

Euractiv online debate “Food for thought – How can we reshape our food systems for a sustainable future?” – 20th June 2023 AM

Secretariat’s notes

- Event supported by The European Alliance for Plant-based Foods (EAPF).
- Recording available [here](#).
- Intro by moderator Mariam Zaidi (Euractiv): Focus on plant-based foods today. Meat production => massive GHG emissions. In addition, if you eat meat => major health issues like cardiovascular diseases. Plant-based foods are becoming more popular. Sales have increased in countries like Germany or Austria. Farm to Fork (F2F): proposal for a legislative framework for sustainable food systems (SFS) to be presented by end 2023.

Opening statement by Jasmijn de Boo, Global CEO, ProVeg International & Vice-President and Board Member, The European Alliance for Plant-based Foods

- Our current food system puts strains on our planet.
- Adapt our food system to European Green Deal? Can be done with shorter supply chains and new technologies
- In addition, need SFS framework with clear targets, overarching principles and measurement tools. Follow progress.

Anastasia Alvizou, Deputy Head of Unit, Farm to Fork Strategy, DG SANTE, European Commission

- Food is emotional.
- [F2F strategy](#) was published in 2020. Key element of strategy is transition to sustainable food systems. Future legislative framework will bring about that, to solidify essence of F2F strategy. Enabling character for paradigm shift on the way we produce and consume food. Ensure a food environment that favours sustainable food choices.

Tom Arnold, Chair, [Irish Food Vision 2030 AgriFood Strategy](#)

- The Irish Food Vision 2030 is a government doc issued in 2021. Objective: Ireland seen as a leader of transition towards sustainable food systems
- Coherence btw health and food systems. The strategy is being implemented.

Isabel Paliotta, Policy Officer for Sustainable Food Systems, European Environmental Bureau (EEB)

- Proposal for a legislative framework for sustainable food systems is the core of F2F promise. Creating a policy framework that guides transition, it is a pre-requisite to ensure human and planetary health.
- Policy fragmentation is a problem. Need for a food system approach in policy making. Need to work on processing, marketing, consumption and waste, aligned with objectives and principles.
- Consumption is key but not all burden of changes shall be on consumer. Info + structural measures on food environment are needed.

Dr Marco Springmann, Senior Researcher, Environment and Health, Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University

- F2F strategy is great as policy doc. But legislative tools shall include quantitative targets for food consumption too like reduction of meat and dairy consumption.
- Dietary changes are at heart of issue. Not necessarily completely plant-based but flexitarian otherwise objectives of F2F will not be reached.

Moderator's question 1: how does your diet look like?

- J. De Boo: I am vegan. Healthy foods. Gluten-free bread. Lots of vegetables and quinoa. Veggie burgers. Vegan pizza. You don't need to go all the way. Plant-based foods can be a solution to issues we are facing. CAP and promotion policies have shaped people's diet like meat. We eat too much meat if you look at dietary guidelines. We need to make that shift on personal and EU levels. Eat more plant-based foods.

Moderator's question 2: What do data say about dietary changes? Dietary concerns?

- Dr M. Springmann: we don't see many dietary changes in aggregated data. Things has stalled in many EU countries. Changing food environments need to make it easy to opt for sustainable foods. And include rural areas and low-income households.

Moderator's question 3: If the data is not there, how to legislate?

- A. Alvizou: no one size fits all solution. F2F is North star for transition. Common principles and stimulate favourable food environment. Consider the entire economic, political context where consumers interact with food. So far, emphasis on responsibility of the consumer. Do we need something more? That is what we will look at. Ex: public procurement, Principles for labelling (sustainability info) + more targeted actions in certain areas. We should eliminate certain practices like marketing. Framework will NOT ban products. It is not about one or the other. Currently, overconsumption of red meat or dairy. We need to stimulate plant-based.

Moderator's question 4 re negative impact of climate crises, conflicts and migration.

- I. Paliotta: effects on ecosystem are rife. Floods in Italy. Droughts in Spain and Portugal. We will have to act on. It wont be enough to act gradually. We need to act now. Policy landscape: effects of crises are really jeopardizing food security and our ability to produce food on long-term. Animal based products = massive part of problem (land use and emissions). If we look at health aspects, it is possible to have healthy diet while reducing consumption of animal protein.

Moderator's question 5 re Ireland's Food Vision 2030.

- Mr Arnold: Ireland is a leader in sustainable food system. Important innovations in this doc: commitment for coherence btw domestic and foreign policy. Produce evidence for action => Ireland has a voice at international level and move things at international levels. Ex: stocktaking moment in July + COP28 in Dec in Dubai. Here, current presidency has acknowledged the link btw climate and food policies.
- Ireland played a role in [2021 UN food system summit](#) + [Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit 2021](#): Ireland made a major commitment on nutrition. The country has been consistently serious about this.

- Alvizou: Legislative framework shall be a common basis whereas member states can further develop their strategies.

Moderator's question 6: stronger focus on production. What are the main bottlenecks to making food systems more sustainable?

- I. Paliotta: There is an issue of power concentration in the middle of food chains where actors (large processors, retailers) are active in this conjunction with signals and messages, determined by verticalized power. Food system being geared towards profit maximisation and market interests. Foods no longer seen as public good. Bottlenecks on production side: massive issue with policy coherence. There are environmental objectives but subsidies support unhealthy behaviour.
- Dr Springmann: what is missing is proper action. Ex of Ireland has one of the most unsustainable food systems and unhealthy diets! We need strict policies. Behavioural changes: we need multicomponent measures (labelling, but not only, like fiscal tools). Meat products could easily double in price so that consumers shift to other products. If you reform agricultural subsidies at EU level, what is supported should be sustainable and not animal-sourced foods. We demonstrate that in our studies. We need progress from lofty ambitious statements to concrete policy actions.
- T. Arnold: Ireland Food Vision 2030 is clear: move towards healthier diet. Reduction in meat consumption. Problem in Western developed countries. The rest of world is not overconsuming meat.
- Dr Springmann: Low-income countries already consume more red and processed meat than what is considered sustainable! we should not export unhealthy and unsustainable foods to low-income countries. At current levels, look at numbers, it is clear. Outcome of comprehensive of literature review of healthy eating.
- J. de Boo: science is clear. Overconsumption of meat. 40% reduction of meat consumption? 40% is bold target by 2030. No time for incremental changes. Individual responsibility. We need framework? Be bold about public procurement. Fiscal measures like VAT. Make it affordable for everyone. Labelling: veggie burger, plant-based milk. We cannot sustain our current dietary patterns.

Moderator's question 7: why is message not getting though? Why do we still eat our meat and national diets?

- J. de Boo: consumers are aware but there is misinformation. Inflation is bad for everyone but hits certain sectors harder. VAT.
- N. Alvizou: food is entrenched with strong emotional and cultural aspects, which makes transition difficult. What we see is a broader acknowledgment from all food system actors. We need a transition. We agree on goal and we need to agree on the how. 2 instruments we are thinking of: labelling (but too much burden on consumers) and public procurement. We can

do more on food waste and on short supply chains. Governance: we need to talk to one another. Learn from best practices. Transition is not painless but it can happen.

- I. Paliotta: F2F strategy and prospects and idea of a framework is important sign, step in right direction. Time is pressing. Steps in right direction are promising. We are aware of amount of work needed. Numbers are there. Message is heard but it is contradictory. For ex, what we hear is not what we find in supermarkets. What is pushed in shops is not necessarily healthy and sustainable. We don't all have the financial means and time to opt for sustainable food. This is what policy action is needed.
- T. Arnold: I agree. Lots of pressure on ordinary people. Political willingness to enable people to move in this direction. Greater political awareness of health consequences of unhealthy diets. More clear-cut actions on how this can be changed. It applies everywhere. Triple burden of malnutrition even in poor countries!

Moderator's question 8: Emotion. Culture. Where does plant-based food fit there? Meat alternatives mimic texture meat => satisfy meat crave !

- J. de Boo: taste is important. Fermenting peas can help to taste better. Ex of smart protein project in Ireland. Upcycling waste from beer making to create new protein products. That's the kind of research we need in EU. Less research on animal-based foods and more research on plant-based products. A lot of entrepreneurs leave EU to Singapore and US where it is easier to conduct research.

Moderator's question 9: What about cultural change with young age. Teach kids from young age: is that the way to improve culture?

- Dr Springmann: Dietary guidance in certain countries is inadequate. Many cultures did not use many animal sourced foods. Meat consumption is a recent development. Culture also determined by price and policy. Focus on specific alternative products is lazy too. Innovators try to replace one for one.
- J. de Boo: alternatives are bridge technologies to shift away from meat-based products. Increase pulse and whole grain is key. EU can set great example. Less promotion for animal-based foods.

Questions from audience

Stop EU funded campaigns to promote meat and dairy?

- N. Alvizoy: public procurement policy is to be reviewed. Over consumption of meat and dairy and underconsumption of plant-based products AND fruit and vegetables. School scheme is one action to be reviewed. We need to see a bit more there.

What about faster novel foods procedure?

- Dr Springmann: this misses the mark. Studies on all processed plant-based products are energy intensive. Emissions are great with those products too. Emission saving is less with unprocessed foods. So you miss opportunity here if. + potential health impacts. You miss ¾ of foods for disease reduction (use of additives, high amounts of sodium). Perhaps healthier than red meat but this less certain for chicken and fish. We should not lose sight of diet equation.

I need to change my diet...don't eat processed foods? The messages are confusing for the consumer!

- Dr Springmann: food companies want to sell their products. Countries say that their meat and dairy are great, which is scientifically wrong. Research => what is healthy is the same for decades. What you need 5 to 8 portions of fruit and vegetables per day and much less meat and dairy. 1 or 2 portions of legumes. Whole grain. 1 serving of red meat per week! No processed grains.
- I. Paliotta: we should make sure that the burden of the transition is not on consumers entirely. Important for policy to act on food environment at retail level.

Question on price

- J. de Boo: price is coming down. Animal products are heavily subsidised and do not reflect true costs and externalities. They would be far more expensive if externalities and true cost would be included. VAT. Price parity.
- Dr Springmann: a plant-based basket is already cheaper! Fiscal incentives and strong messages are both needed.

Final thoughts

- N. Alvizou: urgent need for framework. Make all food system actors responsible, including governments. National competence: educational and fiscal policy. Retailers have to do more. They nudge consumers, they can do that. EU has all elements in place. F2F was a major step forward and we need solidify with legislative framework.
- T. Arnold: governments need to be more active towards better consumption patterns. Importance of producers. Sustainability. Envi sustainability. Social responsibility. Opportunities. Reasonably rural society.
- Dr Springmann: we need consistent and clear targets. Flexible enough not overly prescriptive. Clear policy measures like tax reform. True cost accounting. EU ETS. Consistent messaging. Governments on board with discussions on where science is.
- J. De Boo: no time for incremental changes.