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Fruit and vegetables are displayed for sale at a grocers shop in London, United Kingdom | Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

OPINION

Time to put a Common Food Policy on the menu

The EU needs to think beyond subsidies for farmers if it wants to address some of its biggest problems.

By **OLIVIER DE SCHUTTER AND CARLO PETRINI** | 2/2/17, 7:00 AM CET | Updated 2/2/17, 5:34 PM CET

As the European Commission opens its debate today on the future of its Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), there is an option

missing from the menu.

Europe doesn't need an agricultural policy; it needs a food policy. Rather than focusing on what subsidies go to which farmers, the EU should be thinking much bigger. Ambitious reform of food and farming systems can help address some of the bloc's most pressing problems.

For starters, the EU faces an employment crisis. Nearly a decade after the global financial crisis, average unemployment rates across the EU continue to hover around 10 percent, while youth unemployment in the eurozone is back above 20 percent.

Second, Europe and the rest of the world face an environmental crisis. Food systems produce roughly one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions. They also drive biodiversity loss and soil degradation, threatening the basis of future food production.

Third, the EU is confronting a rising public health epidemic. More than half of adults in the EU are overweight or obese. Non-communicable diseases such as type-2 diabetes and heart disease — often driven by poor diets — account for 70 percent of deaths in the EU. And with one-third of children aged six to nine now overweight or obese, the problem is clearly getting worse.

Recent efforts to reform the CAP have tried to address these concerns, and they will surely crop up again in the debate. But, as long as the discussion centers around agricultural policy — designed to serve agricultural priorities, shaped by the interests of agricultural lobbies and ultimately decided by agriculture ministers and committees — the broader social and environmental objectives will always remain peripheral.

Diverse farms and diverse diets

We have seen only piecemeal reforms aimed at the social and environmental fallout of agriculture in the EU. Estimates suggest that the “ecological focus areas” introduced under the last CAP reforms amount to just 1 to 2 percent of arable land, once a range of exemptions are accounted for. Meanwhile, between 2003 and 2013, one out of four farms disappeared from the European landscape, even as the total farming area remained stable. This suggests that too little has been done to support the viability of small-scale farms.

We need to think big. Food systems can in fact provide the starting point to solve Europe's multiple crises. Too often “green growth” and “green jobs” are hailed as the future, without any real plan to help young people into those jobs.

Surely, there is no greener job than farming, when it is based on building diversified systems that sequester carbon and provide a habitat for wild species to thrive — not least pollinators. Instead of relying on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, agroecological systems use natural diversity and the synergies between different crops and species to foster long-term soil fertility and sustain yields. Resource efficiency is paramount: water is recycled instead of running off the fields, and waste products like manure can be put to good use.

There is also no better way to secure the economic future than to sustain and strengthen the patchwork of sustainable small-scale farms and diverse landscapes. These are both Europe's first line of defense against environmental degradation and the bedrock of its tourism industry.



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Redesigning food and farming systems can also help tackle the public health crisis. Agricultural diversity can be translated into dietary diversity by taking steps to reconnect local suppliers of fresh, nutritious foods with individual consumers and institutional purchasers — particularly school canteens.

Democracy dynamized (by diners)

Clearly, significant EU-level reforms will be needed to set a new direction of travel. In particular, CAP support will need to be reoriented away from chemical-intensive monocultures and toward diversified agroecological systems.

But this will be only one piece of the puzzle. National governments also need to lead the way in ushering in a new generation of agroecological farmers by introducing supportive fiscal regimes and setting up training programs.

Local authorities too can play a role. They are often best-placed to improve access to healthy diets, through urban planning

and public procurement practices. Indeed, the “food policy councils” springing up in municipalities across Europe are already leading the way in putting sustainable territorial food systems in place.

The challenge, therefore, is not the scale of change required, or the costs of achieving it. A fraction of the €60 billion disbursed each year under the CAP could go a long way to setting food systems on a sustainable footing. And any action to improve diets would pay for itself. Non-communicable diseases cost the EU around €700 billion annually, representing 70 to 80 percent of health care spending by member countries. And this amount is expected to rise.

What a Common Food Policy for the EU must do is to set the direction of travel, bringing together a variety of initiatives and measures under one roof, building around what is already working and helping to facilitate the transition to sustainable food systems.

Sustainable food systems can underpin a new economic vision, one in which creative solutions are provided to long-term problems, in which a circular economy and green jobs are more than just rhetoric, and in which the costs of supporting decent jobs and public health are weighed up against the price of inaction. European democracy can be re-energized by giving people a say in the things they most care about. We can start with what they put on their plates.

Olivier De Schutter is the former U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to food and co-chair of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food).

Carlo Petrini is the founder and president of the international Slow Food movement.