



**Best-ReMaP**

Healthy Food for a Healthy Future

# **A CASE FOR INTEGRATING A FOOD SYSTEM INDICATOR IN THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER**

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## 1. Food Systems Impact on European society

Food systems - 'a system that embraces all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructure, institutions, markets and trade) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution and marketing, preparation, and consumption of food and the outputs of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes' - <sup>1</sup> affect European society in several ways.<sup>2</sup>

**First, from the nutritional point of view**, malnutrition affects EU citizens in two regards. On the one side, a relevant percentage of low-income households – up to half of low-income households in the newer Member States - suffer from undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies as a result of challenges in access to quality food such as fresh fruits, vegetables and minimally processed and plant-based foods.<sup>3</sup> On the other side, around 1 in 2 Europeans is overweight or obese, which is also a result of the excessive production, distribution, and ultimately (over)consumption of ultra-processed and HFSS foods (High in Fat, Sugar, Salt) by the very same food systems.<sup>4</sup>

Both these problems are associated with higher likelihood to develop chronic and non-communicable disease (responsible for up to 80% of all global burden of disease) and worse mental health outcomes. These problems are not only lifelong issues for individuals, since they start early in life and continue over one's life course often inducing some epigenetic modifications that are inter-generationally inherited, but they have also been recently identified as one of the leading risk factors for morbidity and mortality in the Covid-19 pandemic, in turn severely exacerbated by pandemic control measures.

**Second, food systems have significant social and economic impacts** on communities, services, and systems. Overall, the economic burden associated with chronic diseases is estimated to account for 70–80% of health care budgets, or €700 billion annually across the European Union alone. Unhealthy diets are a leading cause of this NCD burden, with a cost estimated to range from €3 to €148 per capita, or between 2% and 6% of health spending in the countries.<sup>5</sup>

The economic burden of unsustainable food systems is found not only in the public expenditure related to unhealthy diets, but also in the farming side and in the supply chain, where small,

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. Zero Hunger Challenge Working Group. Final Report: All Food Systems are Sustainable, <http://www.un.org/en/zerohunger/pdfs/Renewed%20ZHC%20ANs-3%20SystemsEbook.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://eurohealthnet.eu/wp-content/uploads/documents/2019/190518\\_PolicyPrecis\\_FoodSystems.pdf](https://eurohealthnet.eu/wp-content/uploads/documents/2019/190518_PolicyPrecis_FoodSystems.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/658209/IPOL\\_BRI\(2020\)658209\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/658209/IPOL_BRI(2020)658209_EN.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210721-2>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/342166/Unhealthy-Diets-ePDF-v1.pdf](https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/342166/Unhealthy-Diets-ePDF-v1.pdf)

family and local-based agri-food operators – who often operate in more sustainable ways<sup>6</sup> - struggle to compete against large-scale food and drink industry.<sup>7</sup>

**Third, current food systems** are not only fuelling unhealthy and unsustainable dietary patterns, but they **have also a vast ‘environmental footprint’**<sup>8</sup>. Food systems are responsible for the emission of high levels of greenhouse gasses (GHG), they often rely on high intensity farming and animal husbandry which result in the degradation of the planetary environment and in the depletion of natural resources, and they produce concerning levels of food waste.<sup>9</sup>

These three points demonstrate that if we are to address the sustainability of the food systems – defining **sustainable food systems** as systems that “deliver food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised”<sup>10</sup> - and to design efficient policy solutions, there is the need to understand the connection between agriculture policies, nutrition, health, and the environmental impact of the food environments. To this purpose, policy making requires specific data and information that define the framework to regulate, so one of the main issues of concern for policy makers is how to measure the impact food systems have on society.

Academic literature offers several measures of food system sustainability,<sup>11</sup> and at the European level a multi-disciplinary team, that included also researchers from the JRC, has developed a **‘Food sustainability compass’** based on four interconnected, desired societal perspectives:<sup>12</sup> 1) Healthy, adequate, and safe diets for all; 2) Clean and healthy planet; 3) Economically thriving food systems supportive of the common good; 4) Just, ethical, and equitable food systems.

Each of these goals is characterized by four ‘areas of concern’ that encompass selected indicators to reflect regional environmental, social, health, and economic conditions and objectives. In this way, indicators can be used to compare policies against science-based targets, thus showing what progress is or is not made in transitioning to more sustainable food systems.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.fao.org/policy-support/policy-themes/sustainable-agribusiness-food-value-chains/en/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://scar-europe.org/images/ARCH/Documents/Global\\_implications\\_European\\_Food-Approach.pdf](https://scar-europe.org/images/ARCH/Documents/Global_implications_European_Food-Approach.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> The Lancet Commission, Volume 393, Issue 10173, P791-846, February 23, 2019. Available at [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)32822-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)32822-8)

<sup>9</sup> IPES, Too big to feed: exploring the impacts of mega-mergers, consolidation, and concentration of power in the agri-food sector. (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.fao.org/3/ca2079en/CA2079EN.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Béné, C., Prager, S.D., Achicanoy, H.A.E. et al. (2019), “Global map and indicators of food system sustainability”, *Sci Data*, 6, 279. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41597-019-0301-5>

<sup>12</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/science-update/food-system-sustainability-compass>

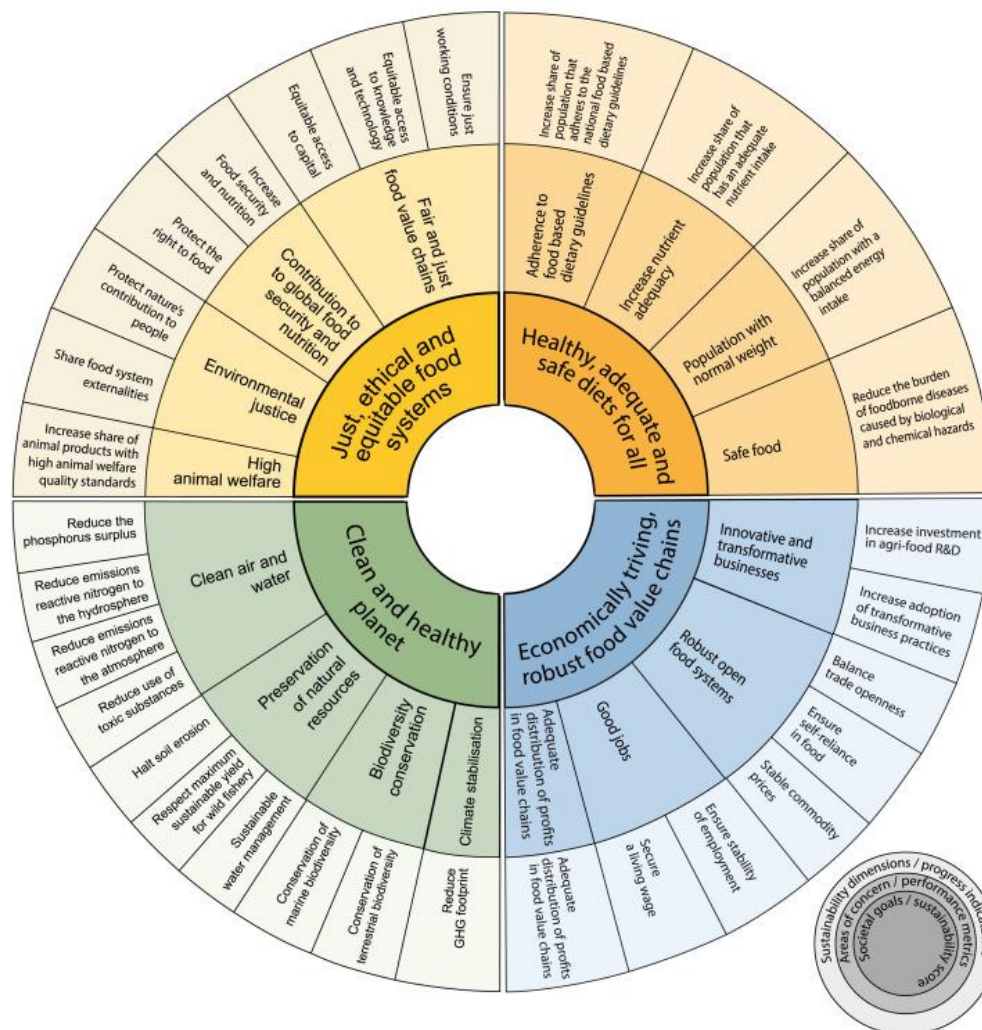


Figure 1 The Food Sustainability Compass<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Food sustainability indicators in the European legislative frameworks

At the European level, institutions acknowledge the relevance of food systems to develop sustainable environmental policies. This is demonstrated by the recent reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and by the launch of the '[Farm to Fork strategy](#)' as one of the main pillars of the [EU Green Deal](#). Moreover, the European Union is working on a horizontal framework law that aims to establish new foundations for future food policies by introducing sustainability objectives and principles on the basis of an integrated food system approach.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Aniek Hebinck, Monika Zurek, Thom Achterbosch, Björn Forkman, Anneleen Kuijsten, Marijke Kuiper, Birgit Nørrung, Pieter van 't Veer, Adrian Leip, "A Sustainability Compass for policy navigation to sustainable food systems, *Global Food Security*, Volume 29, 2021, 7.

<sup>14</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/>

However, despite continuous commitments to improve the sustainability of European food system, no major EU policy or strategy – as the **European Semester** (the framework for integrated surveillance and coordination of economic and employment policies across the European Union) - includes a dedicated and comprehensive indicator to measure how we are faring with regards to all the goals of the European’s food sustainability strategy.

The EU's ‘Farm to Fork strategy’ and several other European policy instruments, such as the [“Resilience Dashboard”](#), [“the Digital Economy and Society Index \(DESI\)”](#), [“the Circular Economy Indicator”](#), and the [‘Transition Performance Index’ \(TPI\)](#), include a few indicators related to food systems. Yet, all these policy instruments focus on a more generic ‘green dimension’, and neither the ‘Farm to Fork Strategy’<sup>15</sup> nor the other policy instruments set a specific and comprehensive framework dedicated to food system sustainability.

Therefore, given that legislation linked to the Common Agricultural Policy represents a significant part of the Acquis Communautaire, and that food systems are mayor players in the EU economy, accounting for 6% of the EU’s GDP, involving around 15 million businesses and 46 million workers and EU trade in food and drink represents 8% of the total EU international trade in goods,<sup>16</sup> the **European Semester could benefit from a set of indicators for food systems sustainability**.

A reference point for how this comprehensive indicator could function is represented by the Social Scoreboard of the [European Pillar of Social Rights \(EPSR\)](#). The EPSR represents European Commission commitment towards a fairer and more equal European Union, and its integration in the EU semester has had a significant impact, such that several institutions and organizations claimed that it has transformed the EU semester into a “European Social Semester”.<sup>17</sup> In this way, the EPSR Social Scoreboard has become a milestone for social rights in the EU, since it is a measure of how well the European Union is faring with regards to its social and equal opportunities commitments.

As for the EPSR Social Scoreboard, a comprehensive food system indicator (or a set of) could help in measuring how well the European Union is fairing regarding its goal to create a truly sustainable food system. This is necessary not only due to the importance of the food system *per se*, but also because sustainable food systems are fundamental to fulfil one of European Commission’s main goals, namely achieving UN SDGs.

### 3. SDGs, Food Systems and European Semester

Improving food system sustainability is essential to achieve all seventeen UN SDGs, but it is above all connected to zero hunger (SDG2), health and wellbeing (SDG3), climate action (SDG13), life below water (SDG 14), and life on land (SDG 15). A food system indicator can help to evaluate how countries are performing with regards to the commitment to achieve UN

<sup>15</sup> This strategy refers to specific indicators only in the case of pesticides and animal welfare.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652058/EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)652058\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652058/EPRS_BRI(2020)652058_EN.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.etui.org/sites/default/files/WP%202019.05%20European%20Social%20Semester%20Hacker%20Web%20version.pdf>

SDGs, while allowing comparisons among countries, and highlighting best practices and steering policy-making towards sustainable policies.

The European Commission made a specific commitment to provide fully updated and consistent SDG reporting across Member States, which is well represented by the yearly SDG monitoring report.<sup>18</sup> In this report, each European Semester country report includes a dedicated section discussing the country's status, compared to the EU average, and progress in each SDG area.<sup>19</sup> Yet, [current SDGs indicators](#) include only partial references to the food system, so SDG monitoring would benefit from the addition of a set of indicators related to the whole food system such as the *Food sustainability compass*.

## 4. Conclusion

In sum, this advocacy paper aims to underline three main points:

- I. As the EPSR has moved the European Commission towards a “Social Semester”, so there is the case for integrating a Food System Sustainability Indicator (or a set of) in the context of the Greening of the European Semester and now in the Recovery and Resilience Plans and Facility Scoreboard.
- II. A Food Sustainability Indicator would strengthen even further the EU commitment to achieving UN SDGs and to create a more sustainable European food system, thereby contributing to *Farm to Fork* and *Green Deal* goal to build a healthier and more environmentally friendly Europe. This indicator could also lead to significant economic and social benefits by reducing the burden NCDs have on the European health system. In this way, it would benefit both the implementation and review process of the European Semester and the willingness of Member States to improve the sustainability of the national context.
- III. As part of their work on the Joint Action Best-ReMaP coordinated by Slovenia, WP4 lead by the Italian Institute of Health (ISS) and EuroHealthNet, a European Partnership for Health Equity and Wellbeing, will gather partners' feedback and continue its advocacy meeting to develop further this project to explore the benefits for both Best-ReMaP partners and for the policy debate on food system sustainability at the European level.

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<sup>18</sup> Eurostat, “Sustainable development in the European Union, Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context”, June 2021 edition.

<sup>19</sup> The SDG country overviews compiled by Eurostat track Member States' position and evolution towards the achievement of the SDGs compared to the EU average, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/infographs/sdg-country-overview/>