



Compendium of EESC opinions on sustainable food systems

(version 12/07/2023)

In its opinions¹, the EESC has developed several proposals and concrete ideas to foster more sustainable food systems. These proposals can be summarised along nine sets of recommendations:

- I. Foster comprehensive and integrated food policies
- II. Promote healthier and more sustainable diets and invest in education
- III. Ensure fair prices and ban unfair trading practices
- IV. Curb food commodity speculation and enhance market transparency
- V. Enhance the potential of short food supply chains and agroecology
- VI. Ensure structured involvement and participation of civil society
- VII. Align food business practices and operations with the SDGs
- VIII. Foster sustainable water management in food production
- IX. Promote sustainable fisheries

I. Foster comprehensive and integrated food policies²

The EESC has been the first EU institution to call for a comprehensive food policy in the EU, with the aim of nurturing healthy diets from sustainable food systems, linking agriculture to nutrition and ecosystem services, and ensuring supply chains that safeguard public health for all sections of European society.

A **comprehensive food policy** should, according to the EESC, deliver:

- economic, environmental and socio-cultural sustainability;
- integration across policy areas, levels of governance and sectors - all stakeholders across the food supply chain have a role to play;
- inclusive decision-making processes; and

¹ Refer at the end of this document for a detailed list on all referenced opinions

² NAT/711, NAT/787 and NAT 844

- a combination of compulsory measures (regulations and taxes) and incentives (price premiums, access to credit, resources and insurance) to accelerate the transition towards sustainable food systems

It should **accelerate the development of a circular economy and reduce the environmental impact of the food processing and retail sectors** by taking action on transport, storage, packaging and food waste. It should also be equipped to address the new situation post COVID-19, in particular the need to improve crisis management and reinforce safe and fair working conditions across the chain.

To be effective, a comprehensive food policy has to be accompanied by a **clear framework with targets, indicators and a robust monitoring mechanism**. The EESC has recommended the development of an **EU sustainable food scoreboard**, which would allow food system challenges to be addressed through a multi-year approach, thereby promoting policy alignment at different levels of governance. The scoreboard would provide indicators and would thus encourage and monitor progress towards meeting the targets that have been set.

II. Promote healthier and more sustainable diets and invest in education³

Healthy and sustainable diets represent a key pillar of a comprehensive food policy, as we urgently need to reorient our diets in order to improve the health of both ecosystems and the public, and the vitality of rural territories.

The complexity of the food-health-environment-society nexus requires a more comprehensive approach on diets, not just related to consumer behaviour. To provide cohesion and shared purpose, the EESC calls for the **development of new Sustainable Dietary Guidelines**, which take into account cultural and geographical differences between and within Member States. Simply reducing the use of resources in production and changing ingredients does not translate into better or healthier diets.

New Sustainable Dietary Guidelines would help **create clearer direction for farms, processors, retailers and foodservice**. The agri-food system would benefit from a new "framework" to produce, process, distribute and sell healthier and more sustainable food with a fairer price.

The EESC reiterates the importance of investing in **education** on sustainable diets from an early age, to help young people appreciate the "**value of food**". Special attention must be paid to vulnerable groups, especially people with low incomes. In this context, the EESC welcomes the EU school scheme that supports the distribution of fruit, vegetables, milk and dairy products to children with the aim of increasing their consumption of these products in the short and long term, as well as educational activities aimed at reconnecting children with agriculture and teaching them about healthy eating habits, strengthening sustainable food production.

The EESC points out that everyone needs the necessary knowledge to fight climate change, especially with regard to all aspects of sustainable consumption and production, making responsible food choices and reducing food waste, as well as the use of sustainable energy. Education of children should be supported by lifelong learning for parents and citizens' education. In addition, outreach to all should be promoted, including by supporting youth-led organisations on this matter. Indeed, the EESC calls

³ NAT/755, NAT/787, NAT/825, NAT/857, NAT/855, NAT/856, NAT/860

for youth to be put at the centre of the education and learning process and welcomes the coordinating role of the Commission in promoting projects, training, exchanges of good practices and communication among teachers to foster the implementation of the SDGs in education.

In order to support the transition towards more sustainable consumption patterns, the EESC recommends to establish a sustainable **food labelling framework** that is transparent, based on science and as simple and pragmatic as possible (e.g. in the form of a traffic light system), both helping economic operators to assess and improve the sustainability of products and providing useful information to help consumers make informed choices. The EESC advocates, firstly, for a voluntary approach, which should impose mandatory conditions if it is applied, while labels that are not based on these conditions should be banned.

Such a **common European food labelling approach** reflecting the Sustainable Dietary Guidelines would improve transparency and discourage the use of unnecessarily cheap raw materials that are both unhealthy and unsustainable (e.g. trans fats, palm oil and excess sugars). Consumers would benefit from extension to food labelling to include environmental and social aspects. Implementing a clear labelling system on the origin, means of production and nutritional value of food would facilitate consumer choices towards healthier and more sustainable options.

Besides helping the commercial sector, Sustainable Dietary Guidelines would also provide common, clear criteria for use in public procurement. **Europe needs food to be at the heart of a Green Public Procurement (GPP).**

The EESC also recommends running an information campaign on the consequences that different dietary habits have on the environment and health, in the context of an EU plant protein and oil strategy. **Plant protein-based diet** is part of a healthy diet, while the importance of **extensive livestock farming** (based on permanent meadow and pasture) for biodiversity and other environmental and agricultural services, and its role in providing sustainable, healthy, safe and excellent food is also key. At the same time livestock farming as a whole should be compatible with EU and UN objectives regarding European and global food security, supply autonomy and sustainability. Globally, a trend in which the global average per capita consumption of meat and dairy products approaches the current levels of developed economies seems incompatible with the UN SDGs. The EESC also recommends setting **production and quality standards addressing the health and environmental impact of imported products** competing with those produced in the EU.

III. Ensure fair prices and ban unfair trading practices⁴

Fair food prices (reflecting the true cost of production for the environment and society) are the only way to achieve sustainable food systems in the long term. The EU and Member States should take action to ensure that farmgate prices stay above the costs of production and that healthy diets become more readily accessible. In order to do so, it will be necessary to deploy the full range of public governance tools, from hard fiscal measures to information-based approaches to make the true costs visible.

⁴ NAT/787, NAT/734 and NAT/823

The EESC has called for an **effective ban on food retailers selling at below-cost prices**. In particular, the EESC recommends that suppliers, such as farmers, be paid a fair and just price that allows suppliers to receive an income that is adequate for investment, innovation and sustainable production.

The concentration of bargaining power has led to the abuse of dominant positions, causing weaker operators to become increasingly vulnerable to Unfair Trading Practices (UTPs). This transfers economic risk from the market up the supply chain and has a particularly negative impact on consumers and some operators, e.g. farmers, workers and SMEs. The problem of UTPs has been acknowledged by all stakeholders in the food supply chain. A **ban on all unfair practices** is therefore needed.

True reciprocity of standards in preferential trade agreements should also be ensured. Cheap imports often imply high social and environmental costs in third countries.

IV. Curb food commodity speculation and enhance market transparency⁵

Food should not be treated as a financial asset as it is not a commodity like many others. While recognising that the issue of food prices and speculation is highly complex where the causality has to be investigated further, **the EESC considers that the current structure of the commodities market is not delivering** for the "sustainable economy we need" and for the objectives linked to sustainable development, climate ambition and just transition enshrined in the UN Agenda 2030 and the European Green Deal - but actively works against them. It undermines the efforts to solve hunger, foster fair revenues for farmers and workers and fair prices for consumers, as well as protect small and medium food processors and the retail sector from the risks of rising inflation. **It must therefore be changed through regulation in order to contribute to people's wellbeing and societal development for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).**

The EESC further highlights the need to deal with concentration in food chains and financial ownership (global physical grain trade is highly concentrated) and notes that **high and fast-rising prices and secrecy about stock holdings create uncertainty and fan fear and panic**. Fear and panic, especially during times of high uncertainty, such as in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, drive excessive price levels and volatility as speculative traders, jumping on the bandwagon of the price boom, dominate the market.

Therefore, the EESC calls on Member States and EU institutions to **enhance market transparency**, take the necessary steps to curb **excessive commodity speculation**, in particular by regulating the **futures market**, regulating **indexes and addressing the financialisation of the food sector** as massive money-making off the backs of people.

V. Enhance the potential of short food supply chains and agroecology⁶

The EESC has acknowledged the **increasing number of initiatives being implemented at regional and local level to support alternative food systems**. These initiatives establish closer links between producers and consumers, create opportunities for local businesses and new jobs, and reconnect

⁵ NAT/873

⁶ NAT/711 and NAT/763

communities with their food. The EESC also highlights the **role of cities** in developing more integrated food policies. A comprehensive food policy should build upon, stimulate and develop common governance at all levels – local, regional, national and European. This would create an enabling framework for these initiatives to flourish, whatever their scale.

Short circuits enhance the added value and profitability of small farms, enabling them to sell identified products that “have a story to tell” to consumers, who are then prepared to pay more, and generate community activity and social links in rural areas. Improvements in food production quality and marketing channels give consumers responsibility in relation to the value of food and to waste, and therefore contribute to a reduction in the impact of food on climate change.

There is a **wealth of short supply chain initiatives based** on social, organisational and regional innovation, which are still in the process of being set up. Many studies highlight the local dimension and collective identity as key factors in long-term sustainability. The challenge is therefore to empower operators to create local food systems based on local governance which is representative of these operators.

The **internet** is proving to be a new area of exploration and innovation for short supply chains. The way it has spread over the past decade or so has been reflected in the proliferation of short food supply chains. Offering a wider market than the traditional producers' market, it also helps to improve and streamline trade. Numerous on-line ordering platforms have emerged in the last five years. These “food hubs” allow producers and consumers to interact directly, particularly in the case of products that can only be found locally.

The EESC considers that **agroecology is the horizon towards which European agriculture should work**: farming inherently depends on conserving natural resources for its development. Building on fully-developed models such as organic farming (avoiding a number of negative trends in the organic “industry”), permaculture and other traditional small farming systems, commitments to moving towards fewer inputs, revitalising soils, introducing a variety of crops and protecting diversity must be encouraged and highlighted.

VI. Ensure structured involvement and participation of civil society⁷

At EU level, the EESC proposes the creation of a **European Food Policy Council (EFPC)**, bringing together the main actors that can unite behind the objective of moving towards food sustainability. An EFPC would help achieve a more integrated and participatory approach to food policymaking, would accelerate the alignment of policies at EU, national and local levels and, most importantly, would increase the quality and legitimacy of EU food policy. This would also contribute to fostering more sustainable and balanced rural and urban development.

Food policy councils already exist at local, regional and national levels, but the EESC believes that these existing forums are not sufficient to effectively achieve a sustainable and just food system and resilience preparedness at EU level.

⁷ [NAT/711](#), [NAT/787](#) and [NAT/892](#)

The EESC sees the European Food Policy Council as a science-based, multi-stakeholder and multi-level platform and as an institutional, independent structure, with a potential composition of academic experts and scientists, food supply chain actors, education system actors and civil society organisations, youth representatives and institutional representatives (Parliament, Council, Commission, EESC, CoR).

It would bring together representatives of local food policy councils and stakeholders from civil society and across the supply chain, providing a platform for stakeholders to learn from each other through the sharing of good practice, ensuring that all points of view from the various sectors are taken into account and identifying obstacles to the promotion of sustainable food at local level. EESC stands prepared to provide a convening space for the European Food Policy Council.

VII. Align food business practices and operations with the SDGs⁸

The EESC:

- acknowledged that food businesses across the supply chain (including European farmers and fishers, cooperatives, agri-food companies, retailers and wholesalers and other type of companies) are already working to make progress on sustainability and to offer consumers healthy and sustainable products in line with the European Green Deal. Nevertheless, to get on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more needs to be done;
- stressed the need for an **enabling framework** for innovation to support business operators with adequate tools and solutions in their transition towards more sustainable business practices. Barriers for innovation must be eliminated;
- noted that business operators nowadays often experience sustainability requirements as complex and burdensome rather than as an opportunity, and therefore recommends developing a more easily understandable language (a "**Grammar for Sustainability**") to change this;
- identified the reduction of food losses and food waste, sustainable sourcing, improved packaging and logistic systems, circular and resource-efficient food chains, as well as bioeconomy solutions, as effective entry points towards greater sustainability;
- emphasised the important role of the **consumer** in this context. Information and education measures in combination with transparent food labelling practices will empower the consumer to opt for the more sustainable choices. The European Commission (EC) should also introduce measures to support the affordability of healthy and sustainably produced, processed and distributed food;
- welcomed the EU **code of conduct on responsible business and marketing practices**. Most involved parties generally consider the development of the voluntary code to be a valuable process that has brought the partners of the food supply chain closer together. The initiative marks a starting point and should continue to serve as a collaborative platform for responsible and sustainable business practices. In particular, the EESC highlighted the **limitations of a voluntary approach** and called for the **adoption of regulation and legislation** to ensure a swift transition to sustainability; and the need to ensure the social dimension.

⁸ NAT/821

VIII. Foster sustainable water management in food production

Water is a fundamental resource for food production and therefore ensuring access to sufficient quality water and its sustainable management is essential to guarantee adequate and sustainable food production in the European Union. Climate change implies higher temperatures, increased evapotranspiration, and a considerable increase in extreme weather events, causing droughts, floods, storms and fires. These problems are highly destructive to the production of crops and livestock. The EESC therefore considers that all CAP schemes should encourage sustainable and efficient water management, incorporating indicators in each Member State in order to monitor progress in water management. A strategic plan is needed that utilises scientific and technological expertise is furthermore needed to ensure safe water is available for agriculture throughout the EU, and specific plans must be prepared for local areas and regions that suffer persistent drought and flooding. A special stand-alone budget and support lines will be necessary, as will an EU Regulation directing resources towards enabling and facilitating central, regional and local plans to supply adequate water. Such plans must ensure the construction and maintenance of fit-for-purpose water infrastructure in all parts of the EU.

Sustainable water management must focus on supply management, taking measures to ensure the availability of water for all users. Supply management must necessarily involve optimising efficiency, reducing losses, prioritising uses, eliminating illegal uses, adopting measures to ensure the sustainability of the whole system and, finally, adopting a set of approaches in line with strategies to consolidate sufficient food production in the EU.

The EESC calls for dedicated standards concerning water use in various economic sectors, for instance agriculture and industry, by building a governance structure to develop sectorial water use guidelines, which should include the EESC.

IX. Promote sustainable fisheries⁹

Sustainable fishing provides animal proteins that not only have the lowest carbon footprint but also have excellent nutritional qualities. Current fish intake is generally below the dietary recommendations in the EU. The EESC therefore recommends that public authorities should prioritise promoting fish consumption at affordable prices for the population as a whole, for example by promoting less well-known species, or applying reduced VAT on fish products.

Our oceans cover 70% of the planet's surface area. They are a source of food and biodiversity, help regulate the climate and provide many coastal communities with livelihoods and jobs. As the European Union imports three quarters of the fish it consumes, the EESC considers that bilateral and multilateral trade instruments should ensure imports of only sustainable seafood products from third countries whose standards are equivalent to those in the EU, and that each opportunity to support the sustainable growth of the EU aquaculture sector should be seized. The EESC further calls for an EU blue deal, highlighting the need to ensure and sustainably increase the contribution of aquatic food systems

⁹ NAT/849, NAT/895

to healthy, safe, nutritious and affordable diets for all, with the ultimate aim of reducing the EU market's dependence on fish imports.

Referenced opinions:

- [NAT/711 Comprehensive EU food policy](#)
- [NAT/734 Improving the food supply chain/UTPs](#)
- [NAT/755 Healthy and sustainable diets](#)
- [NAT/763 Short food supply chains/agroecology](#)
- [NAT/787 "From farm to fork": a sustainable food strategy](#)
- [NAT/821 Aligning food business practices and operations with the SDGs](#)
- [NAT/823 Towards a fair food supply chain](#)
- [NAT/844 Food security and sustainable food systems](#)
- [NAT/849 Action plan to conserve fisheries resources and protect marine ecosystems](#)
- [NAT/855 Evaluation of the EU school scheme](#)
- [NAT/856 Towards a sustainable plant protein and plant oil strategy for the EU](#)
- [NAT 857 Towards a sustainable food labelling framework to empower consumers to make sustainable food choices](#)
- [NAT/860 Empowering youth to achieve sustainable development through education](#)
- [NAT/873 Food price crisis: the role of speculation and concrete proposals for action in the aftermath of the Ukraine war"](#)
- [NAT/891 Water scarcity and climate emergency: circular and other solutions for the EU agri-food system in a future "Blue Deal" \(Own-initiative opinion, adoption expected in July 2023\)](#)
- [NAT/892 Towards a European Food Policy Council as a new governance model in the future EU Framework on Sustainable Food Systems](#)
- [NAT/895 Decarbonisation of the fishing fleet](#)