

The importance of Food Sovereignty for the Farm to Fork strategy and the New Green Deal. Insights and limits of the SAM and SAPEA reports

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Rationale: This brief reflects on the key scientific contributions of the recent publication of the report '*Towards a Sustainable Food System*' by the Chief Scientific Advisors (Scientific Advice Mechanism- SAM) ¹ and the SAPEA (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies) Evidence Review Report on '*Sustainable Food Systems for the EU*' ² that informed it. This is done with a view towards advancing food sovereignty and agroecology in the Farm to Fork Strategy.

Context: Vulnerable food systems

Covid-19 has exposed even more limits and dysfunctions in our globalized food systems: from our reliance on under-paid farm and food sector workers operating in poor working conditions (most often women and migrants), the risks associated with intensive animal farming, including zoonoses, to barriers facing small-scale producers when trying to access local markets, to gender inequalities and the additional risks faced by people with pre-existing diet-related health conditions.

Covid-19 is also set to aggravate other shocks (e.g. crop failures or abrupt changes in food prices due to climate change and other extreme events), and threats (e.g. biocultural erosion, degrading soil fertility, ageing farm population, land concentration, lack of farm renewal). These shocks and threats reveal the fragility of the European food systems, which the SAPEA report makes clear is even more vulnerable due to its interdependent nature and the fact that the EU imports large quantities of food and feed from third countries, while also being a major exporter of food products.³

Food sovereignty as a solution

Small-scale food producers from across Europe have been advancing a positive and constructive strategy rooted in the principles of food sovereignty to address these problems. Food sovereignty presents a viable alternative to the economic policies which have led to current food crises and offers concrete tools and direction for democratic systemic change across our food systems.

Food sovereignty is grounded in 6 pillars: the right to food and nutrition, public policies that value and support small-scale food providers, localised food systems, local control over natural food producing resources, traditional knowledge, and agroecology. As the concept is being increasingly co-opted, it must be re-stated that food sovereignty is a democratic process focused on the rights of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and on their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.⁴

From this starting point, and with a view towards the new Farm to Fork Strategy, this short brief highlights the importance of:

- 1) Respecting complexity and changing the narrative from food as a commodity to ensuring the right to food and nutrition for all;
- 2) Supporting agroecology; and,
- 3) Ensuring territorial solidarity

1) Respect complexity and change the narrative: towards a rights-based approach for food systems transitions

One of the key contributions of the SAPEA report was the conceptualization and identification of multiple, often competing, narratives. Food security and nutrition, and sustainability are multidimensional and dynamic policy goals defined differently by different communities. These goals are marked by uncertainties and represent policy problems for which there are no neutral solutions.^{5,6} There is increasing recognition of the need to govern in ways which acknowledge multiple perspectives, expectations, power dynamics, and strategies, while rejecting quests for a single framing of the problem.^{7,8} For the Farm-to-Fork Strategy to be capable of responding to uncertain contexts it must explicitly recognise the complexity of food systems, including the competing narratives that frame understandings and values (scientific and otherwise).

The framing of problems and procedures is a key issue in every science-policy process.¹ Changing framings, or questioning the implicit narratives and assumptions that underlie policies, can be a precursor for significant policy change.⁵ SAPEA Promoting new narratives, backed by science, practice and the people most affected by policies, is thus fundamental to advancing a Strategy capable of transition to sustainable food systems in the EU.

Recognizing that there are competing narratives, the recent SAPEA Report ² usefully moved past the dominant narrative of food as a tradeable commodity, and identified three other significant narratives: food as a human right; food as commons; and food as identity and culture. In view of sustainability transitions, the SAM report³ proposed a shift from food as a commodity to a common good. This is an important step, as the climate and Covid-19 crises highlight the urgent need to review societal priorities and provide an effective framework for the implementation of the SDGs.

Scholars, alongside social movements, have been advocating for food to be recognised as a human right, and have denounced the detrimental impacts on people and nature that come from treating food as just another commodity. Looking at food as a common (good), as promoted by the SAM report, opens the way for exploring new policy approaches and paying attention to the multiple dimensions of food, including food as a public good, as essential, as a renewable resource, as a tradable good, as a determinant of culture, and as a fundamental human right.^{4,5} However, we note that what is meant by 'food as part of the commons' remains poorly defined, and we are concerned by the fact that the EU remains committed to a growth strategy that is antithetical to the full realisation of the right to food, and of several SDGs.

Commons are fundamentally social-ecological in nature, and should not be conceptualized as physical ecological entities.⁵ Commons are constituted in part by social relationships, legal structures and agreements, collective practices, struggles over access and control over natural resources, and forms of agency all of which are continually renegotiated. Commons can be a powerful way of governing and shaping relationships to resources, and are inherent to many agricultural, fisheries, pastoral and forest systems in Europe. Yet, they do not on their own guarantee equitable access or the full realisation of the right to food and nutrition, nor do they address other sources of discrimination, like gender, race or class.⁹ The Farm to Fork Strategy should recognise food as a fundamental human right, and implement this right

through the development of regulatory frameworks that respect, protect and fulfil the right to food and nutrition for all.¹⁰

2) Agroecology at the heart of food system policies

To achieve the ambitions of the New Green Deal, the Farm-to-Fork Strategy needs to move towards more sustainable food systems. Citing a definition put forward by the SAM, the SAPEA report usefully defines a sustainable food system for the EU, as one that: “provides and promotes safe, nutritious and healthy food of low environmental impact for all current and future EU citizens in a manner that itself also protects and restores the natural environment and its ecosystem services, is robust and resilient, economically dynamic, just and fair, and socially acceptable and inclusive. It does so without compromising the availability of nutritious and healthy food for people living outside the EU, nor impairing their natural environment.”²

The Report however fails to directly engage with agroecology, despite scientific evidence indicating its tremendous potential. Agroecology is defined as the application of the science of ecology (the science of how nature works) to the study, design, and management of sustainable food systems, the integration of the diverse knowledge systems generated by food system practitioners, and the involvement of the social movements that are promoting the transition to fair, just, and sovereign food systems.⁸ In other words, agroecology is understood as a science, practice, and as a social movement.¹¹

Key to an agroecological food system is that it fits the local environment by its very design, in contrast to a one-size-fits-all solution. Further, agroecological systems regenerate themselves, rather than being dependent on external inputs.¹⁰ Agroecology also brings in other principles: circular, social and solidarity economies building alternatives to linear and continuous economic growth, cooperation and care (for people and ecosystems), and the critical role of local, Indigenous, and co-produced knowledge. Examples of how these principles are translated into practice include short food circuits where power is more equally distributed, the payment of fair prices to producers and access to healthy, nutritious and sustainable diets for all citizens.

Agroecological food systems create and manage rich diverse agrosilvopastoral landscapes, and are key to sustaining wild biodiversity, preventing fires, and maintaining a rich immaterial and material cultural heritage, producing well preserved and vibrant countrysides, pillar for other sectors and services in rural areas. Yet, agroecology can only deliver all these benefits if accompanied by a change in economic paradigm, as recognised by the 10 Elements of Agroecology of FAO.¹²

Central to supporting agroecology is addressing concentration across the food system: from land to seeds to supermarkets. Current levels of concentration are antithetical to the diversity required for sustainable and just food systems.¹³ For example, at the heart of agroecology are diverse and heterogeneous peasant seed systems. In line with Article 9 of the *International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*, and Article 19 of the recently adopted *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other Persons Working in Rural Areas*¹⁴, the EU and EU Member States must take measures to address concentration in the seed sector and ensure that seed policies, plant variety protection and other intellectual property laws, seed marketing laws, variety registration and certification systems respect, protect and fulfil peasants’ rights to seeds.

Europe’s potential for agroecology is significant if we consider that small farms (less than 2 hectares) account for more than 50% of farms,^{15,16} and that agroecology works particularly well at a smaller scale. Yet, inadequate infrastructure remains a challenge, as well as limited access to land and natural resources in particular for young farmers. This limits opportunities to regenerate or preserve natural resources, as highlighted in the SAPEA report.² Adequate

measures are required by the EU to implement the human rights to land, water, fisheries and forests.

With regards to the genetic modification (GM) of crops, including gene editing technology, we want to reinforce that there is no broad scientific consensus on the usefulness of GM technologies due to unstudied social, economic and environmental impacts. Further, especially in Europe, the adoption of these technologies has been met with popular resistance. The Farm to Fork Strategy should, among other things: support strict and sustainable application of the current European regulations to all new GMOs; establish sanctions to discourage any attempts at fraud; protect peasants' collective rights to save, use, exchange and sell their seeds;¹⁴ and, prohibit the patenting of plants and animals obtained exclusively by essentially biological processes, including their components and the genetic information they contain.

3) Territorial solidarity

A third important insight from the SAPEA report has been the clear statement that efforts to move towards sustainable food systems in Europe must not happen at the expense of the sustainability of other territories.² Taking a food systems approach means recognizing that changes to one aspect of the food system will result in changes to other subsystems. Ensuring that transitions to sustainable food systems in the EU will not have negative impacts on other parts of the world requires carefully planned changes to European production systems, notably in intensive animal production that relies heavily on raw materials produced in other parts of the world (e.g. soy); and changes in trade and investment agreements. Consider for example the negative consequences of the EU's dysfunctional milk market on West African producers.¹⁷ Concerns have already been raised that recent COVID-19 related decisions to store milk due to low prices will further negatively impact these markets.¹⁸

Concluding remarks

The SAM and SAPEA reports on sustainable food systems for the European Union provide important scientific and political openings for advancing a radical new strategy for a more sustainable and just food system.

The European Commission has an opportunity and an obligation to develop a Farm to Fork Strategy that builds just and sustainable food systems and supports the realisation of the right to food and nutrition for all. To advance sustainable food systems, the Farm to Fork Strategy has to address several interrelated challenges, such as (mal)nutrition, urbanisation including urban-rural linkages and the preservation of peri-urban agricultural land, biodiversity, changing geopolitical relations, territorial imbalances and growing uncertainties, as well as the social and environmental consequences of intensive food-production practices.² Towards this end, establishing participatory spaces for adaptive governance on sustainable food systems are needed to facilitate the development of policies capable of adapting and responding to shocks should be a priority for the EU.

There is mounting evidence and momentum for a Strategy that is coherent with food sovereignty insofar as it: respects the rights of people; understands food to be more than a commodity, but a commons and a human right; promotes agroecological food systems; and, maintains solidarity with food producers and consumers around the world.

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