

IN BRIEF

Food for Earth and for all: a call for the EU to act

Context¹

Existing food systems are damaging both the planet and people's health and fail to contribute to equitable livelihoods for all food system actors and fair value distribution.

The environmental **impacts of the food consumption of an average EU citizen are outside the safe operating space for humanity², transgressing planetary boundaries** for climate change (over three times), particulate matter (e.g. over 5 times for ambient air pollution) and freshwater (over 8 times, including toxic pollution of rivers and the marine environment by high levels of nitrates).

Apart from the direct footprint of the EU food consumption, **the EU has a key role in driving the current unsustainable global food system.**

The decision-making power shaping unsustainable business models can be traced back to a small number of corporate players, including the agricultural inputs industry and global food traders, large-scale industrial farms and food processing and retail giants, while farmers with smaller holdings struggle to make a living and to pay back debts. For example, four companies control an estimated 70-90% of the global grain trade.

There is therefore a vast amount of potential for the EU to act against the catastrophic transgression of planetary, environmental and social boundaries on various fronts: the EU's own food consumption choices and the resulting footprint; the EU-driven global trade flows in agri-food commodities and linked financial flows; and the EU's standard-setting potential as a regulatory powerhouse.

The European Green Deal and its Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy have made very modest advances in recognising the need for a transformation of the food system to achieve sustainability. Current policies still fall short of what is needed to transform the food supply chain (e.g. involving agriculture in ecosystem maintenance, building resilience to climate shocks and diversifying

- The science is clear: the global food system is damaging the planet and its people, and the EU has a key role in perpetuating it. Achieving climate targets and addressing the planetary emergency is impossible without a food system transformation.
- The proposal for a Framework for a Sustainable EU Food System must be urgently tabled and be used as a catalyst for this transformation.
- The next Commission should pursue a science-based 'Food for Earth and for all' strategy, with bold supply-side and demand-side policies and an institutional reform – aiming towards supplying healthy and nutritious diets for everyone through a system that acts within environmental and social boundaries.

¹ See the **Background Annex** and the 4th turnaround proposed by [Earth for All - A Survival Guide for Humanity - Club of Rome](#) for more detailed analysis of the current situation.

² The safe operating space for humanity is defined as the threshold in the Planetary boundaries framework defining the limits of a set of planet's biophysical subsystems or processes (Rockström et al., 2009). If the threshold is surpassed, there is the risk that important subsystems (e.g., monsoon) could shift into a new state, often with deleterious or potentially even disastrous consequences for humans and changing permanently the current state in the Holocene.

farmers' incomes) and food demand (e.g. shifting towards more plant-based diets). Lack of progress from a climate change mitigation perspective is particularly apparent in relation to agriculture, which has been lagging behind other sectors in terms of GHG emissions reductions over the past few decades³.

Moreover, recent developments show an abandonment of the F2F strategy altogether, as key initiatives such as the Framework on Sustainable EU Food systems (which was intended to be a catalyst for the food system's transition to sustainability) are put on hold indefinitely. The State of the Union proposed instead a strategic dialogue on the future of the agriculture in the EU, without any indication that the sustainability objectives initiated by the F2F would be advanced and increased through this dialogue.

Consequently, **EU policy making in the agri-food area falls substantially short of being fully evidence-based, as it continues to take an incremental approach in the face of the planetary emergency and is even back-sliding in the face of resistance from interest groups.**

The actions proposed below aim to make EU food policies more transformative.

Proposals for action

1. Within the mandate of the **current Commission: table as soon as possible an ambitious proposal on a Framework on Sustainable EU Food Systems, developed around the objective of bringing the food system within planetary boundaries.** This would keep the momentum of the work on the transition to sustainability and be coherent with other policy goals – such as the 2050 climate neutrality target or the 2040 target to be announced in 2024. We cannot credibly claim that we are working towards climate neutrality and at the same time freeze action on food systems!
2. For the mandate of the **next Commission: revamp the F2F strategy into a 'Food for Earth and for all' strategy** – with the primary objective of supplying healthy and nutritious diets for all people through a system that acts within environmental planetary boundaries and is socially just.

The 'Food for Earth and for all' strategy should fully accept the current failings of the food system, and establish a correct prioritisation of peoples' wellbeing and sustainability dimensions:

- ✓ **Environmental:** there is no negotiating with nature. Food relies on healthy soils and ecosystems, a stable climate and limited availability of land. Getting the food system within planetary boundaries is therefore a first imperative.
- ✓ **Social:** the right to food⁴ for all must be fulfilled. The food system should *nourish people*, fostering diets which are disease-preventing and health-enhancing, in a socially just way.
- ✓ **Economic:** food systems business models should be based on long-term sustainability and resilience. The current, predominantly productivist paradigm which focuses on producing large amounts of food in a way that maximises profitability for certain actors, is incompatible with long-term sustainability.

Concretely, the 'Food for Earth and for all' strategy should trigger a re-design of food system policies and institutions following the above prioritisation, and wholly grounded on scientific evidence.

The full scientific knowledge available should be used for developing a clear vision on what a sustainable food system would mean on the ground. The recent IPCC assessment report finds

³ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/trends-and-projections-in-europe-2023>.

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-food/about-right-food-and-human-rights>.

that only a combination of supply- and demand-side measures, and only consistent policy packages⁵ can lead to the necessary change.

This change would include a combination of sustainable farming systems (sustainable intensive and/or extensive farming systems, including agroecology) with innovative technologies (such as precision fermentation) and a food environment that is conducive to the necessary changes in diet.

For all these aspects, the European Commission is uniquely placed to carry out work informed by evidence, facts and figures, not influenced by ideology or vested interests.

Key components of the 'Food for Earth and for all' strategy

Supply-side policies

- The **CAP**, as a key funding instrument of the EU agri-food system and the largest expenditure item in the EU budget, should serve the wellbeing of its citizens, and also of the majority of farmers (as opposed to the existing situation where 20-30% of farmers benefit from the vast majority of the CAP funds). It should be fundamentally reoriented to align behind the objective of the 'Food for Earth and for all' strategy.
- **Trade and industrial policies** should be aligned accordingly, so that the EU becomes a true catalyst of change in global food systems. The recent opinion of the Commission's Scientific Advice Mechanism (SAM) on the topic of sustainable food consumption⁶ recommends to 'restrict EU imports of food commodities from places where food production causes major environmental damage, either by border taxes or by bans'.

Demand-side policies

- The adoption of European Planetary Health Diet⁷ (a diet that is healthy, reduces diet-related diseases, and allows food production within planetary boundaries) should become an established policy objective for the EU. National Food-Based Dietary Guidelines should evolve into 'Sustainability-minded Food Based Dietary Guidelines'⁸, and used to guide and enable transformation pathways through suitable economic, governance and innovation environments. An EU-wide framework could be developed to facilitate this⁹.
- According to the SAM, supporting '**a food environment that helps citizens to make healthy and sustainable food choices**' is one of the key avenues of action. The SAM opinion on sustainable food consumption highlights the importance of policy in relation to the food environment and proposes several potential interventions. Regulatory and non-regulatory

⁵ See [IPCC 2022 AR6 WGIII Chapter12.pdf](#), Table 12.9 | Assessment of food system policies targeting (post-farm gate) food chain actors and consumers

⁶ European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Group of Chief Scientific Advisors, Towards sustainable food consumption – Promoting healthy, affordable and sustainable food consumption choices, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/29369>

⁷ Inspired by the Planetary Health Diet EAT <https://eatforum.org/eat-lancet-commission/the-planetary-health-diet-and-you/>

⁸ Costa Leite et al., 2020, [Healthy low nitrogen footprint diets](#), *Global Food Security*

⁹ The SAM opinion on sustainable food consumption finds that 'an EU-wide framework for 'good practices' in updating national dietary guidelines to link health and sustainability could provide everyone with access to practical information to improve their diets.'

- Actions by the Commission should follow up on the SAM recommendations, encouraging EU diets to move closer to a Planetary Health Diet.

In addition, further **action to address food loss and waste across the entire supply chain** should be pursued, in alignment with the commitments of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12.3 and the aim of achieving the 50% food loss and waste reduction target by 2030. The recent proposal¹⁰ on food waste reduction targets, which only focuses on the food wasted at retail and consumers levels, without including targets for reducing food waste at the primary production stage and without increasing the overall target to 50%, foregoes an important opportunity to get closer to EU climate goals and international commitments.

- More broadly, **social and economic policies** should strive to ensure access to healthy and sustainable diets also for low-income households, by addressing poverty and lack of nutritional education as some of the root causes of poor nutrition.

Institutional reform to reflect a systemic approach towards food sustainability

- The internal governance structure in EU institutions needs to be re-designed, in order to reflect a food-system approach and the objectives of the 'Food for Earth and for all' strategy described above, as opposed to the existing structure where agricultural productivity is still the primordial objective around food. Renewed structures could include for instance a new DG for sustainable food and land and sea systems in the Commission, or a reorganisation of Council Working parties and Parliament Committees – in a manner that would facilitate a holistic approach of food system sustainability policies.
- Such structures would need to be staffed and managed by colleagues trained in system thinking and interested to work on the transition to food system sustainability, to ensure that the expertise is there to deliver solutions for the transformation.
- Within each institution, cooperation with other services and departments needs to be institutionalised to ensure policy coherence and inclusive policy development.

Clear communication on sustainable diets and sustainable food systems

- Communication is often mentioned by citizens and stakeholders as one of the areas where EU institutions have ample room for improvement. In relation to food systems, the 2020 SAM opinion 'Towards a sustainable food system' also recommends including communication initiatives as part of the policy mix, to complement regulatory and other actions with a view to bringing about the necessary behavioural changes. In that context, SAM points to the necessity of information campaigns to raise consumer awareness about health and the sustainability impact of diets.
- A future 'Food for Earth and for all' strategy would be the perfect opportunity to launch a large-scale communication campaign at EU level, through all available channels, about the impact of food choices and why substantial changes are needed. The Commission should aim to mobilise Member States to echo this campaign at national level as well, to maximise its impact. More immediately, in the context of the Communication on an 'EU climate target for 2040', which is planned for early 2024, the Commission should take the opportunity to begin communicating clearly and assertively about the changes in European diets (i.e. transitioning to a more plant-based diet) which are indispensable for the achievement of climate targets.

¹⁰ https://food.ec.europa.eu/safety/food-waste/eu-actions-against-food-waste/food-waste-reduction-targets_en

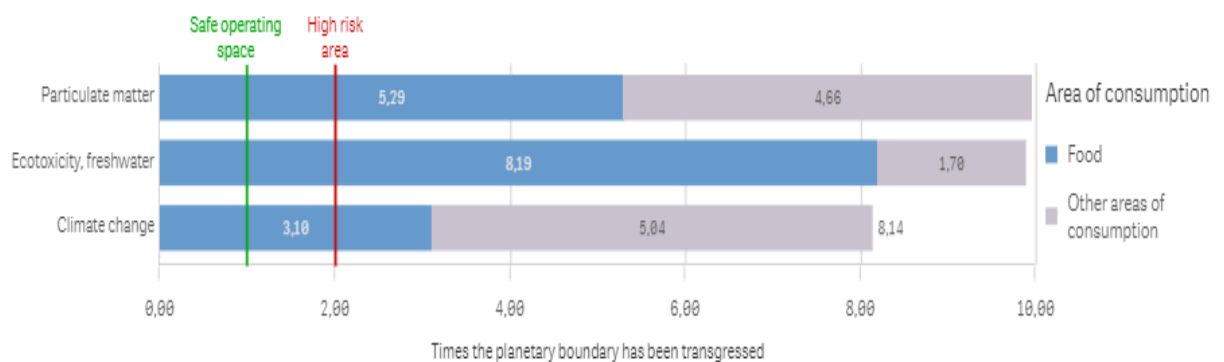
Background annex

1. What is at stake?

Food systems are among the core drivers of the climate and biodiversity planetary emergencies. The global food system is contributing significantly to the exceeding of several planetary boundaries¹¹ and generates about one third of total anthropogenic GHG emissions¹². Food systems also put immense pressure on water resources¹³, which in conjunction with increasingly frequent extreme weather events and droughts creates major water scarcity risks even for Northern countries.

Assessment of food consumption impacts per capita against planetary boundaries per capita

Impact per capita - European Union 27 - 2021



For Planetary boundaries: note that the **high risk area** is considered beyond two times the **Planetary Boundary**. Between the boundary and the high risk area, there is an **uncertainty area** due to the complexity of defining a global boundary for ecological processes.

Source: Data from Consumption Footprint Platform (<https://eplca.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ConsumptionFootprintPlatform.html>).

From a social perspective, food systems are plagued by unfair trading practices, and inhumane or unhealthy working conditions and even child labour, which are still present in many food value chains.

Moreover, food systems globally fail to deliver on the right to nutrition for most people: especially in developed countries (and increasingly in developing countries), unhealthy diets are one of the top risk factors for non-communicable diseases (e.g. cardio-vascular diseases and some types of cancers)¹⁴, with huge costs to society¹⁵ (economically, but also in terms of wellbeing). Globally,

¹¹ Rockström et al., 2023, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-023-06083-8>.

¹² Crippa et al., 2021 <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43016-021-00225-9> ; Rosenzweig et al., 2020.

¹³ Agriculture accounts for 70% of fresh water use worldwide, including 20% for feed production, according to 2020 FAO figures <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/er.h2o.fwag.zs> .

¹⁴ Willett et al., 2019.

¹⁵ The costs of inaction of the current global food and land use system if the current trends continue are worth USD 11.9 trillion a year in 2018 (Pharo et al., 2019). They refer to the main negative externalities and inefficiencies identified in the health, environment and economic domains: 55% of the costs are health costs related with problems of obesity, undernutrition and pollution, 27% are environmental externalities (greenhouse gas emissions and natural capital costs) and the remaining 18% are related with rural welfare and the inefficiencies arising from food loss and waste and fertiliser leakage.

over 800 million people are chronically undernourished, facing daily food shortages, while more than 1.9 billion adults are overweight, of whom over 650 million are defined as obese.¹⁶

2. The EU in the global food system

The environmental **impacts of the food consumption of an average EU citizen are outside the safe operating space for humanity**¹⁷.

Livestock products (meat and dairy) dominate the environmental footprint of EU food consumption, representing around 66% of the overall impacts. Fish and seafood are the 5th highest contributor, accounting for around 5% of the overall environmental impact¹⁸.

Apart from the direct footprint of the EU food consumption, **the EU has a key role in driving the current unsustainable global food system**. The EU's agri-food trade model revolves around importing low-value raw products, such as cocoa, fruits and soybeans, and exporting high-value ones like wine and chocolate – making a positive contribution to the EU economy, but not necessarily to sustainability of the global food system. Many of the agri-food commodities imported into the EU are produced at the expense of millions of hectares of forests and other natural ecosystems, fuelling climate change, rainforest destruction, biodiversity loss and social injustices. Conventional agriculture, which is predominant in the EU, heavily relies on external inputs such as fertilisers, and the EU is largely dependent on imports for most mineral fertilisers¹⁹, which are generally very fossil-fuel intensive. In addition, the EU produces more animal products than is recommended for our health. To sustain this oversized livestock sector, more than half of the grain crops grown in the EU are fed to animals, and in addition the EU imports vast amounts of soy and other feed. Approximately 80% of the biomass produced for food in the EU-27 is destined for animal-based food, while 20% is plant-based food²⁰. This represents also a large opportunity cost, in terms of not using the land and/or biomass effectively in support of climate and environmental goals within a sustainable and circular bioeconomy²¹.

For fisheries and aquaculture products the self-sufficiency rate was estimated at 38.9%²², so the environmental footprint of EU fish consumption can be associated to a large extent with imports.

The unprecedented concentration of corporate power results in large corporations having undue influence on the governance of food systems, which they use to protect the status quo and extract profits rather than engage in the transformation to sustainability²³ and people's wellbeing. Financialisation trends in the food system (e.g. untransparent private equity investments in agriculture) promote an intensive and export-oriented model of agriculture, mainly in the global South²⁴. In addition, the use of financial instruments (e.g. exchange-traded funds and derivatives contracts) linked to agricultural commodities in financial markets has been plagued by speculative activity, driving food prices up and thereby creating socio-economic vulnerabilities.

¹⁶ SAPEA (2020). A Sustainable Food System For the EU. <https://doi.org/10.26356/sustainablefood>

¹⁷ The safe operating space for humanity is defined as the threshold in the planetary boundaries framework defining the limits of a set of planet's biophysical subsystems or processes (Rockström et al., 2009). If the threshold is surpassed, there is the risk that important subsystems (e.g. monsoons) could shift into a new state, often with deleterious or potentially even disastrous consequences for humans and changing permanently the current state in the Holocene.

¹⁸ <https://eplca.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ConsumptionFootprintPlatform.html>).

¹⁹ https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-07/market-brief-fertilisers_june2019_en_0.pdf.

²⁰ See EU Bioeconomy Progress Report 2022 https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/adoption-bioeconomy-strategy-progress-report-2022-06-09_en.

²¹ <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s41893-020-00603-4>.

²² https://www.eumofa.eu/documents/20178/521182/EFM2022_EN.pdf.

²³ [tippingthescales.pdf \(ipes-food.org\)](#); [Food Barons 2022 | ETC Group](#).

²⁴ [GRAIN | Barbarians at the barn: private equity sinks its teeth into agriculture](#).

3. Existing EU policy: persistent shortcomings and risk of backsliding

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) have been at the core of policies driving the EU food system over decades, with Treaty-established goals (in particular for the CAP) of ensuring food security, fair incomes for producers and affordable food for consumers being central.

While these policies historically served the purposes for which they were designed, they are not responding to the challenge of the present – which is to achieve a far-reaching transformation of the food system that would bring it within planetary boundaries. For example, in the CAP, which remains the major EU policy directed at the food sector (and the largest expenditure item of the EU budget, with a share of 35%), a considerable amount of coupled subsidies to livestock production still exists, despite the fact that livestock products (meat and dairy products) dominate the environmental footprint of EU food consumption, representing around 66% of the overall impact²⁵.

The European Green Deal and its F2F strategy have made advances in recognising the need for a transformation of the food system to achieve sustainability and in introducing a systemic approach towards this goal in EU policy. Even in these progressive initiatives, discourse remained timid on food sustainability, and the generally pursued policy approach has been one of incremental change, not transformative action. Adequate responses towards transformative change are perceived as a threat to current structures, which is instrumentalised for a more and more polarised discourse serving short-term goals and blocking an evidence-based search for 'win-win' solutions, for example in the diversification of land managers' income in the maintaining ecosystem services or engaging in sustainable food- and bio-based value chains. The framing of the challenges around food has therefore not recognised the transgressions of planetary boundaries, their potentially catastrophic consequences, including on farmers, who are directly impacted by climate change, and their main drivers (e.g. over-production and over-consumption of meat and dairy products; over-concentration of power in food systems, which increases resistance to change).

Moreover, recent backtracking on the F2F strategy suggests that the influence of vested interests remains strong, and that short-sighted political calculations are constraining policy making processes at all levels. Inadequate internal structures in the EU institutions, reflecting artificial divisions of food-related policy areas and insufficient cross-sectoral cooperation ensuring policy coherence, are continuing to hamper holistic thinking on how to bring about a transformation of the food system.

²⁵ Their contribution to the food consumption has slightly increased during the last decade due to a higher increase in the consumption per capita of these products compared to the other product groups (the contribution of livestock products is now 3% higher compared to 2010). See [Consumption Footprint | EPLCA \(europa.eu\)](#)