

Improving the Sustainability of the European Food Supply Chain

Speech by Diversity Europe Group President Séamus Boland

Brussels, 29 November 2021

Dear Minister, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

I am very pleased to inaugurate this event of the Diversity Europe Group on the topic of *'Improving the Sustainability of the European Food Supply Chain'*. This conference is organised in the framework of the **Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU** and I would like to warmly thank our two Slovenian Members for their extensive cooperation and assistance: **Ms Neža REPANŠEK** and **Mr Branko RAVNIK**. I would like to **thank Branko** in particular for his help, also with the selection of the topic. Whilst Neža is a new Member and I have to say that I really am impressed. I am certain that I would not have been able to organise a Group event in Ireland, within my first 12 months at the EESC. And we did not even have Covid then! So thank you both very much! This event is also unique for our Group, as we are **connected virtually** to the **Slovene Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry**, from where speakers and local civil society organisations will actively participate in the discussions.

As a society, we have learnt many things from the Covid pandemic. Among them, is the strategic importance of an **effective European food supply chain** and a better appreciation of the **value of the persons working within it**. Fortunately, our food supply chain proved to be very **resilient** over the last 20 months, providing **essential services** from food production, manufacture and distribution. And this quite literally allowed us to continue living. Personally, I find quite shocking that as a society, we have **forgotten these basic values**. After all, the **CAP of the post-World War II era** was the cornerstone of European integration, with the explicit aim of enhancing European food security, ensuring fair standards of living for farmers and reasonable prices for consumers. However, European prosperity has made us **complacent** and **urbanisation has disconnected us from the realities of the food supply chain**. Unfortunately, this is not likely to get better in the future. The UN estimates that by 2050, 68% of the world's population will be living in urban areas.

Nonetheless, we can control our **attitudes** and our **actions**. And at the heart of all of this, is the necessity to **restore the value of food**. Clearly, this is even more urgent with **Climate Change** knocking at our doors and jeopardising our entire food system. For this reason, the EU's **Green Deal**, the **'Fit for 55 package'** and **'Farm to Fork' strategy** are essential elements that must **guide our ambitions** and be seen as **opportunities to seize!**

Ladies and gentlemen, the fundamental preposition of our debates today is that we need **fair, inclusive and sustainable food supply chains**. This will allow our **farmers, consumers, workers and businesses** to grow sustainably, within our planetary boundaries and without leaving anyone behind.

In my opinion, the **key words** to this debate are **'sustainability', 'fairness', 'community participation'** and **'ownership'**. It may surprise some of you to hear that within the EU, if food chains were to be disrupted, there would only be **3 days of food supplies**. And this is one of the reasons why the

development of **short food supplies is central to our socio-economic resilience**. Strengthening **local and regional food production and processing within the EU**, would have direct health benefits, whilst enhancing the profitability of **small farms, stimulating local employment and businesses**. In addition, short supply chains offer many benefits to **rural cooperatives and consumers**, at the same time as **reconnecting citizens and communities with their food**. However, the 'Farm to Fork' strategy will only succeed if farmers are given **incentives** to accelerate the transition to sustainable food systems.

Sustainability also includes the concept of **decent working conditions for EU and non-EU workers**, both in agriculture and the wider food sector. Fair and higher wages and seasonal worker rights are at the heart of this debate. Similarly, during today's discussions, you will hear about the necessity for **fair international trading practices**, notably, reciprocity of standards in preferential trade agreements. I expect that we will also debate the necessity to **encourage more women and young people into the farming sector**. The last figures that I saw from 2016, showed that there were six times as many older farmers, compared to younger ones.

But the actors who must play a greater role in promoting sustainable food supplies are **civil society organisations**. There should be a **structured involvement and dialogue** with civil society and all stakeholders across the European food supply chain. A recent EESC Opinion on '*Strategic autonomy, food security and sustainability*' even went so far as to propose the creation of a **European Food Policy Council**. But what is important, is that civil society and local communities come to feel as if they '**own**', **participate in and can shape the future direction of our food supply chains**.

Before closing, I would like to focus on one aspect of this topic which is close to my heart. After all, I am a representative of an Irish rural organisation and as a small-hold farmer myself. The reality is that within the EU, most farmers are still **small holders**, unlike in the US. Clearly, it is easier for bigger farmers to recoup costs. And even though European farmers may support the greening objectives of the new CAP, these changes will incur **costs**. Unfortunately, it is still the case in Ireland and probably elsewhere, that the **average wage of farmers is below the industrial average**. To this, must be added the additional costs of **living and working in rural areas**, such as transport. So my message is very clear: yes, let us green CAP and let us invest in rural areas. But in order to ensure sustainability in the European food supply chain, we also **need fair food prices for farmers, reflecting the true cost of production for the environment and society**. Unfortunately, consumer welfare is still equated with the lowest possible price. On the contrary, we need prices to remain **above the costs of production**.

Dear colleagues, I will end my presentation by saying that in my mind, there is no doubt that the future of Europe will depend on **how we manage our rural areas and our food supply chains**. And this is despite the increasing urbanisation. For today, agriculture still uses half of the world's habitable land. And we will always need farmers, food manufacturers and distributors. However, in the aftermath of the **COP26**, I do believe that it is now **urgent** to move towards actions and to encourage European civil society to work constructively together for our **common sustainable future!**

Thank you for your attention.