



Sustainable EU food system – EuroHealthNet’s vision contributing to the European Commission’s roadmap

EuroHealthNet
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In laying out the vision for sustainable EU food system fit for the current and future realities, EuroHealthNet aims to bring to the attention the importance of addressing the societal roots of nutritional health inequalities, related to food choices within a remit of the EU food, health and social policies. Since the current legislative frameworks are not comprehensive, strategic and ambitious enough, we stress out that changing food behaviours equitably will only be possible through tackling the systemic factors that determine people’s food choices along a social gradient – poverty and income deprivation, social exclusion and the level of disadvantage. Unhealthy behaviours are not ‘just’ the result of individual choices, but they are influenced by societal factors. With 11% of the EU citizens unable to afford a quality meal every second day, healthy and sustainable food choices unaffordable (up to 75% of disposable income), time and energy poverty among lower SES groups, the healthy choice must be the easy and default choice for all.

For this reason, we focus on implementing evidence-based policies and good practices that promote good nutrition for all with an intensity according to the need and the level of disadvantage, and in key stages of life – early years, adolescence, older years. Such action on healthy and sustainable EU food system contributes to the promotion of Social Rights, building a strong Social Europe and European Health Union in the climate of recovery and resilience-building.

Critically, the following points of concern must be addressed:

1. **Rebalance the narrow focus on down-stream nutritional and environmental education and information provision to change people’s food behaviours, with support to health, equity and sustainability-enhancing food system.** The dominant narrative of promoting a ‘responsible consumer choice’ is problematic in that it absolves food industries and regulators, while placing sole responsibility on consumers. Moreover, it poses moral burden on who fails to make the right choice, since all failures become due to personal shortcomings. Hence, actions to reshape food environments ought to focus first on food environments, namely on food characteristics, labelling, advertisement, provision, and retail. The food price should reflect the true cost of production and consumption including for environment and society, and it should send the right signal to consumers on what a sustainable and healthy food is. Financial ability to act should be considered.
2. **Regulatory actions are the most effective interventions, while voluntary commitments should be seen only as complementary drivers. Policy option 4 is thus to be preferred in two regards.** On the one side, it is the most efficient way to make the healthy choice not only the easy choice, but the default one, while limiting the availability of foods associated with unhealthy diets. On the other side, focusing on policies is more equal, since it does not place the burden of change and controlling commercial interests on citizens, but on the public system and public authorities.
3. **EU legislative framework offers important measures to tackle challenges common to all diet-related Non-Communicable Diseases. Yet, there is the need for furthering systemic policies to tackle social deprivation related to food environments.** EuroHealthNet’s

experience gained through [INHERIT](#), and in the Joint Action [Best Re-Map: Healthy Food for a Healthy Future](#), pinpoint three particular aspects:

- a. **Food advertisement and marketing:** European countries have made repeated commitments to limit marketing of ultra-processed foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS), especially to children. However, many of the existing regulations are not sufficient to contain the problem, and a preference for self-regulation by the food industries remains. Policies need to: i) regulate various platforms where citizens are exposed to food advertisement (digital sphere especially); ii) provide clear nutrient profiles for wide deployment, ideally as Front-Of-Pack and in ways that are easy to comprehend and act on (fe. Nutriscore);
- b. **Public procurement:** the policy is a powerful tool to reduce health inequalities, since large population groups – irrespective of SES – fall under its remit (public institutions, schools). By introducing or reinforcing mandatory criteria for healthy and sustainable diets for those settings, gains can be made.
- c. **Food reformulation:** moving away from ultra-processed foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) towards products of better nutritional values would increase availability, affordability and accessibility of healthier diets per default.

Our mission is to help build healthier communities and tackle health inequalities within and between European States.

EuroHealthNet is a not-for-profit partnership of organisations, agencies and statutory bodies working on public health, promoting health, preventing disease, and reducing inequalities.

EuroHealthNet supports members' work through policy and project development, knowledge and expertise exchange, research, networking, and communications.

EuroHealthNet's work is spread across three collaborating platforms that focus on practice, policy, and research. Core and cross-cutting activities unite and amplify the partnership's activities.

The partnership is made up of members, associate members, and observers. It is governed by a General Council and Executive Board.



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