



For the attention of
Mr Frans Timmermans
European Commission

Farm to Fork: food sustainability needs an effective consumption strategy

Brussels, 22 November 2019

Dear Mr Timmermans,

The European Heart Network (EHN), European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) and European Public Health Association (EUPHA), strongly welcome the commitment by the European Commission to launch a “Farm to Fork” strategy for sustainable food as part of a European Green Deal. We have high expectations about this strategy and see it as an important step on the way of transitioning the food system towards better outcomes for people, planet and economy. However, it is increasingly clear that such a transition can only take place accompanied by a collective shift in eating patterns.

Today, unhealthy diet is a main risk factor for the entire burden of mortality and disease in the European Union (EU).¹ It is a leading driver of obesity and major non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cardiovascular disease, cancer and type-2 diabetes. Eating patterns in European countries are also associated with environmental impacts, driving greenhouse-gas emissions, biodiversity loss, global deforestation and other forms of environmental pollution, including marine.²

Numerous studies in recent years have shown that a shift to healthy, more plant-rich diets can deliver important health, environmental and economic co-benefits.^{3 4} The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) identifies that a shift towards diets “featuring plant-based foods, such as those based on coarse grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables, nuts and seeds, and animal-sourced food produced in resilient, sustainable and low-GHG emission systems” is an important climate mitigation opportunity.⁵ The IPCC also highlights the central role of public health policies in achieving food and nutrition security, enabling sustainable land management and contributing to multiple Sustainable Development Goals.

We therefore urge you to ensure that the Farm to Fork strategy includes a solid, effective and equitable approach to advance healthy and environmentally beneficial consumption. In doing so, we stress the following considerations:

¹ Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. Global Burden of Disease. EU, 2017, all ages, Risk factors for DALYs, based on the Global Burden of Disease study

² See for instance: FCRN Foodsource for an evidence-based overview of food system-related challenges and opportunities. Hosted by the Food Climate Research Network and the University of Oxford Environmental Change Institute.

³ Willett et al. (2019) Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. The Lancet

⁴ Springmann et al. (2016) Analysis and valuation of the health and climate change cobenefits of dietary change. PNAS

⁵ IPCC (2019) Climate Change and Land. Summary for Policymakers

1. **The main pillars of a healthy, sustainable diet are known and can already guide policies today.** The main pillars of a healthy diet are spelled-out in food-based dietary guidelines, available in all EU Member States.⁶ Bringing food demand closer to existing guidelines will not only improve people's health and cut healthcare costs, but will also reduce environmental impacts and can facilitate tackling farm antibiotics use and agriculture-related air pollution.

At the same time, to enhance the contribution to health and other sustainability objectives, the Farm to Fork strategy should support the progressive roll-out and implementation of *sustainable dietary guidelines*. Such guidelines will support strategies to transition towards a future-oriented European food system less reliant on the production and consumption of meat and dairy, and more reliant on the production and consumption of diverse vegetable products.⁷ Examples of such guidelines and the principles behind them are available.⁸ ⁹ The success of the Farm to Fork strategy should be evaluated, among others, by the society-wide uptake of sustainable dietary patterns.

2. **Many good quality policy recommendations exist for the creation of health-enabling food environments and these should form the backbone of the Farm to Fork's approach towards consumption.** The purpose of public health nutrition policies is to create food environments where the healthy option is the easy, default and most affordable option. Such policies do not restrict or put the burden of change on individuals, but rather empower people to choose in line with common-held aspirations about their own, their children's and the planet's long-term health.

The World Health Organization (WHO) "Best buys and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of NCDs" contain an overview of the most promising policies.¹⁰ These interventions, based on evidence and endorsed by EU Member States in a WHO context, include policies to minimise the exposure of children to the marketing of unhealthy foods; to rebalance price incentives in favour of under-consumed foods that form a cornerstone of healthy diets; to equip consumers with transparent and easy-to use nutritional information; to advance sustainable public food procurement strategies; to promote product reformulation; and to ensure independent public information.

The Farm to Fork strategy should introduce an action plan to support the adoption of these policies as a package, and identify which actions should be best and most effectively taken at an EU level.¹¹ ¹² At the same time, the strategy should contribute to further developing the policy mix in order to advance effective and equitable approaches to support a 'less and better' animal products consumption future.¹³

3. **A food system transformation can only be sustainable if accompanied by a just socio-economic transition.** In 2017, over 112 million people in the EU lived in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion, equivalent to over a fifth of the entire population.¹⁴ While most of the abovementioned public health policies contribute to reducing inequities in health, alleviating poverty and ensuring all people can have access

⁶ WHO (2018) Healthy diet. Fact sheet No. 394

⁷ European Public Health Association (2017) Healthy and Sustainable Diets for European Countries

⁸ FAO and WHO (2019) Sustainable healthy diets – Guiding principles

⁹ Fischer and Garnett (2016) Plates, Pyramids, Planet - Developments in national healthy and sustainable dietary guidelines: a state of play assessment. FAO and FCRN

¹⁰ WHO (2017) "Best buys" and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases

¹¹ European Heart Network (2017) Transforming European food and drink policies for cardiovascular health

¹² ECDA, EPHA, NCD Alliance (2019) Towards an EU Strategic Framework for the Prevention of Non-communicable Diseases

¹³ Eating Better (2018) Principles for eating meat and dairy more sustainably: the 'less and better' approach

¹⁴ Eurostat (2019) People at risk of poverty or social exclusion

to good food requires a more comprehensive strategy beyond what food policies can deliver.¹⁵

The Farm to Fork strategy should therefore be linked-up with efforts for a just transition and a people-centred economy, including special focus on actors in the food chain who may need additional support through the transition.

We look forward to a meeting to discuss these suggestions in further detail with you, and the future European Commissioners responsible for leading and contributing to the design of the Farm to Fork strategy.

Sincerely yours,

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¹⁵ WHO/Europe (2019) Healthy, prosperous lives for all: the European Health Equity Status Report