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Building a policy mix for a transition towards sustainable food systems: instruments and impacts

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Abstract

In 2016 the EU adopted the “Communication on next steps for a sustainable European future” that describes the contribution of European policies to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), mentioning, among many others, the role of legislation on agriculture and fisheries, environment and climate, food, trade, research. This Communication is among the many actions launched between 2015 and 2016 that touch upon the issue of food system sustainability. Despite commitments, assessments carried out in the last years have highlighted a series of weaknesses of food-related policies in achieving food system sustainability. Inconsistencies (i.e. policies not pursuing given objectives), incoherencies (i.e. conflicting outcomes between policies) and policy gaps (i.e. missing policy instruments) have emerged. The explanation of the distance between intentions and outcomes is not only to be searched in the failure of single policies but also in the interrelations among them and in the overall infrastructure that links together different policies and aligns their objectives, instruments, implementation measures (Howlett and Rayner, 2007).

This paper has a double aim: it proposes a conceptual framework for policy-led transition towards food systems sustainability in Europe and carries out an assessment of selected policy instruments to support the reasoning proposed. The following set of building blocks of a strategy for transition to sustainable food systems are identified and discussed: i. building (shared) food systems’ representations; ii. setting criteria for food systems’ sustainability assessment; iii. fostering integration and broadening involvement; iv. building a policy mix of policy instruments aligned to sustainability goals, on the supply, the demand side, and specifically directed at the food environment. A selection of policy instruments is assessed for illustrative purposes, aimed at confronting their consistency with a set of overarching policy goals (economic, environmental, social, health, ethical and resilience dimensions) and the impacts, based on available literature; (in)coherences and gaps are identified and discussed, accordingly.

The study shows an imbalance between supply-side and demand-side instruments, while the food environment concept is currently not a clear policy focus. Key actors in the food sector, such as urban municipalities, are not involved in the governance of the policy process, and the coordination between public efforts and private sustainability strategies is not taken into consideration. If sustainability of food systems is to be achieved, a radical revision of the existing policy infrastructure is needed: the introduction of strategic tools – such as the Action Plan and the EU sustainable food scoreboard proposed by the EESC (2017) - would lead to new system representations, set updated policy goals, check the existing policy tools against sustainability goals, identify missing policy tools and mobilize all stakeholders in the construction of a coherent policy mix.

Keywords: food policy, policy mix, policy incoherence, food environment, sustainability, food systems

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