

EEB comments on the Public Consultation on the framework initiative for Sustainable Food Systems

Context

Food systems are at the heart of every EU citizen's life. Sustainable food systems should provide nutritious food for all and secure livelihoods for agri-food workers, while protecting natural resources and helping address climate change. However, the current European food system is driving environmental destruction and diet-related public health crises, as well as contributing to socio-economic inequalities through high concentration of power and systemic low wages and insecure working conditions. This led the experts contracted by the European Commission to produce an [Evidence Review report](#) to conclude: "The evidence we reviewed confirms the view that radical system-wide change is required, with 'business as usual' no longer a viable option."

The European Environmental Bureau therefore welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the important development of the framework initiative for Sustainable Food Systems. A wholesale transition to sustainable food systems is urgently needed and requires clear steering from public authorities. This can only be achieved through a reformed governance for food systems, full policy coherence, and policy actions to tackle the root causes of the unsustainability of the current food system.

Comments on the questionnaire

The EEB appreciates the improved consideration of food environments that transpires from the text of the questionnaire. While the Inception Impact Assessment had hardly more than mentioned food environments, the questionnaire goes into more detail, touching upon a few food environments dynamics in more detail (as is the case for the response lines to Q4).

The inclusion of a clear focus on the consumption side is also welcome, as this is not a historical remit for action for EU-level policy but cannot be left out in the effort to shift the whole food system to sustainability. The EEB believes EU action on consumption would benefit from referral to a clear focus on food environments to boost fairness and effectiveness.

The EEB acknowledges the important referral to the need for policy coherence and to the common trade policy as a key area of action for the upcoming framework. These two elements are first and foremost crucial in the effort to ensure effectiveness in the transition to sustainable food systems. For the EU food system to be truly sustainable, the externalisation and import/export of environmental damage will need to cease entirely. EU trade policy has a key role to play in determining this outcome.

The mention of power imbalances in the agri-food sector and the consideration that some actors have a greater responsibility for action in the transition is also appreciated, although formulated in quite a neutral way. It is not a matter of opinion that big agri-food companies driven by profit-making have historically played a key role in determining the current extractive structure of our food system, as well as being responsible for the most disastrous environmental impacts of the system itself. Such imbalances need to be addressed through strict public regulation and mandatory measures to foster a systemic shift to sustainability.

However, a clear-cut and consistent food environments approach is obviously still lacking, as shown by the recurrent referral to consumer responsibility and consumer motivation and information throughout the questionnaire. A well-integrated food environments approach would instead have produced a clear focus on the structural factors that overwhelmingly determine dietary patterns (the determinants of which food is actually made available, promoted, subsidised or taxed, and marketed in the EU, the settings in which such food is made available - i.e. retail environments –, the built environment determining accessibility of different kinds of food, and so on).

The partial consideration of food environments also impinges on the questionnaire's coverage of the consumption side. Indeed, the text reveals a strong focus on consumer responsibility and therefore, in policy terms, in providing information to consumers. Although transparent, clear and comprehensive information on the environmental impact of foodstuffs should be publicly available and easily accessible for consumers, labelling should not be considered more than a complementary policy tool to support an EU-wide food environment transformation and incentivise producers to improve the environmental performance of the processes they are responsible for.

While acknowledging the reference to the importance of trade policy measures in the transition, we believe policy coherence should have been placed more clearly in focus, and are concerned by the lack of any mention of measures requiring cross-policy alignment to sustainability objectives and principles laid out in the forthcoming framework initiative. This would be particularly consequential if related to the Common Agricultural and Fisheries policies, as well as the Common Trade Policy, a link that is lacking in the questionnaire.

Another problematic aspect related to the content of the questionnaire is the clear focus on individual products and processes found in place of a food systems approach (notably in Q8). The 'new comprehensive approach' announced in the Farm to Fork Strategy cannot, by definition, focus on individual sections of the food system. This kind of curtailing on policy-making remits only serves market interests, as it engenders loopholes and policy incoherence and ineffectiveness.

Finally, laying out a hierarchical structure such as the one presented in Q15 is highly problematic. Asking respondents to rank different elements based on which they would prioritise receiving information about is a dubious exercise in itself, one that once again focusses on consumer agency rather than public authorities' responsibility to act and align the food system with an overarching vision for change. We also believe it is highly unethical to consider ranking 'Fair and just remuneration of producers' and 'Fair and just working conditions' among the information on which consumers should receive information aimed at guiding their consumption choices. These aspects (at least) should be exclusively the object of strict regulation, not of consumer choice.

Furthermore, there were several important issues with the way the questionnaire was formulated which strongly impeded meaningful responses. We lament in particular the following issues:

1. Ambiguous and at times misleading formulation of questions and answers

The ambiguity of question 2 is disgraceful. This question could be interpreted as either:

- “How much do actions from the following actors **weigh on** the (un)sustainability of our food system”?

- or “How much can actions from the following actors **support** the transition to sustainability of our food systems?”

These are two very distinct questions, and this ambiguity is particularly problematic in relation to certain actors, which yield large influence on food systems, but are not necessarily important for delivering the transition to sustainable food systems. As the question was phrased, it was impossible for respondents to be sure of how their responses would be interpreted by the European Commission, which we condemn strongly.

We therefore wish to provide some crucial clarifications to the answers given to question 2:

Actor category	EEB Response	Explanation
Primary producers (farmers, fishers, etc.)	Somewhat important	Primary production is the single stage of food supply chains where most environmental harm is done. However, primary producers are generally the weakest actors in supply chains. While their participation in the transition is paramount, they have very little power and leeway to change their practices in the current economic and policy environment. Yet, it is paramount that public policy regulates and supports primary producers to move to sustainable practices and models. Furthermore, these groups are not homogenous in terms of either impact on sustainability nor power to foster the transition, which renders this question further meaningless.
Business operators active in the area of plant protection products; fertilizers; biotechnology relating to the food system; veterinary medicinal products	Not important at all	These businesses are extremely powerful, but have a very limited role to play in the transition to sustainable food systems. They have compounded the environmental impact of our food systems and perpetuated the current extractive and exploitative business and production model. These operators' current business model is therefore not compatible with sustainable food systems, and strong public policies should be designed to limit their negative impacts and curtail their influence in food systems.
Manufacturers; Traders; Retailers; and Hospitality and food service businesses	Very important	These businesses are very powerful and have an important role to play in the transition to sustainable food systems, but are for the most part currently not

		fostering sustainable food systems. Evidence has shown that relying on voluntary action from these actors (e.g. to shape healthier food environments) is not sufficient, and hence we strongly believe that the SFS Law should place specific and strong obligations on these actors, to mobilise them for the transition.
Consumers	Somewhat important	Consumers and consumer behaviour will undoubtedly play a central role in the transition to sustainable food systems. Nonetheless, as explained above, the consumer responsibility narrative is a highly damaging one, relying on the stigmatisation of individuals – a highly ineffective and unethical tool for behavioural change – and deresponsibilising public authorities. This in turn lays the foundation for slack regulation and voluntary measures being recommended to private actors, another notably ineffective practice.

2. Excessive generalisation for some categories of actors, making the questions meaningless

One glaring example of this is the category listed as ‘Primary producers of animal products (e.g. livestock farmers)’ in questions 2 and 3. This is a broad category, comprising large-scale industrial livestock producers, whose activities are among the worst blights on the sustainability of our food system, along with small-scale livestock producers conducting community-based and environmentally sustainable businesses that often provide important ecosystem services. The questionnaire did not allow for any such key distinction to be made. It is impossible to answer these questions truthfully or accurately when referring to such widely-defined categories.

3. Lack of clarity in the questions and the possible answers, which do not support the provision of clear and actionable feedback from respondents

- Question 4 and some of the options listed in the corresponding table are extremely unclear, e.g. lines referring to vague ‘short-term costs’ considered by consumers in making food choices, as well as those mentioning the ‘lack of a common understanding of sustainability’ at the EU or global level. The response lines on ‘Lack of incentives to produce sustainable food (e.g. financial, R&I)’ and ‘Lack of investment in/knowledge/access to innovation support measures’ are very vague, but the categories referred to imply a number of different options that support some transition paths over others. We believe support to and investment in innovation should focus on enabling a transition to agroecological production methods that would signify a truly systemic change, rather than on short-sighted techno-fixes.

- Several response statements in question 8 are also very unclear or badly phrased. Furthermore, these response lines are extremely convoluted and do not facilitate the provision of feedback (e.g. 'A sustainability analysis in the form of a global analysis of the sustainability profile of a product or operations is needed to accelerate the transition to sustainable food systems forward').
- Question 22, response line 2 - 'Marketing techniques should be restricted unless the products they relate to are of high nutritional standard (e.g. low in saturated fats, salt or sugar)': The overall objective for addressing the consumption-side of the transition to Sustainable Food Systems should be to create food environments that enable and support diets that are both healthy *and* sustainable. This response line is misleading as it only touches on the dimension of health while being within a questionnaire about a framework initiative that should support the sustainability of our food system. However, the measures referred to in the line could lead to the unrestricted marketing of some animal proteins (chicken/turkey, eggs, some dairy) just because they are nutritionally healthier, even though overwhelming scientific evidence has long established we will need to drastically reduce the production and consumption of animal products if we aim to make our agri-food system sustainable.

Wider recommendations

The nature and scale of the challenge of transforming food systems requires ambitious action by decision-makers. The continued worsening of many key indicators (e.g. environmental impacts of food production, diet-related diseases, household food insecurity, etc.) indicate clearly that the current policies and laws in place are failing to shift food systems towards sustainability; and 'business-as-usual is no longer a viable option'. Such action requires new legislative action from the European Commission, as already envisioned in the Farm to Fork Strategy two years ago.

The EEB strongly believes that a new legislative framework is needed to reform the governance of the EU's food system. This should take the form of a horizontal umbrella law, which covers the entire food system and takes a systems- and human rights-based approach. Such a new Sustainable Food Systems (SFS) Law must as a minimum:

- ✓ put in place robust governance systems that will enable the transition of the entire food system, including:
 - clear progress monitoring and accountability mechanisms (robust monitoring and evaluation framework and obligation on public authorities to report regularly and transparently on progress),
 - mechanisms for achieving full policy coherence such as an obligation on the European Commission to align existing sectoral laws with the SFS Law,
 - strong emphasis on public participation in food policy-making,
- ✓ pursue systemic change rather than focussing on making individual food products sustainable. To be achieved through a comprehensive approach addressing all seven dimensions of food environments: food properties, food promotion and marketing, food labelling, food provision, food retail and service, food pricing and food access, food trade and international agreements
- ✓ Policy options that take a "food product" approach, such as food sustainability labelling, can be a part of the policy mix, but cannot be the main instrument for change.
- ✓ set clear objectives and time-bound targets, such as:

- achieving land degradation neutrality by 2030
- halting and reversing farmland biodiversity loss by 2030
- bringing the overall environmental footprint of the food system within planetary boundaries by 2040 at the latest

In addition to these basic governance mechanisms, a new SFS Law must include concrete and ambitious actions to shape enabling food environments and to phase out unsustainable practices in food systems. The highest burden of action must lie on those with the most power to change, notably large agri-food companies (who are shaping the food system through their everyday decisions) and public authorities (the foundation of a human rights-based approach rests on the obligations of the State to formulate policies and strategies that contribute to the progressive realisation of the rights). Different policy options should be explored under this scenario, including but not limited to:

- ✓ banning advertising and marketing of unhealthy and unsustainable food;
- ✓ banning products which do not meet EU environmental, animal welfare, and social standards from the internal market;
- ✓ obligations for private companies to set targets on key dimensions of sustainability using harmonised methodologies and to monitor and report publicly on progress (e.g. on food waste, GHG emissions, packaging, etc.);
- ✓ obligation for public authorities to meet minimum mandatory green criteria for public food procurement and to set targets for sustainable and healthy food procurement;
- ✓ obligation for companies to design packaging for reuse and recycling, provide transparency on its chemical composition, and to source materials sustainably.