

Conference of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee, Santiago de Compostela, 26 September 2023

EU food sovereignty: the role of agriculture, fisheries and consumers

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



CONFERENCE

EU food sovereignty: the role of agriculture, fisheries and consumers

26/09/2023 | 9:30 - 16:30 **LIVE STREAM**

City of Culture of Galicia,
Santiago de Compostela, Spain



The numerous global crises such as the climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, food speculation and the multiple repercussions of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have demonstrated the **necessity of European food sovereignty** while maintaining very **high levels of global food security for consumers**. **Agriculture, livestock and fisheries are key sectors for EU food sovereignty** and are therefore decisive for ensuring the EU's strategic autonomy. On 26 September, the Civil Society Organisations' Group met in Santiago de Compostela to discuss the challenges faced by food production in the EU with Spanish and European civil society organisations representing agriculture, livestock, fisheries and consumers, as well as regional and European authorities. While discussing how to maintain food sovereignty, considerable emphasis was placed on designing food production systems in agriculture and fisheries that are in line with the huge changes necessary to achieve the many internationally agreed emission targets. Calls were made to actively support farmers and fishers in terms of the development of new science and financial systems. Participants from all backgrounds highlighted the importance of taking into account the perspectives of producers and consumers in the development of a long-term policy that guarantees EU food sovereignty in the context of fair and sustainable food production for all. The conference was organised within the framework of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU and in collaboration with the regional government of Galicia.

Fair conditions for the primary sector to guarantee food security

- It is crucial to recognise the **essential role of the primary sector** (agriculture, livestock and fisheries) in ensuring food security for European citizens. However, it is also necessary to stress that, **together with consumers**, they are the **weakest and the least protected link in the food supply chain**.
- Producers often have little bargaining power over costs during negotiations with intermediaries and supermarket chains which make the majority of the profit. The introduction of **rules on the negotiation process** is needed to help ensure that those at the beginning of the production chain are **fairly paid**.
- The food supply chain must be examined in more detail in order to publish information on the costs of the different stages of production. This will **enhance transparency and awareness of production costs** and should be made accessible in a timely manner to ensure that they can be used as an accurate reference for pricing. Transparency on the cost of products must also be addressed through **double labelling indicating the origin and destination prices**.

How to provide consumers with sustainable and affordable food choices

- Rising prices related to inflation are the main obstacle to sustainable and healthy food consumption, which also affects staple foods such as meat, fish, milk and olive oil. This is reflected in changes in consumer behaviour, with a decrease in the consumption of fresh products and an increase in the consumption of processed foods with lower nutritional quality. It is necessary to reverse this trend and **return decision-making power to consumers to enable them to make informed choices and select European products**.
- **Greater transparency on labelling** established by setting out the criteria by which products must be labelled can help return consumers to their role as informed decision-makers.
- **Better communication** between producers and consumers should be introduced to remove the barrier of insufficient labelling. This will also help address the problem of media misinformation on production conditions.

Ensuring food sovereignty by guaranteeing a next generation of the farming and fisheries sectors

- To protect the food supply of European consumers, it is vital to preserve the **family and professional farming** tradition. Family farmers are an integral part of territorial networks and local cultures, generating employment opportunities in agriculture and rural areas. Similarly, in the **fishing sector** it is **small-scale fishers** and fish farmers who supply **local communities**. For these reasons, they are key to boosting local economies, managing the territory and fighting against land abandonment and poverty. Political action and regulation must give support to family farmers and fishers to use technological and innovative solutions usually only afforded by big producers. It is also relevant to note the importance of **large scale and long-distance fleets** for EU food sovereignty, which help generate employment and wealth, not only in European coastal areas, but also in many developing third countries.
- **Generational renewal** is one of the biggest and most serious problems in the primary sector, both in agriculture and fisheries. In order to maintain the current EU food production and cope with the aging and decreasing number of professionals in the sector, policies are needed to make these sectors attractive to young people by providing them aid and promoting social recognition of their work.
- A special mention goes to **women** working in the primary sector: at the national level, public administrations must expand social services, such as childcare in rural villages, to help women working in agriculture and fisheries reconcile their profession with care and housework. It is necessary that more and more **women occupy positions of responsibility and representation** in the different agricultural and fisheries sectors and for **equal salaries** for women and men to be achieved.

Sustainability in all its dimensions is key to building EU food sovereignty

- To ensure the long-term production of sufficient and healthy food and viable livelihoods it is important that **natural resources are used in a sustainable way**, preserving soil and water resources, combating climate change and biodiversity losses and protecting animal welfare. In this context we must **recognise the enormous effort that the EU primary sector** makes in minimising the environmental impact of its activity and contributing to the fight against climate change.
- Both producer and consumer representatives recognise that **sustainability must also be defined by economic and social feasibility**: EU authorities must discuss and **agree with all actors on the pace at which the goals of Agenda 2030 can be achieved and realised**.
- **Research, innovation and digitalisation** constitute means to create a toolkit for greener production and have to be supported at national and EU level.
- **EU trade agreements with third countries** need to take into account the mirror clause, i.e. producers (in both the agricultural and fisheries sectors) from third countries **must respect the same production standards as those from the EU** to ensure competitiveness and level the playing field.
- Strengthening local and regional production will allow for combining well balanced food production and food processing with a low carbon footprint. **Shortening the food chain** also helps to reduce the costs linked with it, thus rendering **food more affordable for consumers**.

Finding solutions together

- The value of food should once again be at the centre of the main policies of every EU country. EU food sovereignty will be determined by the decisions of individuals, communities and organised civil society. **All EU citizens benefit from a fair, healthy, resilient and sustainable food chain.**
- The future of the food sector will depend on **working together – producers, retailers, policy-makers, environmentalists and consumer organisations** – to effectively address and remedy the numerous challenges. Progress is still required to **encourage more women and young people** into food production.
- It is also imperative to cooperate better in order to ensure **fairer and transparent prices for both producers and consumers**, fairer wages, climate adaptation subsidies and seasonal workers' rights.
- It is crucial to support **education and to broaden knowledge at an early age in schools**: future generations need to know by whom, how and where food is produced and who is involved in the rest of the food supply chain to get it to the consumers' homes.
- Regional, national and EU authorities must aim for inclusive food policies, which **enable even the most vulnerable in our societies** to also take advantage of sustainable and healthy food systems.
- It is also time to develop a **long-term vision for the EU fisheries sector**. This vision should build on existing European efforts on biodiversity, sustainable food policy, health and well-being and good working conditions, and will enable the EU to commit to decarbonising the fishing sector in order to deliver on the European Green Deal and implement the 2030 Agenda. This vision must also put **fishers at the centre of fisheries policy**, seeking a balance between biodiversity conservation, sustainable use of fisheries resources and food security.
- In view of the forthcoming European Parliament elections, this period presents itself as a transitional period that could be used to **initiate a dialogue with all the actors of the food supply chain**, in order to develop a common sustainability agenda, to discuss the pace for the implementation and mobilise a combination of different instruments, including funding for implementing it at regional, national and European level.
- If internationally agreed climate change goals are to be met, while at the same time meeting the food requirements of our population, there is a serious need to **develop the necessary science quickly so that new sustainable ways of producing food can be developed.**