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National food strategies: the need for coordinated action

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There are health, environmental and geopolitical imperatives to supporting healthier, more sustainable diets in Europe. While taking policy action on food consumption remains sensitive^{[1](#)} evidence increasingly shows the importance of food environments^{[2](#)} in shaping what people eat. As the EU has hesitated, some Member States have begun moving ahead and creating food strategies, but without the needed EU-level framework to create coherence. This blog post explains the state of play around national food strategies, makes the case for why EU rules should harmonize them and discusses some elements that Member States should include within them. It provides an EU perspective on a [Study](#) that proposes a methodology to characterizes the current French food policy framework and makes policy recommendations for designing successful national food strategies.

Recent scientific publications show that Europeans eat an excessive amount of animal products, fats, and sugar, and too few fruits and vegetables, leading to the [proliferation of non-communicable diseases](#). Furthermore, animal products can have significant negative environmental impacts. For this reason, [researchers have suggested dietary changes](#) to improve both human health and the sustainability of food systems. These dietary changes could also have geopolitical implications if they allow the EU to become more autonomous in food production, as the [war in Ukraine illustrated the EU's dependence on third countries for animal feed and fertilizers](#). While the evidence supporting the need for policy action at this nexus is clear, there remain significant policy gaps in promoting healthy, sustainable diets.

Member States begin to take action

Across the EU, a growing number of countries are putting forward strategies³ to improve diets, health, sustainability and nutrition.

In France, discussions around a new national food strategy that includes climate and health objectives alongside economic considerations were launched during the Citizens Convention for Climate, and the Law on Climate and Resilience made the creation of such a strategy a legal obligation. Until now, regulatory action on nutrition and food supply has been done separately through two different plans, while environmental issues were mostly sidelined. This new food strategy, set to come out this fall, offers the opportunity to fill this policy gap and break down siloes in the policy framework.

In Germany, [the government is currently gearing up to release a food strategy in 2023](#), as laid out in the coalition agreement. Following significant stakeholder consultations, in December 2022, a pathway document towards the creation of the strategy was approved, in which the federal government takes the clear position that policymakers need to create food environments that support healthy and sustainable diets.

Other Member States (MS), including Sweden (2016), Finland (2017), Denmark (2018) and Ireland (2021), already created food strategies. Despite some similarities in their coverage of environment and nutrition questions, we observe a number of differences in how the strategies approach the question (from a “food chain” economy-driven vision to a more holistic “food systems” perspective), define the problem (i.e., competitiveness in the value chain, lack of sustainability, social inequalities, health issues) and the policy instruments they mobilize.

The need for a common EU framework stemming from overarching objectives

As more MS create food strategies, interest is growing in EU action to improve coherence. To do so, we and our think tank colleagues [proposed in 2021](#) and [expanded in 2022](#) the idea of having the Sustainable Food System Framework Law (SFS Law), originally set to be published in Fall 2023, create a requirement for MS to put into place action plans on sustainable food systems. An approach wherein EU-level legislation such as the SFS Law coordinates MS action legitimized by a) the food systems' transboundary and market impacts and b) the need for the EU to play a role in ensuring coherence as well as c) the fact that MS are best placed to create context-adapted strategies.

As food systems, including consumption and production, have social, environmental and economic transboundary effects, there is the need for coordination at the EU level to ensure coherence across Europe. Because of the lack of a common framework, there are significant differences between the strategies put forward by MS, leading to possible

market distortions. These transboundary impacts give the EU justification to act to ensure coherence and safeguard against differences in legal frameworks in MS that impact the functioning of the Single Market.

The European Commission can play—and has played in other policy areas—a special role in ensuring coherence, should a European law, such as the SFS Law, create the basis for national action plans. The Commission can contribute significantly to creating consistency between MS by putting into place common objectives for food national action plans. In addition to creating overarching objectives, the Commission could also play other roles to support coherence. In the EU school scheme, for instance, MS make strategies to receive financial support to provide fruits, vegetables and milk to children following certain requirements laid out in [Commission Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2017/39](#), and then must complete monitoring reports on which the Commission can comment.

Including MS action plans in the SFS Law or other EU framework legislation would be beneficial as the national contexts around food are quite different due to pedoclimatic conditions, cultural dimensions, and socioeconomic factors. Therefore, there is a need for flexibility and a multi-level approach to food governance. MS governments are best placed to take into account this diversity and create the appropriate instruments that address national and regional challenges given the right EU framework.

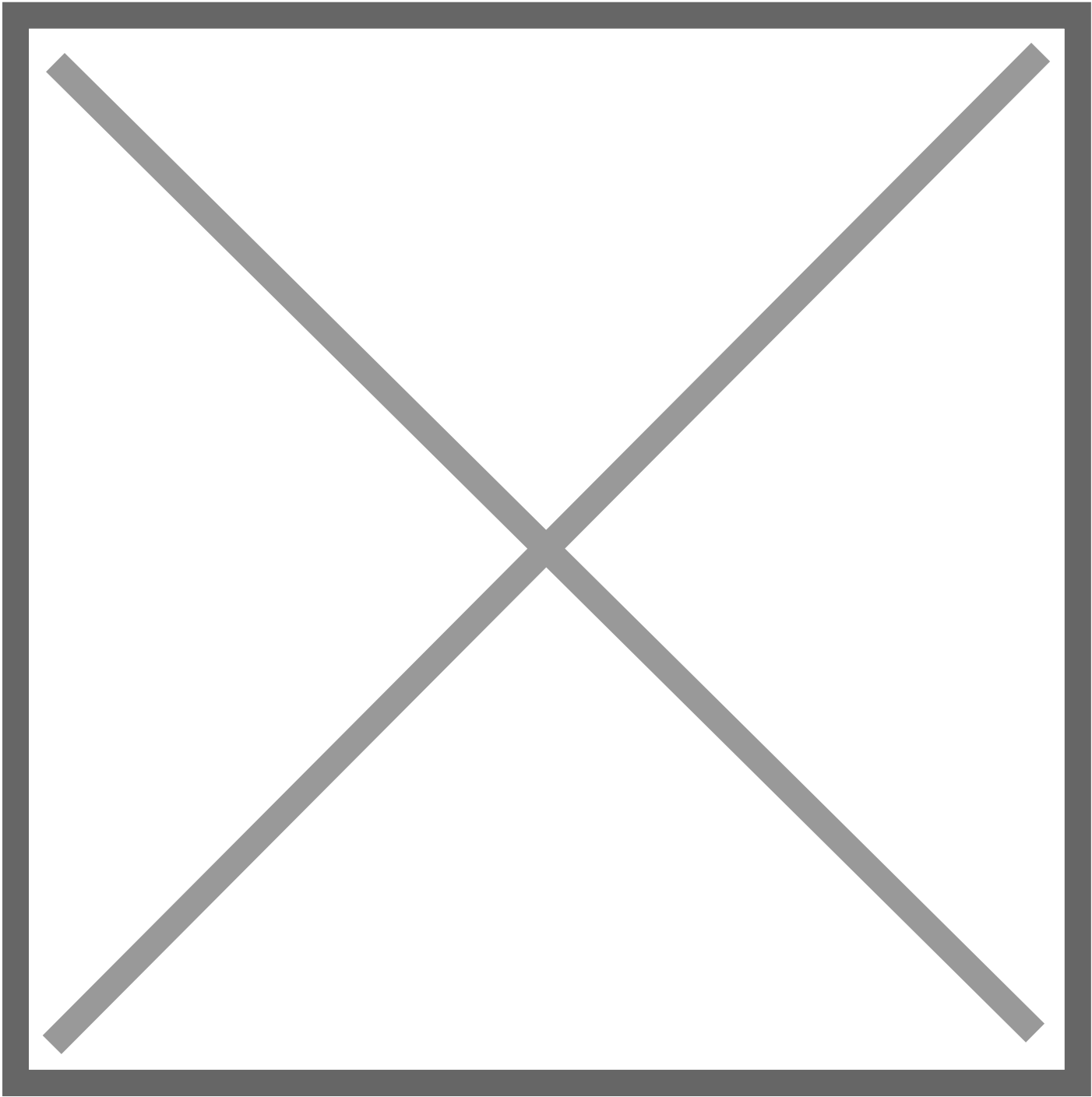
A proposed methodology to create action plans

First and foremost, these plans need to include appropriate timeframes that put into place a series of measures to reach the objectives set out in Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, the Farm to Fork Strategy and possibly the SFS Law.

Second, these plans need to be based on analyses of the state of play in the different countries. Similar to the CAP strategic plans, MS should take the time to analyze the policies and strategies that exist as well as the main challenges to healthy and sustainable eating. In this regard, a definition of sustainability in the food system should be determined at EU level, ideally within the SFS Law, and should integrate health, environmental sustainability, animal welfare, and social aspects. This policy review must investigate all dimensions of food environments: physical, socio-cultural, economic, and cognitive.²

Third, national plans need to set a clear direction towards which all national policies will aim, ensuring coherence at the national level. They should include ambitious instruments evaluated according to their potential to reach overarching EU objectives and also ensure the coherence and comprehensiveness of the different measures. And [they must be proven to be effective and go beyond the idea of individual responsibility](#), with the focus on changing the entire food environment to make the healthiest and most sustainable food choice the easiest for all consumers. For this, the contribution of middle-of-chain actors (retailers, industries, foodservice) should be at the core of national food action plans as they are key in shaping these food environments, and in turn, food practices.

Finally, the action plans should include governance structures that include all relevant ministries and departments, perhaps through a transversal position. They should also allow for citizen and stakeholder engagement before, during and after the implementation phase, using the most appropriate governance tools.



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1 Indeed, while the Farm to Fork Strategy (2020) from the European Commission mentions the need to change diets for example, its measures related to consumption have stalled within the Commission and remain focused on the cognitive environment rather than more hard-hitting measures like taxes.

2 A definition of food environments that is operational for policymaking distinguishes between 4 dimensions: physical (infrastructure and material conditions in which food is consumed, also known as the food landscape); socio-cultural (norms and social representations shaping groups and individuals' attitudes towards food); economic (prices and resources) and cognitive (information, skills and knowledge provision). See Brocard & Saujot, (2023). Environment inequality, health: what strategy for French food policies, Iddri Study.

3 For clarity, we use strategy when referring to current and planned policy by Member States and action plan to refer to future plans harmonized by the EU; however, the two could be used interchangeably.

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