

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Promoting short and alternative food supply chains in the EU: the role of agroecology’

(own-initiative opinion)

(2019/C 353/11)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. In this opinion the EESC emphasises that short chains and agroecology represent a new prospect for agriculture in Europe. For more than 50 years, while these innovative approaches have run counter to the globalisation of food systems, they have been taking shape, being studied as part of numerous national and European research programmes, receiving support for their development from public and private funds, and attracting attention from increasing numbers of new farmers working in these systems. The capacity and relevance of agroecology and short chains as a response to food challenges have consequently been confirmed. They could serve as a crucial pillar of a policy seeking to establish sustainable food systems and implement sustainable development targets within the next 10 years (2030).

1.2. Innovative systems that connect consumers and producers together, such as CSA (community supported agriculture) and other ‘basket’ schemes, are developing across Europe. Many of these producers practice organic farming or apply other environment-friendly methods that are not covered by a label. Local and regional authorities are often involved, putting local food governance systems in place that bring together the various actors, and in particular fostering the use of local produce in mass catering. Short-chain sales offer a real opportunity for small structures to build up the added value and profitability of farms. This re-localisation brings jobs and local dynamism, with strong commitment on the part of farmers who are bringing it about. For consumers, it is a source of fresh, high-quality produce that is enriched by its history and the human relations involved, and acts to stimulate interest and educate people about food and the value of products.

1.3. This form of production and distribution is not suitable for all farms, on account of types of production, geographical position or the absence of an urban population that can, for example, consume all the wine or olive oil from a highly agricultural area. Neither does it replace the need for food that is not locally produced. In longer chains, European quality labels (protected geographical indication, protected designation of origin, traditional speciality guaranteed) provide identification and enhance value, making it easier for consumers to choose.

1.4. Against this backdrop, the EESC sees the emergence of agroecology as a new paradigm for food and farming. As a science, a technique and a social movement, agroecology looks at the food system in its entirety and seeks to bring producers closer to their environment by safeguarding or even restoring the complexity and wealth of the agro-eco-social system. Agroecology, promoted by the FAO and the subject of numerous studies and conferences, is experiencing strong growth in Europe, not least at institutional level, as part of national agricultural development programmes.

1.5. The EESC considers that agroecology is the horizon towards which European agriculture should work: farming inherently depends on conserving natural resources for its development. Building on fully-developed models such as organic farming (avoiding a number of negative trends in the organic 'industry'), permaculture and other traditional small farming systems, commitments to moving towards fewer inputs, revitalising soils, introducing a variety of crops and protecting diversity must be encouraged and highlighted.

1.6. The EESC would like to see the agroecology project rolled out across the EU, based on a structured action plan along with various forms of leverage at local, regional and European levels. A comprehensive food policy promoted by the EESC can provide the framework for this. Important measures include:

- ensuring accessible finance to put in place the necessary structures, individual or collective (CAP second pillar);
- adjusting the application of food legislation to small farmers in a flexible way for small-scale production, as well as for requirements concerning labelling, etc.;
- setting up or strengthening appropriate education and advice services for transformation, direct sales and agroecology;
- encouraging exchange networks between farmers;
- gearing research to agroecology and producers' needs in short chains;
- at local and regional level: adapted competition rules should be introduced to make it easier to supply community catering through short, local chains.

2. Introduction

2.1. Two EESC opinions ⁽¹⁾ pointed to the need to develop a comprehensive food policy in the EU based on a number of pillars, including the development of shorter food supply chains.

2.2. A growing number of initiatives have been launched at local and regional level to support alternative food systems and short food supply chains. A comprehensive food policy should build upon, stimulate and develop common governance at all levels — local, regional, national and European. Such an approach would create an enabling framework for these initiatives to flourish, whatever their scale, and is needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in Europe.

2.3. In this setting, agroecology offers a new agricultural and food paradigm, supporting the development of these new food supply and production practices.

2.4. This opinion sets out to observe how producers and consumers are brought closer together in shorter chains, and how agroecology is developing, in order to identify the necessary conditions and tools to shift the food system towards full achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Developing short supply chains

3.1. In the context of rural development policy (Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013), the European Union defines short supply chains as 'a supply chain involving a limited number of economic operators committed to cooperation, local economic development, and close geographical and social relations between producers, processors and consumers' ⁽²⁾.

⁽¹⁾ EESC opinion on *More sustainable food systems* (OJ C 303, 19.8.2016, p. 64) and EESC opinion on *Civil society's contribution to the development of a comprehensive food policy in the EU* (OJ C 129, 11.4.2018, p. 18).

⁽²⁾ Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013.

3.2. Food distribution has undergone far-reaching changes since the late 1990s. Better food education and the successive health crises related to poor farming and agroindustrial practices have led an increasing number of consumers to adopt new quality criteria which include health and sustainable development references⁽³⁾. Deregulation of agricultural markets, strong price volatility — with prices often lower than production costs — and low farming incomes, in the face of growing concern among consumers for healthy, good quality food are leading some farmers to change their methods of production and marketing. Diversification is reflected in the whole chain, from production to consumption. New lines of agricultural production are appearing and producers have to take the initiative of looking for new markets or inventing new ways of selling via short supply chains in order for human and economic investment in diversification to pay off; practices are moving towards greater sustainability, driven by the fact that producers and consumers are coming closer together. In 2015, the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) highlighted the fact that 15 % of farmers sold half of their production through short supply chains, and a 2016 Eurobarometer survey noted that four out of five European citizens considered that 'strengthening the farmer's role in the food chain' was important. Short supply chains are gaining ground in the various countries of Europe, but not at the same rate.

3.3. Thus there are very many forms of direct sales. Other initiatives are being developed, in addition to traditional forms of sales both on or off the farm. One of the most dynamic innovation sectors in the last 20 years is that of local and solidarity-based partnerships between consumer and producer groups for the supply of 'baskets' on a contractual basis, essentially made up of organic produce, which have been brought together and developed by the international organisation Urgenci. In many countries there are also group actions for making the sector more dynamic, by organising fairs and local events such as the *Campagna amica* network in Italy. There is also a very significant contribution from the cooperative sector. This is a sector which attracts young people and new start-up entrepreneurs, often enthusiastic about the concept.

3.4. The 'very positive' impact of short food supply chains was underlined in the aforementioned opinion⁽⁴⁾, particularly as regards product freshness and organoleptic and nutritional quality. Following the development of a globalised food system over more than 30 years, it seems to be well recognised and accepted that closer links between producers and consumers, and locally-based systems, have numerous beneficial effects. Short circuits enhance the added value and profitability of small farms, enabling them to sell identified products that 'have a story to tell' to consumers, who are then prepared to pay more, and generate community activity and social links in rural areas. Improvements in food production quality and marketing channels give consumers responsibility in relation to the value of food and to waste, and therefore contribute to a reduction in the impact of food on climate change.

3.4.1. This way of trading generates positive externalities for the whole community (creation of jobs which cannot be relocated, maintenance of valued added in the areas concerned, increased attraction as tourist destinations or residential areas). These wider externalities must be taken into account in supporting the development of short supply chains and local potential.

3.4.2. There is a wealth of short supply chain initiatives based on social, organisational and regional innovation, which are still in the process of being set up. Many studies highlight the local dimension and collective identity as key factors in long-term sustainability. The challenge is therefore to empower operators to create local food systems based on local governance which is representative of these operators⁽⁵⁾.

3.5. The internet is proving to be a new area of exploration and innovation for short supply chains. The way it has spread over the past decade or so has been reflected in the proliferation of short food supply chains. Offering a wider market than the traditional producers' market, it also helps to improve and streamline trade. Numerous on-line ordering platforms have emerged in the last five years. These 'food hubs' allow producers and consumers to interact directly, particularly in the case of products that can only be found locally. They can enable producers and consumers alike to get together and buy and sell as a group, thus facilitating logistics in the food chain. Digitalisation can also be applied to production and processing.

4. **Agroecology: A new way of doing farming**

4.1. At the Second International Symposium on Agroecology, held in Rome in 2018, the FAO proposed the following definition: 'Agroecology is based on applying ecological concepts and principles to optimise interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment while taking into consideration the social aspects that need to be addressed for a sustainable and fair food system. By building synergies, agroecology can support food production and food security and nutrition while restoring the ecosystem services and biodiversity that are essential for sustainable agriculture.'⁽⁶⁾

⁽³⁾ Codron J.-M, Sirieix L., Reardon T. (2006), 'Social and Environmental Attributes of Food Products in an Emerging Mass Market: Challenges of Signaling and Consumer Perception, With European Illustrations', *Agriculture and Human Values*, vol. 23, No 3, pp. 283-297.

⁽⁴⁾ See footnote 1.

⁽⁵⁾ R. Le Velly: *Dynamiques des systèmes alimentaires alternatifs [Trends in alternative food systems]*, *Systèmes agroalimentaires en transition*, Edition Quae, 2017, pp. 149-158.

⁽⁶⁾ <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/second-international-agroecology-symposium/en/>

4.2. Agroecology is built up around three major dimensions. The first is the agroecology which appeared in the 1920s as a series of scientific disciplines (physics, chemistry, ecology, spatial planning) which approach agriculture through complex systems of interactions in the agro-ecosystem. The second dimension is agroecology as a series of sustainable farming practices which optimise and stabilise harvests. Lastly, the third dimension of agroecology is as a social movement in the quest for food sovereignty and new multi-functional roles for agriculture ⁽⁷⁾. Agroecology has also evolved to take increasing account of food-related factors, as illustrated by texts such as *Redesigning the Food System for Sustainability* (Hill, 1985) and *Agroecology: The Ecology of Sustainable Food Systems*, a reference work by Steve Gliessman.

4.3. Agroecology is based on a common set of ten principles, defined and identified by the FAO, which guide 'countries to transform their food and agricultural systems, to mainstream sustainable agriculture on a large scale, and to achieve Zero Hunger and multiple other Sustainable Development Goals:

- **diversity, synergy, efficiency, resilience, recycling, co-creation and sharing of knowledge** (description of the common characteristics of agroecology systems, founding practices and innovative approaches);
- **human and social values, culture and food traditions** (contextual characteristics);
- **circular and solidarity economy, responsible governance** (favourable environment).

The 10 Elements of Agroecology are interlinked and interdependent' ⁽⁸⁾.

4.4. On the basis of these ten principles, several types of agriculture can claim to be agroecological: organic farming, which applies the same principles in a standardised framework (EU law on organic production and the labelling of organic products ⁽⁹⁾), bio-dynamic agriculture, sustainable agriculture, agro-forestry, which combines crops and tree products, and permaculture share a common core, constituting a complex and systemic approach to agriculture from production to food consumption. The central role of preserving quality and life of soil in these types of agriculture must be emphasised.

Agroecology represents a paradigm shift for agriculture in order to combat climate change, rebuild living ecosystems and protect water, soil and all the resources that agricultural production depends on. Encouragement should be given to farmers who undertake to reconsider their practices and relationship with the ecosystem so as to reduce the negative externalities and increase the positive ones. Reducing chemical inputs, introducing more variety into rotation and conservation agriculture and preservation of biodiversity are steps that merit encouragement on the way to an agroecological transformation of all farms in Europe.

4.5. The social movement developed in the 1970s and 80s out of Latin America by organisations such as the Via Campesina set in motion the exponential international development of this approach to the food system in its three dimensions (scientific, technical and social). Europe is also involved in this movement. The FAO organised an initial symposium in Rome in September 2014, on 'Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition', which was followed by several regional seminars, including one for Europe in Budapest in November 2016; it advocates the development of agroecology for achieving the sustainable development objectives and the Paris agreement. Another such event will be held in Europe in late 2019. The European research programme Horizon 2020 has incorporated numerous themes relating to agroecology, organic farming and short supply chains, and the European Partnership for Innovation (EIP-AGRI), which also explored these issues for agricultural development, is holding the next Agri Innovation Summit (AIS) in France in June 2019.

4.6. Agroecology has gradually gained institutional recognition, especially in France ⁽¹⁰⁾. By including it in the French Rural Code and putting legal and financial tools in place, France has made agroecology a pillar of its agricultural development ⁽¹¹⁾. The financial resources and focus of a series of French programmes on the subject have generated and supported a large number of projects set up by farmers' groups to shift agricultural development and production towards greater sustainability ⁽¹²⁾.

⁽⁷⁾ <https://pubs.iied.org/14629IIED/?c=foodag>

⁽⁸⁾ (<http://www.fao.org/3/i9037en/i9037en.pdf>).

⁽⁹⁾ Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 of 28 June 2007 on organic production and labelling of organic products and repealing Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Work of S. Bellon.

⁽¹¹⁾ Article 1, as amended by the French Act on the Future of Agriculture passed on 13 October 2014, *Code rural et de la pêche maritime* [Rural Code and Maritime Fishing Code].

⁽¹²⁾ EIP Agroecology Europe: <http://www.agroecology-europe.org/>

4.6.1. Among the significant results of agroecology highlighted by academic studies and reported by development organisations are:

- for farmers: greater soil fertility, lower production costs, greater decision-making autonomy, the development of more resilient agricultural systems to cope with climate risks, and enhancement of the profession;
- for consumers: the health and nutritional quality of food and water, preservation of biodiversity and landscapes, and guarantees in terms of farming practices (livestock or crops) ⁽¹³⁾.

4.6.2. These results are consolidated by the collective dimension from the involvement of farmers as drivers of proposals and innovation in their environment, their desire to do better and the need to reduce their production costs. Internet platforms ⁽¹⁴⁾ may allow the necessary technical and scientific studies to be produced and the testimonies of farmers who have made this transition to be exploited, without overlooking the impact of training courses and group work.

4.6.3. Training for future farmers in public agricultural colleges incorporates the task of contributing to the development of agroecology. There is an increasing amount of teaching material on the subject ⁽¹⁵⁾ and students are more likely to foster agroecological transition and production in their future professional lives ⁽¹⁶⁾. The French agroecological transition programme provides for improvements in food for students by including meals made from local products on the menus of farming college canteens, which will increase students' awareness of the food issue.

4.6.4. So as to accompany the transition at regional level, the French government has created the *Projets Alimentaires Territoriaux* [Regional Food Projects], where freely formed collectives devise the measures needed to improve local food systems. It seems that, despite insufficient resources, the programmes are generating interest and the results are encouraging.

4.7. **Short supply chains and agroecology — connected transitions**

4.7.1. Agroecology is distinguished in particular by the diversity of complementary farm production. Whether for livestock products or agroecological crops, it is important that new outlets are created and made sustainable. Short food supply chains are thus seen as an appropriate response to this transition challenge.

4.7.2. Finally, it is important to stress that the combination of agroecology and short supply chains, at European, national and local levels, is now leading to the emergence of local food governance with new arrangements for involving the players concerned. Such procedures to reconnect cities to their nearby food production areas are under way in many places: Milan in Italy, Montpellier in France, Ghent, Brussels and Liege in Belgium and Toronto in Canada.

5. **Development of short chains and agroecology for sustainable food systems**

5.1. **Contribution to good quality food**

5.1.1. In 2012, a European research programme on short chains and local food systems, co-piloted by the University of Coventry and involving the European Commission's directorates-general for agriculture and health, underlined the quality, traceability and transparency aspects which have to be at the centre of the act of purchasing-selling. The EU therefore has to provide the means for producers and consumers to build and stabilise this triptych, whatever the form of the short chain. It has been noticed that the majority of products sold in short chains come from organic farming, or from non-certified methods that do not use synthetic inputs, depending on the country. This element seems to be the key for bringing together agroecology and short chains. Indeed, the principles and framework for agroecology may create an environment of trust which is sufficiently strong and stable without there necessarily being an agricultural system entailing labels, so that consumers can find the quality, traceability and transparency needed for the development and sustainability of short chains. Regular farm visits by consumers and other producers may offer an effective 'participatory guarantee' method to strengthen transparency, the preparation of contextualised indicators and the monitoring of agroecological practices ⁽¹⁷⁾.

⁽¹³⁾ C. Claveirol: La transition agroécologique: défis et enjeux [The agroecological transition: challenges and issues], *Les avis du CESE*, 2016.

⁽¹⁴⁾ <https://rd-agri.fr/>

⁽¹⁵⁾ <https://pollen.chlorofil.fr/?s=agroecologie>

⁽¹⁶⁾ http://www.bergerie-nationale.educagri.fr/fileadmin/webmestre-fichiers/formation/articles_presse/Plan_EPA1-bilan-Fevrier_2019.pdf

⁽¹⁷⁾ <http://www.cocreate.brussels/-CosyFood->

5.1.2. Regarding individuals, the most recent research shows that short circuits improve personal health significantly. Firstly, they are more alert to what they eat and how it is produced. Secondly, arrangements of this kind are forum for powerful social learning, not least in terms of health eating habits.

5.2. **Food safety and accessibility**

5.2.1. At present, several European research projects ⁽¹⁸⁾ ⁽¹⁹⁾ are pointing out that short chains tend to be structured and organised to move from niche markets to genuine food consumption habits. This has, inter alia, been made possible by the networking of many players at EU level through projects supported by the various European funding programmes. This rapid development nevertheless remains limited because of the difficulties some products have of reaching poorer households. It would be appropriate to continue the work carried out in previous EESC opinions on the matter of policy levers to make these food products accessible. Several research projects on this subject are being completed in France (*RMT Alimentation* ⁽²⁰⁾, *Projet Casdar ACCESSIBLE* ⁽²¹⁾ and the regional food projects ⁽²²⁾).

5.2.2. Amongst the tools available, research and innovation resources provided by EIP-AGRI and DG Research in the future Horizon Europe programme may be devoted to agroecology and short chains. As part of the future CAP, ECO-schemes should be used to promote gradual adoption by farmers of methods based on agroecology and to steering systems towards the use of short chains. The same goes for measures under the second pillar, such as agri-environmental-climate measures and subsidies for the investments needed to implement them, together with processing and marketing tools. Training resources and appropriate advice must be built up, together with local community initiatives, under the LEADER programmes. Support for regional initiatives can, moreover, benefit from funds earmarked for cohesion.

5.2.3. Adapted rules should be devised so that public procurement contracts can be met through short chains, which is currently restricted by competition rules. Tailor-made rules are also needed for short chains. Regulation (EC) No 852/2004 on the hygiene of foodstuffs ⁽²³⁾ provides scope for flexibility in applying the HACCP (hazard analysis and critical control point) method where small-scale producers are concerned: this scope should be used in all EU countries. The same applies to product labelling rules. Labels stating the origin of processed food (e.g. in restaurants or in mass catering) can play a supporting role: if the origin of a food product is made clear, it is more likely that consumers will choose a locally-made product or dish, even if this entails paying slightly more. 4G coverage (telephony and internet) in rural areas is a key factor in facilitating access to and contact with consumers as a result of growing digitalisation.

5.2.4. One frequently expressed concern is about the capacity of agroecology and local chains to feed the world and the 10 billion inhabitants it is expected to have by 2050. The work of numerous research organisations is clear in this connection; at international level, the development of agroecology and the mobilisation of resources within and outside agriculture are vital and possible in view of economic, environmental and social needs. In Europe, recent work by the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI) shows that it will be possible to feed all of Europe's population by 2050 through a gradual agroecological transformation incorporating livestock breeding, crops and trees, with a zero carbon emissions target.

5.3. **The path to agroecology**

5.3.1. In order to roll out the agroecology project across the EU, a structured action plan is needed, along with various forms of leverage across different sectors of public and private activity covering numerous areas: training, agricultural development, redirecting aid, adapting regulations, regionalising sectors, genetic selection, overseas regions and international action ⁽²⁴⁾. It would therefore be appropriate for the EU to work on opportunities for providing support so that agroecology and short chains can develop in tandem and be aligned with one another to ensure mutual sustainability. It is important for this policy lever to be ambitious enough for many agricultural businesses to engage in such a transition in the long term. Awareness of the time frame is important because it will allow the players concerned the time they need to become involved and also enable those who do commit themselves to achieve a complete transition in a system which is, in reality, complicated to set up.

⁽¹⁸⁾ https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/sites/agri-eip/files/eip-agri_brochure_short_food_supply_chains_2019_en_web.pdf

⁽¹⁹⁾ <http://www.shortfoodchain.eu/news/>

⁽²⁰⁾ www.rmt-alimentation-locale.org/

⁽²¹⁾ <http://www.civam.org/images/M%C3%A9lanie/AcceCible/PRESENTATION-Accessible.pdf>

⁽²²⁾ <http://rnp.at.fr/les-projets-alimentaires-territoriaux-pat/>

⁽²³⁾ Regulation (EC) No 852/2004.

⁽²⁴⁾ C. Claveirol: La transition agroécologique: défis et enjeux [The agricultural transition: challenges and issues], *Les avis du CESE*, 2016.

5.3.2. A comprehensive food policy such as the EESC has been promoting for several years, piloted by a European Food Council, for which the EESC could be a facilitator, and coordinated at directorate-general level by a European Commission vice-president, can form the framework of a programme. The proposal for a common food policy has been raised at European Union level through the work of IPES-Food ⁽²⁵⁾.

5.3.3. The work of the FAO may provide inspiration for the development of agroecology at European level. The recommendations of the regional conference on sustainable agriculture and food systems in Europe and Central Asia are particularly enlightening in this connection. The analytical guide on Connecting Smallholders to Markets, adopted in 2016 by the Committee on World Food Security, recommends that states support territorial markets (local, regional and national) in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Brussels, 17 July 2019.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Luca JAHIER

⁽²⁵⁾ IPES-Food, *Towards a Common Food Policy for the European Union*, Brussels, IPES Food, 2017.