



EATING OUR WAY TO A HEALTHY PLANET

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Hotel Sofitel, Brussels



Featuring:

- Catherine Bearder MEP, Member of the European Parliament Committee on Regional Development
Chantal Bruetschy, Head of Unit for Innovation and Sustainability, European Commission Directorate General for Health and Consumers
Mark Driscoll, Head of the WWF-UK One Planet Food Programme
Tony Long, Director, WWF European Policy Office
Sarah Merrington, Project Manager for LiveWell for LIFE, WWF-UK
Christine Moeller, Policy Officer for Economic Assessment of Climate Policies, European Commission Directorate General for Climate Action
Carmen Villar, Senior Expert, Spanish Food Safety and Nutrition Agency
- Moderated by Giles Merritt, Secretary General of *Friends of Europe*

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The report was written by Tamsin Rose, an independent health and nutrition expert commissioned by *Friends of Europe*.

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Executive Summary

The 'LiveWell for low impact food in Europe (LIFE)' project was launched in Brussels on 28 February 2012 with a policy debate with stakeholders. The project tackles head-on two of the big challenges facing modern society - rising levels of chronic diseases and runaway climate change – and looks for solutions that will tackle both simultaneously.

The EU is committed to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 20% by 2020 and food production and consumption accounts for about a third of these emissions. Given that one third of cancer and cardiovascular disease are caused by poor nutrition, improving our diet could not only help the environment but be the single most important contributor to reducing the burden of ill health in Europe.

Speakers from WWF outlined the urgent need for change and the importance of looking at the food sector from a public health and environmental viewpoint. The concept of food sustainability was explored as being very broad, encompassing energy, water and fertiliser use, agriculture, ecosystem resilience, pricing and availability, packaging, the distance and type of transport involved. Food is not just a commodity; it is an emotive and sensitive issue with cultural significance. The way that we grow, produce and consume food has implications for the planet. Catherine Bearder, Member of the European Parliament highlighted the 'silent crisis' of biodiversity. "We are rapidly increasing the risk of tipping points in biodiversity of the food chain that sustains life on the planet".

European Commission speakers described the relevance of the project to several strategic EU initiatives designed to reduce the resource intensity of the food sector. These include reducing food waste without increasing costs for consumers, eco-labels for fruit and vegetables and improved public awareness on how to interpret food labels on 'Best before' and 'Sell by'. The Commission's models show that better eating patterns could deliver reductions in greenhouse emissions and better health. But there are many barriers to implementing such changes, including knowledge levels, buying and eating habits and structural issues. There are ways to support change, including the use of economic incentives, improving consumer awareness and commitment by actors throughout the food chain.

All stakeholders agreed on the need for new and innovative ways of reducing resource intensity and CO₂ emissions in the food chain. The good timing of the LiveWell project was acknowledged because there are upcoming several opportunities to contribute to key EU processes such as the development of a '*Communication on Sustainable Food*', the reform of the Common Agricultural and Fisheries policies, or the updates to food labelling. As a key import and export market, the EU could exercise leadership globally by prioritising sustainability of the food system in their domestic and international policies and trade relationships.

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Introducing the LiveWell for Life project

WWF and *Friends of Europe* are collaborating on a three year initiative aimed at defining healthy and low carbon diets for Europe, using France, Spain and Sweden as pilot countries, which improve both the health of European citizens and contributes towards cutting greenhouse gas emissions from the EU food supply chain.

Sarah Merrington, Project Manager for LiveWell for LIFE, WWF-UK, described the logic of the project "We need new and innovative ways of reducing resource intensity and CO₂ emissions in the food chain." The project began with a comparison between the UK nutrition recommendations called the 'EatWell Plate' and the average diet. It found that most people don't eat enough fruit and vegetables and carbohydrates and we eat too much protein and food high in fat and sugar. WWF used the EatWell approach and added the criteria of sustainability to develop the LiveWell plate, demonstrating the close correlation between nutritional guidance and sustainability calculations.

The same approach will be applied in three pilot countries: France, Spain and Sweden, which have different patterns of agriculture, retailing and food cultures. For each country, researchers will identify dietary trends and create a national 'LiveWell plate' using the format of the national dietary guidance. To identify the challenges and opportunities for implementation of the recommendations, a network of stakeholders from across the food chain will be created.

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Tony Long, Director, WWF European Policy Office



Tony Long, Director of the WWF European Policy Office noted that "Exactly 40 years ago the Club of Rome published their report on the limits to growth. This challenge still stands - how the earth can accommodate the expected population of 10 billion by 2050. The food-water-energy nexus are the building blocks of life on the planet and they have to be in balance".

This concern is shared by others.

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EU initiatives on resource efficiency and food

In 2008, the European Commission's [Action Plan](#) on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) and Sustainable Industrial Policy (SIP) set the political goal of changing economic patterns to reduce the use of energy, natural resources and create new opportunities in the green economy. The **European Environment Agency's** 2010 report on '[Consumption and the Environment](#)' stated that significant changes in production and consumption patterns are needed in order to achieve meaningful reductions in environmental impacts. The **European Commission's** [Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe](#) sets the milestone of a 20 % reduction in resource input in the food chain and a 50 % cut in food waste by 2020.

In 2013, the Commission will issue a '*Communication on Sustainable Food*', looking at ways of lowering the environmental impact of food production and consumption patterns and by 2014 it will develop a methodology for sustainability criteria for key food commodities. National governments have also addressed the dysfunction of our current food models. The Dutch Environment Assessment Agency report '[The Protein Puzzle: consumption and production of meat, dairy and fish in the EU](#)' assesses the consequences of the production and consumption of animal proteins for human health and the environment. The UK government FORESIGHT report '[Tackling obesities: Future choices](#)' described the complex relationships within the food chain that contribute to overweight and obesity.

Triggering widescale change

Changing behaviour is a difficult and complex process and particularly challenging in the area of diet. Food is a necessity but it is also a source of pleasure and part of our cultural identity. Food is a very personal and emotive issue. Despite the consistently clear health messages about health and diet, in developed countries the majority of the population are overweight or obese. Efforts to change eating behaviours have limited success, partly because negative effects of poor diets are not immediate, so feedback mechanisms are weak.



"What we eat is also an opportunity to make decisions that reduce our personal carbon footprint."

Christine Moeller, Policy Officer for Economic Assessment of Climate Policies,
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The European Commission has explored how behaviour changes could affect CO₂ emissions in the areas of housing, transport, food system. They have modelled the potential impact of three changes in eating patterns (vegetarian, healthy and balanced diet). In addition to better health outcomes, the

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models demonstrated co-benefits in reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from the food chain. **Christine Moeller**, Policy Officer for Economic Assessment of Climate Policies, European Commission Directorate General for Climate Action noted "*What we eat is also an opportunity to make decisions that reduce our personal carbon footprint*". A shift in public understanding is needed that our way of producing and consuming food is unsustainable.

Acknowledging the size of the challenge, **Giles Merritt**, Secretary General of *Friends of Europe* asked "*How do you move a sector like the agro-food industry?*" Tony Long described the success of their two year collaboration with the four largest trade associations in the fish sector. "*There is engagement at CEO level and an unprecedented agreement on a joint message to the European Parliament. These kind of cross-over possibilities are becoming more common*". Working with producer, retailer, consumer and health networks, it is possible to find a balance between resource use and food.



"We need some unholy alliances between organisations that don't usually work together to overcome the systemic barriers to changing our food chain."

Mark Driscoll, Head of the WWF-UK One Planet Food programme

Food pricing models are part of the problem explained **Mark Driscoll**, Head of WWF-UK One Planet Food programme. "*In the past 40 years, developed countries have got used to spending less on food. Average food prices in 1980-2000 were about half of the price levels of 1950-1980. What consumers pay when they buy food does not reflect the true cost in terms of environment and health.*" But he asserted that the food sector is more innovative and can move faster to implement change than government. "*We need some unholy alliances between organisations that don't usually work together to overcome the systemic barriers to changing our food chain.*"

Chantal Bruetschy, Head of Unit for Innovation and Sustainability at the European Commission Directorate General for Health and Consumers counselled against trying to tell people what they must eat to save the planet, removing the 'fun' in food. Recalling the principle of free choice, she noted. "*We need to find win-win solutions for people and the planet. All actors in the food chain need to work together*".

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Better food for all?

The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) raised the question of rising levels of poverty making it harder to eat sustainable and healthy diet. Europe is increasingly urbanised and being poor in a city affects access to quality fresh food. There are some interesting new initiatives to get more people involved in growing food on small allotments in urban areas or through farming cooperatives.



"We need to make sure that our new approaches to sustainable food are equitable and accessible to all regardless of socio-economic status".

Carmen Villar, Senior Expert at the Spanish Food Safety and Nutrition Agency

Sarah Merrington replied *"There are actual costs for healthy food and perceived costs. In each pilot country we will research to see if it is more expensive to eat more healthily and sustainably."* The impact of the economic crisis in Europe can already be seen; a [recent survey in the UK](#) showed a drop of almost 30 % in fruit and vegetable intake of lower income families. Sales of organic food have dropped, but fair trade products still enjoy strong support, showing that even in difficult times, consumers are interested and committed to the principles of equitable food production. **Carmen Villar**, Senior Expert at the Spanish Food Safety and Nutrition Agency added *"We need to make sure that our new approaches to sustainable food are equitable and accessible to all regardless of socio-economic status"*.

Consumer education to drive change

Catherine Bearder called for better education in schools, stating *"We have forgotten many of the practical food skills that our parents and grandparents had. It is easy to buy prepared food items. People with busy lives often assemble a meal rather than making food from scratch"*. Consumers are also used to buying 'perfect' looking fruit and vegetables from supermarkets, which is not the reality of how produce is grown. A lot of imperfect looking means that lots of produce is wasted.

People are very time poor compared to previous generations, there is a myth that preparing healthy food takes lots of time and effort and we need to address this. Healthy food should not be considered to be a niche market or an expensive luxury. These perceptions can be changed. Bearder noted that regulation is not always the right approach; the first focus needs to be on changing the attitudes of consumers to understand the issues better.

"We are rapidly reaching the tipping point of threatening the biodiversity of the food chain that sustains life on the planet."

Catherine Bearder, Member of the European Parliament Committee on Regional Development



Education is also important for cutting down on food waste. Lots of food is discarded because of confusion about the 'Sell by' and 'Best before' indications on food labels. The European Commission will develop practical tools for consumers. For example, the 'Sell by' date relates to micro-biological safety and retailers always include an additional time margin. 'Best before' refers to the timeframe for the quality of the product, e.g. flavour and texture.

A network of independent food retailers in Germany, **Edeka**, explained that with 1.5 million food products on the market, stores can only stock about 10,000 products so choices have to be made. Their members don't try to compete with the large retail chains on prices, instead looking for local products with an added value. They promote sustainability on their own label brands and have also employed 2,000 nutrition experts so that each store has an expert available for a few hours a week to help customers learn about the issues.

A science based approach should underpin assessments of sustainability, to avoid a repeat of the biofuels situation - when a few years after early enthusiasm, it became clear that they are not the answer. There is not enough evidence-based information on sustainability making it difficult for actors in the food chain and consumers to know what is more environmentally friendly. European Food

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Sustainable Consumption and Production Round Table will develop a toolkit with an agreed methodology on how to evaluate the environmental footprint of a food item.

Food packaging - a common complaint

Several speakers expressed frustration about the amount and complexity of food packaging. The European Commission Directorate General for Health and Consumers is working with stakeholders on ways to reduce food waste and packaging without adding cost. However, their conversations with the food industry indicate that packaging is sometimes used to reduce food waste. More research is needed to understand the potential trade-offs between cutting food waste and packaging. For example, many cucumbers are packed individually. Would changes in the transport type and timing reduce the need for plastic sleeves? **Mark Driscoll** stated *"We have looked long and hard at some of the key impacts of packaging in a lifecycle analysis. 98% of the environmental impact of food is the item itself, not the packaging"*.

EU role in global food patterns?

The food chain is a global phenomenon, while the EU has a large impact on the food sector; the US has a greater consumption footprint. Catherine Bearder comes from a farming family and is a member of the EU-ACP joint Parliamentary Assembly; she stated that policy-makers have shared concerns about food security and sustainability. *"Look at the global crisis situation for bees" she added, "without them we have no crops and no food"*. Many in the food industry have a strategic interest in sustainability of the food system because they look at the longer term horizon. Governments and politicians operate on shorter timeframes, shaped by election cycles. Several speakers asserted that public policy options to re-balance the food chain must take the long term view. The [European Food Sustainable Consumption and Production Round Table](#) convened by the European Commission brought together actors from the across the food chain to explore the distribution of economic incentives and benefits in the current food system in Europe. They noted that changes in global commodity prices and the Common Agricultural Policy affect food availability. Their remit includes reviewing emerging initiatives in the EU and globally that could improve sustainability of food.

Consumer food choices take place in the wider context of urbanisation, agricultural subsidies and production, development, trade flows and commodity prices. Given this, setting the boundaries of the LiveWell for Life project is a challenge and the project will thus primarily focus on developing public policy options at the national and EC levels and developing 'pathways for implementation' focussing on GHG emissions reduction.



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For more information about LiveWell for LIFE: www.livewellforlife.eu, Twitter: @LiveWellFood



Participants at the launch debate “Eating our way to a healthy planet” which took place on Tuesday 28 February in Brussels.

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