

# Towards healthy, sustainable and inclusive European food systems

## POLICY PRÉCIS

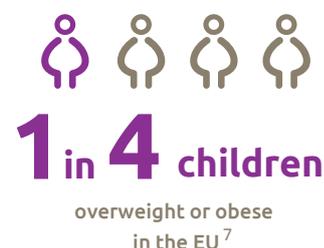
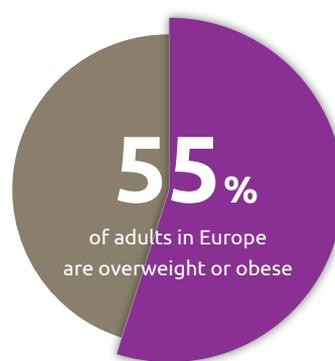
**Food systems affect health, the environment, and wellbeing for all. This Policy Précis covers the latest developments and trends. It identifies what can and is being done to move towards healthier, more sustainable and more inclusive food systems in Europe and beyond.**

What European people eat and drink is influenced by multiple factors including access, availability and affordability, by cultural values and individual preferences as well as environmental, social, and economic factors. Production and consumption patterns have been shaped by rapid globalisation of markets and by the rules of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which accounts for over a third of EU budgets. This much reformed policy still subsidises intensive production of alcohol, meat, dairy fats, oils and sugars. That approach was considered essential for food security and export income. They still matter of course, but the CAP is not fit for modern priorities of sustainable wellbeing in the context of climate change, obesity prevalence and social inequalities.

***'Our core goal should be a food system that creates a safe, secure, sustainable, sufficient and nutritious diet for all, equitably'*** - Geoff Tansey, Food Systems Academy<sup>1</sup>

A food system is 'a system that embraces all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructure, institutions, markets and trade) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution and marketing, preparation, and consumption of food and the outputs of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes'.<sup>2</sup>

Food policy consists of the actions and inactions by government that influence the supply, quality, price, production, distribution, and consumption of food.<sup>3</sup>



## Health impacts

Food supply is a third higher than required for healthy diets, while calorific intake in the EU has increased by 17% since the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Markets have aimed for economies of scale and volume, reinforcing the 'specialised, industrialised, and financialised' models that characterise food systems today.<sup>5</sup> Manufacturers and retailers are increasingly competing for the power to determine the nature of food supply chains and what is being produced and sold on world markets, through processes of consolidation.<sup>6</sup> The consequence of this is apparent in growing levels of overweight and obesity and prevalence of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). 55% of the adult population in Europe is overweight or obese, and between one in four children is, on average, overweight or obese across the EU with this number increasing to over one third in some countries.<sup>7</sup> NCDs, which are largely preventable, have a huge negative impact on both lives and health budgets. Levels are predicted to rise if people continue to over-consume highly processed foods and adopt increasingly inactive lifestyles.<sup>8</sup>



## Sustainability impacts

Current food systems put undue stress on environments. They account for up to 30% of the EU's total greenhouse gas emissions, making them a main driver of environmental degradation and climate change.<sup>9</sup> Meat and dairy production processes account for 50% of those emissions and for 80% of agricultural land use, the bulk of water use and biodiversity loss. The impacts of industry and transport contribute to pollution and associated illness, as do intensive production methods. Instead of encouraging production and consumption of more grains, fruits, and vegetables, high levels of subsidies continue to be spent on production of grain to feed animals for milk, cheese, and meat.<sup>10</sup> As the effects of climate change grow, crops can fail or be



destroyed, particularly in low and middle income countries, pushing their food security status into crisis, contributing to economic, social, and political instability globally. Over-production of food is also linked to high-levels of food waste.<sup>11</sup>

## Inequalities impacts

Current food systems are perpetuating and driving up health inequalities.<sup>12</sup> The latest EU Annual Growth Survey 2019 shows that 22% of people in the EU live at risk of poverty and social exclusion, with an even higher proportion of children (24.5%) at



risk.<sup>13</sup> Use of food banks has rocketed; 8.3% of the EU population are not able to afford a decent meal at any given time.<sup>14</sup> In rural economies, growers are becoming more reliant on fewer suppliers and buyers, squeezing incomes, eroding autonomy, adding to urbanisation and migratory pressures. Workers in often low-paid food industries and services such as retail and distribution are becoming more dependent on the terms set by larger and fewer corporations. Only the most literate, empowered and more affluent consumers can take full advantage of the choices available. Overcoming the aggressive marketing tactics of advertisers requires a high degree of health literacy and will-power. Highly processed foods are relatively cheaper and easier to obtain in low income communities than fresh, organic, and local produce, and low disposable household income can generally direct families towards cheaper convenience foods of lower quality.<sup>15</sup>

## Pathways to Progress

### Policies and Legislation

- Successive EU Council presidencies have aimed to address some important issues.<sup>16</sup> In June 2018, the European Council adopted Conclusions on healthier nutrition for children, including food system-related determinants of unhealthy eating patterns. The 2018 Austrian EU Presidency organised the Vienna Conference “*People’s Food, People’s Health*”, in which EuroHealthNet participated prominently. This resulted in a Policy Brief<sup>17</sup> and a forthcoming Roadmap to be taken forward by States and stakeholders.
- While proposals for the EU budgets including the CAP for the period 2021-27 do not yet signal significant progress, it is anticipated that new research and climate change programmes will enable evidence and coalition building. Meanwhile new integrated social and health programmes will bring new opportunities for actions on the ground in EU States and regions.<sup>18</sup>
- In January 2019, the European Commission published a reflection paper on ‘a sustainable

Europe by 2030’. It states that ‘imbalances in our food chain need to be corrected’, and stresses the need to a comprehensive approach in making the transition to a sustainable food system based circular economy principles.<sup>19</sup>

- EuroHealthNet is calling for sustainable development indicators to be integrated within the flagship European Economic and Social Semester process and annual Recommendations. These indicators would then align with universal targets within the Sustainable Development Goals and UN Agenda 2030, on which EuroHealthNet is working with UN Agencies, EU Institutions and Member States.
- Stronger regulatory measures to discourage excessive market consolidation and enable smaller economic actors and innovators to compete and survive are needed.<sup>20</sup> Policies to combat unfair practices in food systems are in progress. There is growing consensus that stronger regulatory action should be taken to curb production and advertising of, and nutritional claims on, foods containing unhealthy ingredients (high in trans-fats, sugars, salts).<sup>21</sup>

### Evidence based solutions

- The WHO has published key recommendations in *A Healthy Diet Sustainably Produced*.<sup>22</sup>
- The EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health of over 30 world-leading scientists seeks scientific consensus on a healthy and sustainable diet. The Commission has now published the first full scientific review of what constitutes a healthy diet from a sustainable food system, and which actions can support and speed up food system transformation.<sup>23</sup>
- Recognition is growing that solutions lie in integrated actions, including calls by the European Commission and other stakeholders<sup>24</sup> for a new *Common European Food Policy* with new governance towards sustainable food systems.<sup>25</sup> The International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) has produced its Final Report in 2019 on how to achieve this.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile the EC Food 2030 research initiative aims to “future-proof our food systems”.<sup>27</sup>

### Building better practices

- Some European countries, such as Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium<sup>28 29 30</sup> are integrating health and sustainability in national nutrition guidelines. New EU practice sharing via the **Portal for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention** can help scale up good practices.
- There are increasing numbers of innovative actions to shorten food supply chains and bring together all relevant stakeholders to improve food environments and work towards local solutions.<sup>31</sup> This requires power and resources for regional and local authorities to implement food policies.
- Better public procurement can be a crucial step. Innovative practices, for example in schools and public facilities in Denmark, are being showcased by **WHO Healthy Cities**<sup>32</sup>. It is anticipated that a new EU Joint Action of Member States will take this forward in 2019, building on the 2017 Report for the Maltese EU Presidency.<sup>33</sup>

## EuroHealthNet is playing its part

As a leading European partnership working to improve health and tackle health inequalities within and between European countries, EuroHealthNet is working through its policy, practice, and research platforms and communications activities to support these pathways to progress. Numerous EuroHealthNet members develop and implement national, regional and local policies and practices to improve healthy, sustainable and equitable systems and behaviours. Information is published at [www.eurohealthnet.eu](http://www.eurohealthnet.eu), in our regular Health Highlights, and our bi-annual EuroHealthNet magazine.

- EuroHealthNet participates in the **EU Platform on Diet, Health & Physical Activity**, contributing good practices from members, sharing knowledge and supporting evaluation.
- We have a non-state actor partnership with WHO Europe, working together on key health and equity developments.
- Our members and office are implementing our **REJUVENATE framework** for health promotion and equity which will take us towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.
- EuroHealthNet has a Framework Contract with the EU Employment & Social Innovation programme (EaSI 2018-21) to contribute to health and equity progress in all EU policies and practices, including for the next EU Programmes in its Multi Annual Financial Framework (MFF).
- EuroHealthNet participates in EU Joint Actions of member States to address Health Inequalities (JAHEE) and Non- Communicable Diseases (CHRODIS Plus).
- Full information and opportunities to work together are set out at [www.eurohealthnet.eu](http://www.eurohealthnet.eu).

## EuroHealthNet's research and action on more sustainable lifestyles

The INHERIT consortium coordinated by EuroHealthNet explores links between living, moving, and consuming patterns and the environment, health and equity. This large-scale EU co-funded initiative has collected almost 100 promising practices to demonstrate concrete examples of intersectoral actions that encourage and enable citizens to live and behave in more sustainable ways.<sup>34</sup> Many of these practices focus on food consumption and on adapting food systems and local food environments. These include:

- City policies to encourage more sustainable food production and consumption;
- School initiatives to connect children with nature and reduce meat consumption;
- New direct links between producers and consumers, shortening food chains. See: [www.inherit.eu](http://www.inherit.eu)



For more information, please visit our website: [www.eurohealthnet.eu](http://www.eurohealthnet.eu)

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