June 2, 2026, Brussels

PLAN'EAT Final Conference

A conference **harvest**

The project's final Lab: Horizon research meets practice and political power

epha european public health alliance

Contents

Introduction 2

Setting up (yet another) experiment 4

To make it stick, we need each other 4

Politics had moved 4

Putting the propositions under pressure ... 5

A deliberately mixed room 6

Who spoke when 7

What is the true cost of our food, and who pays? 9

The costs that never reach the checkout ... 9

It's not you, it's the economic system 9

True-price labels: do not dump the 'true cost' onto the consumer 10

The pooled-budget problem 10

"It should be a Common Food Systems Policy" 11

TCA can calculate the bill; politics decides who pays it 11

Technical sophistication does not remove politics 12

The evidence is there; the blockage is political 13

Lobbying is predictable; institutional receptiveness is the real question 13

The problem is not only getting evidence into policy, but keeping it there 14

They say farmers push back. But who are 'the farmers'? 14

More dialogue does not automatically mean more balanced power 15

Coordination, capacity and the risk of going first 15

First-mover disadvantage 15

Responsibility ≠ capacity 16

The missing evidence is about 'how' 16

Making transition commercially possible ... 16

That sort of governance EU agri-food is missing 17

Top-down is not enough; bottom-up is not enough either 17

How much can incremental measures carry? 18

Governance has to do several things at once 18

The European Food Policy Council as a test case 18

The institutional form remains open; the function is clearer 19

What the room carried forward 19

Messages that kept resurfacing 20

The battle-tested truths 21

The four movements 21

The next step is really doing it 22

Introduction

This event fostered a conducive environment for multi-stakeholder dialogue.

No. We promised ourselves we would not write a report like this.

In fact, this is not so much a conference report as a conference harvest—**an analytical capture** of what happened once some of the strongest propositions from recent European food-systems research were put into a room full of agri-food policy practitioners: **what held, what became more complicated, and what looked different by the end**.

'Food systems transition' will appear once, at most, because we need to name the formal ambition of PLAN'EAT. The same goes for 'science-policy gap', 'multi-stakeholder', 'co-creation' and the rest of the food-systems vocabulary. Most of it is dead language unless a very specific point genuinely requires the term.

The question was not whether the evidence was good enough, but what happened **once it entered political, institutional and implementation reality**.

This harvest is what came back.



Polina Sokolkina

Projects and Policy Lead, EPHA

PLAN'EAT Lead for Living Labs creation, implementation and consultation & Brussels Policy Lab leader

Setting up (yet another) experiment

To make it stick, we need each other

Many people who work in research projects eventually start to wonder what happens to the work once the project ends. The final conference can make that question particularly uncomfortable: after four years of research, does anything actually leave the room? Where do project outputs go once the project has ended? Do they get a second life? Do they get picked up and acted upon? Or do they end up in another conference where researchers explain them to other researchers while the world outside carries on?

This worried us a lot, too. So, we designed this conference to be less of a conventional "final project dissemination event" and more of a **test of whether evidence could survive contact with political and implementation reality**.

If change is going to last, the people producing evidence, shaping policy, contesting decisions and living with their consequences have to meet while those choices are still open. **Research cannot simply be finished and handed over. Political institutions cannot act in a vacuum. Public-interest actors cannot be brought in once the important choices have already been made**.

Politics had moved

PLAN'EAT was also ending in a very different political moment from the one in which it began. The project had started in the wake of the Farm to Fork Strategy, under a Horizon call explicitly framed around that agenda. By the time the project reached its final conference, much of that political ambition had been rolled back. Farmer protests, organised resistance and the retreat from major Farm to Fork files had exposed problems that went deeper than the fate of individual measures: fragmented policymaking, unequal political influence, weak coordination across levels, and limited ownership of reforms perceived as coming from the top.

The Strategic Dialogue and the new Vision for Agriculture and Food were already responses to that changed context. The opening remarks therefore placed PLAN'EAT in a debate that was no longer simply about what a more sustainable food system should look like, but about **why earlier ambitions had proved so difficult to carry politically and what would have to work differently next time**.

That made PLAN'EAT's timing unusually useful. Four years of research were coming to an end just as **the political question had shifted from setting ambition to understanding what makes change stick**.

And PLAN'EAT was arriving with a substantial body of evidence to put into that changed political environment.



Putting the propositions under pressure

PLAN'EAT was ambitious from start to finish. It tried to understand how healthier and more sustainable eating could become easier in real life, and what would have to change around people for that to happen.

By the end, the project had accumulated several strong propositions:

- dietary change should be understood as a system-design problem rather than an individual failure;
- that conventional food-policy accounting obscures environmental, health and social costs;
- that there is support for ambitious and integrated measures to promote healthier and more sustainable diets, often stronger than policymakers assume feasible;
- that the constraint has shifted from insufficient evidence toward action;
- and, most politically, that the problem may be a "power and accountability gap" rather than a knowledge gap.

But because the conference was brought to you by PLAN'EAT's Policy Lab and co-creation leads, this was never going to end as a presentation-heavy Horizon event with polite questions at the end. Rather than simply scheduling presentations to defend those claims, we wanted to **put them before the room and have them challenged at several points**. Very Policy Lab. Very co-creation.

We progressively moved those propositions through **different kinds of pressure**: political feasibility and governance; valuation and economic incentives; implementation in local settings and food environments; and finally what food-chain actors can actually do when change carries commercial, institutional or political risk.

A deliberately mixed room

Putting those propositions under pressure required a **particular kind of room**: one that put research in front of people who spend their working lives dealing with political limits, competing interests, budgets, institutions, businesses, farmers, consumers and implementation, and made **public-interest actors part of that conversation** from the beginning rather than inviting them in at the end to comment on work that had already been finished.

This also required the right ground. So, we brought that mix of people into a former industrial building in central Brussels, with raw concrete, dark wood, warm lights—and just downstairs—an actual bar. That made the space feel less institutionally owned, more informal, and easier to talk in. Perhaps more importantly, **nobody was quite on home ground**.

The invited speaker architecture was designed to provoke questions. The European Commission was represented through **two different institutional vantage points**: agricultural strategy and research policy. The high-level panel placed **Commission pragmatism beside political-science analysis and environmental advocacy**. The True Cost Accounting discussion brought together **research, methodology and campaigning**. The fishbowl then shifted the centre of gravity towards actors dealing with **commercial margins, consumer markets, procurement and food-chain implementation**.



Who spoke when

Opening remarks

- **Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle**, Director, Strategy and Policy Analysis, DG AGRI, European Commission
- **Giuseppina Luvarà**, Policy Officer, Unit B.2—Bioeconomy and Food Systems, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, European Commission
- **Laura Rossi**, PLAN'EAT Project Coordinator, Research Centre for Food and Nutrition (CREA)

Panel 1 Rebuilding Trust and Ambition in European Food Policy

- **Jeroen Candel**, Associate Professor of Food & Agricultural Policy at Wageningen University
- **Marion Maignan**, Policy Analyst, Policy Perspectives Unit, DG AGRI, European Commission
- **Piroska Kállay**, Vice-President of the EESC NAT Section; former President of the EESC Permanent Group on Sustainable Food Systems
- **Marco Contiero**, Director, EU Agriculture Policy, Greenpeace European Unit

Panel 2 Rethinking Food Policy Through True Cost Accounting

- **Olivia Riemer**, Programme Lead - Food Systems Transformation & True Cost Accounting, TMG Think Tank
- **Anant Jani**, Senior Researcher, University of Heidelberg, FEAST coordinator
- **Nico Muzi**, Cofounder & Chief Programmes Officer, Madre Brava

Fishbowl Strategic Outlook for Food Chain Actors

- **Erik Mathijs**, Professor of Agricultural and Resource Economics, KU Leuven
- **Ancel·la Santos**, Head of Food, Health and Chemicals Safety, BEUC
- **Lajos Böröcz**, Secretary General, Hungarian Hospitality Employers' Association - VIMOSZ
- **Nikolai Pushkarev**, Team Lead EU Policy for Food and Land Use Sectors, Agora Agriculture

The wider room extended the same experiment: a research-heavy Horizon community placed in unusually dense contact with EU institutions, organised civil society, policy intermediaries and actors from farming, food industry, retail and hospitality. The political value lies not in "stakeholder diversity" as such, but in **putting different kinds of knowledge, authority, interest and implementation capacity into the same conversation**.

The point was not to make them agree, it was to see what happened when the research was challenged by people who knew where policy gets stuck, where interests collide, where good ideas become expensive, where representation becomes unequal, and where implementation becomes somebody's actual job.

This conference harvest shows what came out of it.

What is the true cost of our food, and who pays?

The costs that never reach the checkout

True Cost Accounting entered the room as one of PLAN'EAT's strongest propositions because it is **unusually tangible**: economists can work with it, politicians can work with it, and farmers and businesses can understand what it is trying to show. The question put to Anant, Nico and the room was this: if we can identify and measure those hidden costs and benefits, can we start bringing them into **actual decision-making**?

The basic proposition is this: some food products appear cheaper than they really are because **part of the bill has been shifted elsewhere**. Environmental damage, pressure on health systems, depleted natural resources and other social costs do not vanish simply because they are not included in the supermarket price. They are paid **later, elsewhere**, and often by people who had very little to do with creating them—taxpayers, communities, public services, or future generations. The bill does not disappear simply because nobody pays it at the checkout.

It's not you, it's the economic system

Olivia's starting diagnosis is that the current economic **system allows profits to remain largely private while many costs are socialised**.

"Have you ever seen a supermarket come back after a profitable year and offer to share an additional part of its gains with society? But when production generates costs—from CO_2 emissions, nitrogen pollution or higher water-treatment costs—those bills end up being paid by society through taxpayers, health-insurance contributors and people directly affected. Profits are privatised, but costs are socialised. How does that make sense?"



Taken seriously in policy, TCA could imply subsidy reform, internalisation of externalities, taxes or pricing measures, changes in procurement rules, corporate accountability, dietary policy shifts, redistribution of costs and benefits. **TCA, in this framing, did not need to produce a perfect euro value for every impact before it could matter**. Even without putting a precise monetary value on everything, it can change the questions policymakers ask: **what costs are being created, what benefits are being generated, who carries them, and where they show up**.

There are already signs of TCA **moving beyond research**. Germany and the Netherlands were discussed as examples of governments exploring how it could enter agri-food policy and data systems. In Germany, sustained pressure from young people through an existing participatory forum was one factor behind government engagement.

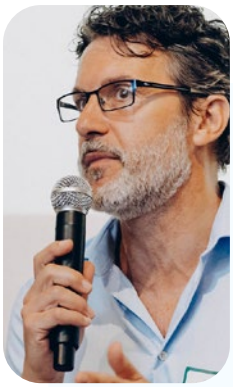
True-price labels: do not dump the 'true cost' onto the consumer

One obvious application of True Cost Accounting would be to communicate the "true price" directly to consumers and let them respond.

Olivia is explicit that **TCA is primarily intended as a policy and economic-framework tool**, rather than as a means of communicating "true prices" to consumers. Instead, it asks how policy can change "the economic framework in which these businesses then operate." The point is therefore not to place the responsibility for addressing externalities primarily on individual consumers, but to **address them through the economic framework in which businesses operate**.

How is a consumer supposed to know whether a high price reflects a company that has actually reduced externalities through better practices, or simply a company being charged for externalities it still creates? That is a specific critique of "true price at the supermarket shelf" as a communication instrument.

The wider conference had already challenged the idea that policy should stay neutral around consumer choice. As Marco puts it:



"**Who are we to tell consumers what to eat? Well, we do it constantly**" - says Marco. Prices, VAT, subsidies and regulation already shape food environments. The question is not whether choice is being structured, but **how, and towards what ends**.



"**Consumers already have a lot of things in their heads.**" - says Nico. The reason to push retailers and food-service actors to change food environments is that "they have the power; they shape what we eat."

But even if a consumer understands the label, can they actually act on it?

"Do they have the opportunity to take account of the label when they're making their decisions?" - Anant asks. He brings in the example of the cost-of-living crisis in the UK, when families were debating "heating versus eating," and asks: "They may want to, but can they? Can they afford to? We have to make the healthiest and most sustainable option the cheapest option. **If people cannot afford the "right" choice, labels are beside the point."**



"It shouldn't be up to the individual consumer. It should be a social decision about what kind of future we want to support collectively with the policies we vote for and though the way we choose to use our taxes," - is Olivia's message.

The pooled-budget problem

If DG AGRI pays and health saves, where does the return go?

The discussion exposed a very practical systems problem: **investment and benefit sit in different institutional silos and budgets**. If food policy pays for primary or secondary prevention but the savings show up in healthcare, the system has no way to recognise the return and redistribute part of those savings to the budget that initially paid.

One practical example from healthcare: Europe spends enormous sums treating preventable non-communicable diseases. Better food policy can reduce some of that burden—but if the investment sits in agriculture or food policy while the savings appear years later in healthcare, the institution paying for the prevention **does not necessarily see any of that return**.

If institutions cannot capture or even see the returns generated elsewhere, preventive investment can look expensive precisely because **its benefits are appearing in somebody else's balance sheet**.

"If DG AGRI invests in better food systems and healthcare benefits, that money should then flow back to DG AGRI in some way," was one idea. A more radical suggestion was to think about **pooling budgets across sectors**, so that investment and return are not trapped in separate institutional boxes.

"It should be a Common Food Systems Policy"

The exchange on Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) became interesting when it moved beyond "expand eco-schemes."

Agricultural spending **does not produce agricultural effects only**. It shapes biodiversity, carbon storage, health, food affordability and the wider resilience of the food system. Yet decisions about that spending are still largely organised through an agriculture-policy frame.

Olivia argues that public support should be used more deliberately to reward **wider societal benefits**—"put public money towards the public good"—and suggested that environment, health and agriculture ministries should all have a role in thinking about how such a large pot of public money is invested.

"**Where the money goes, the energy goes**." In other words, the question is not only what agriculture policy regulates, but what its spending makes economically possible.

This is where one of our favourite provocations of the day came from: '**It should not be a common agriculture policy. It should be a common food systems policy**.' It added another layer to the broader governance question running through the day: whether a policy architecture centred on agricultural production is adequate for governing outcomes that spill far beyond agriculture.



TCA can calculate the bill; politics decides who pays it

A price may be written down, but that does not mean the argument about value is over.

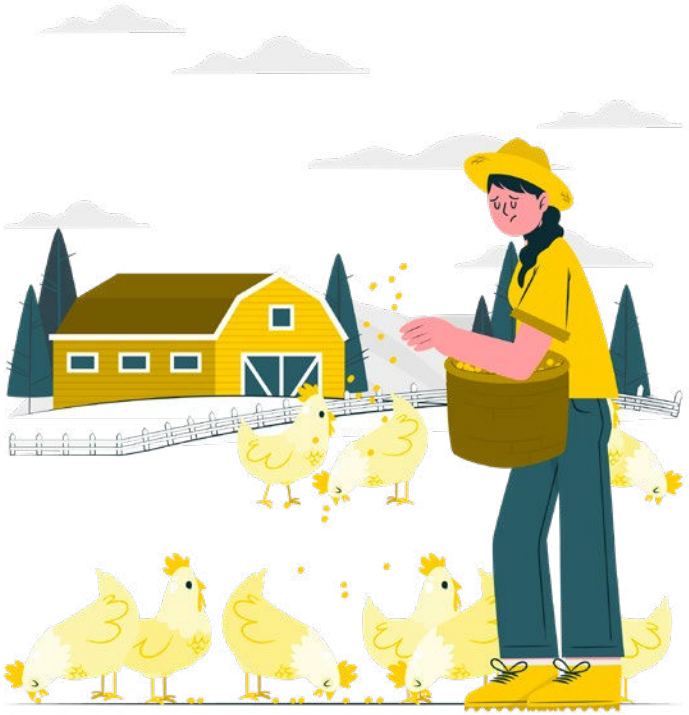
"When you're in India, you go to a shop. If you try to buy something, you say, 'How much?' Then the shopkeeper gives you the price, and you say: 'Yeah, but that's what you have on the price tag. How much will you give it to me for?' There's this sort of negotiation", says Anant, using bargaining in a market stall to introduce the **economics of contested value**.

Once TCA enters a political process, **companies and interest groups can challenge how costs have been calculated**, dispute what should count, or counter with claims about the wider value they create. And the actors **entering that negotiation do not arrive with equal resources or equal access**.



"**Knowledge is power, and access is power**", was Anant's warning. "We keep saying that academics and NGOs should talk to policymakers. But we actually need access to them first."

He points to a recent Corporate Europe Observatory analysis of disclosed meetings with European Commissioners: of roughly 5,900 disclosed meetings, 5,090 were with corporate actors, compared with around 400 with civil-society organisations and only 80–90 with trade unions. And, as he stressed, these were only the meetings that were disclosed.



Technical sophistication does not remove politics

In PLAN'EAT, we explored a **more democratic, multi-level approach to food policy** through the Living Labs and Policy Lab.

The Living Labs worked with very different population groups across Europe: older people, people living with non-communicable diseases, students, children and parents, lower- and higher-income groups. They also involved local policymakers, civil-society organisations and food-chain actors. The Policy Lab worked at EU level, bringing together policymakers, civil society and food-chain actors.

As one of the Living Lab interventions, **people were given space to develop policy measures themselves** (guided through a structured co-creation process, of course; we're not barbarians!) in national and EU-level food policy summits.

Summit participants proposed **far-reaching policy interventions across pricing, retail, farming, procurement, food access and regulation**. These were then assessed for effectiveness and feasibility by independent national experts, resulting in a coherent policy mix of 20 interventions.



The interventions rated highest for effectiveness and feasibility included:

- Bans and restrictions on hazardous pesticides,
- Fiscal incentives for healthy foods (VAT reductions and HFSS taxes),
- Healthy and sustainable criteria in public food procurement,
- Restrictions on advertising of foods high in fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS),
- Subsidy for plant protein production,
- Transition fund for farmers.



"**The result was rather more ambitious than a familiar account of political feasibility might suggest**," - was Jeroen's reading of the findings.

OK. That creates an uncomfortable question:

If a relatively ambitious policy mix can emerge from a democratic, multi-level process and still survive a reality check with expert evaluators, **why is it so hard to move politically**?

The evidence is there; the blockage is political

The implementation gap is no longer, if ever was, an evidence gap.



"**We know a lot from science**," says Marion. In fact, she says it twice. The Commission, she argues, recognises the need for profound food-system transformation. However, the Farm to Fork experience also showed **the limits of moving directly from "science says this" to "we go there"** and the need to build change on the basis of a continuous dialogue with stakeholders across the agri-food chain.

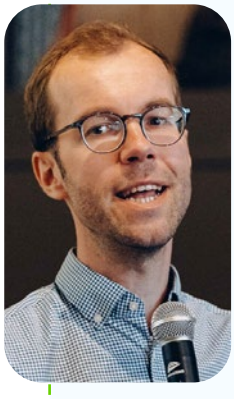
There are **tensions, contradictions, conflicts and power relations that policy cannot pretend away**, alongside food affordability and decent returns for farmers. Some of those conflicts are material and distributive. **More evidence does not make them disappear**.

The clearest examples were the failed revision of the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive and the Framework for Sustainable Food Systems that never came through. "**Starting slowly, and having an incremental path**" with public procurement, transition payments, access to food and protein policy was the Commission-side answer.

Lobbying is predictable; institutional receptiveness is the real question

Effective food system transformation requires not only better policy mixes, but also more participatory and coordinated governance arrangements at European level.

Businesses and organised interests will advocate for themselves—this is almost a "natural phenomenon", as Jeroen puts it. The more important question is why public institutions are more receptive to some interests than to others. **"Stop asking why interests lobby; ask why public institutions are so receptive to some interests and not others",** he argues. Their role, after all, is to serve long-term public goods rather than shorter private gains. His diagnosis goes further: "The way in which our institutions are designed really favours some interests over others." This reframing moves responsibility from 'bad lobbyists' to **institutional design and state responsiveness**.



The problem is not only getting evidence into policy, but keeping it there

Evidence does not become **politically secure** simply because it has made its way into policy once. The current simplification and deregulation turn raises the reverse problem: what happens when information and safeguards that were difficult to build are reframed as "**bureaucratic burden**" and begin to be stripped back?

Data is increasingly economically valuable and strategically important, yet the collection and reporting of sustainability-related data is being treated as a bureaucratic burden. Olivia points to the EU's Omnibus simplification process as an example.



"**The largest companies on this globe are making their money with data. And we are saying that's a burden**." "The future is going to be very different to the past." - she argues.

Data on sustainability, resilience and economic performance is therefore **not simply compliance information**. It is also an increasingly important basis for **understanding resilience**, anticipating future risks and making better policy and business decisions.

They say farmers push back. But who are 'the farmers'?

Representation inside agriculture is part of the problem.

"**There is a multitude of farmers**," says Marco. Young farmers, organic farmers, landowners and other farming constituencies **do not necessarily have the same interests, time horizons or positions on change**. Young farmers, he notes, can take a very different view precisely because they are looking ahead at another forty years of farming and business.

But some organisations are far more likely than others to be recognised **as speaking for "the sector".** There are politicians and MEPs who are themselves farmers, but "a certain type of farmers" with enough time and money to become politicians while agricultural workers run their farms. Agricultural ministers, meanwhile, defend "the farming sector" largely as it is represented to them by the top farm organisations in their countries.

For Marco, this points to **"an essential problem of democratic representation within farmers' unions at European level."** Several organisations represent different parts of agriculture, but in the public debate Copa-Cogeca is often treated as if it speaks for farmers as a whole. In reality, it represents only part of a much more diverse farming constituency.

So **"farmers" cannot be treated as one political actor**. The sharper questions are: **Which farmers? Who speaks for them?** And how does one organised position come to be treated as the position of "the sector"?

More dialogue does not automatically mean more balanced power

Part of the answer put forward in the room was more participatory governance: wider dialogue, a stronger place for organised civil society, and structures in which different actors could actually be heard.

But the discussion also exposed uneven institutional receptiveness: some organisations become recognised as speaking for entire constituencies, while access and capacity remain unequally distributed. Bringing more actors into the process does not make those differences disappear.

This creates a contradiction in the current turn towards dialogue: if unequal representation and access helped produce political blockage in the first place, **more dialogue inside the same power architecture can reproduce rather than resolve it**. If participation is to affect implementation, it needs an institutional architecture that makes participation **consequential**.



Coordination, capacity and the risk of going first

The research panels showed why evidence can fail to move politics. The fishbowl added the next layer: even where there is direction and willingness, implementation can fail because the **actors expected to move face real commercial, institutional and competitive penalties** for doing so. Its distinctive contribution was to shift the question from 'What should change?' to 'Under what conditions can actors actually afford to change?'

First-mover disadvantage

First movers can be punished for doing the right thing.

> **"We talk a lot about opportunities, but we do not talk about risks"** - one intervention from the room noted.

The largest Dutch supermarkets had discussed stopping meat advertising, but the one supermarket that actually did so reportedly lost millions of euros. Government support or accountability could help prevent an individual company from carrying the **commercial cost of acting first**.

But first-mover effects **do not always run in one direction**. There was a counter-example: being the first retailer to provide plant-based alternatives can also create reputational advantage, while reputational risk can itself push large retailers to change.

The unresolved question is therefore not whether first movers always lose. It is **who carries the risk when acting first may be commercially costly**, and when policy has to change the **conditions under which leading becomes viable**.

Responsibility ≠ capacity

Underneath all of this sits a harder question: **"Where does agency reside in the food system?"**

Responsibility for transition and capacity to carry transition risk are **not the same**. The actors expected to change may not be able to absorb **margin loss, investment risk or higher costs alone**.

Producers can be locked into production models that have been optimised over years and require investment to change. Farmers may want to move but still need to make a living.



"Public buyers may be asked to procure differently while operating under tight budgets and rules in which," as Lajos puts it, **"the lowest price wins, not the best quality-price ratio."**

Retailers may be asked to change what they sell or advertise while **remaining exposed to competitors that do not**.

The missing evidence is about 'how'



"There is enough evidence about the direction we need to take. In some cases, though, more analysis is needed on how to implement concrete steps along the way." - Nikolai argues.

The implementation evidence gap is increasingly about **what makes change executable**, not only what interventions work. **Margins, procurement rules, planning security, sequencing and risk-sharing** become part of the evidence base.

Erik pushes the business-model question further: retailers depend heavily on volume, so interventions that change what they sell can have major effects on margins. The question he raises is **whether we understand retailer economics well enough in the first place**.

Making transition commercially possible

The discussion pointed to a familiar coordination problem: **weak demand can justify weak provision, while weak provision in turn helps keep demand weak**.

Supply-side commitments only become investable when demand signals are credible enough to reduce risk.

"If you are trying to build interventions for agriculture without including the demand side, you do not offer them real security".

The same problem exists in procurement. The room was therefore not simply asking who has agency, but **under what conditions that agency can realistically be exercised**.

One intervention from the room captured the wider implication:

"Creating a profitable business model is also a societal question."

Markets do not neutrally reward transition. Policy, procurement, demand and competitive conditions shape whether doing the "right" thing is **commercially possible** in the first place.

Profitability is therefore not simply a constraint that transition has to accommodate; it is partly shaped by the conditions around it. If policy leaves willing actors to carry the cost and risk of moving while competitors continue under the old conditions, it can make leading commercially irrational.

The conference increasingly distinguished between **knowing what could work** and **understanding what has to be in place for it to work**. Many of those conditions turned out not to sit with individual actors at all, but with the governance around them.

That sort of governance EU agri-food is missing

By this point, several problems had accumulated.

Evidence can be technically strong and still **fail politically**. Actors may want to move and still face **conditions that make change costly or irrational**. Participation can widen a process without **rebalancing power**. Costs and benefits can fall across institutions that **make decisions separately**.

Top-down is not enough; bottom-up is not enough either

What matters is whether the two become **politically connected**: whether locally grounded knowledge can enter institutions, whether participation can **shape decisions rather than merely comment on them**, and whether policy domains and levels that currently operate separately can act on problems that **cut across them**.

This is where the lesson from Farm to Fork matters without needing to retell it. **"Science says this, we go there" was not enough**. But simply reversing the direction and expecting local initiatives, Living Labs or civil society to **carry change from below is not enough either**. Their political value depends on whether they can connect to institutions and become consequential inside policymaking.

How much can incremental measures carry?

The most important policy disagreement was not between transformation and no transformation. It was **between two ways of trying to get there**.

From the Commission side came an **incremental path** after the Farm to Fork setbacks: procurement, transition payments, access to food and protein policy as politically possible places to restart. A more structural civil-society reading focused instead on **power, policy mixes, and changing production and food environments**.

The room did not resolve that tension. Politically survivable steps can open a route towards larger change. They can also become **substitutes for the structural reforms that keep failing**. The question left hanging was whether incremental measures can accumulate into transformation, or whether **political feasibility ends up defining its outer limit**.



Governance has to do several things at once

The discussion increasingly pointed to several functions that governance would have to perform at the same time:

- deal with **representation, access and institutional receptiveness**, not just participation;
- bring differently positioned actors into **the same decision-making process** and create continuity **beyond one-off consultation**;
- deal with costs and benefits that **cross institutional silos**;
- connect policy domains and governance levels that **currently make decisions separately**.

The gap is not another one-off dialogue, but **sustained political connection** between actors, levels and institutions that currently operate separately.

The European Food Policy Council as a test case

The European Food Policy Council did not enter the conference as a brand-new idea. The EESC had already developed and advocated the concept, with Piroska Kállay among those carrying that work. PLAN'EAT picked up that proposition and developed it further: **from a participatory forum into a more worked-through complementary governance architecture**.



The concept of **food democracy** provides a normative framework for such reforms, emphasising inclusiveness, deliberation, transparency and accountability.

The value of PLAN'EAT's proposed configuration lies in its **functional complementarity**. By bringing together agrifood stakeholders, citizens, scientists and local practitioners, it combines **different forms of knowledge** and strengthens **public-interest representation** in EU food policymaking. The conference then put that proposition under pressure.

The institutional form remains open; the function is clearer

The European Food Policy Council proposition clearly had "carry-home" potential: the audience returned to it in their closing reflections. The discussion pointed repeatedly to **a missing governance function: a way to connect participation, representation, coordination and implementation across levels and institutions**. The European Food Policy Council is one proposition for filling that space.

For the concept to travel, **it cannot remain owned by PLAN'EAT** or by the organisations already carrying it. It has to become something others can **test, contest and reshape**. It will require **political coalition-building, not only scientific legitimacy**.

The room did not produce alignment around a finished model. Questions of institutional form, ownership and connection to existing structures remained open.



What the room carried forward

In this section, we summarise what survived, what shifted, what remains unresolved, and what happens next.

Messages that kept resurfacing

The bottleneck has moved from knowing to governing and implementing.

Evidence remains necessary, but more evidence alone will not solve problems rooted in mandates, incentives, institutional capacity, power and political choice.

Responsibility without the capacity to act is not a transition strategy.

Individuals, farmers, businesses and other actors can be assigned responsibility while operating inside conditions that make the requested behaviour costly or impossible.

Someone has to carry the risk of going first.

Change looks different once it is treated as a problem of risk distribution and coordination rather than simply willingness.

Participation is not the same thing as power.

Technically sound governance can still reproduce unequal influence. Representation, access and institutional receptiveness determine whose evidence and interests can actually affect implementation.

Making costs visible does not settle who should bear them.

TCA can expose hidden costs. Their distribution remains a political decision.

Governance becomes real when it changes material conditions.

Budgets, incentives, mandates, procurement rules, fiscal arrangements, market conditions and institutional responsibilities matter more than additional dialogue structures by themselves.

The battle-tested truths

At the beginning we asked: after four years of research, does anything actually leave the room?

The strongest battle-tested proposition was not any individual PLAN'EAT intervention. It was that **technically credible solutions become implementable only when the political economy around them is addressed**:

- Evidence tells us what might work, but governance determines whether institutions can act on it.
- Power shapes whose version of the problem counts.
- Economic conditions determine who can afford to move.
- Politics decides how costs, benefits and risks are distributed.

The four movements

The closing reflections drawn from the room provide a useful validation layer: they show which arguments from the sessions were memorable enough to be carried back at the end of the day.

Four movements were reinforced most clearly in the rapporteurs' reflections from the audience.



1. TCA as an actionable rather than merely analytical tool

True Cost Accounting came back as something unexpectedly tangible: a tool able to speak in technical, practical and even emotional registers.

Its strength lies in bringing consequences dispersed across society into the same frame. Government engagement in Germany and the Netherlands also mattered because it showed TCA moving beyond an analytical proposition.

Its limit is equally important. **TCA can make costs and benefits visible and help compare choices. It cannot settle what should count, whose valuation prevails or who should pay**.

2. Participation as a condition of implementation

Policies can fail when the people expected to support, apply or live with them were absent from their formation.

For actors who had been making that argument for years, hearing institutional actors acknowledge that policies can fail without civil-society and grassroots support mattered. "It's good to actually be heard," Katerina reflected.

She was also clear that participation should not stop at the moment of dialogue. **"For it to matter, institutional acknowledgement needs to translate into an architecture where participation actually shapes implementation, not just symbolic recognition,"** she added.

3. Power imbalance in dialogue still matters

"Being invited into dialogue is not the same as having power in it."

Bernadette's reflection was a reminder that power imbalances have to remain visible when dialogues are designed, recommendations are made and organisations are invited to the table. **Even a more inclusive, participatory process can still reproduce unequal influence if some actors enter with more access, capacity or institutional recognition than others.**

That makes participation a design problem as well as a democratic principle. It is not enough to widen the table; the process also has to reckon with the inequalities participants bring into it.

4. From knowing what to understanding how

"PLAN'EAT shows who is needed, what is needed, and how it can be done. The next step is really doing it."

The knowledge base is mature enough to move attention from defining the problem towards understanding how change happens. PLAN'EAT's intervention evidence, the Knowledge Centre and existing research and policy networks offer ways of keeping that knowledge usable beyond the life of the project.

The harder evidence question now is about implementation: who is needed, what has to happen around an intervention, and how evidence can travel **beyond the life of an individual research project**.

The next step is really doing it

Instead of the afterword

A single research project cannot guarantee what happens next, but it can make sure that, by the time a project ends, **the work is no longer held by the consortium alone**.

This is also what the conference tried to do in practice: we approached it as a Lab, putting propositions into a politically mixed room and **seeing what came back**. We ended with **arguments reframed and sharpened, relationships built, questions still being worked on**, and evidence that people can carry into what they do next.

The conclusion of this conference is not another claim that healthier and more sustainable diets matter—we know that already, and nobody in the room disputed it. What PLAN'EAT, together with the community gathered around its final conference, showed is that **credible measures still depend on governance, power and coordination**.

The next step is therefore not another disconnected pilot, but bringing existing efforts into conversation, building shared direction and creating the political momentum needed for a long-lasting change.

That is what it would mean for the evidence to leave the room.



