C/2024/6878

28.11.2024

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

A just transition to ensure a sustainable future for EU agri-food systems

(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2024/6878)

Rapporteur: **Kerli ATS**

Co-rapporteur: **Florian MARIN**

Advisor	Tomaso FERRANDO (for the rapporteur)
Plenary Assembly decision	18.1.2024
Legal basis	Rule 52(2) of the Rules of Procedure
Section responsible	Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment
Adopted in section	3.9.2024
Adopted at plenary session	19.9.2024
Plenary session No	590
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	136/0/9

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EESC considers that the just transition of agri-food systems must address social, environmental and economic aspects coherently, adopting a holistic, coordinated and integrated approach. The just transition should be based on the principles of distributive justice, recognition, participation, environmental and climate ambition, human rights, and 'leaving no one behind'.

1.2. The EESC considers that integrated public policies are needed to ensure that all stakeholders, including small-scale farmers, fishers and food workers, are at the heart of the just transition. The principles of social and ecological justice must guide the development of sustainable food systems, ensuring a fair distribution of costs, resources and benefits, and supporting the right to food and nutrition.

1.3. The EESC proposes that participatory justice be integrated across all aspects of the just transition of agri-food systems. This integration should ensure balanced information and consultation processes that consider the realities of vulnerable actors throughout agri-food product chains. It should also emphasise the availability of information, transparency, education, and reskilling and upskilling, and aim to build capacity at all levels of food systems for all stakeholders.

1.4. The EESC proposes that the just transition should cover the protection, respect and fulfilment of all workers' rights, including by strengthening and supporting social conditionality mechanisms such as the one contained in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), but also by making sure that farmers generate a living income so they can also provide a living income to their workers.

1.5. To tackle the urgent need for a structural transformation of the EU's food systems, the EESC recommends:

— adopting a systemic approach to EU food systems law and governance that goes beyond agricultural production and adheres to the principles of justice discussed below;

— working towards the introduction of living incomes and living wages right across the EU, as well as along non-EU food chains that feed the EU, and promoting, in accordance with Member State and sub-national authorities, forms of financial support and price stabilisation that guarantee accessibility and the right to food for citizen-consumers;

— implementing policies that facilitate access to land for new generations of farmers and small-scale producers, reversing land concentration by promoting equitable land distribution, and aligning land policies with the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines on Land Tenure ([1]);

— addressing the inequities within the CAP as crucial for ensuring a just transition, ensuring that all Member States receive equitable support so as to ensure a level playing-field in the EU's agricultural sector;

— introduce regulations to limit speculation and financialisation in food systems, promoting transparency in food commodity markets and establishing financial instruments that support sustainable practices all along the food systems;

— investing in the research and development of sustainable practices and technologies, while recognising the implications in terms of distribution and recognition of long-standing forms of production, distribution and consumption, promoting innovation in practice, and providing training and resources to farmers, food sector entrepreneurs, and food-sector workers to support the adoption of sustainable practices;

— adopting more ambitious and mandatory standards for sustainable and fair food procurement, and using EU public purchases and food programmes as tools to support the just transition towards socially, economically and environmentally sustainable food systems;

— recognising the importance of reproductive and care labour across the whole food system, and the centrality of women and young people in current and future agri-food systems;

— supporting practices that promote biodiversity and the conservation of natural resources, and implementing policies that encourage the integration of ecosystem services into agri-food systems;

— establishing an Agri-food Just Transition Fund to support small and medium-sized agri-food enterprises, as well as a Just Food Transition Observatory, as part of the proposal for the establishment of a Just Transition Observatory ([2]).

— integrating a global perspective to the EU's just transition in agri-food systems that aligns local, regional, international and global governance engagements with human rights, environmental and climate objectives, and the principles of justice and sustainability in global food systems;

— developing public awareness campaigns to promote the consumption of local, healthy and sustainably produced food, and implementing educational programmes in schools to teach children about the importance of sustainable food systems and healthy eating habits.

([1]) https://www.fao.org/tenure/voluntary-guidelines/en/.

([2]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Advancing the EU's just transition policy framework: what measures are necessary?' (OJ C, C/2024/1576, 5.3.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1576/oj).

2. **The need for a holistic and just transition for EU agri-food systems**

2.1. EU food systems are at the crossroads between the many challenges that the region is facing. Loss of jobs due to changing patterns and geographies of production, the impoverishment of families, hyperinflation, the reallocation of public expenditure ([3]) away from social services towards the military and defence ([4]), the increase in non-communicable diseases linked to the lower cost of unhealthy diets ([5]), climate change and extreme weather events, the move towards low-carbon economies ([6]), and biodiversity loss are just a few of the social, environmental and economic issues that intersect with food systems and in some cases are directly linked to the way in which they operate and are structured.

2.2. While the EU food supply chain has demonstrated considerable resilience, maintaining access to food across the region even under such challenging conditions as the COVID-19 pandemic, the commodity and energy price crisis, geopolitical tensions, and climate crises, these events have also highlighted significant vulnerabilities.

2.3. The EESC welcomes the ongoing efforts towards including food system considerations in both European and global discussions, underscoring the significance of a comprehensive approach to people, animals and ecosystems. However, the EESC takes note of the suspension of the legislative process relating to the Framework Law on Sustainable Food Systems ([7]), and calls on the future Commission to relaunch the debate according to the principles discussed in this opinion.

2.4. Furthermore, the EESC recognises the need for an urgent and structural transformation of the EU's agricultural and food systems that goes beyond what is currently being done, and that is aligned with international and European obligations in terms of the environment, the climate, and the social contract. The EESC proposes to lay the foundations for EU agri-food systems that operate within planetary and social boundaries ([8]) and that are capable of delivering for the people, for the planet and for future generations.

2.5. The EESC recognises that farmers, fishers, food workers, and SMEs represent the backbone of EU food systems, and they often find themselves in challenging positions because of the increasing inequality within their sectors ([9]), the way in which public policies tend to have regressive impacts that affect smaller players the most, and because of the lower prices and the exposure to global competition that has increased fragilities, fears and anger. In the agricultural sector, this has led to an increase in mental health challenges in diverse rural EU regions, with several studies highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive mental health support ([10]).

2.6. The just transition should therefore be rooted in the protection, respect and fulfilment of all workers' rights. This includes strengthening and improving the social conditionality mechanisms as for example contained in the CAP, and supporting its implementation by Member States. Additionally, it is crucial that farmers receive adequate prices for their products, enabling them in turn to pay their workers an adequate wage. Furthermore, migration policies and regulations must be designed so as to prevent criminal organisations from exploiting human beings and to ensure that producers to not reduce production costs at the expense of workers' rights ([11]).

([3]) https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/eurogroup-says-new-fiscal-rules-will-require-public-spending-cuts/.
([4]) https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2023/11/30/record-high-european-defence-spending-boosted-by-procurement-of-new-equipment.
([5]) Orhan R., Paric M., and Czabanowska K., Lessons Learnt from the EU Response to NCDs: A Content Analysis on Building Resilient Post-COVID Health Systems. Healthcare (Basel) 2021.
([6]) Opinion to the European Economic and Social Committee – Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Securing our future Europe's 2040 climate target and the path to climate neutrality by 2050 building a sustainable, just and prosperous society (COM(2024) 63 final) (OJ C, C/2024/4667, 9.8.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/4667/oj).
([7]) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/spotlight-JD%2023-24/file-sustainable-eu-food-system.
([8]) Raworth, R., *Doughnut Economics.*
([9]) Piketty, T., Les paysans apparaissent comme la plus inégale des professions en France actuellement, Le Monde.
([10]) EU CAP Network, Thematic Group on Supporting the Mental Health of Farmers and Farming Communities.
([11]) Human suffering in Italy's Agricultural Value Chain 3–4, 2018.

2.7. Moreover, the EESC recognises the fact that a vision for a sustainable future must systemically look at the entirety of our food systems, at the way in which they are socially, environmentally and economically constructed, and at their implications. Integrated public policies and cross-sectorial interventions should therefore ensure that farmers, fishers, food workers, and SMEs are at the centre, but should always be embedded in the context of the broader food systems of which they are part, along with other commercial actors, consumers, animals and ecological processes.

2.8. The EESC considers it key to identify clear guiding principles that can support all food system actors, policy-makers and civil society organisations in building a sustainable future for EU agri-food systems. The EESC recognises the importance of implementing a dedicated just transition pathway for EU agri-food systems that is inspired by the principles of social and ecological justice and informed by the vocabulary and obligations enshrined in international human rights law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU ([12]).

2.9. A just transition pathway requires that policy-makers address social and environmental aspects contextually, that they adopt coherent policies across all areas of policy, and that they address structural issues that may impede the consolidation of sustainable food systems.

2.10. The EESC asserts that a holistic, coordinated and integrated policy approach towards a just transition for EU agri-food systems should be based on the principles of distribution, recognition, participation, environmental and climate ambition, cosmopolitan justice, demographic challenges (such as ageing population and labour shortages), coherence, and human rights, in particular the right to food and nutrition.

3. **Distributive justice**

3.1. The EESC considers that the application of the principle of distributive justice to the agri-food transition means introducing public policies and measures that address current and future inequities and inequalities throughout food systems, while at the same time strengthening labour rights, guaranteeing healthy and accessible diets for all, enhancing innovation and competitiveness of the operators and promoting animal welfare. At the core of the principle is the recognition that the transition will inevitably require resources, but that these should be obtained by implementing progressive measures, and that the costs and benefits arising from future policies and political decisions should be distributed equitably.

3.2. The EESC recognises the importance of the EU steering Member States in the implementation of adequate policies that can revert the intensification of land concentration ([13]) and that provide access to land for new generations of farmers and small-scale producers. The EESC supports the European Parliament, which, in a self-initiated report from 2017, affirmed the fundamental right to access land and advocated for the alignment of European land policies with the Voluntary Guidelines for Responsible Governance of Land Tenure, as outlined by the Committee on World Food Security.

3.3. Public support must go hand in hand with the recognition of the fact that resources are available within EU food systems, but that they are unevenly and unequally distributed. From farm to fork, control and financial extraction ([14]) by multinational food corporations and the global financial sector have significant impacts on supply chains, diverting substantial profits away from primary producers and workers all along the chain, and promoting food systems that prioritise financial returns over respect for both planetary and human boundaries. This leaves small and medium-sized farmers and food workers with minimal returns, but has also an impact on prices and exacerbates the issue of food accessibility, especially among those people who are the pillars of EU food systems ([15]).

([12]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Advancing the EU's just transition policy framework: what measures are necessary?' (OJ C, C/2024/1576, 5.3.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1576/oj); Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'The transition towards a more sustainable European future — a strategy for 2050' (OJ C 81, 2.3.2018, p. 44) and Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Leaving no one behind when implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (OJ C 47, 11.2.2020, p. 30).

([13]) According to EUROSTAT, land concentration in the EU is changing as 'the number of farms in the EU decreased by about 37 % in the relatively short period between 2005 and 2020. This corresponded to the loss of 5.3 million farms across the Member States, the vast majority of which (about 87 %) were small farms of a size under 5 ha'.

([14]) Privatisation of the value produced within the food sector.

([15]) Part of the just transition should be that of providing more transparency and information with regard to the structure of EU food systems. A 2021 paper by the OECD on 'Concentration and market power in the food chain' uses the 2014 study by the European Commission, Tackling Unfair Trading Practices in the Business-to-Business Food Supply Chain, COM(2014) 472 final.

3.4. The EESC calls on the EU institutions and the Member States to embrace the principles of distributive justice, in order first of all to address speculation and financialisation as key ways in which resources are extracted from food systems to the detriment of consumers, producers, workers, and environmental sustainability ([16]). The EU and its Member States should find a solution to address speculative practices on food commodities and other forms of financialisation and investment practices carried out by EU actors that are not aligned with EU principles, human rights, and the international obligations of the EU and its Member States. Moreover, the EU should strengthen and promote direct market access initiatives, such as support for agricultural cooperatives and direct-to-consumers sales, to help farmers achieve a living income ([17]) and reduce intermediary costs.

3.5. The EESC believes that addressing the inequities within the CAP is crucial in order to ensure a just transition. It is important to ensure that all Member States receive equitable support in order to ensure a level playing-field in the EU's agricultural sector.

3.6. Attention must be paid to the high levels of concentration within EU food systems, which results in uneven bargaining power and un unequal distribution of resources. The risk is that policy decisions, such as the new guidelines on horizontal agreements, may favour coordination among oligopolistic enterprises rather than addressing current concentration issues. Concentration at the level of agricultural inputs, genomic material, land, processing and distribution should be a priority for the European Commission.

3.7. For example, the global fertiliser market, worth USD 200 billion, is dominated by a few companies that control over 30 % of nitrogen fertiliser production. Their market power allows them to influence prices and increase profits by passing on rising costs to consumers. Beyond Europe, in 2021 and 2022 the G20 countries spent USD 21,8 billion more on fertiliser imports than in 2020, while the leading fertiliser companies are projected to earn profits close to USD 84 billion in the same timeframe ([18]). This scenario, like the concentration at the level of seeds and agricultural technologies, highlights the urgent need for EU public policies to promote a reduction of farmers' dependence on these inputs and for adequate public financial support in shifting to more sustainable forms of production ([19]).

EU institutions have long recognised that concentration of power between farm and fork plays a role in the unequal distribution of the economic value that is produced within food systems and the marginalisation of primary producers ([20]). According to the European Commission, 'if over 95 % of the actors in the food industry and retail sectors are micro or small enterprises, a small number of large companies acting as buyers are predominant on the market.' ([21]) A more detailed 2021 study by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre on Market Power in Food Industry in Selected Member States ([22]) stresses the tension between the fact that 'smaller firms dominate the manufacturing, wholesale and retail sectors in terms of their share of the total number of firms' but 'large firms dominate each of the three sectors in terms of their share of the total turnover.' ([23]) According to EU documents and the inputs from within the EESC, manufacturing and wholesale appear to deserve particular attention, given their level of concentration. This can have implications on the whole food chain and the distribution of revenues and opportunities, as firms abusing their dominant position in the market may affect not only the price and quantity of goods traded but also different aspects of contractual terms governing their relationship.

([16]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Food price crisis: the role of speculation and concrete proposals for action in the aftermath of the Ukraine war' (OJ C 100, 16.3.2023, p. 51).
([17]) https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/04/ilo-living-wage-explained/.
([18]) Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Fertiliser Crisis Cost G20 Almost USD 22 Billion While Fertiliser Companies Set to Make a USD 84 Billion in Profits.
([19]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Food security and sustainable food systems (OJ C 194, 12.5.2022, p. 72).
([20]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Food security and sustainable food systems (OJ C 194, 12.5.2022, p. 72).
([21]) EU Commission, Commission delivers report on the implementation of EU rules against unfair trading practices in the food supply chain, 23 April 2024, https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-delivers-report-implementation-eu-rules-against-unfair-trading-practices-food-supply-2024-04-23_en.
([22]) Kjersti Nes, Liesbeth Colen and Pavel Ciaian, Market Power in Food Industry in Selected Member States, European Union: JRC, 2021.
([23]) Kjersti Nes, Liesbeth Colen and Pavel Ciaian, Market Power in Food Industry in Selected Member States, European Union: JRC, 2021.

3.8. Distributive justice would mean that the cost of the transition are borne by those who have most benefitted and that have the most resources. Similar to the energy sector, the just food transition in agri-food systems should be supported by a public fund; however, this should be financed by taxes collected from extra profits on food sales, speculative practices, and the compensation for social and environmental externalities ([24]). This should be dedicated to small and medium-sized farmers, supporting production and distribution capacity, the exchange of farmer-based knowledge and innovation; supporting adequate and dignified working conditions, as well as social protection; and achieving the EU's environmental and climate goals.

3.9. Addressing excessive concentration and power imbalances must be key objectives of a just transition. This can be achieved by EU and national authorities by strengthening the way in which MSs implement the Unfair Trading Practices Directive (UTP), favouring the circulation of best legislative practices among MSs ([25]), tackling superior bargaining power via competition law practices ([26]), and adapting EU and national public procurement rules. Public procurement should be used as a policy tool to pursue multiple environmental, health and socio-economic objectives ([27]) that align with the principles of the just transition and the creation of sustainable food systems. In this context, distributive justice would require particular attention to be paid to the use of public procurement to facilitate the access of smaller producers and producers that adopt the highest standards in terms of ecological, labour and animal practices.

3.10. Distributional justice requires public administrations to become active participants in local food systems to guarantee that public canteens provide healthy, nutritious, culturally adequate, and zero-waste meals, and to ensure that these services, especially when it comes to public school canteens, are universally accessible and adequately financed. The EESC calls on the EU to speed up the adoption of more ambitious and mandatory standards for sustainable and fair food procurement as discussed in the preparation of the Framework Law on Sustainable Food Systems. It also highlights that public school canteens operate at the crossroads between the right to education, the right to food, and the just transition towards sustainable food systems ([28]). For this reason, they should be prioritised by all Member States and supported by the EU with an intensification and expansion of the existing fruit, vegetables and milk scheme, which should itself be in line with the principles of justice.

3.11. The EESC recognises that any discussion regarding a just food transition must acknowledge the intricate interdependence between human and animal well-being within the food system, adopt a 'One Health' approach ([29]), and inherently include a comprehensive consideration of animal welfare. We therefore call for the strengthening of current regulatory frameworks to enhance animal welfare standards, uphold ethical principles, and hold accountable those who fail to meet them. Additionally, it is crucial to incorporate the perspectives and experiences of farmers, who play a vital role in maintaining animal welfare on the ground ([30]).

3.12. Distributive justice should also guide the introduction and promotion of technological innovation at all levels of our food systems. The EESC calls on the EU institutions and the Member States to assess the introduction of innovation through the principles of the just transition and precaution, in order to guarantee that they do not exacerbate existing inequalities, concentrations and the uneven distribution of value and opportunities, and to ensure that they are such that they do not leave anyone behind.

([24]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Food price crisis: the role of speculation and concrete proposals for action in the aftermath of the Ukraine war' (OJ C 100, 16.3.2023, p. 51).

([25]) European Commission, Implementing the prohibition of unfair trading practices to strengthen the position of farmers and operators in the agricultural and food supply chain – State of play, SWD 2004 (106).

([26]) Lianos I. and Lombardi C., Superior Bargaining Power and the Global Food Value Chain: The Wuthering Heights of Holistic Competition Law?, CLES Research Paper Series, ISBN 978-1-910801-08-6.

([27]) M. Stein, M. Mariani, R. Caranta and Y. Polychronakis, Sustainable Food Procurement, Routledge, 2024.

([28]) T. Ferrando, From Marginalization to integration: universal, free and sustainable meals in Italian school canteens as an expression of the right to education and the right to food.

([29]) FAO, (2020), 'One Health'.

([30]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the protection of animals during transport and related operations, amending Council Regulation (EC) No 1255/97 and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 (COM(2023) 770 final – 2023/0448 (COD)) (OJ C, C/2024/4670, 9.8.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/4670/oj).

4. **Recognition and participatory justice**

4.1. The EESC acknowledges the complexity of EU food systems, emphasising the need for inclusive and equitable decision-making processes that engage all stakeholders – farmers, consumers, policy-makers, and food sector representative organisations – in shaping them. The EESC acknowledges that there is not only one EU food system, although the industrial food system is increasing its presence. However, the EU is still characterised by different ways of organising agri-food systems, and the EESC has already called for EU food systems to be even more diversified in all their aspects ([31]). In particular, there are food systems that are structured around collaboration and solidarity, and that promote the achievement of socially and ecologically just objectives, while guaranteeing fair remuneration to all people involved right along the food chain.

4.2. The EESC stresses the need to enhance the recognition and appreciation of local, healthy products, establishing the trust and identity that is crucial for cultural heritage, and strengthening the producer-consumer relationship. In that sense, expressions of the solidarity economy, the well-being society, community-supported agriculture schemes, both workers' and consumers' cooperatives, rural/urban infrastructures, and rural development initiatives that create employment opportunities and improve living standards ([32]) should receive particular attention from public authorities and be actively supported. Adopting policy frameworks that promote and scale up sustainable forms of agriculture, such as agroecology and organic farming, is vital for sustainable and fair agri-food systems, for climate change mitigation and adaptation ([33]), and for the achievement of food security for all ([34]).

4.3. The EESC acknowledges the varying levels of visibility and power among different constituencies, necessitating proactive measures to bridge this gap in identifying pathways, policies, and future steps. The EESC urges EU institutions and Member States to amplify the voices of those often unheard and to consider intergenerational aspects and the rights of future generations. Key roles include young people, women in food systems, seasonal and migrant workers, platform and precarious workers, women farmers, and those in unpaid care and reproductive labour. Additionally, older people, migrants, those in marginalized financial conditions, and young people are especially vulnerable to food poverty and insecurity, particularly during economic crises. A comprehensive strategy for a healthy future and socially and environmentally just food systems must recognize these specific conditions. This strategy should include adequate educational programs and universal, complimentary, healthy, socially fair, and sustainable school canteen services.

4.4. A paradigm shift in how knowledge is produced, conceived and distributed is crucial in order to accelerate the just transition of agri-food systems. This shift should prioritise creating open and accessible knowledge networks that support sustainable practices and innovation across food-systems, particularly benefiting agri-food system actors. There is a need to reconsider the current intellectual property framework, especially regarding seeds and plants, and where the innovation is financed by public resources.

4.5. The EESC recognises the numerous calls to introduce and normalise new forms of biotechnology, genetically modified organisms and new genomic techniques. However, the principles of recognition and participation, along with distributional justice, should be considered, and tribute paid to the existence of a multiplicity of other solutions that small-scale farmers and communities are proposing for sustainable food production, which can be discredited and abandoned in the event that these technological solutions prove to be a 'silver bullet' for the future of EU agri-food systems.

4.6. With regard to participatory justice, the EESC has long advocated adopting a society-wide approach, including more participatory tools, to ensure that civil society can become more involved in the decision-making process on sustainability. This co-construction can be achieved through a European Food Policy Council, which the EESC strongly encourages ([35]), and by promoting the establishment of local, regional and national food policy councils that represent the multiplicity of voices and give particular platforms to those that are heard the least.

([31]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Food security and sustainable food systems (OJ C 194, 12.5.2022, p. 72).

([32]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee 'Towards a holistic strategy on sustainable rural/urban development' (OJ C 105, 4.3.2022, p. 49); Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on The energy and digital transition of rural areas (OJ C 486, 21.12.2022, p. 59).

([33]) IPCC, Food Security, Special Report on Climate Change and Land, IPCC, 2023.

([34]) HLPE, Food Security and Nutrition. Building a Global Narrative Towards 2030, FAO, Rome, 2020.

([35]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Food security and sustainable food systems (OJ C 194, 12.5.2022, p. 72).

4.7. Participatory justice must go hand in hand with the introduction of regulatory, policy and monitoring spaces that cut across the different areas that concern EU food systems. A Just Transition Observatory ([36]) for EU food systems, modelled after the existing Rural Observatory ([37]), as well as a new DG Food with cross-cutting competences would represent significant steps forward in this direction.

4.8. The EESC recognises the Commission's attempt to launch a dialogue around agriculture, but it considers that such a space should be used to go beyond agriculture and establish a true and effective dialogue framework that guarantees a balanced information and consultation process that takes into consideration the reality of vulnerable actors right along agri-food product chains. Moreover, the EESC stresses the need to consolidate social dialogue and collective bargaining, in particular by strengthening the role of unions, so that they can contribute both in guaranteeing representation and ensuring decent working condition for all workers across agri-food systems.

4.9. Participative justice would require availability of information, transparency and education, especially for citizens and consumers, accountability of public and private actors, and building capacity at all levels of food systems and for all its stakeholders. To that extent, the EESC highlights the importance of investing in skills development, including upskilling and reskilling initiatives, as crucial components of workforce development. A new narrative is needed for boosting the social acceptance of the transformative process alongside assuring the social predictability and social protection of farmers and workers in the agri-food sector. Significant efforts should be put in place in order to guarantee that citizens have access to food environments where sustainable and fair food choices are known, available and accessible; this requires policies that go beyond the front and back labelling on packaging as well as the provision of adequate educational programmes and financial capacity.

5. **Cosmopolitan justice, coherence and human rights**

5.1. The EU is one of the largest importers of agri-food products and one of the largest exporters. Cosmopolitan justice requires that the EU pursue a transition that is just not only for the EU, but for all countries and partners that will be impacted by the choices adopted at EU level and by the Member States. This principle is enshrined in the Treaties, in the requirement for policy coherence for development, but it is equally derived from the EU's subscription to international human rights, environmental and climate agreements.

5.2. At the core of the cosmopolitan just transition is the imperative to re-evaluate trade and investment agreements, ensuring that the EU contributes to the successful construction of just, equitable and sustainable food systems worldwide, particularly in the Global South. A coherent effort should recognise the high production standards and associated costs borne by EU farmers, which contribute to the competitiveness of EU production within the single market. At the same time, it should also address the role that the CAP plays in supporting EU farmers and the competitiveness of some EU products in third countries ([38]). A thorough application of the UTP Directive as regards unfair practices suffered by food actors outside the EU is needed, as is a comprehensive review of the CAP that considers global perspectives.

5.3. The EESC asserts that European trade policy should actively embody and promote the values of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, its commitments towards human rights and the international environmental, climate and biodiversity obligations that the Member States have undertaken. This means that EU trade policy should foster the construction of food systems that are equitable, ethical and democratic, and which depart from the prevailing free-trade ideology of low prices and highly competitive commodity markets that is challenged by producers both in the EU and abroad.

5.4. The EESC recognises that the EU is pursuing an 'open strategic autonomy' policy that leverages its unique position to set global standards. By establishing high benchmarks for food quality, safety and sustainability, the EU can certainly strengthen its single market, but also promote environmental and human rights values right across its supply chains. However, the EESC points out that the principles of justice should equally inform all trade and climate diplomacy decisions.

([36]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Advancing the EU's just transition policy framework: what measures are necessary?' (OJ C, C/2024/1576, 5.3.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1576/oj).

([37]) Rural Observatory.

([38]) https://gret.org/publication/pac-quelle-coherence-avec-le-developpement-des-agricultures-paysannes-du-sud/.

5.5. The EESC invites the European Commission to make sure that the adoption of trade measures is always supported by an analysis of their socio-economic impact on people and non-EU regions, and that sufficient inclusion of local voices, regions and perspectives is guaranteed when standards, borders, taxation and other forms of unilateral trade measures are adopted.

5.6. Likewise, the EESC stresses the fact that a just transition would require the EU to acknowledge its historical responsibility in promoting the integration of non-EU countries into global food chains by means of economic partnership agreements, free trade agreements, bilateral investment treaties, and the positions adopted at multilateral level. The EU should also have a responsibility to adopt adequate development and cooperation policies that can redress the negative implications of unilateral measures, while facilitating the consolidation of regional, fair and sustainable food systems all over the planet.

5.7. The EESC welcomes the development of a strategically integrated and global perspective to the EU's just transition in agri-food systems that aligns local, regional, international and global governance engagements with human rights, environmental and climate objectives, and the principles of justice and sustainability in global food systems. This may be based on:

— advocating for food sovereignty and regional food systems, ensuring EU policies do not have detrimental effects;

— promoting the ratification and implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas;

— promoting the ratification and implementation of the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines on Land Tenure.

6. **Investment in the just transition**

6.1. Considering the asymmetric burden, the just transition must be approached as an investment policy and as a transition that supports green investment and requires coherence between different funding sources, including the CAP and the ESF. The CAP budget has its limits when it comes to single-handedly supporting the ambitious targets set for achieving climate goals. It is therefore essential to look beyond CAP funds to ensure sustainable agri-food production.

6.2. The EESC proposes that an Agri-food Just Transition Fund be established, oriented towards small-scale players active in agri-food systems, public-private partnerships, competences and working conditions, with young people, women, human rights and sustainable practices at the centre of the eligibility criteria, and with an approach that involves financing the whole chain, and not only part of the chain. Funds must also be available to facilitate the consolidation and proliferation of SMEs across the food system to promote fair, accessible, short and sustainable food chains.

6.3. Along with the establishment of a fund, fiscal incentives such as reduced VAT should be introduced to favour small-scale and sustainable agri-food products along with other forms of public support for healthy and sustainable producer-consumer schemes, such as the *Sécurité Sociale de l'Alimentation* collective. The EESC highlights the importance of the future CAP being a starting point for the just transition.

Brussels, 19 September 2024.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE