

The Farm to Fork Strategy: reasons for failure and how to move forward

Pierre-Marie Aubert (IDDRI)*

With its "Farm to Fork" strategy, the European Commission proposed an ambitious project to transform Europe's food system. However, the strategy has faced strong opposition and political blockages, indicating that a change of approach is needed if we are to move towards a more sustainable agricultural model.

Will European agriculture be able to feed 530 million Europeans with a healthy diet in 2050, while helping to achieve climate neutrality and contributing to global food equilibria? This question is at the heart of the Green Deal's agriculture and food policy, the so-called "Farm to Fork" (F2F) strategy (EC, 2020).¹ Nearly four years after its publication, it would be an understatement to say that this strategy has sparked debate and controversy within the farming world and beyond. Adopting a systemic view of the food system and setting ambitious environmental targets, F2F was seen either as a cornerstone of a new approach to reform the European food system and keep it within planetary boundaries (e.g. Schebesta *et al.*, 2020); or as a vehicle for an unacceptable decline in European agricultural production, creating risks not only for the EU but for food security worldwide (e.g. Beckman *et al.*, 2020).

In this article we first review the importance and relevance of F2F's potential for the transformation of the European food system. We then describe four factors which, in our view, may explain the great difficulties encountered in implementing the F2F, the failure of which contrasts with the adoption of the "Fit for 55" package. The final section suggests some ways to advance this project, without underestimating the difficulties.

transition pathway that combines climate, biodiversity, nutrition and health, based on three major shifts in the organization of the food system: lower animal product consumption, reduced use of synthetic inputs, and reduced loss and waste (e.g. Poux *et al.*, 2018; Springmann *et al.*, 2018). To implement this pathway, the strategy expressly targets all food chain links, although it is not entirely explicit about the conditions for economic viability (we return to this point later).

Second, its development has been jointly entrusted to three of the Commission's Directorates-General (SANTE, ENV and AGRI) under the leadership of SANTE, thus breaking with what politicians call agricultural exceptionalism (Daugbjerg *et al.*, 2017). The term refers to a decision-making process that is compartmentalized in relation to other public action, in which the agricultural administration co-manages relevant policies with the majoritarian farmer unions, excluding from the discussion not only agricultural stakeholders seen as "minorities" or "alternative", but also stakeholders from other sectors directly impacted by agriculture, such as health, environment or energy. This compartmentalization is justified by the sector's unique characteristics—or at least its claim for such uniqueness—such as its exposure to climatic variation, its geopolitical importance, and its low income structure. This partly explains why major Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reforms have always been triggered by major external shocks, as occurred in 1992 and 2004 (e.g. Daugbjerg *et al.*, 2008).

NOTE

Feb.
2024

1. A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY, THAT RAPIDLY CLOSED

F2F has attempted to introduce two major innovations into food system governance.

Firstly, it takes a systemic approach to the food system, from agricultural production to food consumption, linking social, environmental and economic issues. It outlines a

¹ Strictly speaking, the agricultural component of the Green Deal consisted of two parts: the "Farm to Fork" (F2F) strategy and the biodiversity strategy. This article focuses on the F2F, although the ambitions of the biodiversity strategy are also largely to blame for the difficulties reported here in implementing the F2F.

1. A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY, THAT RAPIDLY CLOSED	1
2. REASONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION DELAY	2
3. CONCLUSION: BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD!	4

* This article was originally published in French by Institut Veblen and *Alternatives économiques* in Issue N°101 of *L'Économie politique* (January 2024).

Against the backdrop of this very specific governance model, the co-development of F2F by the three Directorates-General within the Commission (Agriculture, Health and Environment) already signalled a significant change. The F2F action plan also included a draft "Legislative Framework for Sustainable Food Systems", which several stakeholders had proposed should become a binding framework law for future CAP negotiations, both in terms of objectives and the stakeholders to be included (Baldock *et al.*, 2022).

The political initiative was therefore ambitious, but on the whole it failed. Of the 27 texts that were to be introduced or revised, only nine had been adopted by January 1, 2024, including eight communications and one amendment to the regulation on plant protection products of relatively minor scope. Six other texts are awaiting approval or negotiation, while the draft regulation on the sustainable use of pesticides was simply rejected by the European Parliament. Twelve other texts are still waiting to be proposed by the Commission. However, there is a very high risk that the Commission will simply abandon these proposals after the next European elections.

2. REASONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION DELAY

Long before its publication, the preparation of F2F had been the subject of bitter debate among stakeholders in the Brussels "bubble", as well as between the Commission's Directorates-General. Negotiations focused on certain key aspects, such as reducing the consumption of animal products and defining targets for synthetic fertilizers. Two main factors seem to have contributed to the publication of the F2F as we know it today: the sharing of responsibilities between the three Directorates-General for Agriculture, Health and the Environment in drafting the proposals; and the personal investment of Commission Vice-President Franz Timmermans in arbitrating between the versions proposed by different departments.

Although effective at the Commission level, this configuration proved inadequate during the subsequent legislative process, for four main reasons:

The first is "technocratic": by entrusting DG SANTE with the steering of the F2F, the Commission was forcing DG AGRI to share prerogatives regarding agricultural issues which until then had been almost exclusively within the agricultural remit; but it was also entrusting major responsibilities to a unit with little experience of agricultural issues and few human resources. Therefore, DG SANTE officials were finding it difficult not only to cope with the pace, but also to keep up with the issues in general, compared with DG AGRI, which has a staff of almost 900 people entirely dedicated to these issues. Furthermore, DG CLIMA and DG ENV were only moderately involved in this implementation phase, despite the fact that food system transition is a major challenge within their mandates.

A second difficulty is the polarization of the debate on agricultural transition and food issues. This is structured around an

apparently simple question: do we need to protect (or restore) the biodiversity *within* agricultural landscapes? This question relates to a poorly framed conversation that has lasted for the last 20 years now, opposing two agricultural development strategies. The first, known as "land sparing", considers that it is preferable to focus on the most productive use of agricultural land to minimize the area required to satisfy human needs, leaving room for "nature" elsewhere. This strategy can claim a certain efficiency in terms of resource use (water, fertilizers) and greenhouse gas emissions, in relation to final production volumes (Balmford *et al.*, 2018), but it can have a significant negative impact on local biodiversity (Phalan, 2018). A second strategy, known as "land sharing", considers biodiversity to be a central element in the functioning and long-term productivity of any agricultural landscape (Dainese *et al.*, 2019).

In regions such as the EU, where yields are already very close to maximum agronomic potential, such an approach is likely to significantly change the product mix—e.g. the overall quantities of various food products and their relative proportion. In response to this, land sharing approaches propose to compensate for these reductions in production by reducing the consumption of animal products, accompanied by a reduction in the proportion of crop production used for animal feed, which currently represents 60% of cereals and almost 75% of oilseed and protein crops used in Europe (e.g. Rööß *et al.*, 2022). This has no effect on the nutritional status of populations, in a context where the daily consumption of animal products in Europe is, on average, around double the nutritional requirements (Vieux *et al.*, 2022).

From the perspective of agricultural practices, the opposition between "land sparing" and "land sharing" is clearly less stark, with many practices simultaneously enabling the improvement of yields, and of the climatic efficiency of production and biodiversity (DeClerck *et al.*, 2021). However, the political vision and public debate in general have become strongly polarized around these two extremes, (Loconto *et al.*, 2020) making the search for solutions increasingly complicated.

Comparisons with the energy and transport sectors are illuminating. There is no shortage of controversy in these fields either, for example regarding the role of nuclear power or the extent of the reduction in the number of kilometres travelled that should be targeted. However, they take place in a context where "no-regrets" options exist and are shared by most stakeholders, such as the electrification of the private vehicle fleet or the development of renewable energies. The existence of such no-regrets options has helped generate support for the climate component of the Green Deal, Fit For 55, and thus to drive forward the transformation of these sectors, even though debates have continued on other aspects. Whereas for agriculture, F2F's objectives of reducing synthetic input usage and developing agroecological infrastructure were immediately labelled as land sharing. All actors involved in land sparing, the approach that largely dominates the agricultural sector, rejected it almost wholesale, thus blocking any progress.

The third reason for the failure was the difficulty of discussing the economic implications of the strategy, whether in terms of

income and jobs in the food chain, the cost of food or the EU's trade balance. Less than six months after the publication of F2F, the US Department of Agriculture published a highly critical report (Beckman *et al.*, 2020). Based on a general equilibrium model, the report identifies three main impacts: first, achieving the F2F objectives (lower inputs, developing organic farming and agroecological infrastructure) will lead to a fall in production; second, Europe will be adversely affected, with falls in the value created by the food system, in farm incomes and associated jobs, as well as increases in food prices; and third, at the global level, Europe will need to increase imports and will become less competitive, while the most import-dependent countries will see their food bills rise.

This study, like most subsequent ones, rests on a "all things being equal" approach and consider no to marginal changes in food demand, production methods, or production quality. This approach reflects a well-known methodological difficulty of market equilibrium models: they represent the way the current food system operates, in order to explore the implications of external shocks to the system. But their use in the public debate has led us to forget that the aim of F2F is to take us towards a new food system, with characteristics—and therefore functioning—that are very different from the current situation. For example, F2F aims to shift demand towards "less and better" animal products, or to improve supply by increasing the production performance of low-input systems through investment in research and innovation, etc. It is difficult to model the world under these conditions using highly rigid tools based on market equilibrium (Barreiro-Hurle *et al.*, 2021).²

Other, more flexible tools have nevertheless been used by other researchers and provide considerable food for thought, for example, on farm incomes and consumer well-being (Guyomard *et al.*, 2023), global food balances (Schiavo *et al.*, 2023), access to healthy and sustainable food (Rogissard *et al.*, 2021) and the employment creation associated with increased quality in a context of shrinking volumes (Aubert *et al.*, 2021). These studies show that the socio-economic option space of the transition is wider than is generally assumed. They also point to the need to change *market conditions* to trigger such transitions and to make them economically viable, change that must occur at two levels. Firstly, at the level of consumer preferences and willingness to pay, so that people choose healthy and sustainable products on a massive scale. Secondly, at the level of market organization, so that producers competing on the common market and on world markets play by the same rules.

Although the F2F set out to address these aspects of trade and consumption in its action plan, there also has been movement in the wrong direction. The Commission has proved incapable of intervening on *food environments*—a concept at the heart of the debate, referring to the physical, economic, cultural and cognitive aspects that structure consumption choices (Brocard, 2023), even though this was one of the key promises of the regulatory framework on sustainable food systems. Furthermore,

² This raises the more general question of impact assessment methodologies, as Jeroen Candel rightly points out (2022).

the leeway given to Member States in implementing the CAP through National Strategic Plans has tended to increase market distortions at the EU level, while at the international level, the bilateral trade agreements signed or currently being negotiated pay little attention to the F2F's ambitions regarding agriculture/food. The difficulty of finding consensus on what constitutes truly sustainable agriculture certainly makes it difficult to move forward. However, we may wonder whether more in-depth discussions on the *economic conditions* for achieving F2F might have helped to depolarize the discussions and to reach points of agreement.

This issue of market conditions brings us to the fourth and final factor in the failure of the F2F: the international context. Establishing a fair and equitable market, where producers can embark on the transition with confidence, requires an agreement on the objectives to be achieved and the types of agriculture to be supported. For this to happen, Europe would have had to defend, at the international level, the vision that underpins the F2F strategy, based on an ambitious consideration of biodiversity issues. Yet, F2F triggered misunderstanding at the international level, not only in the United States but also in Southern countries, who see it (or choose to see it) as an abandonment of productivity ambitions and a form of disguised protectionism that would adversely affect their own agriculture. Many of these countries joined forces in the "Coalition on Sustainable Productivity Growth for Food Security and Resource Conservation" launched by the United States at the Food System Summit a year after the F2F's publication. The Coalition deliberately distances itself from the F2F by insisting on the need to increase yields and *global* production, with a clear emphasis on land sparing, paying little attention to biodiversity issues in agricultural landscapes and totally ignoring the issue of changing diets in Northern countries.

For many countries, the global perspective offered by the United States proved far more attractive than the F2F, which was perceived as far too Eurocentric and insufficiently focused on global food security issues. The outbreak of war in Ukraine and the ensuing destabilization of world food markets finally removed what little legitimacy the F2F had left on the international stage, while simultaneously providing European agricultural actors with an additional opportunity to denounce the strategy.

3. CONCLUSION: BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD!

Despite this admission of failure, the way forward is not to abandon the ambition or the course set by F2F, but to go back to the drawing board to examine the work afresh, without being naive about the political dynamics underway. Tensions on world markets in the wake of the Ukraine war continue to push for a productivist agenda with little regard for the environment, while agricultural and food issues are increasingly politicized, all against a backdrop of arguments that are frequently

scientifically weak.³ The question of how to continue with a structured and constructive conversation to identify areas of common ground is therefore anything but simple. The Commission on the Future of Agriculture, launched in Germany under the last Merkel government, does, however, offer grounds for believing that such a dialogue is possible. The *Zukunftskommission Landwirtschaft* has brought together the main stakeholders for over a year, supported by a scientific committee, and in 2021 succeeded in publishing a set of scenarios and proposals that are very much in line with F2F, which were validated by all participants (Commission on the Future of Agriculture, 2021).⁴ Such an approach is fundamentally based on the acceptance, by all participants, of the space of biophysical possibilities, in contrast to the sometimes brutal politicization strategies deployed by certain actors, playing on fears and emotions.

On the basis of this experience and the results of F2F, three aspects seem key to moving the debate forward. First, in terms of method, it is essential to have a shared understanding of the issues involved in the transition, based on an in-depth socio-economic analysis, including the reorganization of markets. Second, in terms of subject matter, it will be difficult to avoid the issue of reducing animal product consumption – though it is not a simple issue and it does not help depolarize the debate. The European level could play an important role in supporting Member States to develop food strategies, an issue that needs to be addressed. Finally, if the F2F can ever be resurrected, it will need to be closely linked to the discussions underway within DG Climate on the introduction of carbon pricing to support sustainable agriculture and food.

REFERENCES

- Aubert, P.-M. *et al.* (2021). Designing Just Transition Pathways: A Methodological Framework to Estimate the Impact of Future Scenarios on Employment in the French Dairy Sector. *Agriculture*, 11 (11), 1119.
- Baldock, D. *et al.* (2022). *Towards a Transformative Sustainable Food System Legislative Framework*. Brussels, Think2030, 26 p.
- Balmford, A. *et al.* (2018). The environmental costs and benefits of high-yield farming. *Nature Sustainability*, 1 (9), 477-485.
- Barreiro-Hurlé, J. *et al.* (2021). Modelling Transitions to Sustainable Food Systems: Are We Missing the Point? *EuroChoices*, 20 (3), 12-20.

³ For example, the narrative that "Europe must feed the world" does not withstand much analysis, in a context where the over-consumption of animal products in Europe is leading it to be a net importer of both calories and proteins (Schiavo *et al.*, 2023).

⁴ The coalition currently in power in Germany seems to be having trouble getting to grips with the subject of agriculture, with the result that many of the recommendations made at the time have not been translated into concrete political measures.

Beckman, J. *et al.* (2020). *Economic and Food Security Impacts of Agricultural Input Reduction Under the European Union Green Deal's Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies*. Washington, Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 51 p.

Brocard, C. (2023). Transition alimentaire : un nouveau cadre d'action politique pour atteindre nos objectifs. *Sesame*, 14 (2), 6-7.

Candel, J. (2022). EU food-system transition requires innovative policy analysis methods. *Nature Food*, 3 (5), 296-298.

Commission on the Future of Agriculture (2021). *The Future of Agriculture. A common agenda*. Berlin, Zukunftskommission Landwirtschaft, 135 p.

Dainese, M. *et al.* (2019). A global synthesis reveals biodiversity-mediated benefits for crop production. *Science Advances*, 5 (10), 13.

Daugbjerg C. *et al.* (2008). Curbing Agricultural Exceptionalism: The EU's Response to External Challenge. *The World Economy*, 31 (5), 631-652.

Daugbjerg, C. *et al.* (2017). Post-exceptionalism in public policy: transforming food and agricultural policy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24 (11), 1565-1584.

DeClerck, F.A.J. *et al.* (2021). *Biodiversity and agriculture: rapid evidence review*. Colombo, Sri Lanka, International Water Management Institute (IWMI). CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE), 70 p.

EC (2020). *Farm to Fork Strategy. For a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system*. Brussels, European Union, 22 p.

Guyomard H. *et al.* (2023). The European Green Deal improves the sustainability of food systems but has uneven economic impacts on consumers and farmers. *Communications Earth & Environment*, 4 (1), 358.

Loconto A. *et al.* (2020). The land sparing – land sharing controversy: Tracing the politics of knowledge. *Land Use Policy*, 96, 103610.

Phalan, B. (2018). What Have We Learned from the Land Sparing-sharing Model? *Sustainability*, 10 (1760).

Poux, X. *et al.* (2018). *Ten Years for Agroecology in Europe: a multifunctional agriculture for healthy eating. Findings from the Ten Years For Agroecology (TYFA) modelling exercise*. Paris, Iddri – <https://www.iddri.org/sites/default/files/PDF/Publications/Catalogue%20Iddri/Etude/201809-ST0918EN-tyfa.pdf>, 73 p.

Rogissard, L. *et al.* (2021). *Une alimentation plus durable augmente-t-elle le budget des consommateurs ?* Paris, I4CE.

Röös, E. *et al.* (2022). Agroecological practices in combination with healthy diets can help meet EU food system policy targets. *Science of The Total Environment*, 847, 157612.

Schebesta, H. *et al.* (2020). Game-changing potential of the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy. *Nature Food*, 1 (10), 586-588.

Schiavo, M. *et al.* (2023). The land use, trade, and global food security impacts of an agroecological transition in the EU. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 7.

Springmann M. *et al.* (2018). Options for keeping the food system within environmental limits. *Nature*, 562 (7728), 519-525.

Vieux, F. *et al.* (2022). Approximately Half of Total Protein Intake by Adults Must be Animal-Based to Meet Nonprotein, Nutrient-Based Recommendations, With Variations Due to Age and Sex. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 152 (11), 2514-2525.

Aubert, P.-M. (2023). The Farm to Fork Strategy: reasons for failure and how to move forward. *Note*, IDDRI.

This work has received financial support from the French government in the framework of the programme "Investissements d'avenir" managed by ANR (French National Research Agency) under the reference ANR-10-LABX-14-01.

CONTACT

pierremarie.aubert@iddri.org

Institut du développement durable
et des relations internationales
41, rue du Four – 75006 Paris – France

WWW.IDDRI.ORG

[@IDDRI_THINKTANK](https://twitter.com/IDDRI_THINKTANK)