RESET, RESTART: TRANSFORMING THE EU FOOD SYSTEM

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It is becoming increasingly clear that the way that we produce, consume, and discard food is having a huge impact on our health and that of our environment.

From soil degradation, to unhealthy diets and the preventable burden of non-communicable diseases, the food system lies at the heart of some of our most pressing issues.

The EU now stands at a tipping point in reversing current nutritional trends, reducing the pressure on the environment and ensuring a fair transition of food systems.

But the question is: what steps need to be taken to ensure that this balance tips in the right direction?

In this event report, EURACTIV takes a comprehensive look at European food systems, exploring the integrated approach needed to reset food systems, engage future generations and facilitate a nutrition transition.
EU at ‘tipping point’ in reversing current nutritional trends, report highlights

Expert: ‘Climate natives’ should be at the centre of EU’s Farm to Fork strategy

Urgent action is needed as Europe’s food systems stand at the crossroads of transformation or crisis
EU at ‘tipping point’ in reversing current nutritional trends, report highlights

By Natasha Foote | EURACTIV.com

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Although southern European countries and the UK were found to have the highest prevalence of overweight in children and adolescents, the number of overweight adults were found to exceed 50% of the population in all the countries analysed.

Speaking during a recent event to mark the launch of the report, Marta Antonelli, head of research at the Barilla Foundation, who authored the report, stressed that overweight and obesity are a serious challenge in all European countries.

If we look at the average, we see that about six adults out of 10 are overweight and obese. And this is also increasing in the youngest generations,” she warned.

It is estimated that in the EU in 2017, more than 950,000 deaths, or one in five, were attributable to unhealthy diets mainly due to cardiovascular diseases and cancers.

Meanwhile, the cost of adult obesity in the EU was estimated at €70 billion per year in 2016, or approximately 7% of national budgets across the EU.

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Pointing out that Europe is the continent most severely affected by non-communicable diseases, which represent the leading cause of disability and death, Antonelli stressed that food choices are the “most important factor that undermines health and well being in these countries”.

However, as Claire Bury, deputy director-general at the Commission’s DG SANTE, pointed out, while average intakes of energy red meat, sugars, salts and fats continue to exceed recommendations, consumption of whole-grains, cereals, fruit and vegetables, legumes or fruits are “not at the levels that they should be”.

Drawing a line between healthy diets and sustainable food systems, she emphasised that current food consumption patterns are “not sustainable from a health and environmental point of view”.

"Healthy diets not only reduce the risk of life-threatening diseases but also can have a positive impact on our food system. The transition to sustainable food systems won’t happen unless we managed to make the change in terms of shifts in people’s diets,” she said, highlighting that now is “really the moment” to work on tipping the scale in the right direction.

NO SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

Ensuring the scales tip the right way requires a multi-pronged attack, panellists stressed.

"Looking at food systems in a holistic manner is the way to go. We have to bring together all the different actors to help shape our policies and initiatives to enable us to deliver on our transformative ambitions," Bury said, highlighting the need for a “fully integrated policy strategy” which engages all stakeholders at all levels.

One way that the nutrition transition can be addressed is by creating an “enabling environment", Barilla's Antonelli pointed out.

"It’s fundamental to create an enabling environment that helps us mainstream healthy and sustainable food choices in all contexts, so that these choices are really the easy, default ones for all consumers in Europe,” she said, highlighting the power of multi-stakeholder partnerships in facilitating this.

One way in which food business' are being encouraged to do this is via the European Commission’s recently launched EU sustainability code of conduct.

In the framework of the code, envisaged to be ready for signature in time for the UN Sustainable Food Systems summit in September, the Commission is looking for concrete commitments from companies for actions on health and sustainability.

This includes encouraging the increased consumption of fruits and vegetables and whole grain cereals, as well as improving the nutritional quality foods and meals through reformulation where possible.

"Education is a fundamental element of a wider comprehensive approach to a more sustainable and healthier food system in Europe,” he said.

He stressed that it is of “paramount importance” to invest in citizens education and provide them with the “knowledge and skills so that they can make informed and conscious choices regarding their nutrition”.

Quaroni also commented on the fact that the report notes that traditional diets, such as the Mediterranean diet, are increasingly being abandoned in favour of Western diets, which are characterised by saturated fat, refined grain, salt and corn-derived fructose syrup content, with an associated reduced consumption of fruit and vegetables.

Noting the culinary and cultural importance of traditional diets, Quaroni also highlighted that these initiatives should also be focused on reviving “national the traditional dietary models,” which he said are “invaluable assets in terms of health and sustainability goals”.

"The value of the Mediterranean diet does not end with the balanced combination of foods, there is an even more important underlying cultural dimension in it," he added.
Expert: ‘Climate natives’ should be at the centre of EU’s Farm to Fork strategy

By Gerardo Fortuna | EURACTIV.com

Europe’s vision of the future of food systems needs to be improved with a focus on young generations, who will be putting into practice the Farm to Fork strategy (F2F), according to Riccardo Valentini, a prominent agricultural expert, who warned that “everything in this transition that is done without young people is a waste of money”.

Riccardo Valentini is a professor of forest ecology at the University of Tuscia and was a member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) board when it was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2007. He spoke to EURACTIV’s editor Gerardo Fortuna.

In a recent event, you referred to young people as the ‘climate native’ generation. How is this generation different from the older one?

I was born in 1959 and I grew up in the midst of the economic boost after the II World War, so when things like land pressure, atmospheric pollution, and biodiversity loss actually started and become exponential. For instance, my generation was the first one to have electricity and water available in their households. Then, we developed the idea that there were no limits to growth, and the use of resources, including the food we eat.

The starting point of the ‘climate native’ generation is a completely different one. Since they know resources are limited, they limit their demands. They are also more concerned about the future of our planet in a very pragmatic, not ideological way: they are worried because they know they have to live with fewer things.

Does this shift in attitude toward the future imply radical changes?

There are slow changes but they are occurring. These are also positive changes as the ‘climate native’ generation is basically adapting to a future that is different from ours.

When it comes to nutrition, you can see how many people are changing their food habits and it is particularly evident with vegetarians and vegans. But also the so-called sharing

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The economy is another concept alien to our generation: I grew up on the idea of buying myself a car, while young generations feel less the need for the ownership of mean of transports.

**What are the new topics young people seem more interested in when it comes to food?**

In my experience as a university professor, I can see that a different approach to food is one of the distinctive elements of the climate natives, as they really eat differently compared to my generation. They select food considering the environmental impact, and food companies are also considered on the basis of their social attitude. Two other topics they really care about are food waste and animal welfare, which most of the time underlies the choice not to eat meat.

**While the EU launched its stimulus plan with a strong focus on young people, as the name NextGenerationEU suggests, the Farm to Fork strategy (F2F) is more focused on producers and consumers, no matter how old they are.**

Well, I see positively the F2F initiative and I’m proud that Europe has started talking about the transition in our food systems because, in the US or China, there is no such debate. They select food considering the environmental impact, and food companies are also considered on the basis of their social attitude. Two other topics they really care about are food waste and animal welfare, which most of the time underlies the choice not to eat meat.

**Do you think there is enough communication for rating awareness on the current transition in food systems?**

We have a lot of information but little education. Food labelling is important to communicate information to people in a transparent way, but information on the internet and alleged ‘healthy’ claims from food companies do not compensate for a lack of real food education. That is why we need to create a new generation of food systems professionals.

**Is the current university system ready for that challenge?**

It is not, our university system is simply too old and does not grasp the systemic approach of food that is needed. I teach in an agricultural faculty, but everything linked to food is kept split: there are separated curricula on agronomy, economics, food industry, agricultural ecology and so on.

If I were to design a school to train a new generation of food professionals, there would be room for different disciplines, from teaching microprocessors to food transformation, new food systems, biotechnology, but also cultural heritage and ancient history.

These professionals would be an important element for democracy too because they would be able to dispute or clarify different and conflicting news about food that people are constantly bombarded with.

**You have recently conducted a project to see how food providers can embrace the change in the food systems.**

It was a social experiment to see how people can change their diets starting from the catering sector. The food sector normally offers menus according to their economic and business plans, so we ask them to take on board sustainability and nutritional aspects to see how consumers react. In the end, we found very interesting results as food providers have been more open than I expected to put in place new menus.

**You also involved renowned chefs in the project, why so?**

Creativity is also an important element. You cannot ask people to save the planet and eat rubbish or something they don’t like. These chefs created these recipes to prove that it is possible to live in a more sustainable and healthy way without losing the joy of food. If you offer the image that, in order to follow the sustainability path, you have to suffer, nobody will join you.
Urgent action is needed as Europe’s food systems stand at the crossroads of transformation or crisis

By Marta Antonelli | Barilla Foundation

The average European wastes their own weight in discarded food each year, and, worryingly for both our health and sustainability, more than half of the adult European population is overweight. Alongside this, agriculture is responsible for around 10 per cent of the total greenhouse gas emissions in the EU.

Dr. Marta Antonelli is Head of Research of the Barilla Foundation.

These are clear signs that the way we produce, eat, and dispose of our food is harming our health and the health of the environment. We cannot afford to continue ignoring them.

Our research shows that European food systems face a series of converging crises in health, environment, and society. From soil degradation to the ageing of farmers, unhealthy diets...
and the preventable burden of non-communicable diseases, the scale of these problems is massive, but not yet insurmountable.

Now, we stand at a crossroads where an urgent response is clearly needed if we are to have any hope of effectively addressing these mounting challenges.

The importance of food systems transformation was reinforced by the European Green Deal in 2019, which aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. A crucial element of this Green Deal is the "Farm to Fork Strategy", which calls for a transition towards a fair, resilient, healthy, and environmentally friendly food system.

Food systems are essential in the transition towards a decarbonised European continent, given they contribute up to 37 per cent of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions according to the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

To reach our climate goals, we recommend four key transformations that will ensure our food systems in Europe are healthier and more sustainable for all.

Firstly, Europeans should adopt healthier and more sustainable diets as individuals. Our dietary choices have a significant impact not just on our personal health, but the health of our environment also. Dietary guidelines in Germany and Sweden, for instance, promote the connection between environmental sustainability as well as the health impact of food, acting as an important model for how individuals can be encouraged to adopt healthy and environmentally sustainable diets.

Secondly, European lawmakers should pursue policies that incentivise and promote healthy and sustainable eating. Examples of this could include compulsory nutrition education in the national curriculum for primary and secondary schools, as well as helping to create environments that make sustainable food choices the default option.

Furthermore, policymakers should also ensure our food systems reduce greenhouse gas emissions throughout the different phases of production, as well as reducing overall food loss and waste. Moves have already been made in the right direction; France was the first country in the world to adopt laws against food loss and waste in 2016. Similarly, Italy introduced incentives in 2016 to encourage business to donate unsold food to charities, rather than let it go to waste.

Finally, the focus of new policy should be to transform European agriculture from part of the problem in our current food systems to a solution, so that we can achieve a healthier, more inclusive, and more sustainable future. This includes getting more young people involved in agriculture, promoting better biodiversity and ecosystem management, and developing new tools and solutions for more sustainable food systems overall.

The issues affecting our food systems are not new but have been building unaddressed for years. The fragility of our existing systems in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ability to achieve transformative change, should be on our minds as we move into the crucial period of the "Farm to Fork Strategy" and beyond.

The EU, and European citizens themselves, can take the lead in responding to these issues and begin transforming our food systems at both a European and global level. As these challenges mount, there has never been a greater need for decisive action.
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