



SUMMARY OF EU ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Building pathways towards sustainable food systems and sustainable diets in Europe:
what role for livestock, fish, and alternative proteins?

June 30, 2022, 9.00-13.00
Mundo-J, Bruxelles, Belgium

BACKGROUND

With 'planetary boundaries' being crossed, the climate crisis accelerating, and threats to food security and human health mounting by the day, meat and protein are now firmly in the spotlight. The status quo in animal production systems is clearly not an option, but the way forward is far from clear. A number of diverging and conflicting claims are being put forward about the problems with animal source foods, their alternatives, and how to address them. Plant-based alternatives, lab-grown meat, precision livestock and fish-farming, and regenerative livestock schemes are among the 'solutions' being put forward to address the problems with animal production systems – solutions often being advanced by big meat/seafood firms, with the backing of private investors and growing support from governments. More broadly, support is growing for a 'protein transition' and for the adoption of 'plant-based' or 'plant-rich' diets.

In Europe, policy changes affecting meat and protein are imminent, from support for *protein transition* under the Farm to Fork Strategy to upcoming authorization requests for lab-grown meat. Although debates remain polarized, a growing number of EU actors appear to be converging on the need to move away from highly industrial livestock production, to move towards 'less and better meat and dairy', to adopt diversified, plant-rich diets with less processed foods, and to build healthier 'food environments' that facilitate these choices. But how much consensus is there around this vision? What does it look like in practice (for farmers, fishers, food businesses, consumers, etc.)? Can we trace out a clear reform pathway?

Bringing together a range of scientific organizations, civil society groups, food producer and industry representatives, this roundtable sought to achieve an open discussion of these questions under Chatham House rules, with space for different viewpoints to be heard and understood.

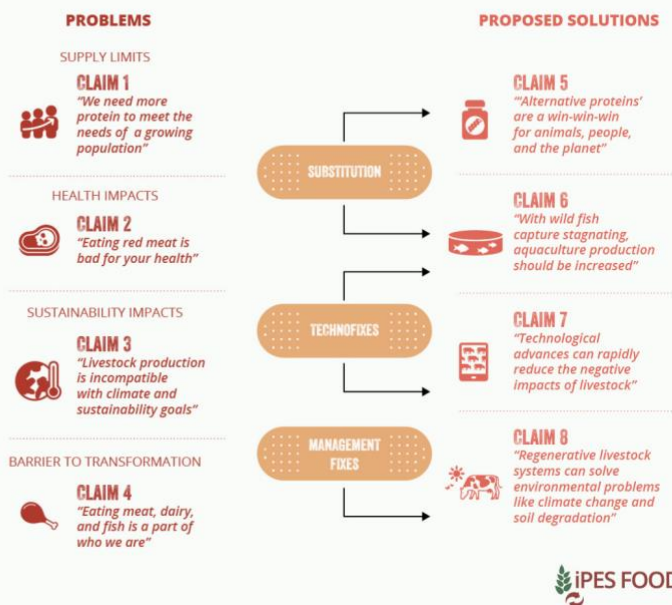


SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

IPES-Food's April 2021 report, *The Politics of Protein*, provided a basis for discussion, and was summarized at the outset in a *PowerPoint presentation*. Referring to the eight claims discussed by IPES-Food (see below), participants were asked to identify the claims they think are most influential (and most misleading) in shaping debates around meat and protein, what questions are being overlooked, and what solutions, approaches, and objectives should guide efforts to build sustainable animal production systems and sustainable healthy diets in Europe.



WE IDENTIFIED EIGHT KEY CLAIMS THAT ARE SETTING THE TERMS OF DEBATE AND DRIVING THESE RESPONSES:



Participants generally agreed that the claims highlighted by IPES-Food are widespread, and often skew discussion towards certain solutions. Misleading statements about **techno-fixes** and silver bullet solutions are regularly encountered. **Concentration of power**, and the ability of powerful actors to set the terms of debate, was highlighted by several discussants as a major concern. A number of participants agreed with the need to challenge misleading **cultural narratives**, highlighting how rapidly food cultures can change and the importance of this lever. The idea of a **'protein obsession'** also resonated with a number of participants, with some identifying positive steps now being taken to use broader metrics and encourage more complex nutritional understanding.



However, several participants highlighted that while simplistic claims about meat and protein dominate media coverage and public debate, **EU-level policy discussion is already more nuanced**. In particular, there is a strong body of evidence in the EU context on the negative health impacts of current animal source food consumption (and fewer misleading claims in this area) – and this should be the baseline for conversations. Participants also highlighted issues that were insufficiently covered by IPES-Food, including animal welfare, and differences between ruminant and monogastric systems (in terms of impacts, political economy, etc.).

Participants highlighted a number of **additional claims** that are being used to shape debates (and in some cases to oppose change), including arguments that 'protein transition can't happen because of employment loss in livestock farming' or that 'action to curb meat consumption will undermine access to healthy diets for low-income populations'.

While participants were broadly supportive of aiming for **'less and better'** meat and dairy in Europe, a number of people highlighted that the focus should be on 'better' to ensure attention to issues like animal welfare and sustainability (with 'less' consumption likely to follow as a function of moving away from industrial production systems). Some highlighted that 'less' can/should be guided by the data on what is required to meet climate objectives and achieve viable agroecological transition pathways. Another participant suggested that livestock numbers should simply be aligned with what soils and ecosystems can support, warning that current attacks on meat are affecting small-scale farmers rather than leading to reductions in industrial livestock. There was broad agreement that clarity is needed on the biophysical parameters within which 'less' should be approached.

Participants generally agreed that **alternative proteins** are part of the solution but not the foundation of it, calling for more emphasis on and promotion of diverse, whole food-based, plant-rich diets – pulses, legumes, lentils etc. There was broad agreement on the dangers of corporate consolidation in meat/dairy *and* alternative protein industries, with some citing patents and genetic techniques as further grounds for caution. Others underlined the need to better leverage private investment (e.g., with regard to ESG) to support plant protein SMEs, arguing that public resources can also help to prevent capture of the alternative protein sector by big meat firms and 'level the playing field' vis a vis animal agriculture. Public funding could be provided, it was argued, without diverting money from elsewhere based on the precedent of biotech investment. There was broad agreement, nonetheless, that accessing funding opportunities is always a challenge for small-scale actors.



Diverse diets, agroecological food systems, and better food environments resonated with many participants as key solutions for sustainable food systems/diets – at least in the medium-to-longer term. Improving food environments was highlighted as a critical lever for making plant-rich diets attractive and avoiding (ineffective) prescriptive approaches.

Nonetheless, some participants warned that holistic transformation pathways will not deliver the **rapid change** that is needed in the face of the climate crisis, underlining the need for investible, scalable solutions with clear data to back them up, and reiterating the potential of alternative proteins as a viable, immediate solution – at least as a first step in changing the habits of heavy meat-eaters, and helping to ensure the overall reduction in meat consumption that is required (in the global North). We need all these solutions in the same way that we need electric vehicles *and* a new transport environment, one participant explained. But all agreed that the right incentives are still far off: **food prices – particularly meat and dairy – do not reflect true costs**, with some participants suggesting that current incentives (e.g., dairy substitutes priced higher than milk) are holding back the adoption of more plant-based diets.

Moving forward, there was general consensus around the need to **understand the behaviors of different consumer groups**, and for *convenience* to be factored into any solution. Participants converged on the need for **careful sequencing** of transition initiatives, the importance of ensuring viable alternative pathways for farmers, and the need to avoid solutions that perpetuate the problematic elements of today's food systems.

In terms of how and by whom solution pathways are devised, one participant questioned why the businesses driving today's problems should be at the table, while another discussant urged consideration of **what is perpetuating unsustainable business models** (shareholder primacy, capitalism, etc.). Participants were skeptical about these questions being comprehensively addressed under the CAP, and uncertain about possibilities under the Farm to Fork Strategy – fearing that it will be watered down.

One participant cautioned that there may be limits to the extent to which organizations can reach agreement on these topics, as their end goals may be divergent. Nonetheless, participants remained broadly **optimistic about the value of ongoing dialogue** on these topics, highlighting the need to bring more groups (e.g., retailers) into future discussions.

The roundtable was composed of participants from the following organizations: BEUC, Compassion in World Farming, COPA-COGECA, ECV, EHN, FAIRR, Food & Drink Europe, GFI, Healthy Food Healthy Planet, IDDRI, IFOAM, IPES-Food, ProVeg, Slow Food, WWF.