

Food supply chains are of key importance for a sustainable future

Strengthening local and regional food production and processing within the EU and guaranteeing decent working conditions for all workers in agriculture and the wider food sector are important objectives in seeking to improve the sustainability of the European food supply chain. Other aspects of key importance to sustainability are fair international trading practices, encouraging more women and young people into the farming sector, and structured stakeholder involvement and dialogue.

These are some of the main conclusions from a [conference](#) held by the EESC's [Diversity Europe Group](#) in the framework of the Slovenian presidency of the Council of the EU and the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Diversity Europe Group president, **Séamus Boland**, and the Slovenian Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Food, **Jože Podgoršek**, opened this event.

Mr Boland said: "We need fair, inclusive and sustainable food supply chains. This will allow our farmers, consumers, workers and businesses to grow sustainably, within the planetary boundaries and without leaving anybody behind." The European Green Deal, the Fit for 55 package and the Farm to Fork strategy are essential elements that must guide ambitions and should be seen as opportunities to seize. The president of the Diversity Europe Group, who also represents a rural organisation and is himself a small-hold farmer, argued in favour of food prices that reflect the true costs of production: "Let us green the CAP and invest in rural areas, but to ensure sustainability in the European food supply chain we also need fair food prices for farmers."

The Slovenian minister, **Mr Podgoršek**, called for EU measures to redistribute income in favour of primary producers and farmers and to enhance farmers' competitiveness. Unfair trading practices were an issue that required further attention in the context of the sustainability of food supply chains. **Mr Podgoršek** welcomed the EESC opinion entitled "[Towards a fair food supply chain](#)" and the initiative to resolve unfair trading practices at EU level in this regard. Finally, he recommended "closer cooperation between primary producers, cooperatives, the processing industry and shops" to make chains more resilient and ensure a redistribution of risk between stakeholders.

Key figures based in Slovenia and at EU level representing the institutional, agricultural, consumers and environmental perspective, as well as the research and business arenas, took part in the debate.

MEP **Franc Bogovič** spoke about challenges for small and medium-sized players in the food sector such as increased competition and imports from third countries and a high concentration of ownership. Technological development, cooperation in the form of cooperatives, short supply chains and the trend towards quality food could help the various stakeholders to cope with these challenges. **Mr Bogovič** said: "We need to exchange good experiences between Member States in order to be able to change the market for the better. The market will not do everything; we need to take action."

Annikka Ojala from the cabinet of Commissioner Stella Kyriakides spoke about the European Commission's initiatives to improve the sustainability of the food supply chain at European and global level. She said: "Transforming our food systems into sustainable ones is an important part of the solution to counter the global trends on climate, biodiversity and unhealthy diets. The Farm to Fork strategy is our transformative vision of food policy in Europe and in the world."

Other speakers and participants agreed that a global view, a comprehensive systemic approach, and efforts by all stakeholders were needed in order to succeed. Civil society would be the stakeholder that needed to demand change, while making sure that solutions are feasible and non-bureaucratic.

Roman Žveglič from the Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia spoke about the situation of farmers in Slovenia. "The recent increase in prices has been a burden to farmers," he said. "Especially the prices for plant products, fertilisers, seeds, as well as energy, oil and other production costs whose upward trend continues". Prices of agricultural products could only increase with a delay of a few weeks. This affected the long-term stability of food production, he explained, as small farmers had no influence on retail prices and distribution of income.

Other participants also raised short-term investments, trade imbalances and unfair competition as threats to the sustainability of the food supply chain. In order to fulfil their economic, social and environmental functions farmers need financial support and measures to tackle imbalances.

Andreas Thurner, president of the [EESC thematic study group on Sustainable Food Systems](#), proposed different areas of action. "We need to reduce food losses and food waste, create an enabling framework for innovation and sustainability and support fair and responsible business practices." The Diversity Europe Group member also drew attention to the role of consumers: "education and information in combination with transparent labelling can be a key tool to empower consumers to make more informed choices, ideally towards healthy and more sustainable food products."

Anja Mager of the Association of Slovenian Rural Youth spoke about the difficulty in attracting young people into farming. She said that one of the ways to achieve this was a good and functioning food supply chain. "A fair food supply chain represents an opportunity in which young people will see their future in agriculture."

The activities of food banks were essential for ensuring food security but also to improve the sustainability and efficiency of the food system and to reduce the impact of food waste on the environment, explained **Angela Frigo** of the European Food Banks Federation (FEBA). "Food banks are an integral part of the food system. They are a bridge between potential food waste and a concrete need of food," she said. **Ms Frigo** believed that it was important to encourage governments to strengthen national legislative frameworks in order to facilitate and promote food donation for human consumption, to develop integrated urban food system policies, to promote digitalisation and innovation for food banks, and to support those who are already active in food redistribution.

Participants also called for more local and diversified food systems and stressed the need for immediate action. The functioning of food supply chains could not be taken for granted. The role of farmers, especially small holders, needed to be recognised and farmers supported. This was considered a key aspect for achieving sustainability.

The full set of conclusions and recommendations from the conference will be published on the [website](#) of the Diversity Europe Group shortly. They will form part of the Group's contribution to the CoFoE.

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