

Embargoed to 18 January 2021

EU foresight expert group urges reform of food systems to drive COVID-19 recovery

The pandemic highlights the global problem of food insecurity. A new report prepared by an expert group for the European Commission details how research and innovation can tackle the problem – and ‘build back better’

BRUSSELS, 18 January 2021 - As the New Year gets underway, an expert group organised by the European Commission urges action on one of the most intractable problems highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic: food insecurity in Europe and beyond.

Their report details the complexity and urgency of the problems of food production and supply – and calls for research and innovation to catalyse changes in food systems across the globe.

Even before the pandemic, problems of poor diet, social inequality and carbon-emitting agricultural methods were severe:

- 8% of the world’s population is undernourished, while an ever increasing number is overweight or obese;
- Food and agriculture are responsible for up to 30% of greenhouse gas emissions – despite EU plans to reduce the European footprint;
- About a third of the food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted – a cost of nearly €1 trillion;
- Diversity is so imperilled that 1 million plant and animal species face extinction, yet our food habits are so concentrated that 60% of calories come from just three grains: rice, maize and wheat.

But during 2020, we all saw how the pandemic created a ‘perfect storm’ of system level problems. After initial, localised disruptions in food supplies, prices began climbing – modestly in Europe (2-5% for key products) but more dramatically in some parts of the world (15% in Argentina, nearly 20% in Myanmar.) Switching to remote classes deprived millions of low-income families of school lunches for their children across the globe. In some food industry sectors, in Europe and beyond, workers found themselves unwillingly on the front lines of virus exposure. As people have been forced to change how and where they get food, thousands of restaurants have closed while in-store and online food sales have soared – a major re-allocation of food supply with broad economic and social consequences.

These are among a few of the food impacts of the pandemic presented in a new report on food and agriculture research policy: “Resilience and Transformation.” The report is by a group of 14 experts in food, agriculture and research policy organised by the European Commission for the EU’s Standing Committee on Agricultural Research. The report is accompanied by 17 supporting papers.

The group details what needs to change in the longer term, if we are to “build back better”. The EU has taken ambitious steps already, with a law to go carbon-neutral by 2050, and a panoply of new policies, programmes and legislation that will propel its Green Deal, Biodiversity, Farm to Fork and Circular Economy plans. But their ultimate success will depend heavily on European research and innovation – and the report details how the new €95.5 billion Horizon Europe programme should respond:

- To tackle the challenges and to reach the ambitious targets, R&I must help define common pathways for the future. The countries should urgently agree on commonly accepted targets. For instance, that by 2050 we cut agricultural phosphorous usage by 81% and pesticides by 75%, and that we roll back the average human body mass index in the EU to a healthier range – down from an average now of 51.8% overweight. The report lists 11 such targets for the physical and social spheres.
- An extended research programme is needed to improve diets and nutrition across the EU. For instance, we eat 2.5 to 3 times as much meat as recommended by dieticians, with knock-on effects on our own health and that of the planet. The reasons are complex: a mix of industry structure, social pressures, economic inequalities and personal preferences. Research and innovation can help understand the causes, and guide needed government action – in food advertising, education, competition policy and technological aids to better nutrition.
- A circular food and resource supply can become reality. Wasteful practices can be stopped, circularity designed into all products from the start. Critically important: R&I into the advancing field of ‘agroecology’: for instance, farmers working to improve soil biota naturally, paying more attention to crop rotation and cover. For this, a massive effort in education is needed – both on the farm, and among consumers. But governments must also act, with more coherent policies, support to promising innovations and networks, better cost accounting and investment, and more information for consumers and producers to trace supply routes.
- For society and the economy to become more resilient – a problem highlighted by the pandemic – we need more diversity: in what we eat, what we grow and fish, and how we structure society. R&I can help develop new information and genomic technologies, ecosystem services, environmental policies.

The group of 14 experts in food, agriculture and natural resources was initiated by SCAR, the [Standing Committee on Agricultural Research](#), founded in 1974 by EU Council regulation to advise member states and the Commission. It was chaired by Gianluca Brunori, professor of food policy and bioeconomy at the University of Pisa.

Contact:

Expert Group Chair Gianluca Brunori, gianluca.brunori@unipi.it
SCAR Foresight Group, Elke Saggau, Elke.Saggau@ble.de

Resources:

[REPORT DOWNLOAD](#)

[COMPLETE SET OF DOCUMENTS](#)