

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on ‘Safeguarding food security and reinforcing the resilience of food systems’

(2023/C 79/05)

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Reference documents:	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions COM(2022) 133 final

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

1. condemns the unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine;
2. strongly supports Ukraine's efforts to join the European Union, noting also, in the context of the subject of this opinion, that this will have a very significant impact on strengthening the EU's food security;
3. welcomes the European Commission's Communication on safeguarding food security and reinforcing the resilience of food systems;
4. stresses the urgent need to address the weaknesses of EU countries' food systems in order to introduce profound and structural changes and prepare for future crises;
5. recalls that the EU is a net importer of food products in terms of quantity, calories and the land needed for cultivation and that it is a net exporter only in terms of value, mainly thanks to wines with a geographical indication and spirits. It would be appropriate to encourage Member States to reduce biofuel production in the short term, which would increase self-sufficiency;
6. strongly supports the willingness to enhance the EU's food sovereignty and achieve greater autonomy by encouraging regional and local diverse food production;
7. draws attention to the fact that we are currently experiencing the third global food price crisis in 15 years in countries directly connected to international trade prices, such as the European Union;
8. underlines the key role of the CoR as the institutional representative of European cities and regions in the process of supporting Ukrainian partners;
9. stresses that actions in the area of food security, towards which the EU has suddenly been forced by the ongoing war, should be used not only to address the current problem, but to bring about changes in the Common Agricultural Policy of a more structural nature in order to improve quality of life and the competitiveness of the EU economy, and also to achieve significant environmental benefits in areas related to food supply. Account should be taken of the demands of representatives of agricultural producers and processors, farmers' organisations and, in particular, small and medium-sized farms, which in the European Union have experienced a decline or even loss of profitability for many years, resulting in a drastic decline in their numbers and in numbers of agricultural workers, adverse social and cultural changes in rural areas, deterioration in food quality, and rising prices for agricultural products, particularly for those maintaining the highest quality standards in terms of human health, nutritional and taste values and the minimising of environmental impacts;
10. calls for the current debates on the reform of the European electricity market to be used as an opportunity to reconsider the issue of food stocks and to take a step back from the market orientation of the Common Agricultural Policy, taking the example of oil, for which Member States have security stocks of up to 90 days of consumption;

11. denounces the instrumentalisation of the war in Ukraine as a reason for not discussing or taking action to remedy the weaknesses of the CAP or to stem long-standing trends and changes in the food production system, including the implementation of the Farm to Fork Strategy, as the fragility of the European food system already existed, and stems from the deregulation that followed the abolition of the CAP's market tools, which led to a weakening of Europe's agricultural production potential through under-remunerating the factors of production;

12. supports the implementation of the objectives of the Farm to Fork Strategy and its targets to reduce the use of pesticides, chemical fertilisers and antimicrobials and to increase the share of organic farming, in line with the previous CoR opinion ⁽¹⁾, but points out that reduction targets for pesticide use, at least for the duration of the war in Ukraine, should not jeopardise global food security; at the same time, it also calls for a thorough assessment of the progress made in implementing the quantified targets of the Farm to Fork Strategy, which need to be monitored;

13. points out that the majority of the global production of fertilisers and their raw materials and also plant protection products in recent years originated in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Reducing dependence on imported inputs, such as fertilisers or pesticides, contributes to the resilience of our food system. Innovation and the application of best practices need to be strengthened to maintain and, in the long term, increase harvests (in particular, practices and innovations aligned with ecological objectives);

14. suggests that the European Commission refrain from abandoning the greening scheme in light of other more effective measures, including the suspension of biofuel production;

15. highlights the strategic role of rural areas for climate and food security, with local food value chains providing stabler incomes and involving small (agricultural) farms; calls for EAFRD management to be decentralised in all Member States with regard to the implementation of local and regional agricultural policies;

16. reiterates its recommendation to steer consumer behaviour towards diets with a high intake of fruit and vegetables, as well as towards the purchase of local/regional, fresh and seasonal foods produced using sustainable production methods, reducing global meat, fat and sugar consumption. Comprehensive actions need to be undertaken to make those options easy and affordable for all ⁽²⁾. The Committee proposes that to this end existing European Commission programmes promoting healthy and sustainable diets such as the ESF+ MDP within the EU should be significantly strengthened;

17. also maintains that the development of quality local food systems is the best way to guarantee a stable and decent income for farmers; welcomes, in this connection, the introduction of social conditionality in the Common Agricultural Policy; considers that existing standards in the EU in this area should equally apply to importers;

18. highlights the need to ensure greater involvement of local suppliers of food, as well as fertilisers and energy, in the establishment of emergency and global stocks. In terms of international trade, the Committee suggests restoring the logic of commodity agreements;

19. supports the European Commission's proposal to develop, as part of the trans-European transport network policy, better rail connections with Ukraine, in particular with a view to promoting the transport of essential raw materials. To this end, the planned increase in the CEF budget is welcome;

20. stresses the need for urgent and large-scale action to adapt the food economy to climate change, while also calling for the strengthening of the insurance system for agricultural production and greater resilience to the adverse effects of climate change;

21. encourages research into new rainwater management systems, the construction of new reservoirs, and the renovation of irrigation systems and the drinking water network, which promotes agricultural production, the food industry and innovative investment in food production;

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 37, 2.2.2021, p. 22.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 272, 17.8.2017, p. 14.

22. calls on the European Commission to complete this work on food security contingency plans in order to develop and implement a long-term strategy to ensure basic food security at regional level, understood as the ability to meet the basic needs of a regional community over a certain period of time through its own food production and that of neighbouring regions; suggests, in this connection, the widespread use of local food plans developed in several European countries;

23. encourages the European Commission and the Member States to prioritise food use of agricultural products by making policies to promote biofuels and methane from agricultural sources more flexible so as to disconnect agricultural markets from energy markets when prices soar while maintaining this important outlet in the event of overproduction;

24. in this context, urges the European Commission to further develop, in particular within the Common Agricultural Policy, the regulation of agricultural markets which have been known to become completely unstable and inefficient in times of scarcity; in particular, this will make it easier to activate crisis management measures and make it possible, including through negotiations within the framework of the World Trade Organisation, to build up European food and agricultural stocks in order to avoid financial speculation in relation to international agricultural prices; the market regulation policies that need to be re-established as part of agricultural policy must also aim at maintaining remunerative price levels for farmers when the current period of tensions comes to an end, since being able to live a dignified life from work as a farmer is the best lever to strengthen agricultural activity and employment and to encourage new farmers to get established;

25. encourages the European Commission to have a policy of direct support to farmers that is more counter-cyclical (specific to the size and type of agricultural holding) in order to better target the most affected sectors while avoiding unnecessary aid to 'super-profit' sectors;

26. calls on the European Commission to place greater emphasis on stimulating progress in food production by funding research and implementation activities in the areas of adapting production to climate change, reducing dependence on non-EU suppliers, improving the health value of produced food and extending the lifespan of food with organic methods;

27. calls on the European Commission to place greater emphasis on stimulating progress in agricultural production by reducing its energy intensity. This will make it possible to substantially eliminate the dependence of agricultural production efficiency, and ultimately of food prices, on fluctuations in energy prices;

28. calls on the European Commission to place greater emphasis on ensuring favourable economic conditions for farming in a context of rising production costs, through support for agricultural producers adapted to the nature of the production carried out and the potential (volume) of the producer concerned;

29. calls on European Commission to set a binding target to halve food waste by 2030 as part of the revision of the Waste Framework Directive and on the basis of the work carried out by the EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste ⁽³⁾;

30. stresses that the involvement and action of local and regional authorities complements and supports efforts made in the context of international action as well as at the national level of individual EU Member States;

31. emphasises the role of the CoR as an institution whose members work in direct partnership with Ukrainian cities and regions.

The threat to food security

32. stresses that at present, the likelihood of a real famine in Europe as a consequence of the war in Ukraine still appears to be low, but that the conflict has already caused supply problems for some products, led to food inflation of 13,2 % year-to-year in August 2022 across Europe, and brought about a quite widespread sense of unpredictability (a drastic increase in the cost of artificial fertilisers, protection products and other inputs, as well as energy, may have unacceptable effects on autumn and spring sowing and lead to socially unacceptable further increases in food prices), which is also causing the destabilisation of regional socioeconomic systems;

⁽³⁾ Food waste reduction targets (europa.eu).

33. recalls that the ongoing conflict eliminates agricultural products and fertilisers from international markets originating with two very large exporters: Ukraine, where the war will lead to agricultural insufficiency and, afterwards, to the long-term process of rebuilding its potential; and Russia, which, as the aggressor, should be excluded from international trade;

34. assesses that the continuation of the war in Ukraine and the isolation of Russia's economy in its role as aggressor may pose a real threat to food stability, especially in non-European regions, which will increase the EU's humanitarian commitments towards famine-struck regions, while raising the migratory pressures in those regions;

35. stresses that one of the biggest threats to a stable food supply is the concentration of food production, which must be counterbalanced by favouring food supply from local producers. For many decades, highly developed countries have worked harmoniously together in food production and distribution, but recent years have shown that the political situation and also progressive climate change, natural disasters and pandemics can suddenly and very effectively interrupt these chains, cutting off extensive areas from supply making it necessary to increase the food resilience of these regions by relocalising production and building up minimum private and public stocks;

36. stresses, therefore, the need to develop a long-term strategy to safeguard European food security. This strategy should lead to relocalisation of food production to Europe, in particular through mirror clauses in free trade agreements signed by the European Commission to avoid unfair competition from imported products vis-à-vis European products; undertakes to support equivalent efforts towards food sovereignty by other countries around the world, particularly in Africa;

37. stresses that food availability can be improved by more responsible food handling, resulting in reduced wastage; this can take place in a great many ways, such as reducing overproduction, improving technologies for harvesting, transport, storage and processing, adapting the scale of retail and catering supply to real demand, and shaping consumer awareness;

38. expresses its readiness to take action at the level of regional development planning to reconnect agricultural and food policy at territorial level in order to reinforce sustainable food security, improve the quality of food and reduce its negative impact, by making systemic changes in technologies for food production and food management: reducing environmental impacts in food production, minimising the EU's dependence on external food suppliers and building a European solidarity system for secure access to food;

39. guarantees total protection for products covered by the Union's geographical indications scheme: PDO (Protected Designation of Origin), PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) and GI (Geographical Indication);

40. calls on the European Commission to place greater emphasis on funding projects aimed at increasing food security at regional level to ensure the security of local communities, at least for the time needed for allied countries to organise aid. This objective should be achieved through diversification of food production, increased areas for producing food, adaptation of agricultural space to climate change, funding for research and implementation towards the production of food with a longer shelf life, and EU-level storage mechanisms for those regions which, for physical and geographic reasons, are unable to achieve the same self-sufficiency, as well as creating a safeguard for food security at EU level.

Organic agriculture as a factor in strengthening food security and reducing the negative impact of agriculture on the environment

41. recommends, in the pursuit of food security, reversing the trend of increasing specialisation in food production, and hence the concentration of food-producing areas. This is typical of high-commodity agricultural production oriented towards maximum economic efficiency;

42. considers that this objective can be achieved by significantly increasing the share of agriculture carried out in accordance with the principle of organic agriculture, and by promoting the development of perennial crops. This will contribute to reducing the use of mineral fertilisers and chemical plant protection products, while significantly improving the water capacity of the soil, which is important in periods of both water scarcity and excess;

43. stresses that two main benefits are achieved here: a significant reduction of the degrading impact of intensive agriculture on the environment, and an increase in regional food supply autonomy by expanding food production capacity based on local agricultural production (shortening supply chains and reducing dependence in food production);

44. supports and protects terraced areas and growing crops on terraces, which can mitigate aspects of climate change by improving rainfall absorption, reducing soil erosion, mitigating extreme temperatures, reducing the risk of floods and forest fires and increasing the sequestration of organic carbon in the soil;

45. points out that the full implementation of the European Green Deal in agriculture, despite the undisputed environmental benefits, requires continuous monitoring to prevent a decline in the levels of agricultural production guaranteeing security of supply, especially in global terms. Consideration should be given to whether, in the event of a war-induced decline in the level of agricultural production in Ukraine and reductions in food imports from that country leading to famine in African and Middle Eastern countries, this decline should be compensated by EU countries in the short term. An increase in agricultural production and thus a revision of the general objectives of the European Green Deal should therefore be expected;

46. recalls that the global use of NPK fertilisers increased by 40 % between 2000 and 2019 (according to the FAO). It currently stands at more than 200 million tonnes per year, and the available data indicate a very high excess use of fertilisers. It is estimated that more than half of nitrogen fertilisers and about three quarters of phosphate fertilisers used are not absorbed by plants, either remaining in the soil or seeping into water bodies, determining to a large extent their ecological and chemical status. Furthermore, the Committee points out that the objective of the Water Framework Directive is for water bodies to achieve at least good ecological status. Excessive use of mineral fertilisers for the purpose of food production is now a major reason for the degradation of the aquatic environment and should also be eliminated in the context of the adopted Community water policy;

47. points out that China and India account for more than half of the over-consumption of fertilisers, which is another example of rapid economic development taking place in those countries at the expense of environmental degradation; competitive advantages obtained in this way do not constitute fair competition. Consumers of goods imported from these countries should be made more aware of this fact;

48. recognises that it is not possible to introduce universal organic agriculture; however, the EU's objective should be to consistently pursue the implementation of the action plan on organic farming and the target set in the Farm to Fork Strategy, with a view to achieving organic practices on 25 % of agricultural land by 2030. However, these objectives must not worsen the already difficult economic and social situation in Europe's countryside, but should reverse negative trends. It therefore asks the EU institutions to carry out an analysis of methods to achieve the environmental objectives of agricultural production. In order to achieve the ambitious objectives, there is a need to support environmentally-friendly farming, including, besides organic farming (full compliance with the criteria for organic farming), also habitat farming (subsidies for farms operating in areas with valuable natural characteristics) and environmental/integrated farming (support for farms undertaking selected ecological measures, e.g. packages under the current agri-environmental programme for sustainable agriculture, soil and water protection, or buffer zones). It is recommended that EU payments in the area of agriculture be closely linked to both environmental and food security objectives. The EU's long-term environmental ambition should be that food produced on its territory has the least possible negative impact on the environment. Food produced in this way also has a higher nutritional value and is healthier.

Price increases

49. considers that the soaring cost of living, including the significant rise in food prices, has so far not led to a drop or reduction in food consumption to levels that are life-threatening or health-threatening, but it has contributed to a deterioration in the comfort of life through the need to renounce certain products;

50. stresses the need to take protective measures in relation to the poorest residents to compensate for difficulties in access to food, which may have negative health consequences in the long term, in particular by supporting food aid organisations, schools and kindergartens from marginalised areas and providing assistance to homeless people;

51. points out that this loss of competitiveness is most often due to unfair competition from imported agricultural products; proposes, therefore, that the European Commission implement mirror clauses in its free trade agreements to ensure that imported agricultural products comply with the same environmental and social standards as those prevailing in Europe;

52. points out that the progressive increase in the prices of goods and services is significantly reducing the profitability of production in the agricultural sector. On the one hand, production costs are rising and, on the other, more expensive food from Europe will be less competitive on the markets;

53. considers that the main risks to agricultural activity and food production are currently caused by the very high and in recent times significantly increased prices of mineral fertilisers, fuels (notably diesel), electricity and plant protection products. This is compounded by the problem of water supply in agriculture, which has been growing over the years, as well as worsening climatic conditions and sudden weather events;

54. warns that lowering the profitability of agriculture may pose a real and significant threat to food security, because agricultural activity is cyclical and cannot be changed overnight. It can take several months to renew animal herds or restore sown areas;

55. considers that from a regional perspective, the rapidly rising cost of living, including food prices, is a very high threat to the stability of local and regional socioeconomic systems. It will negatively affect the labour market, people's incomes and local government incomes, ultimately increasing poverty and in turn forcing local and regional authorities to be involved in addressing the effects of the problem. Instability in the food market therefore has much wider consequences, and can affect the proper implementation of the tasks assigned to individual local and regional authorities and reduce the basis for regional economic growth;

56. recalls that from the point of view of business, the need to ensure that the foundations of the functioning of enterprises are safeguarded will limit development expenditure, which will have an impact on the innovativeness of the economy.

Boosting effective and cross-sectoral adaptation action and addressing loss and damage

57. draws attention to the complex problem of food waste, the reduction of which will make it possible to achieve a number of benefits at various levels, in particular a reduction in the use of valuable resources needed for the production, transport and distribution of food — energy, water, labour costs, surface area devoted to production and also the production of greenhouse gases;

58. stresses the importance of systemic action to reduce food waste, as more responsible food handling will lead to a reduction in the scale of purchasing, with consequences for production, processing, transport, trade and the labour market. It is therefore necessary to ensure a planned transition that takes into account safety net measures;

59. stresses the acute importance of creating and promoting short and fast supply chains from farmer to consumer (meaning lower prices, high quality and rapid delivery). Shortening food supply chains also has a significant climate impact through reducing emissions from transport;

60. points out that, in order to encourage the public to use locally produced food, it is worth highlighting the place where it is produced (creating regional brands), as appropriate labelling and local economic patriotism can facilitate the acceptance of higher food prices if such are necessary in view of the cost of producing food;

61. recalls that a significant decrease in crop production is projected as a result of the Green Deal, and that rising food prices will cause social reluctance towards the energy transition. Safety net measures are therefore needed to create a positive climate and understanding for the Green Deal;

62. sees a need for cross-sectoral cooperation between farmers, businesses, public authorities and the scientific community to develop approaches for adapting the agricultural economy to climate change — mitigation and adaptation measures in face of the existing water shortage and natural disasters, aiming to reduce the variability of annual agricultural production dynamics and minimise additional potential failures and losses in food production. These measures should involve public investment and technological and agro-ecological innovation and run in parallel with the Green Deal, with respect for environmental resources;

63. points out that the industrialisation of agricultural production also leads to increased dependence between countries. This is particularly evident in the chemical industry. Russia is the world's largest exporter of NPKs. Moreover, the concentration of production results in a very high carbon footprint from transporting it globally on a massive scale (more than 20 million tonnes of fertilisers are transported annually between continents). The production of fertilisers requires very large quantities of gas, and with five countries concentrating two thirds of its global supply, this poses a real risk that the regulation of gas prices can shape the prices of fertilisers and ultimately of food. Efforts should therefore be made to diversify the production and supply of agricultural inputs.

Problems of the information policy of the EU food economy

64. stresses that disinformation on the availability of food is one of the most effective ways of destabilising social harmony and inducing people towards unreasonable behaviour, and these threats must therefore be resolutely opposed; Member States must be able to reassure the population in future by having food security contingency plans that are sufficiently ambitious in order to follow up on the Commission communication of 12 November 2021;

65. stresses that structural changes in food production to reduce dependence on external suppliers and increase the importance of regionally produced food may result in higher food prices, making it necessary to have a transparent and reliable information policy which should pay attention not only to security of supply but also to reducing the environmental costs of producing food;

66. encourages the continued promotion of high-quality food produced close to where people live.

Brussels, 30 November 2022.

*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*
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