


 Strengthening sustainable food systems


 POLICY INSIGHTS

2023 is the year when the EU's [Farm to Fork Strategy](#) aims to confirm policy proposals for establishing an [EU legislative framework covering sustainable food systems](#). The [Common Agricultural Policy \(CAP\)](#) plays many instrumental roles in supporting Member States' transition to sustainable food systems. [Networking CAP](#) know-how in such fields offers useful added value opportunities to help determine how the CAP can be better used for its core purpose of safeguarding EU food supplies.

Food sustainability affects us all and the success of the flagship Farm to Fork initiative for [sustainable food systems](#) is influenced by a host of EU policy perspectives supporting agricultural production, environmental protection, and the population's general well-being. Policy approaches to the pending sustainable food system initiative are therefore being developed by a cross-section of multi-discipline expertise taking account of food systems in the 27 EU countries. Results are to lay down general policy principles and objectives, together with the requirements and responsibilities of all actors in the EU food system.

A [public consultation](#) provided policy makers with evidence-led insights on key points for the new EU sustainable food system initiative. This included recognition that EU food systems must become more sustainable and that greater action is needed at all levels of governance. There was strong support for a harmonised, EU-wide approach and results could rely on increased awareness through knowledge sharing to help accelerate the transition towards more sustainable food systems.

Cooperation in the area of sustainable food systems has been the subject of an earlier [Policy Insight article](#), in which we drew attention to the potential of networking CAP actors using CAP Strategic Plans (CSPs) to reinforce food system resilience. CSP stakeholders continue to network with this purpose in mind and

reflections from these processes help progress practical options for achieving policy objectives. The [EU CAP Network](#) is an increasingly active channel in this domain, helping Member States to advance with food system sustainability using the [EUR 307 billion of public expenditure that CSPs can mobilise](#).

Networking EU food expertise

Member States' capacity for absorbing such sums within successful sustainable food systems is being built by a multitude of EU CAP networking activities. These regularly harvest and share best practices and expertise and pursue new approaches through [innovation focus groups](#), [evaluation support](#), and [thematic groups](#). Sustainable food systems feature prominently across the EU CAP Network activities, namely its thematic work on related topics such as [Sustainability Agreements](#) within value chains to secure new commercial competitiveness and [strengthening the position of farmers in the organic food supply chain](#).



Conclusions from EU CAP Network thematic work on Sustainability Agreements highlighted possibilities from new legal arrangements in EU competition law for food producers (from **Article 210a** of the regulation establishing a common organisation of the markets in agricultural products). Outcomes of this stakeholder-driven policy support work advanced collective understanding of what constitutes a **Sustainability Agreement**, the challenges and barriers related to their establishment and implementation, and the added value of pursuing sustainability objectives through collective actions. Enabling factors for these contributions to sustainable food systems were identified, such as applying integrated and inclusive value chain approaches that build business resilience by cost reductions through collective actions and capitalising on sustainable use of local natural assets.

Other useful insights on opportunities from Sustainability Agreements underscored the benefits from seeking fair prices through peer-learning, market transparency, and long-term commitments. Engaging with consumers to enhance their potential as vital drivers of demand was another common success factor for sustainable food system transitions. Findings from this CAP networking activity are informing new EU guidelines that are due to be published later in 2023. These aim to help enforcement authorities and others be clear about what agri-food businesses can do now to be (more) sustainable under the new legal prospects.

Organic insights

Food production systems applying **organic and agro-ecology principles** are generally sustainable by nature. Significant opportunities for growth in the organic market are anticipated given EU targets to increase the land area certified under organic agriculture. Networking activity among CSP specialists in organic sectors has helped clarify an increased role for the CAP in areas such as new entrants, succession, cooperation, processing, promotion, innovation, and knowledge exchange as well as payments for conversion/maintenance.

Small farms make up the largest proportion of EU food producers and networking CAP expertise among small-scale producers is capable of catalysing larger-scale impacts from CSP support for organics. Knowledge exchanges between peers implementing the CSPs has also highlighted various approaches that can improve supply and demand for sustainable food products, e.g. biodistricts, cooperatives, public sector food, direct sales etc.

Better market transparency throughout food value chains is another enabling factor that CAP networking stakeholders have encouraged to improve the position of organic producers via pricing, volumes and other relevant information. This point was underlined during the latest EU **Forum on Best Practices in the Agri-Food Supply Chain**, which also reminded advocates of sustainable food systems about the importance of **data** for optimising transitions and associated benefits.



Fundamental to all these points identified by EU CAP networking on sustainable food systems is the need to achieve critical mass. The creation of food forums, city and regional food systems, advisory and research services for instance can all be combined with online platforms facilitating trade and capacity. Synergies from such coordinated implementation of CSP assistance can help to continually expand the critical mass needed for converting organics and other elements of sustainable food systems from ambitious policy goals to practical reality.

