

EU promotion policy for agricultural products needs a fundamental revision

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In view of the evolution of European Union (EU) policies in the areas of food systems and public health, the [EU policy for the promotion of agricultural products](#) (promotion policy) is no longer fit for purpose and needs to be fundamentally revised.

Not fit for purpose

With a budget of €200 million per year, the [general objective](#) of EU promotion policy is to “*enhance the competitiveness of the Union agricultural sector*”, with the policy’s five specific objectives closely following this aim. Such narrow framing is not compatible with the spirit and purpose of the EU’s new framework for food and agricultural policy established by the European Green Deal, and more specifically the [Farm to Fork Strategy](#). This new framework aims to advance a comprehensive sustainable food systems transition meant to “*bring environmental, health and social benefits, offer economic gains and ensure that the recovery from the crisis puts us onto a sustainable path.*”

Likewise, a focus on competitiveness risks overlooking potential trade-offs with other EU policy objectives, including on health. While the annual work programmes since 2018 include a specific action to promote “proper dietary practices”, among others to tackle obesity, this remains a distinct strand within a policy that is not designed to structurally pursue human and planetary health objectives. For instance, during the last three years more than €18.3 million has been granted to promote alcoholic drinks, and €58.2 million for meats and meat preparations.¹

This state of affairs is not consistent with the European Commission’s obligations under the EU Treaties,² its commitments to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across the globe,³ and with [Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan](#), an upcoming flagship health initiative with disease prevention as a main pillar. Both alcohol use and unhealthy diet are key risk factors for non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including cardiovascular disease, certain cancers and type-2 diabetes. Any public money distributed, especially for consumption-oriented measures, should ensure consistency with the aims of NCD prevention, both within Europe and internationally.

¹ See the lists of programmes selected for Union’s financial contribution for [2017](#), [2018](#) and [2019](#). Both are rough and low estimates, which do not include alcoholic drinks and meats promoted as part of ‘baskets’ of products.

² Article 168(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU: “A high level of human health protection shall be ensured in the definition and implementation of all Union policies and activities.”

³ Especially Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. [\[link\]](#)



A new approach

To ensure EU promotion policy adds value and is coherent, its overall objective should shift towards supporting the aims pursued by the Farm to Fork Strategy, while ensuring consistency with other health policy objectives.

Among others, Farm to Fork includes targets to reduce the use of pesticides and fertilisers and the sales of antibiotics, while increasing the share of farm land under organic agriculture. It emphasises the imperative to reverse the rise in overweight and obesity by 2030. It stresses the importance of a dietary transition, emphasising that *“average intakes of energy, red meat, sugars, salt and fats continue to exceed recommendations”*, while the *“consumption of whole-grain cereals, fruit and vegetables, legumes and nuts is insufficient.”*

The strategy likewise stresses the aim *“to reward those farmers, fishers and other operators in the food chain who have already undergone the transition to sustainable practices, enable the transition for the others, and create additional opportunities for their businesses”*. Increasing short supply chains is specifically mentioned as one such important opportunity.

All EU policies should contribute to achieving the food systems transitions outlined in the Farm to Fork Strategy, in a way that is most suitable for each policy’s design. **Promotion policy should, therefore, be used to help create changes in demand to provide producers with market incentives that are consistent with a transition towards a nutrition-sensitive agriculture, and environmentally, socially and animal welfare friendly food systems.**

Reallocation of funding priorities

The renewed policy objective will need to be accompanied by a full revision of the logic by which funding is allocated.

- **Promotion funding** should be dedicated to:
 - **Health-enhancing products that are currently under-consumed**, especially fresh or minimally processed fruit and vegetables, whole grains, pulses and nuts.
 - **Products from organic agriculture** and, subject to the availability of credible certification systems, other models using sustainability-enhancing production methods. Only those animal-sourced products falling under this category should be eligible for support. A maximum ceiling should be established for this type of products, considering their current high levels of consumption in Europe.
- Products with a **geographical indication** (GI) should no longer be automatically considered as priority products for promotion. GIs appear to leave space for considerable heterogeneity in product requirements, questioning the ability of the current schemes to consistently represent higher added value in terms of sustainability.⁴

⁴ Slow Food (2019) European designations between identity values and market. A survey on production specifications of dairy chains. [\[link\]](#)





- **Alcoholic drinks**, including wines, beers, ciders and spirits, should be excluded from eligibility for promotion support.
- Considering the need to promote changes in demand in support of a sustainable food systems transition, and the economic risks of relying on export-oriented supply chains, promotion funding should **focus on the EU internal market** and shift away from its current priority of promoting exports. The remaining promotion projects to third countries should demonstrate they do not entail the risk of disrupting local markets thereby endangering livelihoods of smart-scale producers.
- Special provisions should be made to support projects that promote the **development of local and/or direct supply chain models**, including peri-urban to urban linkages, and rural markets.

Reality check: Why public spending must be 'NCD-proof'

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cardiovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases and others, are the major health issue of the 21st century, representing over 85% of all deaths and 75% of all diseases in Europe. They are likewise the largest cause of deaths globally, rising disproportionately among lower income countries.

Around €700 billion is spent on treating NCDs in the EU each year. Premature mortality from NCDs results in a loss of €115 billion per year to the economy, or 0.8% of EU GDP.⁵ Pre-existing conditions such as obesity and NCDs have been found to increase the risk of complications and mortality related to COVID-19.⁶

What connects the main NCDs is that they are highly preventable and driven by a number of common, modifiable 'risk factors', including alcohol use and unhealthy diet, alongside tobacco use, insufficient physical activity and air pollution.

Using public money to promote products associated with an increased risk for NCDs cannot be part of a sustainable European policy, both internal and international.

The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) is a leading European NGO alliance advocating for better health in EU policies. Food Systems & NCD Prevention is a priority policy area.
<https://epha.org/>

⁵ For more about NCDs, see: ECDA, EPHA, NCDA (2019) Towards an EU strategic framework for the prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) [\[link\]](#)

⁶ WHO (2020) Information note on COVID-19 and NCDs [\[link\]](#)

