



# FARM TO FORK: WHAT ROLE FOR CONSUMERS AND INNOVATION

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## FARM TO FORK: WHAT ROLE FOR CONSUMERS AND INNOVATION

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*Although reduction targets set in the EU's flagship food policy stole public opinion's attention at first, consumer behaviour and innovation are expected to have an equally critical role to play in the path toward more sustainable food system.*

*With its Farm to Fork Strategy (F2F), the European Commission has proposed highly ambitious targets to transform the European way of producing, distributing and consuming food.*

*Consumers, as much as producers, are put at the core of this comprehensive new food agenda.*

*Innovation and training come to farmers' rescue not only to implement the new sustainable ambition but also to help the sector recovering from the disruption caused by the pandemic.*

*In this report, EURACTIV presents the contribution that both innovation and consumers can provide to make Europe the world's sustainable standard for food.*



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## INTERVIEW

# Farm to Fork needs a tweak in its 'fork' part, says MEP

By Gerardo Fortuna | EURACTIV.com



The Italian lawmaker Herbert Dorfmann is the European Parliament's rapporteur on the Farm to Fork strategy. [EP/BUISSIN]

There is still work to be done on the segment of the EU's Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy that deals with consumers, as they are required to play a major part in the transition toward more sustainable food systems, according to centre-right MEP Herbert Dorfmann.

*The Italian lawmaker Herbert Dorfmann is the European Parliament's rapporteur on the Farm to Fork strategy, the EU's flagship food policy. He spoke with EURACTIV's agrifood editor Gerardo Fortuna.*

**What is lacking in the Commission's**

**F2F that the European Parliament could fix?**

The Commission wants to take a slightly broader view of food systems with its strategy. This is the right approach and the implementation of the Green Deal in farming is important, but if we want to move towards more sustainable agriculture the consumer side must play a major role.

Unfortunately, the Farm to Fork as it was presented remains too much focused on 'farm', while the 'fork' aspects have been a bit overlooked. The responsibility for the transition

needs to be spread across all elements of the food chain, not just agriculture.

**Can you mention an example?**

All the substantial aspects of the strategy, such as pesticide and antibiotics reduction targets, are on the 'farm' side. But, for instance, when it comes to the promotion of the organic sector, only the surface area for organic cultivation has been mentioned as a target. They could have put a 20% target for the market to be organic, so the consumer would have understood that they have an important part to play too. The target

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for organic land is good as long as the consumers buy these products, otherwise, it becomes a disaster for farmers.

***On the consumer side, the strategy seems to rely heavily on labelling. Is it the only way to 'nudge' consumers?***

To be completely honest, I have strong doubts about this. Countries have already their labelling systems and there is a bit of everything on our labels. The most developed labelling framework in the world at the moment is, in my opinion, that of the United States. But I don't have the impression that their diet is healthier than ours.

***So, what do we need to improve this situation?***

For the label to be effective, we first need consumers who care about the labels, who want to read them and know how to do that. Consumers must be educated to know what eating a certain food means, what fats do and what sugar is, for instance. I am sometimes appalled that, although food is one of the most important things in our lives, the school system has given up on educating children on this.

***There is much talk about Nutriscore, the French nutritional labelling framework. What is your take on it?***

On the one hand, I agree with those, like consumers association BEUC, who say that a label must be clear and simple since malnutrition is growing in the less educated section of the population, the one who has

less money to buy food. But on the other hand, the Nutriscore risks being, unfortunately, too simple.

Another problem of the Nutriscore is that although fighting overprocessed food, it could paradoxically act as a catalyst for big industries to reformulate their products and add further industrial processes to foodstuff. So, to get a high score, ice-cream makers could be tempted to remove a little bit of sugar replacing with other sweeteners or put a random amount of fibre in the mix just to get some more.

***Do you think that the strong push on environmental ambition has somehow overshadowed the role of innovation in the transition?***

Sometimes I get the impression that there is a bucolic vision of agriculture in a sort of nostalgia of the good old days. The consumer is led to think that the best agriculture is that of yesterday and often farmers themselves sell this aspect for marketing purposes. This is a somewhat misleading vision: these improvements will only be made with advances in technology such as less impactful chemicals, ever more resistant plants and new application technologies. We often pretend that yesterday's world was perfect and new technologies are a problem, but that's not the case.

***Which kind of innovation could lead to this transition?***

Innovation in agriculture is nothing new. If you think about what farmers used to do fifty years

ago and what they do today, that's a completely different world. We need to move forward and accelerate with technologies already available today: precision farming, self-propelled machinery, sensor technology, the possibility of treating plants only where it is needed, the use of satellite systems such as Copernicus to identify areas where fertilizer is needed or not.

If you go to any agricultural fair, almost all machines have robotics components or sensors. We should start thinking about new technologies of genetic improvement. If we want to treat less we need more resistant plants and more resistant plants means genetic improvement as it has been done for thousands of years.

***Are farmers ready to cope with this innovation?***

It is true that young people are clearly more open to innovation and they may think differently than those who are 70 and about to retire. Therefore, we need more young people, but they need to be prepared. However, we are letting new people in agriculture and pay them with public money, even if they have never learned how to be farmers. Being a farmer is one of the most delicate activities that can be done because you produce food products. We ask hairdressers or doctors to be trained and it is a good thing, at the same time a farmer needs to learn how to farm. I wouldn't give a helping hand to someone who has never been trained in agriculture for the first time.

# EU bets on research to put Farm to Fork ambition into action

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By Gerardo Fortuna | EURACTIV.com



"I cannot stress enough the importance of research and innovation to tackle the challenges we face," said agriculture commissioner Janusz Wojciechowski. [SHUTTERSTOCK]

Stakeholders, researchers, and policymakers are seeking to find the right place for innovation in the EU's new flagship food policy with a view to empower consumers to make the best choices for themselves and the planet.

Committed to supporting the transition towards more sustainable food systems, the EU is currently weighing up which kind of innovation is needed to achieve this ambition.

The EU executive's Farm to Fork strategy (F2F) features a number of measures to promote healthy and sustainable food production and consumption.

Unveiled at the height of the COVID-crisis, the F2F is also part of the EU's efforts to recover from the pandemic.

The new EU research programme Horizon Europe will also contribute to the Green Deal's ambitions by developing and testing solutions for a green recovery.

These topics were touched upon in [a conference](#) on the future of food organised by Europe's leading food innovation initiative, EIT Food.

"I cannot stress enough the importance of research and innovation to tackle the challenges we face," said agriculture commissioner Janusz

Wojciechowski in a speech that kicked off the conference.

According to the EU's farming boss, research and innovation are key to improving the circularity of food systems and developing alternative proteins and more sustainable farming practices, as well as for understanding consumer behaviour.

Although the F2F strategy, as the name implies, aims to increase the sustainable components throughout the whole food supply chain, consumers are expected to play a crucial role.

"We want to target consumers because if they are not motivated

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and ready to move along, we will have problems implementing a more sustainable food system,” said Sabine Jülicher, director for food and innovation at the Commission’s Directorate-General (DG) SANTE.

### CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR TRACKER

During the conference, a new tool developed by a team of multidisciplinary researchers across was presented.

Based on data from 18 EU countries, the EIT Food’s Trust Tracker works on the existing literature from various disciplines, included neuroscience, to explain the formation of consumer trust in the food value chain and the role of this trust in consumer behaviour.

Developers hope that this model could become the standard tool to measure trust in foodstuffs and far-reaching behavioural consequences, from approach to avoidance.

“Trust can make you do something or it can stop you from doing that very thing,” explained Sophie Hieke, head of consumer science at the European Food Information Council (EUFIC)

In the three years of its implementation, the tracker has shown that when consumers trust the actors in the food value chain, they are more confident in the integrity of their food.

The tracker has also revealed that European consumers tend to be most confident about the taste of the food they buy, followed by food safety, healthiness, authenticity and sustainability.

The Commission is expected to propose by 2024 mandatory front-of-pack labelling intended to give information to all consumers on nutritional and sustainable aspects of foodstuffs.

“We don’t want the consumer to be left alone, and that is why we are also addressing retailers to make it easier for consumers to choose healthy and sustainable options,” said the Commission’s Jülicher.

But the role of innovation in the F2F goes much beyond just ‘nudging’ consumers.

According to Jülicher, this ranges from the means of transport used for delivering food to the plant protection products and husbandry conditions to address the plague of anti-microbial resistance (AMR).

“There is a huge scope for innovation and any research is absolutely welcome,” she concluded.

### SKILLS AND EDUCATION

In his opening speech, Commissioner Wojciechowski said that education and skills are also key to helping farmers successfully implement the F2F.

“We’re working on the aspect of the transformation agenda of higher education, which is particularly topical for how we can develop entrepreneurial skills, entrepreneurial education, to support the innovation capacity,” said Georgi Dimitrov, deputy head of unit innovation at the Commission’s DG EAC.

The EU executive recently put

forward a policy initiative, the European Skills Agenda, that looks at underpinning the different industrial transformations and societal challenges that EU countries will face, including those in agriculture and food.

For the liberal MEP Irène Tolleret, greater focus should be directed to lifelong learning for farmers and the tools and resources that can drive effective skill development.

“If we want the digital precision of agriculture to help us, first of all, we need to have it working for all the farmers in the European Union, which is not at all the case in the rural areas,” she said.

She mentioned that strategic plans in the new Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) under negotiation may promote peer to peer support, demonstration, farmers’ discussion groups, hackathons as well as new and interactive training methods.

“We will not change the way we use new techniques in farming if the way we teach them is not simple and sexy,” she added.

According to Jannes Maes, president of the European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA), the most important skill that farmers will need in the coming decades is the ability to adapt to new situations, such as climate change, market fluctuations and changing policy frameworks.

PROMOTED CONTENT

*DISCLAIMER: All opinions in this column reflect the views of the author(s), not of EURACTIV Media network.*

# A recipe for success: three crucial ingredients for the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy

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By Andy Zynga | EIT Food



Dr Andy Zynga. [EIT Food]

Following the publication of the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy six months ago, policymakers acknowledge that the future of food is dependent – now more than ever – on innovative solutions that challenge the industry status quo. While the Strategy has defined a series of ambitious goals, debate now concentrates on the 'how'. The Farm to Fork Strategy is the theory but now we need the practice.

*Dr Andy Zynga is the CEO of EIT Food, Europe's leading food innovation initiative, with the aim to create a sustainable and future-proof food sector.*

Innovation is part of the answer. If done right, it can be disruptive and drive monumental change. It can remove obsolete solutions from the food system and inject healthy competition into the market. Best realised through a combination

agrifood sector knowledge and policy interventions, and 'pulls' guided by consumer trends, choices and preferences, innovation can truly empower consumers to make sustainable and healthy choices – just as the Farm to Fork Strategy recognises.<sup>1</sup>

The recent growth of plant-based products is one such example. After an impressive wave of innovation, alternative protein products are

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moving from niche to mainstream, with the European meat alternatives market now accounting for around 40% of the global market and forecast to grow to €2.4bn by 2025.<sup>[1]</sup>

But if innovation is the motor propelling change in our food system, consumers are the ones in the driving seat. Their choices and purchasing behaviour indicate what they are prepared to pay for, and therefore which innovative solutions, products and services they are ready to pull into the market.

Great research will only deliver impact when it becomes innovation in the marketplace and meets consumer demand. But how are we going to inject this dynamism into the agrifood sector? And how are we going to mobilise the great forces of consumer choice and behaviour to achieve this transformation, while catering for the needs and expectations of all the players in the value chain?

Our recipe includes three main ingredients.

Firstly, policymakers and industry professionals must place consumers at the heart of innovation strategies moving forward and not leave them at the margins. This means consumers need to have a place in our innovation ecosystems and in our R&I projects. Horizon Europe encourages researchers to do so, but we are still far from a total rethink of the innovation process around the needs of consumers. We need to redesign R&I and build opportunities for co-creation.

EIT Food is piloting this approach

through our Consumer Engagement Labs – pre-competitive co-creation sessions run by consumers and focused on ideation or development of new product concepts.

Involving consumers exposes them to the complexities of the food system and the trade-offs faced by the industry as it tries to solve multiple problems. For example, giving animals more space to roam while ensuring high safety standards against diseases such as salmonella or swine flu may be one such trade-off.

Secondly, consumer information is key. Prices are pieces of information but, today, this is not enough. The agrifood industry is expected to deliver a higher level of transparency. We need solutions to capture information along the entire value chain and make it available to consumers. Technology can be of great help here and we see considerable potential for the application of blockchain and AI in this field. At EIT Food for example, our partner startup Connecting Food has created a digital platform that can follow a product in real-time, tracking and digitally auditing each batch or production as it goes through the food supply chain. This ensures that the consumer can easily see the entire journey of the product in their hand, from farm to fork.

Today, we are labelling the nutritional qualities of a product, but tomorrow we will also need to find a way to include information about its environmental and carbon footprint, allowing consumers to understand the process of a product's creation and why the price tag is as it is.

Thirdly, consumers will only embrace change and help us pull innovation in the market if we find solutions that meet all their demands. Consumers will always demand food that is tasty, safe and convenient, but innovation must now also deliver food products that are both healthy and sustainable. At the same time, affordability remains an important concern, especially in the current economic context. The challenge we face now is to reconcile the need for an affordable price with the need for a fair reward for those who produce food, starting with farmers. It is crucial therefore to support farmers to help them deliver on the Farm to Fork Strategy. Bringing consumers and farmers closer together will be vital to create our recipe for success.

## FURTHER READING

- 1 Deloitte: Plant-based alternatives driving industry M&A



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