

## EESC Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT)

### Permanent Group (PG) on Sustainable Food Systems

#### Work Plan 2023-2025



#### Context:

Fostering the systemic change and wellbeing economy we need for the successful implementation of the European Green and Social Deal and the Sustainable Development Goals towards a just transition will be the cornerstone of the NAT, SDO and PG work programmes in the 2023-2025 mandate. The EGD is an ambitious EU strategy to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 and provide economic impetus, but the social and labour dimension should be strengthened to contribute to the SDGs more comprehensively, to achieve a "wellbeing economy" as a vision of prosperity for people and planet and to ensure that no person/community/worker/sector/region is left behind.

Sustainable, healthy, inclusive and fair food systems are instrumental to achieving the SDGs and the EGD. Food is a common thread linking all 17 SDGs. Transforming food systems will thus provide a powerful lever for the implementation of the sustainable development and climate agendas as a whole. The work of the permanent group will build on the previous mandate with the aim to foster more sustainable and fairer agri-food systems, linked to thriving rural areas, while respecting the planetary boundaries.

At the **international level**, the follow-up of the [UN Food Systems Summit](#) convened by the UN Secretary-General in 2021 through its stocktaking exercises planned every two years, the work of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the growing space devoted to food systems in the COP on Climate Change and Biodiversity will set the tone on the importance of sustainable food systems for the coming years.

At **EU level**, the ***Farm to Fork (F2F) Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system*** is at the heart of the European Green Deal. It aims to contribute to Europe's climate change agenda, protecting the environment and preserving biodiversity, ensuring farmers' and fishers' position in the value chain, encouraging sustainable food consumption and promoting affordable and healthy food for all without compromising on the safety, quality and affordability of food. The upcoming **Framework on Sustainable Food Systems (FSFS)** is a crucial deliverable of this strategy and will set the foundations for the systemic changes that are needed by all actors of the food system. It will also provide a framework for the future governance of food systems, which could hopefully include the creation of a European Food Policy Council, as well as for a sustainable food labelling framework and criteria for sustainable food procurements. Reducing **food loss and waste** will also require further actions. Ensuring proper implementation of the F2F action plan will be essential for the success of the F2F and the overall EGD.

With other institutions and stakeholders, the EESC has strongly contributed to **creating the momentum** for adopting the F2F Strategy. For years, the Committee has been at the forefront of promoting a **comprehensive EU food policy**, providing healthy diets from sustainable food systems, linking

agriculture to nutrition and ecosystem services and ensuring supply chains that protect public health for the whole of European society, as well as creating a culture that **attributes the right value to food**.

The **COVID-19 pandemic**, the climate emergency and the unprovoked **aggression against Ukraine** have been **wake-up calls for change**. The multiple crises have underlined the fact that getting food "from farm to fork" cannot be taken for granted and has demonstrated the interconnectedness of actors and activities in agriculture and throughout the food system. In particular, the European agricultural and agri-food chain proved to be remarkably resilient during the COVID-19 outbreak and managed to maintain a level of supply at all times. Despite being exposed to the risks of infection, workers across the food supply chain did a tremendous job. **The Committee will continue working on strengthening the agri-food system and supply chain so that it continues to respond efficiently and sustainably to its strategic role.**

In the 2023-2025 half mandate, the permanent group will work on **turning these strategies into meaningful and timely actions** proposing concrete examples of actions/ways forward, while at the same time developing strategic recommendations to feed in the European Commission's 2024-2029 work programme. In particular, more structured involvement of civil society in the governance of sustainable food systems will be promoted, as a wide range of stakeholders across food systems have a role to play in overseeing the development and implementation of the strategy.

### **Overall objective and proposed actions:**

The Permanent Group on Sustainable Food Systems will, among other things, contribute to the first working priority of the NAT work programme on **Fostering a Comprehensive Food Policy – Towards a More Sustainable Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)**, as well as on sustainable rural/urban development. Close cooperation with the Sustainable Development Observatory (SDO) will be ensured.

After having developed a **strategic vision on how to promote a comprehensive food policy**<sup>1</sup>, and promoted sustainable food systems through more specific opinions building both upon this strategic framework and the F2F Action Plan in the first half-mandate of the 2020-2025 terms of office<sup>2</sup>, new actions will be developed in this second mandate following the cross-cutting principles of structured involvement of civil society, reinforced youth engagement and Youth Test, sustainability, circularity, rural proofing, education, rights-based approach, foresight approach, leading by example and cooperation with other EESC sections/bodies, in line with the NAT work programme.

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<sup>1</sup> The building blocks of this vision are contained in flagship opinions on [Comprehensive food policy](#), [Sustainable and healthy diets](#), [Fair food supply chain](#), [Short food supply chains/agroecology](#), ["From farm to fork" a sustainable food strategy](#), [Sustainable consumption](#) and [Compatibility of EU trade with the EGD](#).

<sup>2</sup> The following opinions were developed in the first half-mandate of the NAT Section 2020-2025 terms of office: [NAT/892 – Towards a European Food Policy Council as a new governance model in the future EU Framework on Sustainable Food Systems](#); [NAT/873 own-initiative opinion – Food price crisis: the role of speculation and concrete proposals for action in the aftermath of the Ukraine war](#); [NAT/857 – Towards a sustainable food labelling framework to empower consumers to make sustainable food choices](#); [NAT/856 – Towards a sustainable plant protein and plant oil strategy for the EU own initiative opinion \(2022\)](#); [NAT/855 – Evaluation of the EU school scheme](#); [NAT/844 - Food security and sustainable food systems](#); [NAT/823 – Towards a Fair Food Supply Chain](#); [NAT/822 – Strategic autonomy and food security and sustainability](#), [NAT/821 – Aligning food business strategies and operations with the SDGs for a sustainable post-COVID-19 recovery](#); [NAT/818 – Action Plan for the development of EU organic production](#).

<p><b>Farm to Fork strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system and framework legislation on Sustainable Food Systems (SFSF) – follow up</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss, e.g. via thematic debates at PG meetings, promotion of the NAT section opinions and inter-institutional cooperation, the application of <b>specific aspects</b> of the F2F Strategy and SFSF such as for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Transparency/sustainable <b>labelling</b>, information and education for consumers, marketing standards: promote food labelling as a tool to foster responsible, healthy and informed consumer choices, while considering specifically the green claims and the risks of greenwashing,</li> <li>○ Role of <b>education</b> facilities (pre-schools, schools) with regard to awareness raising for sustainable food/diets amongst the future generations and combatting food poverty,</li> <li>○ Role of public authorities through <b>public procurement</b> (e.g. partnership event in collaboration with stakeholders and leading example with the EESC canteen),</li> <li>○ Prevention and reduction of <b>food waste</b>, knowing that one third of produced food is lost/wasted (mainly at the end of the supply chain), (debate linked to the opinion on the revision of the EU waste framework),</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Gather and provide civil society's contribution to the upcoming <b>framework legislation on Sustainable Food Systems</b> and its implementation (e.g. developing an opinion and organising a public hearing),</li> <li>• Discuss synergies between the SFSF and the <b>future Common Agricultural Policy</b> towards an agri-food system that guarantees the viability of farms and the agri-food industry and social rights of workers, especially in family farming and small and medium-sized enterprises, while ensuring sustainability across the chain (e.g. through an OIO),</li> <li>• Promote <b>true reciprocity of standards</b> in trade agreements, particularly regarding welfare, sustainability, transparency and traceability from farm to fork,</li> <li>• Discuss the <b>impact of food systems on climate and biodiversity</b>, e.g. via side-events at the COPs, thematic debates, joint meetings with the SDO,</li> <li>• Ensure <b>structured civil society participation</b> and inclusive governance for sustainable food systems by promoting the idea of a <b>European Food Policy Council</b> and helping to implement it.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Sustainable, efficient, fair, and competitive food supply</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further explore the functioning of the whole <b>food value chain</b> as essential sector in Europe in terms of sustainability (economic, social and environmental), efficiency,</li> </ul>

<p><b>chain &amp; implementation of the SDGs</b></p>	<p>competitiveness<sup>3</sup>, work conditions and service to consumers, taking into account the regional differences and the different working conditions across Europe and considering in particular food and land speculation, distribution of profits, true cost of food, transparency all along the marketing chain, and including the follow-up on the Directive on <b>Unfair Trading Practices</b> in the food supply chain (e.g. through thematic debates or an OIO).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote the <b>alignment agri-food business strategies and operations with the SDGs</b> to achieve sustainable food systems in practice, e.g. building on the <a href="#">NAT/821 opinion on Aligning food business strategies and operations with the SDGs for a sustainable post-COVID-19 recovery</a>,</li> <li>• Include considerations on <b>food (in)security, food affordability</b>, sustainability of supply (e.g. deforestation), malnutrition and due diligence in the food chain in ongoing works and debates,</li> <li>• Discuss concrete tools to support the farmers and food chain actors in the transition towards sustainability and a <b>wellbeing economy</b>, e.g. via a joint debate with the Sustainable Development Observatory,</li> <li>• Analyse factors influencing mindset and behavioural changes, Building on the <a href="#">EESC opinion on Digitalisation and Sustainability</a>, explore how <b>digitalisation and innovation can help achieve more sustainable food systems</b> (precision farming techniques, traceability, digital labelling, efficient food supply chains etc.),</li> <li>• Discuss concrete tools to support food chain actors in the transition towards digitalisation and skills and adequate training of workers to face the future, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyse the contribution of food commerce to the sustainability of both rural and urban zones and quality life of European citizens,</li> <li>• Analyse factors influencing the costs of functioning of the whole food chain actors and its impact on food inflation and prices e.g. building on TEN/803 <i>Impact of energy prices on inflation and essential sectors</i>.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>- Based on previous work, propose recommendations for the upcoming European Commission's work programme, taking into</p>
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<sup>3</sup> "In order for a comprehensive European food policy to be truly relevant for European consumers, it is essential that the food produced sustainably in the EU is competitive. This means that the European agri-food sector is able to deliver food for the consumers at prices that include extra costs for criteria such as sustainability, animal welfare, food safety and nutrition but also a fair return to the farmers, and at the same time maintains its position as the preferred choice for the vast majority of consumers." Opinion *Civil society's contribution to the development of a comprehensive food policy in the EU*, paragraph 5.8, [OJC129, 11.04.2018, p. 18](#).

	account the current economic (high energy prices, cost of living crisis, ...) and geopolitical context (unprovoked war in Ukraine,...).
<b>Promoting an open strategic autonomy for sustainable food while fostering thriving rural areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considering that the EU imports 75% of the fish it consumes, contribute to the NAT reflection on how the EU could develop its <b>fishery and aquaculture</b> sectors sustainably, highlighting nutritional aspects linked to healthy diets and promoting opportunities for rural areas (e.g. via an orientation debate on possible OIO),</li> <li>• <b>EU protein supply</b>: considering that the EU imports 75% of its plant proteins for feed uses, explore avenues to harness the potential of EU (regional) protein supply, responding to the needs of farmers, producers and consumers, and considering the latest developments in the sector of alternative proteins (organisation of a broad societal debate on "cultured meat" also called "cell-meat" or "laboratory-produced meat" as a follow-up of the NAT/856 opinion,</li> <li>• Promote <b>sustainable water use</b> in food systems, building on the EESC work on an EU Blue Deal,</li> <li>• Explore alternative economic sources of revenue in rural areas, in line with the long-term vision for rural areas and the Rural Pact,</li> <li>• Foster wellbeing, generational renewal and youth involvement in rural areas.</li> </ul>
<b>Circularity in the food supply chain – food waste and circular bioeconomy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participate in the <a href="#">EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste</a> (PSG president is invited to attend meetings),</li> <li>• Foster links with the <b>EESC/EC European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform</b> and NAT bioeconomy work.</li> </ul>
<b>Participation in international fora</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribute to the follow-up of the <b>UN Food Systems summit</b> (e.g. by organising an EU stock-taking moment),</li> <li>• Highlight the topic of food systems in the preparations of the <b>UN Summits on Biodiversity and Climate</b>, e.g. through a written contribution or organising side-events),</li> <li>• Participate in the <b>annual UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS)</b>, which is the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for all stakeholders to work together to ensure food security and nutrition for all,</li> <li>• Further reinforce the <b>relationship with the FAO</b> (family farming, gender issues, healthy diets, water, biodiversity, etc.).</li> </ul>

### **Working methods:**

In line with the NAT work programme, **new working methods** will be explored to ensure that we use our individual strengths to achieve better results in the new term of office. The PG president and members, as well as the secretariat, have different but crucial roles to play in **co-designing and co-creating** the PG's activities. The PG president and members will be the story-tellers of the strong narrative on sustainable food systems and be invited to **engage on social media** (Twitter, Instagram) on relevant occasions. The PG will also **"walk the talk"** on sustainable working methods via continued cooperation with **EMAS on food-related issues** (food waste reduction in the canteen, food donation scheme, sustainable sourcing of food, etc.) and **optimising use of digital tools**, e.g. webinars, and making events more inclusive (gender balance, youth participation, going beyond the "Brussels bubble" etc.). It will continue inviting EMAS to PG meetings when relevant to highlight the links between policy and practice.

Food is at the intersection of various policy areas, and food sustainability is connected to several other issues the NAT and other EESC sections/CCMI are working on, including the CAP, climate change, the circular economy, social inclusion, trade and development, the internal market, consumer protection and industrial change. The **added value and the cross-cutting dimension of the permanent group** are very significant and worth developing further in the coming years, by favouring a **synergistic approach and consistency across the various policy areas** that have an impact on food policy and vice-versa. Regular exchanges with other sections, thematic groups and observatories could be developed.

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