

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — From farm to fork — the local and regional dimension

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. warmly welcomes the 'Farm to Fork' strategy (hereinafter 'the strategy') , which, together with the 'EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030' ⁽¹⁾, is at the heart of the European Green Deal ⁽²⁾ and is essential to making Europe a climate-neutral continent by 2050; emphasises that the two strategies must dovetail perfectly in order to limit the impact of food systems on the climate, sustainable environment and biodiversity, by promoting soil health, the protection of pollinators, and the use of biological resources for integrated pest management, water and ecosystems, and ensuring safe and healthy food at the same time. They must also help to tackle the issue of the depopulation of rural areas; considers that food autonomy is equally strategic and entails maintaining production capacity; this requires sufficient budgetary support from the EU;

2. stresses the need for consistency between the various food-related policy areas, such as agriculture, livestock farming, forestry, fisheries and maritime affairs, and environmental, energy and health, consumer, production, employment, rural development and forestry policies, through a multilevel governance approach so that concerted action at European level can help the implementation of the strategy for achieving ambitious and shared reform objectives. The contribution of local communities and rural communities needs to be better acknowledged and integrated into policies. Recoupling the cultural identity of the regions with the ecosystems is essential;

3. points out that the COVID-19 pandemic has made us acutely aware of the interrelations between our health, ecosystems, supply chains, consumption patterns and planetary boundaries. The current pandemic is just one example: the increasing recurrence of droughts, floods, forest fires and new pests is a constant reminder that our food system is under threat and must become more sustainable and resilient, capable of functioning in all circumstances and of providing people with a sufficient supply of healthy, adequate and affordable food;

4. notes that sustainable agriculture cannot be developed if the EU continues to import cheap agricultural products which do not comply with European production standards and are in unfair competition with European production and to export its own surpluses at prices below European production costs; calls for the urgent introduction of new multilateral rules that are fairer and more solidarity-based so that the economic sustainability of EU producers' farms is not undermined; hopes that such a new approach is directed towards strengthening producers' economic perspectives and the links between producers and consumers, and supports diversified food systems and alternatives that complement conventional production systems; would like to see a more equal redistribution of value, which better remunerates producers that provide quality public goods and ecosystem services;

⁽¹⁾ COM(2020) 380 final.

⁽²⁾ COM(2019) 640 final.

5. calls on the European Commission to consistently use existing indicators (e.g. the SDG Indicators) for monitoring progress in achieving the target to unite sustainable food production, ecosystem services and fair economic perspectives for farmers and employees across different sectoral policies; new indicators should be introduced only in areas that have not yet been adequately captured; hopes to see all players in the food system actively participate in monitoring and assessing the implementation of the strategy;

6. hopes that the role of regions and cities as key players in the food transition will be recognised and supported; among its other functions, the European Committee of the Regions is a reservoir of knowledge of European cities' and regions' practices, and can therefore be an important intermediary for communication and mutual learning between levels of government; in the context of implementing and framing the future CAP, it is essential that European regions be able to continue to perform their role as managing authorities in order to support the transitions set out in the Farm to Fork strategy as locally as possible and to ensure that the future strategic plans meet local needs. In this regard, it would be essential to regionalise the first pillar in the strategic plans, so that eco-schemes can be managed as important tools to support the implementation of the strategy in a way that corresponds to the specific needs of each region;

Support for producers, promotion of short and transparent supply chains

7. recommends closer monitoring of the trend towards land concentration in favour of agribusiness, the increase in the price of land, the abandonment of land in marginal areas and the consequent loss of agricultural land by small to medium-sized producers and new farmers; therefore recommends changes to existing instruments under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), such as a possible cap on direct payments per farm, in order to facilitate access to agricultural land for local small to medium-sized farms and for new agro-ecological farmers operating individually or in groups, avoiding the loss of active farmers; recommends that the balance between the economy and the environment under the CAP be preserved; also encourages the use of reclaimed water for irrigation in deficit areas and the promotion of agroforestry;

8. is pleased that the Commission plans to boost organic farming, announcing that it is willing to ensure, following an impact study, that at least 25 % of the EU's agricultural land is used for organic farming by 2030, and to bring about a significant increase in organic aquaculture; likewise calls on the Commission to assess other cultivation and production systems that deliver environmental benefits; in this regard, recommends considering and supporting the role of local and regional policies as a means of preserving and increasing land used for organic, precision and integrated production, which takes care to preserve environmental resources, through programmes such as local food policies (including bio-districts, eco-regions and bio-regions⁽³⁾) and training processes; hopes that, under the CAP, the transition will match developments in the consumption of organic products; also calls for measures to support the structuring of the whole organic sector and not only the development of production, in order to preserve the added value associated with this method of production and processing in various regions, including encouraging the provision of water networks so as to provide organic producers with water compatible with organic farming legislation;

9. calls for greater emphasis to be placed on short supply chains and for recognition of the diversity of production systems across Europe, including alternative production systems, aimed at promoting local and regional forms of production, processing and marketing, based on nutritional quality and animal and environmental well-being; calls for a European framework to be established for promoting and strengthening short supply chains, based on innovative practices adopted successfully at local level; calls for greater support for collective local projects that involve processors, local authorities, farms, forest holdings, traders and local consumers to develop a local food offer; also calls for support for the diversification of production and local and regional processing, for the development of new sectors (such as plant proteins, particularly vegetables and high-quality sectors such as berries and nuts, etc.), that factor in the promotion of secondary supply chains linked to secondary and waste flows, in order to create added value in the various stages of the food chain, examining the possibility of introducing sustainable production certification, which would include water and soil management; points out here that concepts such as local and regional should be considered in the context of the product in question; the starting point is ensuring that the product has a small environmental footprint, avoiding unnecessary journeys, and improving the relationship between producers and consumers;

⁽³⁾ An example here is BioRegio Bayern 2012, which set the goal of 30 % of its land to be used for organic farming by 2030 (Source: *The role of local and regional authorities in making food systems more sustainable*, study commissioned by the CoR).

10. recognises that the production, processing, retailing, packaging and transportation of food contribute to air, soil and water pollution and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and have a profound impact on biodiversity, and therefore would like to see the promotion of secondary flows towards a circular economy; in line with the Commission, deems the following measures to be imperative:

- (a) reduce the overall use and risk of chemical pesticides by 50 % and the use of more hazardous pesticides ⁽⁴⁾ by 50 % by 2030, while ensuring that farmers are offered genuine alternatives to both the pesticides and farming practices used that do not limit their productivity, with more resources being allocated to research in this area and ensuring faster market access;
- (b) reduce nutrient losses by at least 50 %, while ensuring that there is no deterioration in soil fertility;
- (c) reduce the use of fertilisers by at least 20 % by 2030;
- (d) reduce sales of antimicrobials for farmed animals and in aquaculture by 50 % by 2030;
- (e) continue to reduce GHG emissions from the agricultural sector and from land use, in particular nitrous oxide and methane, the latter also produced by the livestock sector, as well as agricultural use of moorland sites, thus ensuring that the sector contributes appropriately to the European Climate Law process; to this end, calls on the Commission to publish, as soon as possible, a 2030 climate target plan to increase the GHG emissions reduction target to 55 % compared with 1990 levels ⁽⁵⁾, implementing a coherent plan with adequate financial commitments;
- (f) increase grassland and the production of protein feed in Europe through a reduction in the amount of imported feed and protein falling below European climate and environmental standards;

11. calls on the Commission to produce, as part of its ongoing work, impact assessments on the design of the quantified targets. It is important for countries that use large quantities of antibiotics, chemical plant protection products and plant nutrients to be given greater consumption reduction targets than those countries whose consumption is already low;

12. suggests that transparent impact assessments be carried out and communicated, in order to monitor the medium-term targets reached and renegotiate any necessary adjustments in consultation with the Member States, local and regional authorities and agri-food players;

13. recommends introducing more stringent measures against the environmental impact of intensive industrial livestock farming; calls for the officially certified animal welfare labelling envisaged in the strategy to be made compulsory at EU level; recommends clear, mandatory labelling of the husbandry method, covering the animal's lifecycle, such that producers can obtain recognition of improvements in their practices and consumers can choose products in line with their wishes; suggests phasing out cage-rearing in a planned manner throughout the European Union, including through livestock density limits on the relevant farms, and supporting extensive aquaculture; calls for a livestock density limit on farms as a condition for access to CAP payments and for stronger CAP conditionality regarding animal welfare legislation;

14. calls for the new eco-schemes to provide an equitable, obligatory, effective and increasingly important funding stream to promote sustainable production practices that significantly improve, among other things, carbon sequestration (carbon farming) by farmers and foresters, as well as biodiversity; points out, however, that the agri-environment-climate measures under the second pillar of the CAP have proven to be by far the most effective greening measure of the CAP and that this is linked to the bottom-up approach used in designing these measures in the case of regional management; therefore calls for more use of the options for switching from the first to the second pillar of the CAP and for regional authorities to be involved in designing the eco-schemes at both European and national levels to ensure greater consistency and complementarity between the eco-schemes and the AECMs, and for better account to be taken of the needs of the

⁽⁴⁾ These are plant protection products containing active substances that meet the cut-off criteria as set out in points 3.6.2 to 3.6.5 and 3.8.2 of Annex II to Regulation (EC) No 1107/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council (OJ L 309, 24.11.2009, p. 1) or are identified as candidates for substitution in accordance with the criteria in point 4 of that Annex.

⁽⁵⁾ The same request was made in the opinion on the *European Climate Law: establishing the framework for achieving climate neutrality* (COR-2020/01361 — rapporteur: Juan Moreno Bonilla (EPP/ES)) (OJ C 324, 1.10.2020, p. 58).

regions; also recommends support for extensive livestock farming with a lower environmental impact; with a view to balanced environmental, economic and social sustainability, it should be permitted to compensate farmers with European and national assets, for additional costs involved in agricultural production;

15. in parallel with changes in agriculture, the shift to sustainable fish and seafood production also needs to be accelerated; recommends measures aimed at protecting and promoting small-scale fishing operators, such as those who work sustainably in the outermost regions, and combating intensive cage-rearing, illegal industrial fishing and overfishing, including by introducing more appropriate measures when revising the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and concluding trade agreements;

16. calls for proposals to be drawn up aimed at establishing maritime spatial planning and creating a network of areas in which all forms of fishing are prohibited for a sufficient period of time in order to more effectively achieve a balance between exploiting fish stocks and the sea's capacity to replenish those stocks; also calls for efforts to focus on ensuring greater efficiency when establishing fisheries management plans in the areas that are most vulnerable from an environmental point of view;

Food environment, combating obesity, promoting responsible and critical consumption

17. reiterates the importance of consumer food choices and eating habits as a key driver of food system change; supports the Commission in its intention to facilitate the transition to healthy and sustainable diets, in line with Goal 12 of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development⁽⁶⁾; therefore calls on the Commission to implement a consistent and targeted package of measures to promote the Mediterranean diet, which has been found to be healthy, as well as healthy diets that contain more vegetables and an appropriate and responsible amount of fat and sugar;

18. calls on the Commission to devise more appropriate schemes for the nutritional labelling of food, agreed at European level and based on the most up-to-date scientific research data; asks the Commission to explore the possibility of creating a European database on nutritional values and of establishing a European programme on nutritional labelling. In order to stimulate a conscious consumption, the aim should be to provide transparent, complete and clear information on nutritional quality, taking into account the origin of products, the environmental impact of transportation and the production methods;

19. also stresses the importance of going beyond information labelling measures, and deploying educational measures, incentives and structural measures geared towards encouraging critical and responsible consumption and promoting healthy food environments accessible to all; thus recommends information campaigns and educational programmes on healthy eating and plant-based, fibre-rich diets; supports the adoption of tax incentives to encourage consumers to opt for healthy and sustainable diets; also encourages the roll-out of measures to discourage the agri-food industry from marketing and advertising highly processed and unhealthy foods, which are rich in sugar, salt and saturated fats;

20. strongly supports measures to ensure that the price of food reflects its real environmental and social costs and that primary producers receive a fair income for their work; thus calls on the Commission to discuss with the Member States measures to limit the purchasing power of processors and retail and strengthen the negotiating position of primary producers, considering the scientifically-proven cost involved in terms of the environment and public health; where a fair price for the products requires a higher price for consumers, the CoR considers this to be acceptable⁽⁷⁾;

21. calls on the Commission to make the right to food one of the cornerstones in the implementation of the strategy; thus suggests working with the Member States and local and regional authorities on developing short- to medium-term measures, e.g. through economic support and long-term measures (structural social policies) aimed at easing access for the most vulnerable groups to a more sustainable and healthy food system, thus helping to combat obesity and malnutrition; calls for a post-2020 EU action plan on childhood obesity to be drawn up; underlines that the affordability of healthy food should be supported preferably by direct social policies and measures while ensuring fair product prices for farmers and employees at the same time;

⁽⁶⁾ SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production.

⁽⁷⁾ See for example Willet, W., et al. (2019). *Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. The Lancet Commissions*, 393 (1170), pp. 447-492. See also Howard, P. et al. *Global Meat: Social and Environmental Consequences of the Expanding Meat Industry*. MIT Press, 2019.

Sustainable public procurement, Green Food Procurement, educational programmes

22. calls for greater emphasis to be placed on the role of 'green food procurement' as a means of supporting healthy and sustainable diets and of strengthening and promoting local and regional agriculture based on specific regional features, thus ensuring market shares for local and regional producers ⁽⁸⁾;

23. strongly advocates establishing more flexible criteria for the introduction of local and regional products in public procurement, particularly by adopting the zero-kilometre principle in school canteens; advocates, furthermore, introducing an effective advisory system or a simplified European guide, in order to provide public authorities with clear guidance on how to introduce more sustainability criteria;

24. supports the Commission in encouraging the Member States and local and regional authorities to put in place educational programmes on agriculture, food, the environment and climate in schools; considers it essential to encourage critical consumption and to instil education on agriculture, food culture and environmental awareness among the younger generation and the most vulnerable groups;

Reducing and preventing waste, promoting a circular economy

25. urges the Commission to present ambitious legislation and binding targets on food waste prevention and reduction; hopes that the Commission sticks firmly to the binding target of halving food waste by 2030, on the basis of work done with the EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste, and calls on the Commission to pay greater attention and give more support to outermost regions, given that it is very important to boost the circularity in their economies and improve the management, recycling and reuse of waste and by-products of the agri-food and fishing industries;

26. recommends taking a holistic approach to the food chain, providing for measures on limiting waste upstream (primary production), and during processing, during the transport and marketing of food, and when it comes to the consumption of food both in and outside the home; suggests encouraging supermarkets to stock products more efficiently and introducing measures to tax supermarkets for inefficient use of surplus stock; welcomes the initiative of some Member States regarding mandatory donations of surplus stock;

27. calls for more appropriate expiry information on food labels, assessing both the 'preferable' timeframe for consumption and the point at which the product is 'inedible'; communication and consumer awareness campaigns aimed at encouraging good habits in limiting food waste are also important; also recommends a bottom-up approach aimed at increasing awareness of and strengthening innovations and good practices that are emerging in many cities and regions;

28. supports the introduction of measures to promote the deployment of zero-waste, re-use and circular-economy production and territorial development models throughout the chain, including the plastics sector; stresses that public procurement is a powerful instrument through which LRAs can set standards and drive the market towards more sustainable and local products and services; suggests a bottom-up approach, with programmes to support positive circularity measures that involve urban, peri-urban, rural areas and the outermost regions ⁽⁹⁾;

International trade, solidarity and sustainable development in third countries

29. considers it necessary to adopt a comprehensive approach to the transition to sustainable agri-food systems through cooperation with third countries and international trade policies; points out that the EU, which is the world's largest importer and exporter of food, has increased its dependence on third countries and has, to date, developed a trade policy in contradiction with its social and environmental objectives; urges the Commission to actively search for solutions on this topic especially when it comes to international agricultural trade rules, price development on EU and international markets and to a sustainable balance between demand and production in the meat and dairy sectors;

⁽⁸⁾ Recalls and reiterates, in this context, point 19 of the Resolution on Sustainable Food (OJ C 313, 22.9.2015, p. 5), which 'recommends that the various stakeholders in sustainable production and responsible consumption (...) be informed of the possibilities of including sustainability criteria in their invitations to tender (...) and was adopted at the 113th plenary session in July 2015.

⁽⁹⁾ An example here is the city of Maribor in Slovenia, where synergies can be seen between a city and a rural area through the conversion of bio-waste into fertilisers (Source: *The role of local and regional authorities in making food systems more sustainable*, study commissioned by the CoR).

30. insists on the need to assess trade agreements with due regard to the GHG emissions reduction target and for such agreements to be based on the concept of sustainable development; calls for more robust chapters on sustainable forest management and the fight against deforestation and human rights violations, and in support of animal welfare⁽¹⁰⁾;

31. considers that trade policy which does not ensure outside markets are held to the high European standards in regards to sustainability and food safety can severely undermine the internal market, and can endanger our agricultural sector; regards European trade agreements as instrumental in ensuring an equal level playing field between the internal market and the external market, safeguarding the competitiveness of European farmers and guaranteeing a fair return; calls for strict reciprocity to be negotiated with third countries on production rules, putting crop protection and environmental regulations on the same level, identifying local early plantings if applicable, and for control of products on entry into the single European market to be strengthened; supports a border tax on carbon, preventing EU companies from moving production to countries with less stringent environmental standards;

Governance, implementation, monitoring

32. recommends that the future CAP, CFP, operational programmes and national CAP strategic plans be consistently adapted to the objectives set out in the European Green Deal, notably within the 'Farm to Fork' and 'Biodiversity for 2030' strategies; in this regard calls for common quantifiable and measurable European targets for the national strategic plans to be included in the CAP regulation; suggests establishing clear impact indicators to set targets and track results; calls for the regions to play a prominent role in the governance of the strategic plans, particularly with regard to the second pillar; hopes that the territorial and regional approach will not be lost in the CAP reform plans;

33. regrets that the share of the MFF 2021-2027 allocated to the CAP in the position taken by the European Council in July has decreased by 6,4 % compared to the current period. Ambitious goals for implementing a green transition in European agricultural production should go hand in hand with an ambitious budget for the CAP, and in particular for the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development; also laments the fact that efforts to overhaul the CAP to make it more public interest-oriented, sustainable and protective of resources have not to date been more apparent in proposals for regulations, and that the approaches adopted will be very slow to have any impact owing to the long transition periods;

34. welcomes the intention to involve all food-system stakeholders — without overlooking civil society and representatives of local and regional authorities — in the implementation and monitoring of the strategy; considers it necessary for the strategy to put in place cross-cutting and multi-level governance systems conducive to a joined-up approach by the relevant directorates-general of the Commission; would like the strategy to draw on the example of participatory models such as the food policy councils that have been set up in many local and regional authorities;

35. suggests that the Commission enter into close cooperation not only with Parliament but also with the European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee on implementing and monitoring the two strategies.

Brussels, 10 December 2020.

*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*
Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS

⁽¹⁰⁾ The same request was made in the opinion on *Stepping up EU action to protect and restore the world's forests*(COR-2019/04601 — rapporteur: Roby Biver (PES/LU)) (OJ C 324, 1.10.2020, p. 48).