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Towards a sustainable European food system: for a successful operationalisation of the "Farm to Fork" strategy

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The European Commission today published its Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system, one of the Green Deal's 11 components. In its general principles, the strategy sets an ambitious course for the transformation of the entire sector, in line with recent scientific findings modelling sustainable food systems. It apprehends head-on and jointly the issues of reducing consumption of animal products, loss and waste, and the use of synthetic inputs. Achieving the drafted objectives will, however, require going a step further by making this strategy the reference framework for the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the deployment of industrial strategies in the food sector (particularly in the context of the negotiations of the post-Covid-19 crisis recovery plans) and the (re)negotiation of international trade agreements.

If, like any policy, some will judge this strategy to be too spineless on one point or another, while others will find it too ambitious, no one will deny it at least one strong point: that of integrating in a systemic way, and as rarely seen before, the main conclusions of recent modelling exercises that identify the conditions to reach sustainability for our food systems1 . In this respect, the goal of reducing meat consumption is unambiguously expressed for the first time in a document of this nature (without, however, being quantified); similarly, the reduction in the use of synthetic inputs (pesticides, fertilisers and antibiotics) is clearly stated, even if the indicators used remain vague; the challenge of reducing food waste and losses throughout food chains is again highlighted. The whole strategy, closely linked to the Biodiversity Strategy also published today, is to be the subject of a legislative proposal on sustainable food systems by 2023 put in place in a collaborative effort between the Directorates-General for Health, Agriculture, Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries. While it would probably be too much to talk about a revolution, we can only welcome the ambition and coherence, at least in its overall outlook, of a text considered important by the Brussels executive. Its ambitious objectives align with needed changes at the level of the entire food system, involving action on the production side (which is what the CAP does) as well as in downstream sectors and in consumption. The question remains, then, how can we ensure that it lives up to its promises? What should be the next step to make this framework a real lever for change?

The question of the evolution of diets, due to its inherently systemic nature, is a good starting point for outlining some answers to these questions—without, of course, pretending to exhaust them. Indeed, although the Commission has for the first time faced the elephant in the room by clearly articulating the issue of reducing meat consumption, work remains to be done to clarify and operationalise it.

First, it must be recognised that the issue goes beyond meat, and that it is the consumption of proteins, and animal proteins in particular, that must be called into question: the average European's protein over-consumption reaches almost 200% compared to their nutritional needs, and the majority of this protein comes from animals. It is therefore not only meat consumption that should be addressed, but the whole range of animal products—milk, eggs, meat— in order to simultaneously reduce total protein consumption and reverse the proportion between proteins of animal and vegetable origin (from 60%/40 % to 40%/60 %).

The type of farming systems in which these animal products should be produced—in smaller quantities—should also be clarifed. From this point of view, the strategy and its action plan, as well as the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030- Bringing nature back into our lives, are surprisingly silent on the impacts of highly intensive livestock farming systems on biodiversity, nutrient cycling and animal welfare. An essential step in this direction would be to orient production towards extensive livestock production that minimises competition between food and feed and generates numerous ecosystem services, and making it a strong point of reference in defining the provisions of the future CAP on livestock production.

The question of how to support the evolution of consumer behaviour also remains open. This is a key, and missing, point: recent work in this area indicates that informational measures alone are insufficient to generate the necessary changes in the short and medium term. The entire consumer food environment must change, and this requires coordinated action between legislatures, retailers and food processors.

Finally, and from an agronomic point of view, one cannot think about a protein transition without considering the need for a reduction in Europe's dependence on protein-rich material, which are currently imported on a massive scale from North and Latin America. It is indeed through the re-diversification of European cropping systems and the reintroduction of legumes2 reintroduction of legumes in rotations, that farmers will gradually be able to reduce their dependence on synthetic inputs and thus reach one of the key Farm2Fork objectives. Once this goal has been clearly formulated as a result of this strategy, legislators and stakeholders must tackle two questions.

The first relates to industrial strategies and the structuring of value chains—a hot topic at a time when the contents of the post-Covid-19 national recovery plans are being discussed. Increasing the share of legume crops in rotation presumes that farmers have access to both quality seeds that are adapted to their pedoclimatic context—which has not been the case since the end of the 1980s or so—and markets for their products. While major investments will have to be made (around 10 to 12 billion euros for France alone, by way of illustration) for these projects to become realities, they will also provide new and accessible jobs in Europe's rural areas. At the same time, particular attention must be paid to the transformation of animal-based industrial sectors, that today account for more than a third of the jobs in the the European agri-food industry (which is itself the leading manufacturing sector in Europe in terms of employment and added value). As 8 out of 10 Europeans declare that they are willing to eat "less but better" meat, it would certainly be possible to increase the share of high quality products in the animal production sector and thus retain the same number of jobs.

The second question, which cannot be separated from the first, concerns the conditions under which the EU organises its trade with the rest of the world. The possibility of developing a dynamic plant protein sector, just like the possibility of an upgraded livestock sector, presupposes fair conditions for European businesses to compete on world markets. This is the challenge of the last axis of the strategy: to promote a global transition, and not only a European one. This ambition must be embodied first and foremost in the re-negotiation of bilateral agreements. The EU should also consider the need to revitalise multilateral trade negotiations in order to truly take up the challenge of an ecological and solidarity transition.

1 Notably, the EAT-Lancet report (https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31788-4/fulltext#main-menu), the Nordic Diet scenario (http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1163192/FULLTEXT01.pdf), the Agrimonde Terra foresight exercise (https://www.quae.com/produit/1521/9782759228805/land-use-and-food-security-in-2050-a-narrow-road), the TFYA (https://www.iddri.org/fr/publications-et-evenements/etude/une-europe-agroecologique-en-2050-une-agriculture) or Afterres (https://afterres2050.solagro.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Solagro_afterres2050-v2-web.pdf) scenarions. Les implications de ces scénarios pour la stratégie ont été rappelées dans cette contribution (https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/report/contribution-2020-roadmap-consultation-farm-fork-strategy) submitted to the Commission on March 16, 2020, by Think Sustainable Europe, a coalition of European think tanks to which IDDRI belongs.

2 Legumes are plants that have the ability to fix some atmospheric nitrogen in the soil, thereby improving soil fertility and life

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