



The EU Vision for Agriculture and Food – and Health?: A Reflection from Healthy Diet, Healthy Life

The European Commission's Vision for Agriculture and Food outlines an ambitious vision for the future of the EU farming and food sectors. At Healthy Diet, Healthy Life (HDHL), we foresee that the Vision will also have a strong impact on the health of European and global populations. Therefore, health needs to be a key consideration of the European Commission's vision, policies and actions moving forward. In this reflection, we outline how the Vision can be strengthened by more explicitly linking agriculture and food policies with health, and by recognising the role of research and innovation in driving this transformation.

Farming and food are of strategic importance to the European Union (EU). They are important drivers of the economic outlook and competitiveness of the EU, but have also been shown to be vulnerable in recent years due to climate and geo-political challenges. We need to change our food production, processing, and consumption to reduce the environmental impact of our food system and to improve health. Furthermore, we need to be cognisant of food systems security and resilience in future scenarios – particularly regarding geo-political and economic challenges.

Vision and priority areas

In this recent communication, the EC sets out a vision to protect and indeed celebrate our farming and food production systems. The vision supports the farming culture and communities, but also challenges the sector to embrace change and adaptation to overcome these challenges. It sets out four fundamental priority areas – attractiveness, competitiveness, future-proofing, and connection. It also presents a roadmap to support a cohesive and joined-up approach for research and innovation (R&I) investment and policy development to address the new realities of this sector.

While this Vision is welcomed by HDHL, we must also consider the gaps, particularly the link between food and health. HDHL's goal – 'Healthy diet, Healthy life, and Healthy Planet for all' – articulates the clear link between food, diet and environmental impact and planetary health. Therefore, we foresee that the Vision for Agriculture and Food will have a key impact on the health of European and global populations. This link between food and health needs to be part of the EC vision, policies and actions moving forward.

Elephants in the room

Global increases in obesity, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and cancer are inherent consequences of poor dietary quality. Conversely, a healthy diet is an enabler of primary prevention of disease. Our diets are closely intertwined with other societal challenges, including those within agriculture and food production. The effect of food production and consumption on biodiversity and climate change, and vice versa, is well established. Therefore, a rapid and positive change in both production and consumption patterns are needed. If we don't address these issues now, we will pay the price later.

This is where HDHL and other European partnerships can play a role. HDHL takes a programmed approach to align national R&I strategies to deliver a better understanding of the relationship between diet, physical activity and health. Providing a framework for coordinated and structured research activities, it connects relevant global and European policy initiatives, like the Sustainable Development Goals, the Rome Declaration on Nutrition and the FOOD2030 policy framework, and now this Vision for Agriculture and Food.

Focusing on 3 strategic research areas - Citizens, diet and behaviour, Food for Health and Diet, and Health and Disease - HDHL supports activities to bridge the vision presented here, and health

outcomes. For example, the EU-funded *HDHL Food4Health* project will address the interconnected challenges of diet-related chronic diseases and climate change, integrating the food and health domains. The project will promote collaboration and knowledge exchange to shift towards a healthier and more sustainable dietary behaviour, ultimately contributing to improved public health and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Future work on ultra processed foods will address the link between the modern food system, sustainability and health.

Unlocking impact and innovation

Urgent transformation of our food systems is essential not only for human and planetary health, but also for European competitiveness. In enhancing competitiveness, there is a need for integrated approaches across sectors and disciplines. HDHL breaks down the siloed approach, avoids duplication, and aligns R&I priorities within the food, health, and agroecology sector. More specifically, HDHL exemplifies its impact by connecting government, industry, and academia and aligns the food and health systems within Horizon Europe partnerships such as *FutureFoodS* and *ERA4Health*, adding value to the partnerships and beyond.

The network's success demonstrates the potential for transformative impact. With over €125 million in funding awarded to 83 research projects and 7 knowledge hubs to date, HDHL showcases how collaborative efforts can drive economic growth, enhance societal well-being, and reduce fragmentation in policy and research. Positioning health at the centre of food systems, we are not only addressing pressing health issues but also creating new market opportunities and strengthening Europe's global standing. Future food, agricultural and public health policies need to recognise this moving forward.

Towards healthy and competitive food systems

At HDHL, we believe we can enable people to live a healthy life on a healthy planet while contributing to Europe's ambition to remain a global leader in science, technology, and sustainability. What we need now is:

- Recognition of the importance of EU's agriculture and food sectors for individual, population and planetary health
- Development of cohesive and integrated agriculture and food & nutrition policies that recognise the link between food and health - and applying a systems thinking approach when developing policies.
- Continued support of, and investment in food systems innovations, to drive a positive and lasting change in our food system.

Together we can make a difference. By linking agriculture, food and health – a food, nutrition and health vision - the European Commission can enable EU citizens to live a healthy life on a healthy planet.

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