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## **8 Political demands to promote socio-ecological innovations**

Policy Brief for the Promotion of Pioneers of the Socio-Ecological Transformation of Food Systems



## Background

This policy brief was developed at the beginning of 2024 in a participatory process involving over 100 pioneers of socio-ecological innovations<sup>1</sup> from all over Europe. It bundles demands for political decision-makers to directly support and promote the implementation of socio-ecological innovations of the food systems.

Food systems in Europe are characterised by their diversity, which results from individual and regional histories, geographical conditions and the distribution of natural resources, among other things. A common feature

found in all countries and regions is the current lack of sustainability across the different stages of the food systems. The ongoing loss of biodiversity, progressive soil degradation, severe pollution and overuse of water as well as the enormous emissions of climate-damaging gases reveal the need for a socio-ecological transformation of the food systems.

The pioneers of socio-ecological transformation show that it is possible to establish a food system that is sustainable, healthy, environmentally friendly and in line with planetary

boundaries. The potential of these initiatives to contribute to sustainable system change unfolds especially well when these innovative practices find the optimal time to enter the mainstream and spread. This is supported by findings of transformation research. As the initiatives grow and connect with other pioneers, the likelihood that they can bring about lasting change in the food system increases. Despite the existence of numerous socio-ecological innovations in Europe, they are still often underrepresented in political awareness and public discourse. It is up to political decision-makers to change this underrepresentation in order to contribute to the necessary

transformation of the European food system and to strengthen the pioneers and their work.

The eight demands listed below are primarily aimed at political decision-makers who should contribute to removing the hurdles and obstacles that the pioneers of socio-ecological transformation face. Political decision-makers should support the pioneers in promoting the spread of socio-ecological innovations and thus accelerate the urgently needed, sustainable transformation of food systems.

<sup>1</sup> Socio-ecological innovations in the food system comprise new approaches, products, practices or models that aim to make the food system more sustainable. They combine ecological compatibility and social justice and are initiated by various groups of actors such as state and civil society actors, transformative companies as well as individuals and their consumption decisions. Examples of this include initiatives such as "community supported agriculture", "food policy councils" and the "edible cities" concept.

Societal challenges such as climate change are increasing the urgency for alternative solutions. The dissemination and networking of numerous socio-ecological innovations increases the potential to bring about sustainable adjustments in the food system.

# 1

## Recognising Socio-Ecological Innovations as Drivers of Transformation

Socio-ecological innovations are tried and tested practices and drivers of the transformation of food systems and should be given greater political recognition and support due to their significant importance.

To this end, an improved exchange between the pioneers and political decision-makers must be established. This should serve to ensure that the concerns and demands of the pioneers are taken into account in political decision-making processes.





## Financial Support for Practice and Research

Unbureaucratic financial support for the practical work of innovative small associations, organisations and companies is fundamental to the progress of the socio-ecological transformation of food systems. At present, the development and often the work itself is carried out solely on a voluntary basis. There is an urgent need to strengthen and secure these structures with paid contributors.

Funding and subsidies could be awarded specifically for socio-ecological innovations in disadvantaged regions, e.g. for so-called “solidarity tables” that

supply people in disadvantaged regions with food. The funding modalities should have such low-thresholds that access is also possible for small projects and organisations.

Funding for research projects concerning the sustainability and impact of individual socio-ecological innovations should also be made possible or increased. Funding should be long-term and it should be ensured that the findings are not lost after the end of the project.

# 3

## Fostering Cooperation and Networking

Cooperation and networks play a major role for many pioneers. They not only serve the exchange of content and expertise, but also involve the joint use of resources.

The development of networks between projects of one type of innovation as well as overarching and interdisciplinary networks should therefore be supported financially, as should existing networks.

It is also important to promote exchange between actors from different process stages or professional fields such as farmers and researchers.

Cooperation and networking at regional level should also be supported. To this end, it is helpful to provide regional infrastructure, such as premises for shared and diverse use depending on the innovation, e.g. for washing and packaging facilities, communal kitchens

and storage rooms. Shared logistics can contribute to supporting the pioneers, for example by providing shared vehicles. In addition, unused public spaces can be made available for the activities and thus contribute to the common good of a regionally more sustainable food system.

Political decision-makers can ensure that laws and good practice examples from other countries and regions are used to learn from them and adapt them to the prevailing conditions in their own country, such as the existing legal regulations on bio-districts in Italy.

To facilitate (international) cooperation, political decision-makers can contribute to the establishment of standards (in the sense of good practices), for example concerning the use of data and data protocols.

Increased promotion of improved accessibility and protection against privatisation, as promoted by concepts such as "open source", "free software"

or "open access", also contributes to intensifying cooperation and should be supported by political decision-makers.

# 4

## Promoting Regional, Seasonal and Organic Food

The promotion of food systems based on seasonal, regional and ecological aspects not only benefits the environment, but also promotes the development of socio-ecological innovations, for example in the context of bio-districts, community supported agriculture, Regionalwert AG or the so-called edible cities.

Important measures to promote the consumption of regional food include, for example, the low-threshold promotion of special ecological services in the production of regional food and the mandatory introduction of menus with regional, seasonal and ecological ingredients in communal catering facilities. Regional food should always be both a cost-effective and convenient choice for consumers.

In addition, municipal laws can promote local food supply chains, for example by the regulation of fees at markets or stall allocation at local festivals and events.

To further promote regionality, local politicians in particular can help to improve the image of their own region (possibly in synergy with strengthening sustainable tourism) and thus increase consumers' willingness to support their own region.

The intensification of trade relations between regional producers and consumers not only affects the food trade, but also gastronomy and community catering. In these sectors, for example, municipal legislation could promote local food supply chains.



# 5

## Improving Access to Land

Pioneers of socio-ecological transformation often have difficulties gaining access to land as they are unable to pay high rental or purchase prices. This is due to small production volumes and the use of sustainable practices, among other things.

By implementing sustainability criteria for land allocation, it can be ensured that, on the one hand, use is in line with ecological principles and, on the other, that small and sustainable enterprises have a better chance of gaining access

to land. Furthermore, framework conditions should be designed in such a way that long-term land use is possible.

One approach would be to protect land from market forces by giving it to trusts or legal forms oriented towards the common good and to facilitate access to land for pioneers of the food system transformation. Public funding should support citizen-led and community-oriented forms of land ownership in the start-up phase.

# 6

## Promoting Small and Sustainable Enterprises

Socio-ecological innovations usually start small. Even if they have proven themselves, they are often decentralised and operate only in their regional context. Actors who follow these pioneers also usually start small. In addition, their innovative actions often do not fall into traditional funding and subsidy schemes (such as the CAP). However, in order to support these important drivers of the transformation of the food system, it is necessary to promote small and sustainable enterprises at all stages of the value chain.

Measures which simplify compliance with food safety requirements and reduce bureaucratic hurdles, such as

building permits, are needed to facilitate pioneering work. In addition, the path to certification (for example with the organic label) should be made easier for small companies, which often have limited resources.

Higher taxation for companies that do not operate in a socially and ecologically sustainable manner could generate additional tax revenue, which in turn could be used to finance socio-ecological innovations. In this way, sustainable business practices would be promoted and companies would be motivated to integrate social and ecological standards.



## Use Educational Measures to Increase Willingness to Pay

Consumers' willingness to pay has a direct impact on demand for the products offered by actors in the socio-ecological transformation (for example, the products of community supported farms or agroforestry systems). Educational measures create the possibility that consumers' willingness to pay will be guided more towards the sustainability of the products.

It is important that consumers are informed about unsustainable, unfair and antisocial food production practices along the entire value chain and that they can develop an idea of what characterises sustainable products and what prices are appropriate for

sustainable and fairly produced food.

Consumers must be able to obtain information on the quality of individual products, also with regard to ecological, economic and social aspects.

Political decision-makers can promote consumers' willingness to pay through various information offers, information campaigns, labels, apps and other digital applications. In addition, dietary education and educational programs on sustainable food systems should be an integral part of teaching at schools and universities.

# 8

## Improve Payment Possibilities

Improving consumers' willingness to pay is not enough if the consumers do not have the appropriate payment possibilities. These must also be improved. This can be achieved, for example, by basing consumption taxes on sustainability aspects of food, which leads to a reduction in prices for food

produced according to sustainable criteria.

Furthermore, the payment possibilities of financially disadvantaged households can be improved through a variety of other measures.

# The signing organizations and companies

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