I

(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

OPINIONS

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

579TH PLENARY SESSION OF THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE, 14.6.2023-15.6.2023

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee: 'Towards a European Food Policy Council as a new governance model in the future EU framework on Sustainable Food Systems'

(own-initiative opinion)

(2023/C 293/01)

Rapporteur: **Piroska KÁLLAY**

Plenary Assembly decision	25.1.2023
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	Own-initiative opinion
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(for/against/abstentions)	179/1/2

1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

1.1. The EU food system is at a crossroads, facing a polycrisis that includes various interrelated environmental, climate, health and social challenges. Given the urgency of the food system crisis and the need for rapid behavioural change, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) believes that its call for the creation of a 'European Food Policy Council' (EFPC) is more timely than ever.

1.2. The EESC considers that an EFPC would help achieve a more integrated and participatory approach to food policymaking, would accelerate the alignment of policies at EU, national and local levels and, most importantly, would increase the quality and legitimacy of EU food policy. This would also contribute to fostering more sustainable and balanced rural and urban development.

1.3. The EESC welcomes the announcement of an EU framework for sustainable food systems (FSFS), which will lay the foundations for the systemic changes that need to be made by all stakeholders across the value chain; highlights that the framework should be proposed without delay by the current Commission to address the challenges of food systems in a timely manner — any delay would risk the success of the Farm to Fork strategy; calls on the Commission to commit to the structured engagement of stakeholders and civil society in the new governance of this FSFS, and points out that the idea of an EFPC would adequately fit into it.

1.4. The EESC notes the existence of food-related platforms at local, regional and national levels, but believes that these existing forums are not sufficient to effectively achieve a sustainable and just food system and resilience preparedness at EU level. The EESC therefore considers that food democracy needs to be strengthened further and embedded in the food policy process.

1.5. The EESC sees the European Food Policy Council as a science-based, multi-stakeholder and multi-level platform and as an institutional, independent structure, with the following potential composition:

— academic experts and scientists,

— food supply chain actors (farmers, food businesses and processors, retailers, trade unions, etc.), education system actors and civil society organisations (anti-poverty networks, food banks, social platforms, environmental and development NGOs); youth representatives. The social partners' participation in the EFPC is also highly recommended to reflect on the needed changes in the labour market,

— institutional representatives (Parliament, Council, Commission, EESC, European Committee of the Regions (CoR).

After the initial phase, the EFPC should also include representatives from local, regional and national levels and food policy councils, ensuring organised connectivity between relevant levels and the right to equal participation of Member States' representatives at EU level. At the moment, national food policy councils are not widespread enough to ensure that all countries are equally represented.

1.6. The EFPC would have to be a trusted and transparent structure and contribute to the food issues identified as challenges in the UN 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, the EFPC should:

1.6.1. be an institutional body to which the EU institutions should be committed and ensure political buy-in;

1.6.2. be a constant source of sound advice and evidence-based policy options and recommendations about the direction of the EU food system, to which the EU institutions should be bound to provide feedback and reasoned answers;

1.6.3. improve coherence between policy areas (such as the common agricultural policy, the common fisheries policy, the right to food, legislation related to healthy diets, public procurement, education policies, etc.) and promote social innovations towards the wellbeing of all food chain actors, taking into account the need for the generational renewal of farmers. In particular, the EESC considers it important to establish priority content on food in the education system, involving both the agri-food sector and the relevant education authorities;

1.6.4. eventually provide for a network of food policy councils (FPCs) at EU level, creating a platform of exchanges of best practices and insights to inform and influence EU policy.

1.7. The EESC stands prepared to provide a convening space for the European Food Policy Council. A successful example already exists with the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, a joint initiative by the EESC and the Commission.

2. **Background**

2.1. Our food systems are facing a polycrisis that consists of various interrelated challenges including [1]: environmental (greenhouse gas emissions linked to how we produce, process and consume our food, loss of biodiversity, depletion of fish stocks, loss of soil organic matter and soil erosion, among others), health (increase of diet-related diseases), disappearance of farms, lack of access to sustainable and healthy food and poor labour conditions. At the same time, food systems are already suffering under the pressure of multiple climate shocks, changing weather patterns, ecosystem collapse and degradation of land, soils and waterways. Lastly, debates about food systems are increasingly subject to misleading information and communication.

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[1] Transforming Europe's food system — Assessing the EU policy mix — European Environment Agency (europa.eu) and Prof. De Schutter, presentation at the EESC on 14 April 2023.

2.2. The European Commission is currently drawing up a new EU framework for sustainable food systems (FSFS), which was provided for in the Farm to Fork Strategy and is due for publication by the end of 2023. The framework will lay the foundations for the systemic changes that need to be made by all stakeholders in the food system, including policymakers, business operators and consumers, in order to accelerate the transition to a sustainable EU food system. The framework will also provide a foundation for the future governance model for food systems and will contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which requires cooperative, comprehensive solutions involving various departments, ministries, sectors and the whole food supply chain. The EESC calls for the urgent adoption of the FSFS to address the challenges of food systems in a timely manner — any delay would risk the success of the Farm to Fork strategy. The framework should include time-bound objectives, indicators that allow for measuring progress, and corrective mechanisms to be taken if the targets are missed.

2.3. In order to foster a food system transition towards more sustainable outcomes, previous EESC opinions ([2]), as well as other experts and civil society organisations, have increasingly pointed to the need to strengthen food democracy. Given the urgency of the food system crisis ([3]), undoubtedly also caused by the war in Ukraine, and the need for rapid behavioural change, there is little time to lose in fostering more effective and legitimate governance arrangements. It is believed that, by increasing the participation of the general public and food system stakeholders, democratic innovations, such as FPCs, will promote the quality and legitimacy of food policymaking ([4]).

2.4. FPCs are defined as community-based coalitions of diverse stakeholders who work together to address food-related issues in a particular geographical region ([5]). The accuracy of the qualifier 'policy' has been called into question as some of these councils, food coalitions or committees wish to avoid being perceived as political, whereas others focus on programmes as well as policy. These organisations aspiring to inclusiveness and democratic principles involve stakeholders from across the food system, bringing together individuals, local governments, non-profit organisations and representatives of various economic sectors — agriculture, healthcare and education — to collaborate on food policy initiatives that promote access to healthy, affordable and sustainable food for all members of the community where they are established.

2.5. The first FPCs appeared in the United States in the 1980s ([6]) and they have been growing in number and becoming more diverse ever since. Although Europe has been a latecomer to the FPC movement, over the past decade, FPCs have been emerging rapidly across Europe ([7]). According to the academic literature, the creation of FPCs in Europe really took off with the ratification in 2015 of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP), an international agreement on urban food policies signed by more than 260 cities worldwide, which has supported the founding of FPCs in several European cities/regions. FPCs have also emerged in rural or sub-urban regions, without being directly linked to a city ([8]).

2.6. FPCs usually operate at regional and/or local level, although there are some FPCs at state/provincial and national level. They are often a way to reconnect cities to food production in the surrounding regions and ensure effective governance of local and regional food policies, but they can also be relevant to non-urban communities. They can be interpreted as networks that connect the objective of sustainability with the goals of democracy and good governance by

([2]) Among others: Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Civil society's contribution to the development of a comprehensive food policy in the EU' (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C 129, 11.4.2018, p. 18) and Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — A From Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system' (COM(2020) 381) (OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 268).

([3]) See the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports: www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/

([4]) *Power to the people? Food democracy initiatives' contributions to democratic goods*, Jeroen J. L. Candel, May 2022.

([5]) See definitions in the following academic articles: Opportunities and challenges of food policy councils in pursuit of food system sustainability and food democracy–a comparative case study from the Upper-Rhine region (Mooney, 2022) and Food Policy Councils: Lessons learned (Harper et al., 2009).

([6]) The first US Food Policy Council was established in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1982.

([7]) Examples of European FPCs or similar urban food initiatives can be seen in Horizon2020 and Horizon Europe projects that focus on agri-food policies and tools to improve food systems such as Cities2030, FoodSHIFT 2030, FoodCLIC, FEAST and FOOD TRAILS.

([8]) Franzen-Castle, L. *et al.* Engaging Rural Community Members with Food Policy Councils to Improve Food Access: Facilitators and Barriers. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* 17, 207–223 (2022).

initiating participatory, collaborative and deliberative processes among farmers, food entrepreneurs, consumers and others. Major examples in the European Union include the Catalonian FPC ([9]) (created in 2017), with a managing body composed of 33 members, including regional and local authorities, key players of the food chain, people from rural areas (but looking at enlargement with five new members representing, among others, the ministries for education, culture and equality and feminism) and working with 42 towns, and the Network of Food Policy Councils (2016) that brings together 30 local FPCs based on bottom-up approaches (mostly from Germany) and 40 founding initiatives.

2.7. Examples of national FPCs are more limited in the EU. In France, the National Food Council (CNA ([10])) is an independent advisory body to ministers that is consulted on food policy developments and issues opinions to inform both public decisions and the various stakeholders in the food chain on topics such as food quality, consumer information, nutrition, health security, access to food and crisis prevention. Terres en ville, the French network for stakeholders in urban agricultural and food policy ([11]), established in 2000, brings together French cities and chambers of agriculture ([12]) with shared goals, to co-construct metropolitan agricultural and food policies between local elected officials and professionals. These territorial food projects are financed and driven by public authorities, which sometimes leads to tensions with other institutional levels. The experience shows the lack of involvement of citizens in the design of food policies (at local and national level). In Portugal, a National Council of Food Security and Nutrition (CONSANP) was established in 2018 ([13]). In Luxembourg, the creation of a multi-stakeholder organism called the National Food Policy Council was planned in Luxembourg's 2018-2023 Coalition Agreement ([14]) but has not yet been officially settled. In the Netherlands, a citizen summit on the future of agriculture has been in the making, but has so far received no backing/funding from political decision-makers ([15]).

2.8. The Nordic Food Policy Lab created by and for the Nordic Council of Ministers ([16]) is also worth mentioning, with the goal to 'help address the food issues identified as challenges in the UN Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals'.

2.9. In its opinions ([17]), the EESC has called for the creation of a 'European Food Policy Council' that would help achieve a more integrated and participatory approach to food policymaking, would accelerate the alignment of policies at EU, national and local levels, would provide a platform for stakeholders to learn from each other through the sharing of good practices, and would ensure that all points of view from the various sectors are taken into account.

2.10. This own-initiative opinion aims to provide concrete ideas for the governance of food systems and meaningful and structured civil society engagement, including of young people, in the development, monitoring and implementation of food policies. The opinion also looks at how to involve the authorities responsible for education and the civil society representatives of schools and pupils' parents in order to foster the early education of future generations on sustainable and healthy food, based on recent work on youth education ([18]) and on the EU school scheme ([19]).

3. **Lessons learned from existing FPCs at local and national level**

3.1. Existing FPCs show a patchwork of organisations with a variety of legal and organisational forms and structures, missions, objectives and activities that are tailored to the needs and priorities of the urban community they serve, ranging from non-profit organisations through hybrid forms to (local) government bodies. They have different participatory approaches and methodologies for developing and transforming urban food systems.

([9]) Consell Català de l'Alimentació.
([10]) Le CNA: www.cna-alimentation.fr/
([11]) Terres en villes: www.terresenvilles.org/
([12]) Montpellier, Rouen, Voiron, Le Havre, Artois (Béthune, Bruay-en-Artois), Douai, Angers, Rennes, Saint-Nazaire, Nantes, Lorient, Toulouse, Grenoble, Saint-Étienne, Lyon, Besançon, Dijon, Nancy, Metz, Amiens, Lille, Auxerre, Poitiers (2022).
([13]) Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional entra em funcionamento.
([14]) Food Policy Council: https://food.uni.lu/projects/research-projects/food-policy-council/
([15]) https://g1000landbouw.nl/
([16]) Nordic Food Policy Lab: www.norden.org/en/nordic-food-policy-lab
([17]) Among others: OJ C 129, 11.4.2018, p. 18 and OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 268.
([18]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Empowering youth to achieve sustainable development through education' (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C 100, 16.3.2023, p. 38).
([19]) EESC information report on Evaluation of the EU school scheme.

3.2. A common goal seems to prevail across all these organisations, namely the need to build a sustainable, healthier, transparent and fairer food system for all. Other objectives of regional and local FPCs include achieving food sovereignty, developing shorter and local food supply chains, reducing food waste, putting in place community gardens, connecting cities and rural areas, developing local food markets, promoting urban agriculture and fostering a vibrant food culture.

3.3. To achieve this goal, these organisations engage in a wide range of activities that do not always involve policy development, policy advice or policy change. Most FPCs arise from bottom-up approaches and support networking, advocacy, education, awareness-raising and project development. Others are policy-driven, like in France.

3.4. Community-based FPCs aim to make 'food democracy' a procedural guiding principle. Organisational structures for coordination, advice, and so on allow different stakeholders to engage in leadership, assistance, partnerships and other self-governing roles. Membership in FPCs is most often open to anyone with an interest in sustainable food system issues and willing to abide by democratic principles. Outside of regular membership, FPCs often build institutional partnerships with government agencies, businesses and civil society organisations that are active in transforming current food systems towards sustainability; these partnerships are also based on democratic practices, including collective control and decision-making. Last but not least, FPCs partner with the (local) government, as a major manifestation of democratic governance.

3.5. From FPCs' point of view, food system sustainability is the overarching goal, working on strategic (general) goals such as supporting resilient food systems, increasing access to and knowledge of healthy and sustainable diets, fighting food waste using circular economy, supporting economic development, promoting equity in the food system, promoting environmental sustainability, and increasing knowledge of and demand for healthy food.

3.6. Two types of legal forms are dominant in European FPCs: associations and non-profit organisations, bottom-up structures created by civil society and top-down structures established by the local municipal authorities. Besides citizens, most FPCs bring together a wide variety of members, including private businesses, public administrations and stakeholders in the food, health and education sectors. They also bring together a broad representation of social groups from the local community.

3.7. Funding and financing of FPCs vary significantly. Some FPCs have paid staff and/or (large) funded programmes and projects, others rely completely on contributions and volunteers. Funding sources vary from annual government support to membership fees, research or other grants, private foundation support and donations. Fundraising activities, members' contributions, donations and public subsidies/grants are the main funding sources for FPCs established as non-profit organisations or associations, while FPCs founded by municipal authorities mostly rely on an annual budget from the city council.

3.8. There are also potential pitfalls: research shows that FPCs may also have downsides and/or may not always function optimally ([20]), e.g. if the most vulnerable groups are underrepresented or if vested interests have a large influence. Another important challenge is that the quality of deliberation is conditional on equal participation, good process facilitation and a focus on knowledge/values rather than interests. The EESC therefore stresses the need for real inclusiveness and quality deliberations in FPCs, which requires going beyond open membership in ensuring genuine representativity, in particular of traditionally under-represented groups in society.

3.9. The EESC further believes that FPCs should engage with young generations, including through education. Sustainable food systems education should be prioritised in future generations, focusing on knowledge of sustainable and healthy diets, of the production chain from the beginning to the end to identify who and how it is produced and explain what is the distribution that takes place in our food system, from the farmer or livestock breeders, until the final product is

([20]) Power to the people? Food democracy initiatives' contributions to democratic goods.

consumed by the citizen. The EESC therefore recommends involving the competent education authorities in FPCs, which, in coordination with the agri-food sector, can establish the priority food content for the education system. Moreover, education of children should be supported by lifelong learning for parents and citizens' education ([21]).

4. **Call for a European Food Policy Council**

4.1. The bottom-up tradition of FPCs has been rich but has not been able to influence progress and resilience at European level. Governance reform of food systems is inevitable and must be undertaken in a way that restores democracy and accountability to food systems. The future FSFS requires careful steering, ensuring coordinated change across sectors. It is by increasing accountability and participation that the veto of incumbents with little interest in change can be most effectively circumvented, and the impacts of a really comprehensive food policy can be regularly assessed, revised and improved. This is why the EESC believes that the establishment of a European Food Policy Council will be such a crucial step towards fulfilling a comprehensive food policy vision ([22]).

4.2. A European Food Policy Council should:

4.2.1. be science-based and ensure a scientific advice mechanism; be a trusted and trustworthy source of research and scientific advice;

4.2.2. have the following composition:

— academic experts and scientists (within the EFPC or as an advisory board);

— food supply chain actors (farmers, food businesses and processors, retailers, trade-unions, etc.), education system actors and civil society organisations (anti-poverty networks, food banks, social platforms, environmental and development NGOs); youth representatives; social partners;

— institutional representatives (Parliament, Council, Commission, EESC, CoR);

4.2.3. after the initial phase, the EFPC should also include representatives from local, regional and national levels and food policy councils with organised connectivity between relevant levels. At the moment, national food policy councils are not widespread enough to ensure that all countries are equally represented;

4.2.4. be an institutional body to which the EU institutions should be committed and ensure political buy-in: an independent, authoritative body for long-term planning, a non-departmental body, to be trusted (flagship body), with the aim of helping to face the food future towards sustainable food systems and act as leverage;

4.2.5. be a constant source of sound advice and evidence-based policy options and recommendations about the direction of the EU food system to which the EU institutions should be bound to provide feedback and reasoned answers. It should explore options for how to meet and monitor existing EU commitments, also assessing national food policy plans, and translate these into policy terms which provide social progress through food. It should finally engage in discussion on the functioning of global food systems;

4.2.6. improve the coherence between policy areas (such as the common agricultural policy, the common fisheries policy, the right to food, legislation related to healthy diets, public procurement, education policies, etc.) and promote social innovations towards the wellbeing of all food chain actors, taking into account the need for the generational renewal of farmers;

([21]) OJ C 100, 16.3.2023, p. 38.
([22]) IPES food report: CFP_FullReport.pdf (ipes-food.org), and De Schutter, O., Jacobs, N. and Clément, C., 2020, 'A "Common Food Policy" for Europe: How governance reforms can spark a shift to healthy diets and sustainable food systems', *Food Policy 96*.

4.2.7. in relation to FPCs, support (financially and structurally) and foster bottom-up approaches towards sustainable local/regional/national food systems, combatting the rural/urban divide and polarisation between producers and consumers by supporting civil dialogue (including representatives of youth, the vulnerable and marginalised groups of society, rural actors, social partners), enable systematic development of FPCs, fostering synergies between local authorities and civil society;

4.2.8. eventually provide for a network of FPCs at EU level, creating a platform of exchanges of best practices and insights to inform and influence EU policy;

4.2.9. provide synergies with other existing EU platforms such as the EU Food Policy Coalition ([23]), the Food Waste Platform ([24]), the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP) ([25]) and the EU Rural Pact ([26]).

4.3. The EESC stands ready to provide a convening space for the European Food Policy Council. A successful example already exists with the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, a joint initiative by the EESC and the Commission ([27]).

Brussels, 14 June 2023.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE

([23]) EU Food Policy Coalition.
([24]) EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste.
([25]) European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform.
([26]) The rural pact. https://rural-vision.europa.eu/rural-pact_en
([27]) European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform.