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Healthy and sustainable food for all: mission (im)possible?

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The social accessibility of the sustainable food transition project is under debate. Have we reached a dead end? Are we condemned to maintain the status quo, considered by some as the only model capable of producing food that is accessible to all? Or are we about to implement a food transition that is environmentally effective but socially unjust? This blogpost aims to show that we must avoid becoming trapped in this dilemma, and that the building of an inclusive food transition requires a clarification of the

issues at stake and the collective discussion of public policy frameworks that are equal to the challenge.

A model that is already failing from a social perspective

Prior to the analysis of the environmental challenges facing the transition, it is vital to consider the social failings of our current food system and the limitations of existing policies. Although the post-war goal of providing abundant and relatively cheap food has been achieved, meeting this objective has not satisfactorily addressed the need to ensure food and nutritional security to the French population. Today, the current food paradigm is reaching its limitations, as evidenced by food insecurity statistics ([Terra Nova, 2021](#)), by the persistence of major social inequalities in health related to food ([Hercberg, 2017](#); [Darmon and Carlin, 2013](#)) and, in parallel, by the difficulties of farmer remuneration ([Insee, 2021](#)). More generally, the current food system is leading to major public health issues, with the rise in obesity and diet-related diseases ([Eat-Lancet, 2019](#)) and recent concerns about the health impact of ultra-processed products ([Inserm, 2018](#)). This implies that the status quo is not an option and that profound changes are necessary, not only for reasons of environmental protection.

In this context, the agricultural and food transition, which aims to reduce the heavy environmental impacts of our agriculture, implies changes in production and consumption patterns. The project must be widely shared and accessible: what social obstacles does this transition face?

Short and medium-term affordability

In the current situation, the use of sustainable agriculture in food production is generally more expensive. However, in the short term this slight increase in the cost of the average food basket due to sustainable produce¹ can be fully offset by a rebalancing of the diet (less animal products, more fruit, vegetables and pulses) for a large majority of households ([I4CE, 2021](#); [WWF, 2017](#); [Soler et al., 2021](#); [Fardet et al., 2021](#)). Except for the most vulnerable, the move towards healthier and more sustainable food does not significantly reduce the economic accessibility of the household food basket. And for the most vulnerable, the most urgent challenge is that of combating food insecurity and health inequalities, particularly by improving their access to a healthier and more diversified diet.²

This economic issue could become limiting in the longer term when baskets contain a substantial proportion of sustainable produce ([I4CE, 2021](#)). Two factors will then be instrumental: (i) in terms of supply, the evolution of sustainable food prices in light of economies of scale, the subsidies directed towards the different means of production³, technical progress and the sharing of value in the supply chain⁴; (ii) in terms of demand, changes in income levels, the proportions of other types of expenditure out of the total budget (energy, housing, transport, etc.), and the priority that households give to healthy and sustainable food relative to these other costs when they are able to prioritize.⁵

Access to sustainable food is therefore a potential obstacle for the poorest, which must be taken seriously for reasons of equity, but also for societal cohesion during the transition. These issues are of course shared with the transport, energy and housing sectors.

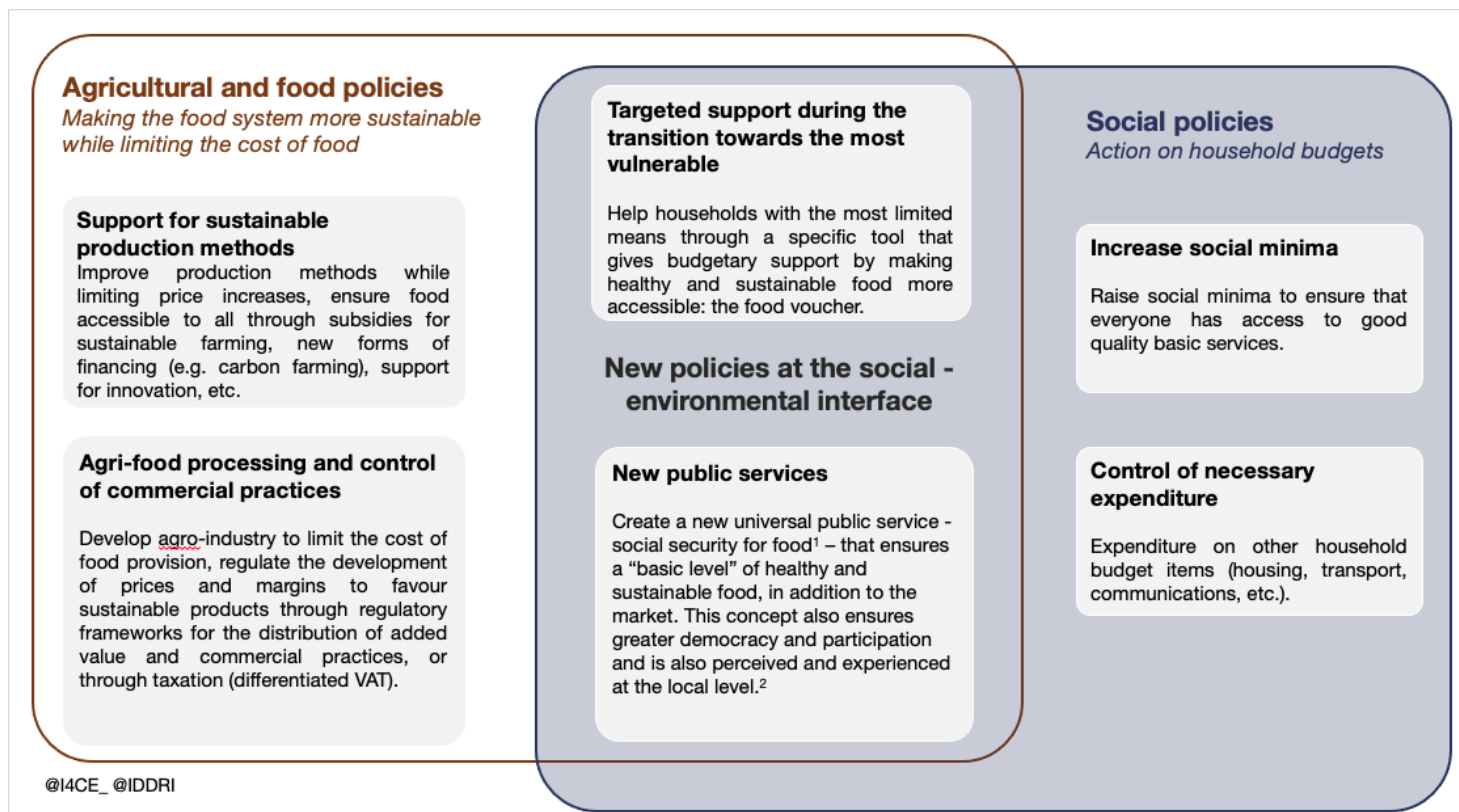
What are the rationales for action?

The media spotlight has focused on the implementation of a food voucher system following the proposal made by the Citizens Convention for Climate ([I4CE, 2022](#))⁶. Although this measure may be relevant in the short term to respond

to the social emergency, we believe it is important to take a step back to examine the different options in the debate.

We have identified at least four rationales for action to contribute to the objective of healthy and sustainable food that is affordable for all. Two of these correspond to relatively classical policies: social policies aimed at ensuring access to basic goods and services for all, and agri-food policies aimed at controlling the cost of healthy and sustainable food. Two other rationales for action involve for the first time the linking of ecological transition policies and social policies on the food issue: one specifically targeting precarious households (food vouchers for example), and the other taking a more universal approach. This typology prompts the questions: what might a healthy, sustainable and fully accessible food “service” look like in 2040? How can it be envisaged and what criteria could ensure its ultimate success in the transition? Should we combine these rationales for action, and if so how?⁷

Four rationales for action to ensure the affordability of healthy and sustainable food (from a survey of existing proposals and drivers)



¹ Supported by Engineers Without Borders, social security for food involves designing a food service that is similar to that of social security for health. Its three pillars would be: universality (everyone benefits), democratically determined product agreements, and financing through social contribution.

² A French local example in the Drôme.

A new perspective on less affluent people

These rationales for action cannot be based solely on economic perspectives and the budget support approach⁸. Taking into account social inclusion more broadly is essential to implement the food transition. Firstly, it is necessary to avoid stigmatization. Changes towards a sustainable diet can cause tensions when recommendations and their wording appear stigmatizing (e.g. 5-A-Day fruit and vegetable campaigns) and consumption norms seem exclusive (e.g. organic food can be a vector of social differentiation). Moreover, the sustainable food concept is not defined in the same way by all French people (IDDRI, 2019) and can take different forms. Acknowledging these truths is a prerequisite for ensuring that the greatest number of people adhere to this concept, and therefore to secure its success.

At the same time, a fallacy is gaining traction concerning the belief that wealthy and educated classes are already in tune with the challenges of sustainability, while poorer citizens have been left “behind”, which is contributing to a widening of a gap that will hamper the implementation of the transition. In fact, a detailed analysis of the practices and aspirations of less affluent groups shows that they should not be considered as obstacles to the transition, but rather as actors with a particular vision of sustainable food, which should enrich the transition project (IDDRI, 2022). Their current practices are no less sustainable, and like the rest of the population, they express an interest in healthy, quality and sustainable food and are not resistant to consumer trends, such as organic food. The challenge is therefore more about ensuring inclusion and cohesion in the way the transition is designed, presented and implemented, which can take very practical forms, particularly at the local level (see for example the “[Territoires à vivres](#)” project).

Developing forward-looking visions of a just food transition

A clear and operational vision has yet to be established that could ensure that the implementation of the food transition is accessible to all consumers: what would an inclusive food system look like by 2035-2040? How would the financial capacities of households evolve (food prices, food budget)? What public policy tools would accompany the development of practices?

Until now, the foresight studies that have made it possible to outline the food system of the future (SNBC, Afterres, TYFA, etc.) have not fully integrated the social dimensions of the transition (changes in lifestyles, inequalities, collective organization, etc.), which is a more global issue for environmental foresight studies (IDDRI, 2021).⁹ To address this blind spot, IDDRI and I4CE will continue to explore the social mechanisms and household budgetary impacts of different dietary transition scenarios towards “less but better” animal products.

¹ It should be noted that organic production, for example, represents only a small share of the food market with 6.5% (Agence bio, 2021): in the short term, it is not therefore a question of ascertaining whether a 50% organic basket would be accessible, as it cannot be taken up by all due to production limitations, but rather to envisage that average baskets contain a small proportion of organic products—which is often the case for consumers of organic products, see (Lamine, 2008).

² See for example the issue of empty calories, which refers to foods containing simple sugars but little or no nutritional value (Summary of the report “Pour une politique nutritionnelle de santé publique en France” <https://www.hcsp.fr/explore.cgi/ouvrage?clef=56>)

³ Subsidies represent a significant proportion of funding (I4CE, 2021: <https://www.i4ce.org/download/decryptage-financements-systeme-alimentaire-francais-climat/>), varying according to the sector: fruit and vegetables, the price of which may be an obstacle to consumption, are less subsidized than other foodstuffs (MAA, 2021).

⁴ Both the share of value accruing to the agricultural product rather than to its processing by the agri-food industry, and commercial practices in the supply chains (UFC-Que choisir, 2019).

⁵ In a recent survey about agricultural work published by the FNSEA, 72% of respondents are willing to pay more for French products, while 71% would pay more to guarantee a fairer remuneration for farmers (FNSEA, 2022).

- 6 Proposal SN6.1.5: enable the poorest people to buy organic products or via AMAPs. See also, more broadly, proposal SN5.2.3: design a new national food solidarity scheme to enable low-income households to access sustainable food. To date, it should be noted that on this basis the precise purpose of the public scheme has not yet been fully defined (CCC, 2021).
- 7 Brazil's "Fome Zero" food security and nutrition policy project is a useful source of inspiration (Ministry of Agrarian Development Brasi ?lia, 2011)
- 8 As illustrated by two recent studies on the carbon tax (Douenne and Fabre, 2022; Mildenberger et al., 2022).
- 9 While other socio-economic dimensions have recently been analysed, notably the issue of jobs, farm income, see (IDDRI 2021)

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