

SHIFTING DIETS FOR HEALTH AND CLIMATE

Current European diets are not in line with dietary recommendations. While meat intake levels exceed recommendations by [2–4 times](#), Europeans do not eat the [recommended portions](#) of other food groups such as fruit and vegetables. In most European countries surveys show that diets consist of excessive amounts of calories and saturated fats, trans fats, and are high in salt and sugar. Besides increasing the risk of [non-communicable diseases](#), current European diets fuel the [obesity crisis](#) with over half of the EU population being overweight. This number is increasing rapidly, especially among more vulnerable groups. Unhealthy diets also have a higher environmental impact and contribute to higher emissions.

Shifting to healthier and more plant-based diets – rich in vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts and whole-grains – can have a positive impact on health, the planet and animals. However, consumer food choices are shaped by food environments¹ which currently do not ensure that the healthy and sustainable option is always the easiest one for consumers.



What role do the agriculture and food sectors play in reducing GHG emissions?

Agriculture is responsible for [10.3% of the EU's greenhouse gas \(GHG\) emissions](#) and nearly 70% of those come from the animal sector, with the livestock sector being one of the largest emitters of methane, a significant contributor to GHG emissions. Studies have shown that adopting more agroecological practices in the EU while phasing out vegetable protein imports for feed and adopting more plant-based diets with 'less and better' animal products can **reduce GHG emissions from the agricultural sector by around 40%** while maintaining food security. Transitioning to more plant-based diets and reducing livestock numbers would also free up land used for grazing and cropland for growing feed, that could be converted into forest and grassland for the benefit of the ecosystem.

¹ Food environments are the "physical, economic, political and sociocultural context in which consumers engage with the food system to make their decisions about acquiring, preparing and consuming food". HLPF. 2017. [Nutrition and food systems. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security](#), Rome, September 2017

What role do diets play in reducing GHG emissions?

Dietary patterns have a significant impact on climate and changing these has great potential to reduce GHG emissions. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recognised that changes to lifestyles and behaviour, including shifting to sustainable healthy diets, can result in a [40–70% drop in GHG emissions](#) worldwide by 2050, while also improving health and wellbeing. Similarly, the European Commission's 2030 climate target Communication noted the great climate mitigation potential from changing consumer choices towards healthy diets – in the same order of magnitude as technical options available to reduce emissions in the agriculture sector.² A recent study even estimated that the adoption of more plant-based diets in Germany could lead to [reductions in GHG emissions of 29–53%](#) compared to a 2050 baseline – versus 5–10% only for technological improvements at the farm level, and 8–12% for reductions in food loss and waste.



What needs to be done?

Changing dietary habits, is not always easy for consumers. [Two-thirds of consumers](#) are willing to change their food habits for environmental reasons – but in practice, many of them struggle to turn their sustainable eating goals into action. Price, lack of knowledge, the challenge of identifying sustainable (including climate-friendly) food options as well as their limited availability are the main perceived barriers. **Food and climate policies must recognise the central role of 'food environments'** that [drive consumer food choices](#) and that currently push consumers towards unhealthy, unsustainable and high emission foods.



In order for Europe to achieve its health, sustainability and climate targets, the healthy and sustainable (incl. climate-friendly) food choice must become the most available, affordable, promoted, and desirable option.

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0562> It added that "a strong decrease of consumption of animal products for nutrition could potentially reduce emissions by more than 30 million tonnes by 2030" (compared to 2020)

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