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Why an EU framework for sustainable food is crucial for climate, biodiversity and competitiveness

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In her plans for 2023 addressed to the EU Parliament, President of the EU Commission von der Leyen did not mention the proposal for a Sustainable Food System legislative framework (SFSF). This created speculation about the timeframe of this key proposal which has been put forward as a cornerstone of the EU Green Deal for the agri-food sector. This blogpost, co-signed by members of the Think Sustainable Europe network, underlines the importance of the SFSF to be proposed next year in order to drive a sustainable transition of the EU food system, given the urgency of such a transition.

The droughts, heatwaves, floods and wildfires experienced this year and over the last years are only set to intensify as the planet warms, while loss of pollinators, natural insect predators and soil erosion already severely threaten food production. Ensuring long term food availability in the EU thus requires strengthening the resilience and adaptive capacity of our production systems. Of particular importance is the need to reduce the dependence on imported animal feed and fossil-based fertilisers, and to transition towards healthier and more sustainable diets. These shifts are necessary for the EU to become a net exporter of calories, while it is now a net importer. The SFSF is an opportunity to establish coherent plan for such a transformation, and thus achieving the objectives of the European Green Deal. Undoubtedly this transition will take time, but this is even more reason to agree and implement an ambitious SFSF as soon as possible.

Nevertheless, there has been significant pushback by some against the agrifood aspects of the EU Green Deal, pre-dating the Russian invasion of Ukraine, based on claims of negative impacts on global food security and on the EU's food sovereignty (defined as strategic autonomy for a series of food products). However, it appears that behind these arguments, what is really at stake is the issue of competitiveness of EU agrifood players, which has been declining over the last two decades.

So let us discuss competitiveness and share in global markets. Very often this discussion focuses on competing on volumes of agricultural output, rather than on value. This is problematic as a major rationale of the EU Green Deal is

as a sustainable growth strategy; to provide EU economic sectors with an opportunity and way forward through ecological transformation. They can find a new space and role in a globalised world, both by raising the standards on climate, biodiversity, public health and animal welfare within the EU common market and by acting as frontrunners and standard setters in global markets on these issues. Greater value creation, as well as compliance with higher standards, is therefore critical. Amongst other things, a SFSF would be the foundation for defining standards for whole food chains that would also define the competitive advantage of European players.

Why is this even more necessary in the current context? Three main points need to be considered:

1. **The competition for being the standard setters is fierce.** Many actors very active in food systems diplomacy intervene in a variety of fora, from the UN Committee on World Food Security to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. They promote an approach based on sustainable intensification and climate-smart agriculture consistent with marginal adjustments to already large-scale and highly specialised (e.g. industrial livestock farming and crop monocultures) food production systems. If EU players fail to crystallise and codify their own standards, they may miss the opportunity to ensure that more sustainable and diversified EU farm systems are represented. In such a context, the choice of the European Green Deal to bet on a transformation to preserve not only carbon cycles but also biodiversity, and to diversify production systems and diets, needs to be defended. This has to be done at the highest level of food diplomacy in all instances, and it begins with the early and proper definition of sustainable food through the legislative framework for sustainable food systems foreseen in 2023.
2. **Opting for diversification is also opting for resilience**—to climate shocks, pest outbreaks and other biological shocks like zoonotic diseases, as well as to economic shocks. This is why the path of diversification was made with the Farm to Fork Strategy, rather than a risky strategy of marginal adjustments to existing concentration and specialisation trends. Many players in the EU agrifood sectors are already convinced that this is the best resilience and competitiveness strategy and have invested substantially in this transformation pathway. These actors can be the engine of transformation of the EU food system if the markets and supply chains in which they have invested become the mainstream, and if their investments are considered the future also by the financing industry. For this to take place, an enabling policy environment is needed that addresses systemic challenges, including by establishing conditions for consumers to play an active role and make choices that support healthy diets from sustainable sources.
3. **The SFSF proposal is critical to the internal and external coherence of the whole EU Green Deal project.** Without a strategy that can address both food consumption and production in a joined-up way, the EU's sustainability goals for food, agriculture, climate, biodiversity, zero pollution and animal welfare will be extremely difficult to reach. Moreover, given the amount of embedded carbon in Europe's food and feed imports, a sustainable food system transformation is fundamental for ensuring coherence with a range of other international commitments, including on climate and limiting the EU's contribution to deforestation. An ambitious SFSF will allow the EU to remain credible on the world stage as a frontrunner in environmental ambition, and more importantly demonstrate what is possible and use the single market as a lever to raise global standards.

A move to sustainable food systems, both in terms of production and consumption, is critical to meeting the EU's climate and biodiversity goals and ensuring the long-term competitiveness of its food system. An ambitious SFSF law is therefore urgently needed to drive this transformation and implement the EU Green Deal.

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