainable consumption.

3. How can better use be made of the immense opportunities offered by knowledge and technological innovation?

Knowledge and technological innovation play a crucial role in ensuring sustainable competitiveness, mitigating climate change, fostering sustainable food systems, and promoting healthier diets. Within this context, the plant-based sector emerges as a vital contributor, drawing from an inventory of successful local and regional initiatives, that can serve as inspiration and provide policymakers with the courage to make bolder decisions in favour of sustainable food systems. This requires a multifaceted approach that integrates agricultural research, consumer education, and forward-looking policy frameworks.

Investment in Research and Development

Allocating substantial funds towards research and development in the plant-based food sector is crucial. This investment can fuel innovations in crop breeding, cultivation techniques, and food processing methods to enhance the efficiency and resilience of plant-based food production. Initiatives such as the EU's [Smart Protein Project](#) demonstrate the potential of targeted research in driving innovation within this sector.

Consumer Acceptance and Education

Addressing consumer concerns and enhancing acceptance of plant-based alternatives is crucial for widespread adoption. Educational campaigns highlighting the environmental benefits and health advantages of plant-based diets can shift consumer preferences towards more sustainable food choices. Additionally, sustainability labelling of foods which give consumers the information they need to make informed decisions about their food choices, including certification schemes, can instil confidence in healthy, sustainable foods.

Policy Support and Strategic Partnerships

Governments play a pivotal role in creating an enabling environment for the plant-based sector to thrive. Furthermore, policy frameworks, such as the EU's Green Deal and the Common Agricultural Policy, should prioritise funding and incentives for sustainable agricultural practices, as outlined in the [CAP's eco-schemes](#).

Integration with Climate Change Mitigation Strategies

Recognising the interconnectedness of food systems and climate change, efforts to promote plant-based foods should be integrated into broader climate mitigation strategies. The findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) sixth report from 2023, underscore the significant potential of shifting towards plant-based diets in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. By aligning agricultural policies with climate goals, such as the [EU's commitment to carbon neutrality](#), governments can amplify the impact of plant-based food production on mitigating climate change.



In conclusion, maximising the opportunities offered by knowledge and technological innovation requires a holistic approach encompassing research investment, technological adoption, consumer engagement, and supportive policy frameworks. By leveraging these tools effectively, stakeholders can not only address the challenges posed by climate change but also pave the way towards a more sustainable and healthier food future.

4. How can a bright and thriving future for Europe's food system be promoted in a competitive world?

In a competitive world, fostering a bright and thriving future for Europe's food system hinges upon recognising the interconnectedness between sustainability, competitiveness, and addressing pressing issues such as climate change, the sustainability of our food systems, and healthier diets. Within this context, placing strategic emphasis on the plant-based sector becomes imperative.

Policy Framework and Regulatory Measures

The introduction of a Sustainable Food Systems Framework should establish key principles and concepts, fostering a holistic approach. This framework should be coupled with comprehensive regulatory measures to accelerate the transition towards sustainable, plant-centred food systems. Principles such as [One Health](#) and fair competition should guide policy development.

[Reforming the Common Agricultural Policy](#) to better align with the EU's climate ambitions, emphasising sustainable production and promoting healthy diets, is crucial. This entails incentivising farmers to shift towards plant-based food production through various support mechanisms, while also stimulating consumer demand.

Fiscal Policy, Pricing Mechanisms & Trade Policy

Equitable fiscal policies should be implemented, including standardising EU VAT rates for plant-based and animal foods. Lower or zero VAT rates for plant-based foods can foster affordability, health and sustainability. Additionally, implementing effective carbon pricing mechanisms for agriculture, particularly targeting high-emitting activities, can incentivise the transition to more sustainable practices.

Integrating trade policy to enhance the competitiveness of the plant-based sector is also vital. Access to competitive international markets can lower input costs for farmers, making agricultural production more efficient. The EU's trade policy should align with sustainability goals outlined in the Green Deal, ensuring a level playing field while promoting fair trade practices. In addition, by gradually integrating sustainability requirements into global trade agreements, Europe can avoid unfair competition and further advance innovative and sustainable food production.

Investment in R&D and Collaborations

Shifting funding towards scaling up sustainable plant-based products within investment and research and development programs is essential. This encourages innovation and competitiveness within the plant-based sector, facilitating the development of new products and technologies, with a spill-over effect throughout the agri-food supply chain.



Collaboration among stakeholders including governments, industry players, research institutions, and civil society is also crucial. Partnerships can drive innovation, knowledge sharing, and resource mobilisation to advance the plant-based sector's competitiveness and sustainability.

Consumer Awareness and Accessibility

Raising awareness among consumers about the benefits of plant-based diets and ensuring the accessibility and affordability of plant-based products are key. Education campaigns and targeted initiatives can help shift consumer preferences towards more sustainable food choices.

In conclusion, Europe should develop tools to foster a competitive and sustainable food system, while recognising the pivotal role of the plant-based food sector. With all the knowledge and innovative agro-food technology available in Europe, the continent could emerge as a centre of excellence, leading the global transition towards sustainable food production and consumption.