



EVENT REPORT

How to Make Sustainable Diets the Norm?

Hosted by MEP Juozas Olekas
Moderated by Regine Roncucci

13 February 2024



**Scientific Advice
Mechanism**
to the European Commission



OPENING REMARKS

MEP JUOZAS OLEKAS, Vice Chair of the Working Group on Sustainable Agriculture, Food Systems and Apiculture of the EP Intergroup on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development



“If we want to have diets that are not only healthy for consumers but also for the environment, we should give more attention to those based on local products and short supply chains.”

Mr. Olekas praised the fundamental role played by the agri-food sector in upholding the EU’s economy and food security and reflected on how to reshape EU food systems in the face of climate and environmental challenges. Firstly, highlighting the need to promote sustainable diets by integrating health, environmental, and economic factors, the MEP warned that **providing consumers with information and data is not enough to achieve this objective**; habits, emotions, and cultural patterns must also be considered, as they play an important role in consumption decisions. Secondly, Mr. Olekas advocated for an **increased focus on local, short-supply chains**, as a means to reduce CO2 emissions and supply-demand unbalances, bolster food affordability, and cut waste. Thirdly, the MEP drew attention to the **strategic role of new technologies, such as NGTs, in helping achieve ambitious environmental goals** while ensuring high productivity and profitability for farmers.

MEP MIAPETRA KUMPULA-NATRI, Co-Chair of the EP Intergroup on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development



“Sustainable choices have to be made the obvious choices in terms of affordability, availability and overall desirability of the products.”

Ms. Kumpula-Natri emphasized the need to **provide consumers with accurate information on the environmental footprint of their food choices** in order to foster a voluntary shift to more sustainable consumption while respecting cultural differences. In this process, **digitalisation represents an asset**, as she argued by referring to the popularity of an online lifestyle test designed by Sitra, a Finnish independent fund. The MEP also called for **positive price incentives and the repurposing of economic subsidies** to make the production of healthy and sustainable food more profitable for farmers and more affordable for consumers. In terms of policy, Ms. Kumpula-Natri urged decision-makers to put the issue of **food waste higher on the EU agenda** and to ensure that the **needs of EU farmers are always considered** when designing and implementing climate policies in the Union.

PRESENTATION OF THE EXPERT REPORT “TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE FOOD CONSUMPTION”

PROF. ERIK MATHIJS, University of Leuven (KU Leuven) and Scientific Advice Mechanism to the European Commission



“The main message is that we don’t need a set of individual instruments, but rather a coherent mix of policies.”

Prof. Mathijs presented the results of a report aimed at identifying **what concrete interventions could be taken to overcome existing barriers to sustainable diets**. A broad consensus was reached on the fact **that psychological processes, social norms, digital factors, informal production elements, and power imbalances** in the food chains have a relevant influence on individual decision-making. Therefore, informational and educational campaigns are necessary but insufficient for fostering better diets, especially among vulnerable groups. Instead, it was found that marketing strategies such as **product reformulation, product placement, and store location significantly affect consumers’ choices**. Pricing interventions to make unhealthy and unsustainable diets more expensive are also deemed effective from a theoretical perspective. In general, the report highlighted the **need for a systemic, holistic approach that takes into account dynamic feedback effects**.

PANEL DISCUSSION

ANASTASIA ALVIZOU, Deputy Head of Unit ‘Farm to Fork’ (E1), DG SANTE, European Commission



“We need a system approach to make sure to improve human, animal, plant, and environmental health at the same time.”

Ms. Alvizou called for a **shared vision among all food system actors** to comprehensively tackle sustainability and health challenges at the EU, national, and local levels. Outlining some of the Commission’s past and present initiatives, Ms. Alvizou referred to the upcoming **legislative framework for sustainable food systems**, which examined how labeling, public procurement, and targeted actions in schools can create a favorable food environment for sustainable choices. Concerning the issue of food waste, the Commission’s **proposal for a set of mandatory food waste reduction targets** to be achieved by 2030 was highlighted. Moreover, Ms. Alvizou mentioned **Food 2030** and the collaboration with the JRC on the **monitoring of the Farm-to-Fork Strategy** as examples of the Commission’s effort to support research and innovation in the field of sustainable food systems. However, she also remarked that **the active collaboration of Member States and market operators is indispensable** to achieve a more healthy and sustainable EU food system.

LYNNETTE MARIE NEUFELD, Director, Food and Nutrition (ESN), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations



“There can be no sustainable consumption without sustainable production: they are intimately related.”

Ms. Neufeld drew attention to the **pillars of a healthy diet: nutrient adequacy, diversity, balance in energy and sources, and moderation**. The challenge therefore lies in shaping dietary patterns that meet individual and cultural preferences while remaining sustainable and healthy. As, in this process, food-based dietary guidelines are fundamental, FAO will soon release a new **document for the development guidelines that include environmental, social, and equity sustainability considerations**. Ms. Neufeld underlined the importance of using these guidelines not only to educate consumers but also to **inform agricultural policies and enable a shift in food production**. She also invited to use a **nuanced language** when comparing the health and environmental impact of animal products with that of plant-based food and to remind that an adequate intake of all necessary nutrients is crucial for a healthy diet. In this regard, she announced the release of a **systematic review of the health risks and benefits of animal-source food alternatives**.

CAMILLE PERRIN, Senior Food Policy Officer & Team Leader, BEUC



“Food processing and retail sectors have a huge influence on choices made by farmers and consumers, so we need to tackle those actors more.”

Ms. Perrin focused on the existence of a **gap between consumers’ intention** to follow more healthy and sustainable diets and **effective actions taken in this direction**. Referring to the “Illusion of choice” report published by BEUC, which analysed the impact of marketing practices on the food environment, Ms. Perrin remarked on the **need to increase the availability, affordability, and desirability of healthy and sustainable food**. For instance, **stimulating food reformulation to reduce levels of fat, sugar and salt, reshaping the CAP and repurposing subsidies to incentivize the production of sustainable food and increase its affordability, , and using carbon pricing to correct price signals** (while paying attention to the distributional effect and social justice) are some of the necessary steps towards more healthy and sustainable food systems. Retailers also play a crucial role in this process, as they can use pricing to help consumers make sustainable choices. In this regard, Ms. Perrin argued that there must be clear communication on the fact that diets heavily reliant on animal products have a significant climate and environmental impact. She also urged Member States to work on **reducing the attractiveness of unhealthy food** by restricting marketing practices, especially those targeting children.

BO DOHMEN, Senior Manager Nutrition & Health, FoodDrinkEurope



“To facilitate healthier and more sustainable food systems, we need an enabling environment, which stimulates investments, supports innovation, boosts trade and secures supply, builds better regulation, and improves policy coherence.”

Emphasizing the central position of the food and drink industry plays in the EU food system, Ms. Dohmen called for a **collaborative approach** to transition towards more sustainable food systems. She also called for the establishment of a **dedicated Executive Vice-President of the European Commission on food** to provide policy coherence and a strategic direction for more sustainable food systems. The industry can play a crucial role in the transition. They are at the **forefront of innovation, adopting sustainable production methods, and leveraging technology to improve efficiency and reduce environmental impact**. To contribute to the transition, FoodDrinkEurope has launched several initiatives in the areas of climate change, sustainable packaging, and nutrition, as part of its [Action Plan on Sustainable and Resilient Food Systems](#). For instance, [a toolkit on product innovation and reformulation for SMEs](#) was launched, and another one to help businesses reduce food waste is under development.

DR. EVA SALI, Senior Policy Advisor, Copa-Cogeca



“Environmental sustainability is not limited to GHG emissions. It includes food security, circularity, resilience, biodiversity, and much more. There is no free ride on environmental consequences.”

Addressing the issue of the ongoing farmers’ protests across the EU, Dr. Sali explained that the **agricultural sector’s economic viability is being threatened by economic and bureaucratic burdens and legislative demands**. She argued that, although the EU food production is already one of the most sustainable in the world, there is space for improvement and farmers are indeed committed to doing their part in the green transition. However, it is indispensable to provide the agri-food sector with **time, investments, and an appropriate toolbox** to help it implement green measures while ensuring its economic viability. Highlighting the need for connecting social policies with food production and supply chain policies to ensure that low-income population has access to healthy and affordable food, she also warned against generalizing about the unhealthiness and unsustainability of animal products, on the one hand, and the sustainability of plant-based options, on the other. Overall, she noted that it is important to recognize that **all sectors can be more sustainable if they are supported via the right measures and incentives**.

ROSALIE TUKKER, Senior Policy Advisor, Européche



“One of the primary focuses should be on the fishing industry, the fishers, and the communities who belong to it: they are providing us with one of the most sustainable, low carbon, healthy food protein there is.”

Bringing the fishing industry into the equation, Ms. Tukker stressed the importance of acknowledging the role played by European fishers in upholding high quality and sustainability standards while providing healthy food. Arguing that **food security and self-sufficiency are crucial sustainability indicators**, she highlighted that the EU seafood self-sufficiency lies below 50% and that, even if self-sufficiency exists for some fish species, these do not always correspond to consumers’ demand. On the other hand, even if **imported fish products often do not comply with the EU’s high health and sustainability standards**, consumers are not given the tools to distinguish them from EU products. Therefore, it is necessary to help consumers make **well-informed choices by intervening in the retail sector** and to ensure a **level playing field** by restricting imports from countries where production may cause environmental damage and health risks. The need to make the fishing profession more **attractive to young people** to guarantee generational change was also noted.

JOKE SCHAUVLIEGE, Rapporteur for the Opinion on the Legislative Framework for Sustainable Food Systems, Committee of the Regions (CoR)



“The transition to more sustainable diets cannot only rely on consumers. More than ever, cooperation among different governance levels is needed to address the environmental and health challenges we are facing.”

Ms. Schauvliege highlighted the need to **involve regional and local authorities** in the challenge of fixing the EU’s broken food system. For instance, they have the capacity to design and implement **adequate spatial planning** to facilitate access to healthy food in the surroundings of strategic locations, such as schools and train stations. Bringing the example of the successful initiative launched by the city of Gent to support organic, fair production, Ms. Schauvliege argued that **public procurements are also a powerful tool** to bring healthy, sustainable food into public catering while supporting local producers and reducing food waste. However, there should be **more guidance for cities** on how to take advantage of such tools and **more options to communicate and scale up successful initiatives**. Ms. Schauvliege urged the Commission to publish the framework law for sustainable systems. In addition, she called for the **regular update of national dietary guidelines**, the **alignment of promotional campaigns with the objectives of the Farm-to-Fork Strategy**, and an **EU-wide science-based labeling standard**.

CLOSING REMARKS

PROF. ERIK MATHIJS, University of Leuven (KU Leuven); chair of the Working Group of the Scientific Advice Mechanism to the European Commission



“I only have on call as a scientist: Let’s collect data, not only on GHG emission but also on biodiversity impact, socioeconomic indicators, nutritional indicators.”

Prof. Mathijs emphasized the need to find a **balance between conveying the complexity of sustainable food systems and crafting simple messages** to effectively communicate with consumers.

MEP JUOZAS OLEKAS, Vice Chair of the Working Group on Sustainable Agriculture, Food Systems and Apiculture of the Intergroup on Climate Change, Biodiversity & Sustainable Development



“It’s very important that we discuss these issues in this House where we can have all the information to find a compromise. Together we have the possibility to move forwards.”

MEP Olekas closed the event by **urging EU politicians to make knowledge-based decisions** and remarked on the importance of taking a **holistic approach** to fostering sustainable diets while **respecting regional and cultural differences and habits and supporting EU farmers**.

WRITTEN STATEMENT



MEP MARÍA SORAYA RODRÍGUEZ RAMOS

MEP Rodríguez Ramos emphasized the need for **structural changes to make sustainable diets the norm**, arguing that it is unacceptable that agriculture and land use still contribute to roughly half of GHG emissions in EU industrialized regions. Concern was expressed regarding the Commission’s delay in presenting the legislative framework for sustainable food systems, which would be a golden opportunity to switch to sustainable food systems. The MEP also agreed on the importance of having a **science-based comprehensive approach that includes production, transformation, distribution, and access to sustainable, healthy food**.



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Biodiversity and Sustainable
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