

News > [Farm to fork strategy: The first step towards an EU sustainable food and farming policy framework?](#)

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Farm to fork strategy: The first step towards an EU sustainable food and farming policy framework?



The European Commission has published its long-awaited strategy on food and farming that sets out the EU's long-term goals and direction of travel to 2030 for the agri-food sector. IEEP's agriculture researchers share their first impressions.

The [Farm to Fork strategy](#) is a key and necessary element of the European Green Deal, and together with the [new EU biodiversity strategy](#) comes at an important moment as European leaders get ready to decide their priorities for the next EU budget and Europe's recovery plan in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

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It is a welcome initiative that starts to take a more systemic approach to EU food and farming policymaking. It recognises the need for food systems to reduce their environmental and climate footprint and increase their resilience in the face of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Indeed, food systems **are responsible** for between 21-37% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions (pre- and post-production activities) and we're facing significant decreases in biodiversity globally, which underpin our food security.

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The strategy also takes account of the impacts of the COVID crisis that have led to a growing recognition of the **vulnerabilities** of linear food supply chains including the often precarious working conditions faced by many agricultural workers across Europe and the risks to farmers' livelihoods.

The emerging impacts of the COVID-19 crisis also see a renewed emphasis placed on food security. While many of the different dimensions of food security are acknowledged, it is critical that the strategy delivers on all dimensions of food security, not just the availability of food commodities and products.

Overall, the strategy acknowledges many of the key challenges faced by the **complex socio-ecological nature** of agri-food systems.

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This includes the growing pressures on natural resources and the climate, the environmental footprint of the processing and retail sector as well as primary production and the prevalence of diet-related diseases influenced by an unfavourable 'food environment'. Furthermore, it acknowledges that these challenges cannot be addressed in isolation.

However, the interconnections between these challenges will require further assessment when designing and implementing the different initiatives that make up the strategy – particularly addressing the synergies and trade-offs of policy choices. This includes working towards a safe operating space for EU livestock that balances human needs and the adverse negative environmental and social impacts of intensive livestock production.

See also: *First impressions of the EU biodiversity strategy to 2030*

Moving towards a comprehensive framework for food policy driven by targets

Central to the implementation of the strategy will be the development of an EU legal framework for a 'sustainable food system' by the end of 2023. This will complement the number of headline targets and

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policy targets, assessing their achievements and ensuring coherence

require a clear

**identification of what
a ‘sustainable food
system’ looks like**

across all the policy areas that influence food systems (e.g. agriculture, food chains, trade, development).

Such a working definition is already necessary to fully inform the forthcoming policy debates on how to formulate a more sustainable EU food policy for the future and to guide work on reaching the targets as well as the proposed initiatives whose work will commence before the end of 2023.

The strategy's headline targets reflect the long-recognised evidence of the **negative externalities of food and farming** and the potential pathways for internalising them – with a specific focus on production, in contrast to consumption.

Policy targets are not a panacea, but they provide a useful mechanism to send a clear signal

Policy targets are not a panacea, but they provide a useful mechanism to send a clear signal to policymakers and administrations, farmers and businesses, and civil society of the necessity and urgency for all agri-food stakeholders to actively contribute to common environmental and sustainability goals. Targets further provide a means to enable the monitoring of progress towards these common goals and to hold to account those who are not delivering, potentially on a binding legal basis.

While the strategy is seen as integral to achieving the EU’s contribution to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), further work is needed to align these goals and accompanying targets with the strategy and European Green Deal more broadly. A recent analysis from IEEP and the SDSN on the performance of the EU and Member States on all 17 SDGs shows that the Member States **need to accelerate progress** on many of the goals affecting food systems.

Using EU policies to tackle sustainable land management and diets in a holistic way

The way the different initiatives in the action plan accompanying the strategy are shaped and implemented is critical for tackling the twin challenges facing our food and farming systems – those of sustainable land management (which produces fibre and materials for the bioeconomy, beyond just food) and diets.

Of the range of initiatives, it is welcome that the Commission will set out clear recommendations on how Member States should address all nine Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) specific objectives in their national CAP strategic plans (CSPs) and establish corresponding national targets to those underpinning the strategy.

This is critical so that the next CAP is working to ensure future land management and agri-food business decisions are in line and

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At the same time, many of the initiatives related to sustainable land management such as reducing the use and dependency on pesticides and fertilisers as a means of improving environmental and human health appear to come after the decisions on the CSPs have been taken. Therefore, greater clarity is needed to guarantee that any actions set out in these forthcoming initiatives are implemented retrospectively where appropriate or are part of a mid-term review of the CSPs.

A greater focus on sustainable food consumption within the strategy is also welcome, allowing the EU to bridge a gap in existing policy that has limited progress as it is primarily focused on addressing food safety concerns, voluntary sustainability initiatives and does not make strong links with production.

In particular, the actions for setting minimum mandatory criteria for sustainable food procurement to promote healthy and sustainable diets is a notable step away from voluntary guidelines and can build on the initiatives and policies already existing in some parts of the EU.

EU food policies must go well beyond green labelling and increasing consumer awareness

However, EU food policies must go well beyond green labelling and increasing consumer awareness to fully tackle the underlying physical, economic, political, and socio-cultural dimensions of the ‘food environment’ which strongly influence food choices and dietary patterns.

Like sustainable farming systems, sustainable diets require definition – one that is culturally appropriate and integrates the sustainable management of natural resources, whilst enabling consumers to make genuinely informed choices.

Further work will be needed to ensure the EU policy is robust enough to facilitate the development of alternative business models and that they go hand in hand with ensuring sustainable livelihoods for the entire agri-food labour force.

Other promising ideas to **encourage more sustainable outcomes** in the food system include moves to reflect the true cost of sustainability in the price of food commodities and products and to introduce more wide-ranging environmental fiscal measures to influence market decisions – a conclusion reached by IEEP in our **Think2030 paper** which focuses on feeding Europe sustainably.

These approaches require further exploration as the different initiatives of the strategy are developed including how the CAP and other EU Structural and Investment funds can be fully utilised in order stimulate the development of sustainable chains across European regions.

The Farm to Fork strategy offers a new beginning, which EU leaders and all stakeholders must drive forward

The launch of the strategy is an important first step. However, it is just the start, and throughout its implementation, it must be able to pass a number of **key sustainability tests** to be fit for purpose.

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clear and transparent decision-making as well as independent scrutiny of implementation.

The success of the strategy will also be very much dependent on the political support and initiative of all who have a stake in the food system with all stakeholders – policymakers and administrations, farmers, businesses, civil society and citizens moving beyond vested interests.

It is, therefore, critical that Member States and the European Parliament take full ownership of the Farm to Fork strategy and build on the Commission's roadmap so that EU agri-food sector is fully on board and part of the solution in realising a more sustainable and resilient future in Europe.

**Achieving the ambition
of the strategy will
necessitate clear and
transparent decision-
making**

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