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Towards a transformative SFS legislative framework: in need of a constructive debate on the meaning of “sustainable food system”

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The Farm to Fork Strategy (F2F), the agri-food component of the EU Green Deal (EGD), sets [an ambitious and realistic approach](#) for a transition towards a more sustainable agri-food sector. A legislative framework for sustainable food systems (FSFS) has been proposed as a key vehicle for the implementation of the F2F, pursuing the objective to “ensure that all foods placed on the EU market increasingly become sustainable.” Yet, what shape such a framework law would take, and how influential it would become for other pieces of legislation has yet to be defined by the European Commission. This blogpost identifies the need for the

FSFS to spell out clear principles defining the contours of the sustainable food system the EU should transition towards to meet the EGD objectives. Agreeing on such principles for the FSFS would however require an open, transparent and democratic debate regarding the future of the EU food system, that takes into account two aspects often left aside: the necessity to strongly link supply and demand measures; and the importance of giving equal consideration to climate change and biodiversity preservation

Over the last few months, the Commission has given some indications of what it is considering for the FSFS. Three measures are under consideration, targeting the demand side as well as the supply side: the development of a sustainability labelling scheme, the issuance of new guidelines to "green" public procurement and the creation of minimum sustainability requirements. All options are on the table regarding the level of stringency that would be applied, between fully voluntary or fully mandatory approaches.

While the measures themselves are still vague, their operationalization will require agreed-upon definitions of what "sustainable food" and "sustainable food system" mean: in the case of sustainability labelling, to determine how and against which criteria and thresholds products are rated; in the case of green public procurement, to determine what products public authorities should purchase; and in terms of minimum sustainability requirements, what products are allowed on the market.

However, as [illustrated by the ongoing debates in France](#) on the definition of a sustainable food labelling scheme, defining criteria regarding what "sustainable food" is or not is not only a technical and scientific discussion. Technical choices about what indicators to use, how to weigh them, and the functional unit (per hectare or per kilogramme) adopted cannot be disassociated from the discussion about values in terms of what a desirable EU food system should look like.

The Farm to Fork Strategy outlines the European Commission's vision for the future of the EU food system, providing one answer to what the EU food system should look like. It sets targets on the reduction of external inputs uses (fertilizers, pesticides and antimicrobials), the restoration of landscape heterogeneity for biodiversity preservation (through the target on landscape features), and the reduction of food waste and losses; it also highlights the need to reduce red and processed meat consumption for health and environmental reasons. This overall direction towards healthier, more sustainable diets and less intensive production is not only aligned with most sustainable food system scenarios published over the last few years (including the [EAT-Lancet report](#) and the [TYFA report](#)), but it also reflects at least partly the recommendations made by the Scientific Advice Mechanism of the European Commission in its 2020 [report](#).

Yet, to say that the F2F has been heavily criticized since its publication would be an understatement: the vision advanced by the European Commission is clearly not supported by a significant number of stakeholders. Those attacking it have used the [war in Ukraine to call for the EU food system to stabilize or increase its current production levels](#), in the name of food security or even food sovereignty. To this end, they state that any new environmental rules should be judged against this objective. Such arguments about food security are underpinned, either implicitly or explicitly, by two ideas.

First, that demand cannot be changed, or is at least not an area where public policies should intervene. Among policy options, proposals for policies on animal protein consumption reduction are believed to be particularly untouchable by F2F opponents. Second, that biodiversity collapse across EU agricultural landscapes should not be considered a problem in and of itself. This idea is often coupled with a climate change-centered vision, which prioritizes climate change mitigation above other environmental challenges.

Our research supports the Farm to Fork's position on intervening in demand and the necessity of preserving biodiversity. Changing demand is a key lever for food system transitions, as also pointed out by the [IPCC's Special Report on Climate Change and Land](#) (figure SPM.3A). This should thus be a top priority in a context where EU animal protein consumption is on average well above what is needed to cover nutritional needs, and production is responsible for the EU being a net importer of calories. On the other hand, diversified agricultural landscapes, which host biodiversity, provide significant ecosystem services with an important role in maintaining EU agricultural land productive capacity; this should not be overlooked [as yield stagnation in many cropping systems in Western Europe](#) is at least partially due to biodiversity decline and a lack of adaptive capacity.

Rather than set forward a consensual vision for the future of EU food systems, the Farm to Fork Strategy opened a Pandora's box of ongoing disagreements between stakeholders, both within and outside the EU. In such a context, agreeing on clear principles to define the contours of a desirable EU food system—a key prerequisite to get to a robust and transformative FSFS—will require much more than technical debates. Different food system visions must be discussed, and their assumptions made explicit and thus debatable so that a political consensus can be built and then operationalized into more technical guiding criteria and indicators. If the final EU vision is more robust, then it will be easier for the EU to promote it in international fora, where discussions are ongoing with significant implications for trade norms.

In view of such debates, the role of science and scientists is to support the discussion with the best available evidence, while making explicit the assumptions underpinning the research used in the debate. As such, IDDRI and its think tank partners will continue to bring to light to the need to consider consumption and production together, and that conserving biodiversity within agroecosystems is at least as important as the need to reduce the climate footprint of the agri-food system if we are to maintain productive capacity in the long run.

