

Meeting of the European Economic and Social Committee's Diversity Europe Group  
in the framework of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU

Brussels and Ljubljana, 29 November 2021

**Improving the sustainability of the European food supply chain**

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Extraordinary meeting of the Diversity Europe Group

**Improving the sustainability  
of the European food  
supply chain**

29 November 2021 | 09.30-13.00

Brussels/Ljubljana in hybrid format

 @DiversEESC #FoodChain #EUFarm2Fork



**The European food supply chain is of strategic importance and has shown great resilience over the last twenty months during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is important not to take this for granted. Various different issues, such as climate change, extreme weather conditions and health issues have challenged global supply chains. The Diversity Europe Group of the EESC, in collaboration with the Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia and the Slovenian Presidency, held an extraordinary hybrid meeting on 29 November. It took place in two locations, Brussels and Ljubljana, where participants came together to discuss the food chain's current situation and how to make it more sustainable for the future.**

**So far, food chain disruption has been avoided, despite the difficulties experienced by other areas of manufacturing. However, given the uncertainties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and supply chain disruption which was caused by the difficulties resulting from the blockage in the Suez Canal, it is impossible to assume that food supply chains will remain unaffected. Clearly, in terms of sustainable food supply chains, shorter chains based on local food production are more likely to tackle the problems of climate change.**

### **Recognising Farmers' Key Role in the Chain**

- **Farmers** are the weakest link in the food supply chain, and it is important for their **role** to be recognised as it is **of great importance**.
- In order for them to contribute effectively to the supply chain, they **need more financial support** and guidance with the introduction of the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).
- Working conditions should be made more favourable to all farmers, especially **small holders** who represent the majority in the European Union, and **international trading practices should be made fairer**.
- Sustainability can only be achieved by **fairer distribution in the food supply chain**. **Fairer food prices** are needed to reflect the **true cost of production** and the work that farmers put in, particularly in taking care of the environment (maintaining healthy soils and biodiversity).
- **Unfair trading practices (UTPs) should be resolved** at EU-level and all stakeholders should be properly informed of their rights to strengthen national trading legislation. This legislation should be implemented and enforced at EU-level to **enhance competitiveness, redistribute incomes and encourage favourable practices for small farms**. Solutions need to be found to enable the long term survival of the food chain.
- Supporting business operators in the farming, processing and distribution sectors with adequate **innovation** tools and solutions (**adequate infrastructures, digitalisation, access to finance etc.**), is essential to enable the transition towards more sustainable practices.
- The future of farming is dependent on long-term links with the retail sector to improve the global food supply chain. Examples of solutions include **promoting short food supply chains** such as local food markets, and direct door-to-door or online sales of **locally-sourced products**.

### **Encouraging more women and young people into the farming sector**

- Rural areas should be equipped with adequate resources to **attract young farmers** to remain on their land and incentives should be proposed to motivate and recruit female farmers.

- Technological developments in farming practices are needed to entice young people to the profession. A fair food supply chain represents an opportunity, which will attract young people to the sector.

### **Restoring the value of food**

- Food connects us all on a daily basis. The EU has already set the global standard for food, however, it needs to be sustainable for everyone. It's time to be courageous and make the change.
- The **EU's Green Deal, the 'Fit for 55' package, the 'Farm to Fork' strategy and CAP** are strategies which Member States can use to reach **ambitious national targets** around environmental legislation and to help tackle the climate crisis. Reducing chemical pesticides and facilitating the marketing of biological pesticides will bring more alternatives to the market.
- **Reducing food losses and food waste** at all levels of the food supply chain is a key element for improving its sustainability, and it is becoming more urgent every day. Food banks are the citizens' initiative which help to reduce food waste, by prolonging their use and donating to vulnerable people (solidarity based economy). Cooperative supermarkets can aid the reduction of food waste and should be encouraged.
- **Consumer awareness and education** surrounding supply chains and food consumption is necessary to encourage them to **shop locally, buy organic products, and reduce food waste.**

### **Jointly finding solutions: the future of sustainable food supply chains**

- In order for the food supply chain to achieve sustainability, the interconnectedness of all actors and links within the chain is essential. **These actors must cooperate together and make their network stronger.** Cooperation (rather than competition) among food chain operators is essential: long term supply chain agreements should be encouraged in order to reduce farmers' dependency on imported critical goods.
- **Strengthening local and regional food production and processing within the EU** would have health benefits and would enhance the profitability of small farms. This would aid local businesses and **increase employment.**
- Food supply chains should be made shorter to ensure that there is **less of an environmental impact** on the food consumers eat. Less nautical and air miles are needed to reduce emissions.
- **Structured dialogue and the involvement of civil society organisations (CSOs)** is encouraged, in order to increase cooperation and support small holders, as well as ensuring that communities feel they can participate and shape food supply chains.
- **Food labelling systems should be improved and enhanced to inform consumers** on healthy, balanced diets and be more cautious when buying products.
- Links could be made with **schools** and **restaurants** to allow menus to be adapted according to seasonal produce, and a vegetarian option should always be provided.
- **The future of Europe will depend on how we manage our rural areas and our food supply chains.**