


# The EU Farm to Fork Strategy: What needs to come next?

A first assessment of important steps for an ambitious implementation of the EU Farm to Fork Strategy

A decorative graphic on the left side of the page. It features a photograph of fresh vegetables, including green bell peppers, carrots, and leafy greens, held in a person's hands. This image is partially overlaid by a large, light gray triangle pointing right and a smaller, dark blue triangle pointing left, creating a layered, geometric effect.

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# 1 The EU Farm to Fork Strategy – a step towards more resilient food systems?

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The European Commission launched its long-awaited Farm to Fork Strategy on May 20, 2020. The strategy is a first attempt to define long-term objectives for a healthy, just and sustainable EU food system that addresses both food production and consumption.

The strategy was published against the background of the Corona crisis that has critically highlighted the dependence of the EU food system on global supply chains and the need to increase resilience against shocks – be it a pandemic or other crises such as climate change. The Covid-19 outbreak has also put a spotlight on how human impact on biodiverse areas and wildlife habitats – such as the clearing of forests to provide space for agricultural zones - is linked to the spread of infectious diseases. It has highlighted the often precarious working conditions faced by many agricultural workers and has shown the difficulties to ensure food supply to vulnerable groups.

The [EU Farm to Fork strategy](#), alongside its tandem [Biodiversity Strategy](#), is not only an important element of the European Green Deal and the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, but also needs to be **part of Europe's recovery plan in response to the Corona crisis**.

In the absence of a dedicated food policy or strategy so far, the Farm to Fork Strategy is a **remarkable first step towards the needed transformations of food systems**. It recognizes the huge challenges facing our food and farming systems, acknowledges the negative externalities of the current system, provides quantitative targets for key issues of food system transformation and shows potential pathways for how to achieve them.

The strategies' **concrete targets** include a reduction by 50% of the use and risk of pesticides, a reduction by at least 20% of the use of fertilizers, a reduction by 50% in sales of antimicrobials used for farmed animals and aquaculture, and reaching 25% of agricultural land under organic farming. It also reiterates the objective of halving per capita food waste at retail and consumer levels by 2030 and announces that the Commission will propose legally binding targets to reduce food waste across the EU by 2023.

While the strategy offers remarkable ideas for a food system transformation, a successful implementation will depend on the smart translation into ambitious and effective processes, funding and regulation. A first assessment shows that **to achieve these targets** progress on five issues, which are only partially outlined or not yet fully developed, will be key:

1. **Policy coherence:** The farm to fork strategy needs to be coherent with other EU policies. This includes most notably the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), but also a range of other policy areas.
2. **National strategies for sustainable and healthy food systems** should be set up that facilitate stakeholder engagement on national level and allow the implementation of locally adapted and socially just transition strategies.
3. **Regional supply chains** need to be (re-)built to increase resilience of the EU food system.

4. **Bottom-up participatory research and advisory services** that are focused on agro-ecological and locally adapted solutions need to be further developed.
5. An “**EU Platform for healthy and sustainable food**” should be set up that supports implementation and multi-stakeholder knowledge exchange around targets, strategies and monitoring of the F2F Strategy.

## 2 Ensure policy coherence

To achieve the goals of the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Green Deal, a coherent policy framework is needed. The F2F Action plan which accompanies the strategy acknowledges this and describes the intention to develop a “proposal for a **legislative framework for sustainable food systems**”, to be developed by 2023, without yet being specific about its content. This provides a mid-term opportunity to further define and operationalize principles, criteria and indicators for sustainable food systems.

What is needed immediately though, is a translation of the EU targets set under the Farm to Fork Strategy into targets of the **national CAP strategic plans**, so that the most important EU agricultural policy is in line with the Farm to Fork Strategy. The proposed measure to “*adopt recommendations to each Member State addressing the nine specific objectives of the CAP, before the draft CAP Strategic Plans are formally submitted*” (Action No. 3 in the F2F Strategy) until the end of 2020 plays an important role in this regard.

However, there are many more **policies that are not yet coherent** with the vision of the F2F Strategy and will need to play a role in the development of a legislative framework for sustainable food systems such as:

- **Land use and soil:** A sustainable food policy can only be achieved if it considers that food production competes with other land uses, most notably feed, fuel, fibre, urban development, recreation and nature protection. Given the ongoing trend of land degradation and the UN Goal of Land Degradation Neutrality (SDG 15.3), there is also the need for restoration. As shown for example in the Ecologic Institute’s research projects [RECARE](#) and “[Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals for Soils](#)“, an overall framework for sustainable soil management and concept to achieve land degradation neutrality is needed at EU and national level, complemented by binding and quantitative land-take targets and adequate financial and technical support at national scale.
- **Food consumption:** While there are quantitative targets for different aspects of food production (reduced use of pesticides, fertilizers, antimicrobials, increase of organic production) there are no quantitative targets for food consumption in the F2F strategy. This is problematic as production and demand measures should work hand in hand in order to achieve the intended objectives. An important area of action will be the **reduction of both animal product production and consumption**. [Numerous studies](#) have highlighted that currently, both production as well as consumption patterns of meat and animal products in the EU are neither sustainable nor healthy. Unfortunately, the suggestion that “the Commission will propose to stop stimulating production or consumption of meat” that appeared in the almost final draft of the F2F is not included in the final version<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, achieving a higher ratio of plant-based proteins in European diets

<sup>1</sup> But was replaced by „Furthermore, the Commission is undertaking a review of the EU promotion programme for agricultural products (...) In relation to meat, that review should focus on how the EU can use its promotion programme to support the most sustainable, carbon-efficient methods of livestock production.“

remains an important area of action for the future. Similarly important is to further work on **better food environments**. This means to make the healthy and sustainable choice the easy choice rather than overly relying on measures of consumer information and product labelling which have been shown to be the **least effective interventions**. Here, the strategy's intention to improve the availability and price of sustainable food through determining "the best modalities for setting minimum mandatory criteria for sustainable food procurement to promote healthy and sustainable diets, including organic products, in schools and public institutions" as well as potential tax incentives to encourage consumers to opt for sustainable and healthy diets are important steps in the right direction. They should be accompanied by setting standards for maximum levels of sugars, saturated fat and salt in certain processed food.

### 3 National strategies for sustainable and healthy food systems

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Over the past decades, the dominant approach has been to develop policies with relevance for the food system (like food safety, agriculture, health, environment and trade) in isolation. The F2F Strategy is a welcomed first attempt at the EU level to break such 'silo thinking' and to develop an integrated approach towards healthy and sustainable food systems.

A similar step is needed at the national level to **develop national strategies for sustainable and healthy food systems** and to build up processes, institutional structures and capacities that facilitate collaboration between different policy area administrations and coordination among different government levels and stakeholders. It is only on this level, that locally adapted solutions can be identified and where locally adapted and socially just transition strategies can be implemented. National food strategy plans can also be used to ensure that the CAP Strategic plans are aligned with the F2F ambitions and other national policies with food system relevance (e.g. on health, food security, rural development etc.).

### 4 Support for regional supply chains

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Among the lessons learned from the Corona crisis is that **short supply chains** are an important element of resilient food systems. They not only help to decrease dependency on global supply chains and ensure the availability of food supplies in times of crisis, but are also an important element to closing nutrient cycles, reconnecting producers and consumers, reducing food waste and supporting the regional economy and life in rural areas. The unprecedented rise in demand for regional food products and community-supported agriculture all over Europe seen during Corona crisis, shows how important these structures are.

Unfortunately, the **beneficial role of short and direct supply chains** and consumer cooperatives is hardly recognized in the F2F Strategy. It is therefore important that, amongst others, further support, the CAP strategic plans, research efforts under H2020 acknowledge and further develop regional food systems. As many cities and regions all over Europe have already started **(re-)building city-region food systems**, for example as part of their commitment under the "Milan Urban Food Policy Pact", these lessons should also be included in national and EU processes of setting up more resilient food supply chains.

## 5 Research and advisory services

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Research will continue to provide a scientific basis in further specifying, analyzing and testing innovative approaches for food systems transformation. The Ecologic Institute was significantly involved with two of the nine EU H2020 research projects that the [EU Commission highlights](#) as having contributed to the F2F strategy. The outcomes of [REFRESH](#) and [RECARE](#) have helped to inform the Strategy's content on food waste and measures to reverse soil degradation.

The additional support for Research and Innovation (R&I) as announced in the F2F is an important element of the strategy. The research agenda recognizes research needs in the area of digital technologies and nature-based solutions for agri-food, urban food systems, and increasing the availability and source of alternative proteins such as plant, microbial, marine and insect-based proteins and meat substitutes.

However, there is a risk that top-down approaches and technological solutions may dominate. The outcomes of a broad consultation process in our work in the [CIRCASA project](#) underline the importance of tailored guidance and advice to farmers, context specific agronomic solutions, and **strengthened advisory services and knowledge exchange** as central to scaling up soil carbon sequestration.

Research and experience also shows that **participatory, bottom-up processes** where farmers are actively involved in research, for example by co-defining the questions to be asked, testing solutions and then acting as demonstrators in their environments, results in effective changes of farming practices. Bottom-up participatory research, advisory services, and farmers' knowledge exchange groups that are focused on agro-ecological solutions and are developed with farmers in their specific biophysical and economic conditions therefore need to play a prominent role.

## 6 Stakeholder engagement

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Last but not least, a well set up broad and transparent stakeholder engagement process is not only an important element of research and innovation, but is also a crucial precondition to implement the overall F2F strategy and to facilitate the exchange of different views, integrate knowledge from different stakeholders and enable the identification of solutions that reflect the complexity of food systems.

An **exchange forum on EU level**, inspired by the well-functioning “EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste”<sup>2</sup> should be set up that allows an exchange between Member States, all relevant DG's within the EU Commission, the private sector, independent researchers, civil society organisations and representatives of local governments about, for example, target setting, implementation strategies and monitoring<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food\\_waste/eu\\_actions/eu-platform\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food_waste/eu_actions/eu-platform_en). The Platform meets biannually and is organized by DG SANTE.

<sup>3</sup> Given the complexity of the challenge to transform food systems on all levels and the need to collaborate with all relevant stakeholders the setting up of, for instance, an advisory group of food experts, would not be sufficient to define and implement action for sustainable and healthy food systems.

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