



Civil society's contribution to tackling food security

Position paper – October 2015

"We strongly believe that ensuring food security is not just about producing more food. Supplying diverse, nutritious and good quality foods, supporting smallholder farmers, sustaining soil and water resources and reducing food waste are objectives that should also be pursued. We have to re-think the entire agro-food supply chain and design comprehensive policies that recognise the true value of food to achieve supply systems that are built to endure."

Peter Schmidt, President of the EESC Permanent Study Group on Food Security

Introduction

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) currently estimates that about 795 million people are still undernourished¹ around the world, while about a third of all food produced globally for human consumption is lost or wasted each year. Meanwhile, the buying up of agricultural land by investors is putting the livelihoods of small farmers at risk².

In order to address these challenges, the EESC Permanent Study Group on Food Security (PSG) aims to take stock of different areas of food security policy and push for a larger role for civil society in the decision-making process. Foremost is the need to develop better agricultural production regimes – for example, by improving the position of smallholders, women and workers, promoting more balanced land-tenure regimes, and by giving greater priority to sustainable agriculture in EU and other countries' development policies. Further down the food supply chain, greater civil society involvement is needed in the wider strategy to prevent or reduce food waste.

Role in international policy

On the global stage, the EESC aims to promote civil society's role in food security, for example through its co-operation with the FAO, participating as observer in the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) or through UN International Year events.

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) is an international platform designed to ensure that all viewpoints are considered when addressing food security issues and reviewing and following-up food security policies. The CFS coordinates a global approach to food security; promotes policy convergence; supports and advises countries and regions; and promotes accountability and best practices. It also aims to give a voice to all stakeholders in the world food system and to be as inclusive as possible. Indeed, the CFS has taken steps in recent years to promote the voices of civil society in the global debate³. EESC Members for example participate every year as observers to ensure that the concerns of European civil society are represented.

Co-operation between the EESC and the FAO has also intensified in recent years. In particular, the PSG was heavily involved in the FAO-led International Year of Family Farming (IYFF)⁴ in 2014, which focused world attention on the role of small-scale farming in alleviating hunger and poverty and providing food security. The UN's 2015 International Year of Soils⁵ was another opportunity for the PSG to reflect on global issues and highlight the crucial role of soil in food security, poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

EESC messages and recommendations

Since its creation, the PSG has inspired the EESC to adopt important opinions on key related issues, organise and participate in awareness-raising events, and stimulated debate in the wider policy-making context.

In March 2013, the EESC tabled an **own-initiative opinion on civil society's contribution to the prevention and reduction of food waste**, with a particular emphasis on the need to channel food products which are still fit for consumption into food banks. The opinion called for a clearer definition at EU level of food loss and food waste, along with an acknowledgement that different approaches are required in developing and industrialised countries. The Committee also called for efforts to raise consumers' awareness and to reinforce a waste hierarchy in order to reduce food losses and wastage. "Prevention" comes first, followed by "use for human consumption" (such as donations to food banks), "use for animal consumption", and lastly, "energy production and composting".

1. <http://www.fao.org/publications/sofi/2014/en/>
2. <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.nat-opinions.32593>
3. <http://www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-home/en/>
4. <http://www.fao.org/family-farming-2014/en/>
5. <http://www.fao.org/soils-2015/about/en/>

Food waste was one of the priority projects of the EESC's Wind of Change initiative, due in large part to the findings of this opinion. The PSG worked closely with the steering group which was set up to coordinate this priority project, and a comparative study on EU Member States' legislations and practices on food donations⁶ was established. The study's findings were presented at a conference in July 2014, which resulted in recommendations from organised civil society to facilitate food donation in EU Member States. These have since helped to change food donation practices within some Member States (such as Belgium and Croatia) and attracted interest from other EU institutions⁷.

In a 2015 **opinion on land-grabbing in Europe**⁸, the Committee called for active measures to protect "family farms" to ensure that small-scale agriculture can offer a viable alternative to industrialised forms. The opinion reported that in Romania, up to 10% of agricultural land is now in the hands of investors from third countries and a further 20-30% is controlled by investors from the EU.

To address this, the EESC wants all EU Member States to implement the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT) and to report to the European Commission and the FAO on the use and application of the VGGT in their land governance policies. The EESC also called upon the European Parliament and the Council to discuss whether the free movement of capital in respect of the alienation and acquisition of agricultural land and agribusinesses should be guaranteed.

In September 2015, the EESC adopted **an opinion on agricultural trade and global food security**⁹, which examined the effects of market liberalisation on Europe's agro-food sector and rural areas. The opinion pointed out that SMEs are particularly dependent on sustained administrative support for accessing markets in third countries, and it welcomed the further extension of partnership agreements with developing countries. It also noted that bilateral free trade agreements concluded by the EU can help considerably in dismantling non-tariff barriers to trade.

The way forward

The PSG will continue to encourage a more holistic approach to the challenges of food security by focusing on issues where civil society can make a real difference, such as in defending "the right to food", advocating for food quality and reducing food loss and waste. The Group will also keep ensuring that key challenges, such as sustainable agricultural production as well as more efficient food systems and supply chains, are addressed at the EU and global levels through its presence at fora like the CFS.

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Further information

EESC opinion on land grabbing in Europe/family farming: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.nat-opinions.32593>

EESC opinion on agriculture trade/global food security: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.nat-opinions.35264>

EESC opinion on prevention and reduction of food waste: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.nat-opinions.25955>

EESC project on food waste and food donations: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.nat-section-foodwaste>

CFS website: <http://www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-home/cfs-about/en/>

UN 2014 International Year of Family Farming: <http://www.fao.org/family-farming-2014/en/>

UN 2015 International Year of Soils: <http://www.fao.org/soils-2015/about/en/>

6. <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-eu-food-donations>

7. <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/ppaper-en.pdf>

8. <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.nat-opinions.32593>

9. <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.nat-opinions.35264>