



PS Lifestyle

Policy Brief: Food Systems



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Shifting towards more sustainable, healthier food systems in Europe

Learnings & policy recommendations from PSLifestyle

PSLifestyle is a pan-European research project funded by the European Union. It has developed a [Lifestyle Test](#) to help individuals adopt positive, sustainable, and healthier lives and to reduce their climate impact. By taking the Test, individuals can see how their daily activities impact their carbon footprint. They also receive personalised tips to help reduce their footprint through lifestyle changes that can be tailored to fit their needs and capabilities. Additionally, the test collects anonymous data on the reasons why people may be unwilling or unable to adopt certain lifestyle choices, providing valuable insights to promote sustainable lifestyles more effectively.

This policy brief draws on over 410,000 responses to the Lifestyle Test. Based on the actions people are willing to take, and on the challenges people face when adopting such actions, it presents a series of policy recommendations on 'Shifting towards more sustainable, healthier food systems in Europe'. These recommendations aim to address structural barriers to meeting Europe's climate neutral goals and help make sustainable, healthy choices easier and more accessible for everyone.

This brief is one in a series of four, that respectively focus on: transport, food, housing, and purchases. The other three policy briefs can be found [here](#).

What is the situation?

Food systems, defined as “the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products”¹ have a significant environmental footprint.

The manufacturing of food, its distribution, consumption, and waste **are responsible for 30% of the world’s greenhouse gasses (GHG) emissions.**² Most of these emissions are generated by crop and livestock production activities, with deforestation and peatland drainage also consequences of the need to make room for food production.

Intensive farming and livestock production degrade soil quality, deplete natural resources, harm biodiversity,³ and rely heavily on fossil fuels and non-renewable mineral resources.⁴ Furthermore, while pesticides have been central to the food security of European nations, given the need to protect crops from pests and other hazards, there is also evidence that **over-reliance on chemical pesticides impacts both human health and ecosystems.**⁵

Finally, food waste – amounting to approximately **59 million tonnes annually in the European Union (EU) alone**⁶ – not only represents a significant waste of natural resources such as energy, fuel, and water but also contributes to land degradation.

Our current food systems are not only based on an intensive production system that is not environmentally sustainable, but they also have negative consequences on individuals’ health. **Food systems are currently favouring access to foods that are ultra-processed (UPFs) and high in sugar, fat and salt (HFSS).** These foods are drivers of malnutrition, which comes in many forms: under-nutrition, over-nutrition and micronutrient deficiencies, often referred to as the ‘triple burden of malnutrition.’⁷ **This is a leading cause of chronic and non-communicable diseases (NCDs),** the main determinants of global health burdens and are responsible for up to 74% of all deaths globally.⁸

In particular, overweight and obesity rates, which affect almost 60% of adults and nearly one in three children in the WHO European Region,⁹ are very worrying, as they are major risk factors for heart diseases, certain types of cancer, and type-2 diabetes.

Moreover, **there are significant inequities associated with obesity.** Rates are rising faster in lower socioeconomic groups, especially for women, in groups with lower educational level, and in marginalised groups.¹⁰

The pressing question, then, is: **How to transform this unsustainable system into one that promotes health for citizens while also respecting the environment?**



What needs to change?

A comprehensive package of interventions is needed to address the problem at all levels.

This means that policies are required to change the intensive crop and livestock production, protect biodiversity, improve the sustainability of food distribution, enhance the health and sustainability of food offered to consumers, and reduce food waste.

While the core actions must be taken at the policy level, as it is a political responsibility to make sure that the healthy and sustainable choice is the easy choice for everyone, including by setting frameworks for the food industry, **individuals can also play a part in addressing the unsustainability of the food systems.** To this end, PSLifestyle data offers valuable insights into what citizens are capable and/or willing to do to reduce their food consumption carbon footprint.

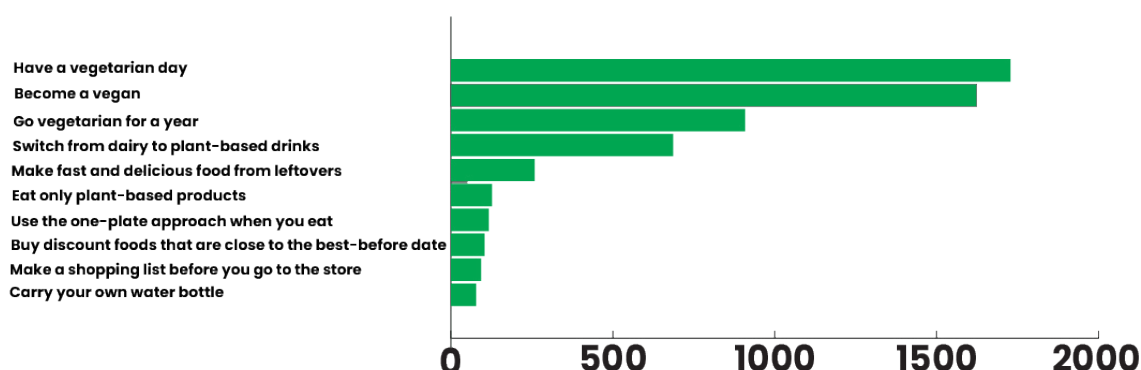
A systemic problem cannot be resolved via a single silver bullet measure.



The evidence from PSLifestyle: what sustainable actions are people willing and able to take?

Given the complexity of food systems, individuals have limited power to radically intervene on the general structure causing the unsustainability of the system. At the same time, this does not imply they are completely powerless nor that there is no action they can take to improve their environmental impact. In this regard, the graph on **“Annual CO₂ reductions from Action Plans”** taken from the [Lifestyle Test](#) (see box **“What does the Lifestyle Test do?”**), shows the most influential actions individuals in Europe are willing to take.

Annual CO₂ reductions from Action Plans (tonnes of Co₂/year)



Actions we can take

It is important to note that the actions in the graph are not necessarily those with the biggest potential to reduce CO₂ emissions per se, but **they represent a combination between impact and individuals' willingness to select these actions**. For example, going vegetarian for a year has a bigger impact than having a vegetarian day every week, but the former requires a much bigger effort, which many people may not be willing and/or capable to undertake. Similarly, eating only plant-based products has a high impact on reducing CO₂ emissions, but few people are willing or able to do this, making the cumulative impact low. There is therefore a delicate balance to consider between maximising the impact of an action and **making sure that the actions are realistic**

and feasible for all individuals. Furthermore, only the carbon footprint of a vegetarian diet is captured here, but favouring such a diet can **also have a positive impact on health**, which can further incentivise individuals to make a change.

Among the actions identified, those focusing on reducing the consumption of meat and animal derivatives have the biggest cumulative impact in terms of total reduction of CO₂ emissions per year. Other actions with high potential for impact are better utilisation of leftovers, using the one-plate approach when eating (aiming for balance, variety, and portion control when it's time to fill your plate) and buying discount foods that are close to the expiry date.

What does the Lifestyle Test do?

The [Lifestyle Test](#) is a tool designed to inform individuals about the climate impact of their daily activities and inspire them to reflect on their habits, encouraging change through practical actions.

The data presented in this brief, collected between 19 December 2023 – 21 November 2024 in eight European countries (Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia and Turkey), illustrates the impact of these actions in terms of CO₂ reduction, linked to individuals' willingness to adopt them. It also highlights the main barriers individuals face in adopting certain actions, with respondents able to select between "too expensive", "not available where I live", "not popular where I live", "not possible in my life situation", "I don't know how", "I don't have the support I need", and "it takes too much time and effort". Their answers highlight the need for structural changes in infrastructures, business models, marketing and advertising messaging, and policies.

By analysing this data, the Lifestyle Test helps to identify actions that decision makers can prioritise to maximise societal acceptance and uptake of more sustainable choices, while pinpointing the key challenges that need to be addressed to further promote these actions across society. Data collection is still ongoing. A new interactive policy and business insight platform providing access to real time data from the Lifestyle Test can be found [here](#).

Barriers to overcome

Several barriers hinder individuals' ability to make these changes. In fact, half of the respondents indicated that the actions were not feasible in their life situation. **The cost of low-carbon footprint alternatives was declared as an important factor**, with 20% of respondents indicating that it would be too expensive to switch from dairy to plant-based drinks, and 19% saying that going vegetarian for a day would require too much time and effort. Finally, **many respondents do not know how to implement the actions** (between 10% and 21% of respondents depending on the action, with 21% representing making food from leftovers).

Policies are required to facilitate this shift in eating behaviours so that these actions become easier for everyone to adopt.



Policy recommendations: how can policymakers support and enable sustainable change?

To make sure that it becomes easier for everyone in Europe to adopt healthy, sustainable food habits, policymakers need to focus on several specific policies:

Make healthy and sustainable choices more accessible and affordable.

Individuals may be willing to shift to a more plant-based diet, but there may be economic obstacles hindering this. Despite vegetarian diets not necessarily being more expensive than meat diets, in many EU countries, fruits, vegetables, and substitutes to milk derivatives are still too expensive, and thus may not be as accessible as they could be. While this applies to the whole population, this is specifically the case for those in a lower socio-economic status, as they suffer more than those better-off from the shifts in prices on essential goods.

To address this, two main policies could be implemented:

- 0% VAT on fruits and vegetables: removing taxes (or in some cases reducing them to the minimum possible) from fresh products like fruit

and vegetables helps to reduce their price. This measure has been debated recently both at EU level¹¹, and at national level^{12,13}, and there are promising grounds to disseminate to all EU Member States.

- Direct subsidies to purchase more sustainable foods: policies can be implemented to offer citizens, especially those in greater need, the funds they need to increase the consumption of healthier and more sustainable foods. These incentives can come in the form of direct monetary transfers, vouchers to buy specific foods, etc.¹⁴ On top of this, meat is still strongly subsidised by EU funds, with more than 80% of the EU's agricultural subsidies going to the production of animals or animal feed.^{15,16} Removing such subsidies would be a significant step towards favouring a transition to alternative proteins. This measure could also be linked with penalty taxes for meat products, discouraging their consumption.

II.

Support public procurement of high-quality sustainable food.

Public procurement is a well-documented tool that facilitates individuals to access a healthy diet, especially for school children.¹⁷ In public settings, food is often selected by price criteria only, which too

often neglects the sustainability and health components. Public procurement policies should thus focus on providing more healthy plant-based food, also making sure that this food has been produced locally, equitably, and sustainably. The recent EU Vision for Agriculture and Food¹⁸ acknowledges the importance of public procurement of food.

III.

Invest in education programmes.

Public institutions, especially at national, regional and local level must invest in developing education programmes and implementing existing programmes

that help individuals understand the benefits of healthier and environmentally sustainable eating behaviours, starting in schools, as this is critical to help children develop healthy eating habits, that are sustainable, for their whole lives.

IV.

Tackle food deserts. Plant-based products must be made accessible not only within public institutions, such as schools, but also in surrounding areas and in all rural and urban settings. Increasing the availability of healthy, locally sourced and affordable foods

should be a priority to avoid creating ‘food deserts’, namely: “an urban or rural area in which it is difficult to buy affordable or good-quality fresh food”¹⁹. Often, unhealthy and ultra-processed foods are easy to find in food deserts,²⁰ rather than healthy, plant-based foods such as fruits and vegetables.



V. **Implement changes to expiry dates on product labels.**

The European Commission (EC) estimates that up to 10% of food waste generated annually in the EU is linked to date marking.²¹ These dates are not easy to understand for consumers, especially the “use by” and “best before” labels. In 2020, the EC aimed to improve labelling on food products as part of its Farm to Fork Strategy, but despite its promising goals, eventually no legislation on food products labelling was adopted.²² This point has not yet been picked up again

by the European Commission, so it would be important that the new EU Vision on Agriculture and Food does not dismiss previous work on expiry dates on product label.

To make sure that consumers can better understand when foods are still safe to eat, it is necessary to improve how information is communicated. The EC should adopt clear, uniform and mandatory rules to be applied across the EU. Clearer labelling can also help business operators reducing their environmental impact, as their decisions on whether to use a “use by” or “best before” indication, their market practices, and their compliance to national rules can all help reducing food waste.

VI. **Implement mandatory regulations and not self-regulatory frameworks.**

Across all the policies in this brief, it is crucial for policymakers to avoid corporate lobbying efforts centred on watering down key actions

and mandatory regulations. Industries favour codes of conducts and self-regulatory and voluntary approaches, even though these have proven to lead to very limited results.²³ Instead, policies related to public procurement, tackling food deserts, labelling, etc., should be made mandatory.



Case studies

Estonia – Adopting a whole school food approach

Five schools in Tallinn and Viimsi have been recognised for adopting a Whole School Food Approach, which aims to instil healthy and sustainable eating habits in students by providing holistic nutritional education as well as tasty school meals. Catering changes include switching meat for healthier and more sustainable options and implementing zero-waste practices. Activities took place within the SchoolFood4Change initiative in collaboration with local municipalities. The initiative aims to transform food systems by engaging schools as catalysts for promoting healthy and sustainable diets, for instance through sustainable food procurement practices. Find out more [here](#).



Greece – Reducing food waste and food insecurity

Boroume is a non-profit organization dedicated to reducing food waste and combating food insecurity in Greece. It coordinates the donation of surplus food from various sources—such as farmers' markets, fields, and orchards—to charities across the country. Their programmes include "Boroume at the Farmers' Markets" and "Boroume Gleaning," which focus on collecting unsold produce and distributing it to those in need. Find out more [here](#).

Find out more

Check out the other three policy briefs here: <https://pslifestyle.eu/policy-briefs>

Find out more about the PSLifestyle initiative here: <https://pslifestyle.eu/>

Take the Lifestyle Test here: <https://pslifestyle-app.net/> and help us to share the word!



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