

Open letter on the Vision for Agriculture and Food

Brussels, 9 December 2024

Dear Commissioner for Agriculture and Food Christophe Hansen,

Cc: European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Executive Vice-President for a Clean, Just and Competitive Transition Teresa Ribera, Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms Raffaele Fitto, Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy Jessika Roswall, Commissioner for Climate, Net Zero and Clean Growth Wopke Hoekstra, Commissioner for Budget, Anti-Fraud and Public Administration Piotr Serafin, Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans Costas Kadis, Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport Glenn Micallef.

Congratulations on your appointment as Commissioner for Agriculture and Food. While navigating the complexities of the food and farming sectors will be a challenging task, your mandate has the potential to bring significant positive change to our societies and the environment. We look forward to working constructively with you on the future of EU agriculture and food systems.

We, the undersigned organisations, are a diverse group of civil society groups, farmers and fishers organisations, and policy institutes that support the transition to sustainable and agroecological food systems.

We are writing to **offer input on the *Vision for Agriculture and Food*** that will be developed within your first 100 days. Additionally, we would appreciate the opportunity to **meet with you to introduce ourselves and discuss your plans for this mandate** in greater detail.

Our food system is facing several challenges. Some farmers struggle to be paid fairly for their work, in a system rife with unfair trading practices. Some consumers struggle to access and afford healthy, sustainably produced food. All the while, society grapples with the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, to which the current food system - often reliant on intensive farming practices that compromise animal welfare - is both a contributor and victim.

The *Vision for Agriculture and Food* needs to set the direction of travel and include a concrete work plan to address these challenges. It should build on the recommendations from the *Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture* in their entirety and will require close collaboration with your colleagues across the College to implement. The *Vision* must uphold an integrated food systems approach addressing the entire chain from production to consumption and hold all stakeholders, including commercial actors like traders, processors, and retailers, accountable to ensure a fair and effective transition without placing the burden solely on farmers and fishers.

Five critical areas of work are particularly important to us, drawing from the *Strategic Dialogue*:

Fair prices for farmers and consumers

All farmers and farmworkers should have decent incomes and be fairly paid for their work. **Unfair trading practices** must be addressed to ensure that farmers can receive decent revenues from the market and do not have to systematically sell their products below production costs. A well-functioning **Agri Food Chain Observatory** is key in this regard, as it can provide transparency of prices, costs and margins all along the food chain.

The cost of living is the greatest concern of many consumers. **VAT reductions on more sustainable products** can help with affordability and promote rebalancing diets to include more plant-based foods. However, it is critical to ensure that that benefit makes its way to consumers and is not absorbed by retailers.

Make the healthy sustainable choice the easy one for consumers

What we eat is largely shaped by our surrounding food environment. Hence, there is a need for **demand-side policies** that make sustainable and healthy food widely available, affordable, appealing, and easily recognizable to consumers.

Public food procurement has significant untapped potential to address food poverty, provide healthy and sustainable options, and promote food education that can influence household eating habits. It can also support small-scale farmers, encourage organic and agroecological practices, and boost competitiveness. Updating the **Public Procurement Directive** to encourage Member States to procure sustainable, healthy, and high-welfare food in public institutions by prioritising "best value" over "lowest price" can help achieve these objectives (see also the [Manifesto](#) on Minimum Mandatory Standards for Public Canteens developed by some of our organisations).

Developing an **action plan by 2026 for plant-based foods** can strengthen the plant-based agri-food chains from farmers all the way to consumers and helps consumers achieve sustainable healthy diets. Additionally, an **evaluation by 2026** of national measures and voluntary industry commitments on **marketing unhealthy food to children** is key; if found to be inadequate, EU legislation to regulate such marketing should be introduced.

Reform the CAP to assist farmers who need it most and support those who demonstrably engage in sustainable practices

The CAP is currently failing to support the transition to agroecological systems on the scale and at the speed we need. It should be revised to target those who need it most, especially small farms and new entrants, including women, while ensuring the highest possible environmental, social, and animal welfare practices in a quantifiable manner.

We were pleased to see that this Strategic Dialogue recommendation was echoed by President von der Leyen in your mission letter and look forward to working with you towards its realisation.

Ensure food systems and farming practices work for nature and the climate

We share your commitment to generational renewal in the farming sector. Yet as we secure the passage of family farms to the next generation or welcome new entrants into the sector, we must also ensure that the type of farming can last generations as well.

Many agricultural practices contribute to the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, and all are vulnerable to their impacts. Existing environmental legislation should be fully enforced, including the Nature Restoration Law. Establishing a **Nature Restoration Fund** can help farmers achieve the full implementation of that legislation and build resilience on their lands.

The Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive should be fully implemented without delay, to ensure that pesticides are truly only used as a very last resort through Integrated Pest Management (IPM), and to protect citizens and the environment against pesticides. Organic and agroecological practices demonstrate that it is possible to be economically viable and farm within planetary boundaries. These practices should take center stage in your *Vision*.

Food systems and sustainable farm practices can and must contribute to an ambitious 2040 climate target.

As you noted in your hearing confirmation, animal farming is responsible for the vast majority of the agricultural sector's greenhouse gas emissions. The focus of your action should be on **areas of high concentration of livestock** and how to transition these to sustainable animal farming practices with a reduced weight of livestock clusters. Farmers, and the broader value chain, need to be given clear transition pathways that take planetary boundaries fully into account. Technofixes, as the Strategic Dialogue notes, will not achieve the emission reductions necessary. Real transformation to holistic animal farming is needed, based on high levels of animal welfare, done in accordance

with the carrying capacity of the land, thus regenerating agricultural landscapes by integrating animals into farmland and allowing nature to flourish.

Support the transition through an *Agri-food Just Transition Fund*

Farmers will need **financial support** as they **transition away from industrial factory farming** (as discussed above). This support should be provided through a dedicated *Agri-food Just Transition Fund*, established outside of the CAP.

Modernising the outdated EU **animal welfare rules** on keeping and killing animals, as well as labelling, including in aquaculture systems, is a key piece of unfinished business from the last mandate. It is also [demanded by European citizens](#), as demonstrated by the End the Cage Age ECI. Finalizing these rules will ensure farmers have the certainty needed for sustainable investments, though they will also need support.

These two elements should be at the heart of what the ***Agri-food Just Transition Fund*** supports.

We welcome your commitment to explore accessing funding via the existing Just Transition Fund, as there is no time to lose; however, any just transition funding must be linked to clear objectives to transition away from industrial factory farming and improve animal welfare standards.

Several of the issues raised in this letter also apply to fisheries and aquaculture, including needing to take a systemic approach to food systems, and enabling sustainable consumer choices. While the Strategic Dialogue did not consider the issue, we consider it to be an integral part of the *Vision* as it relates to food and look for it to be reflected.

Given the multiple crises that the food and farming sectors face, there is no time to waste in accelerating the transition towards sustainable food systems. We have been deeply disappointed with recent actions by the Commission, from the undemocratic and misguided CAP reforms taken earlier this year, to the shelving of the Sustainable Food Systems Law and the withdrawal of the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation. We sincerely hope that the cooperative spirit of the Strategic Dialogue represents a new mode of working together.

A **European board on agri-food** (EBAF) may serve to support this new cooperative mode of work, however its composition should reflect the food system in its entirety and at all levels of governance, build on the Strategic Dialogue, and its procedures should ensure genuine participation that delivers tangible results.

European food production does not occur in isolation but is embedded in international agrifood systems. Through dialogue and cooperation, the EU can also lead a sustainable transformation beyond its borders.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the Vision and your plans for the next five years.

Sincerely,



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