

Farm to Fork Strategy: Consumer Co-operatives as Key Actors in Bringing about the Change

- ❖ Consumer co-operatives are **owned and managed** by their consumer-members. This ensures, per se, people-focused operations, consumer engagement and community belonging.
- ❖ Abiding by a **strict set of principles and values**, among which democracy, equality, solidarity and concern for the community means sustainability is a definitory element of our identity, resulting in an inherent **environmental and social** function. This distinguishes us.
- ❖ **Labelling, education, and information** are essential tools for the promotion of sustainable food systems. Yet, the food environment must become inherently sustainable for the **cheapest and easiest choice** to be the **most sustainable** one.
- ❖ **Revitalising rural areas** should be given **a prominent focus in Strategy**. We can play an important role in the promotion of **rural entrepreneurship, business development and employment generation**, and hence, be part of the solution.
- ❖ **Stringent commitments to ensuring consumers and primary producers are protected from AMR**. Consumer co-operatives design and implement prevention plans where good animal health and welfare standards go hand in hand with antibiotics reduction policies.
- ❖ **National dietary guidelines** should be reviewed and harmonised taking into account **environmental considerations** and other facets of sustainability.
- ❖ The Strategy needs to apply the **circularity** principle and go beyond reducing loss and waste. The **post-consumer** implications of resource re-usage should be addressed.

Consumer Co-operatives: Engines of Sustainable Development

Engines of sustainability already exist. As operators in retail, consumer co-operatives utilize their **distinct** business model to engage, galvanize, inform and **empower consumers**, while fostering **social responsibility** and **community belonging**.

Being member-owned and democratically governed ensures the **participation of consumers in the decision-making process** and, thus, in the shaping of the food supply chain. Our governance model translates into a sustainable and responsible **business conduct** enshrined in the organisations' Statutes. As such, **consumer co-operatives are proven enablers of sustainable food systems as per the triple bottom line**.

From a 'Farm to Fork' perspective, consumer co-operatives are a natural connector among every actor of the supply chain: on one side, their **direct and long-term partnerships with primary producers** foster sustainable

farming and fishing practices, and on the other, their **in-store initiatives facilitate more responsible patterns of consumption** by increasing availability and access to healthy, sustainable and nutritious foods.

Championing **radical transparency** across the entire supply chain as means of maintaining **highest consumer trust**, Co-op own-brand products prioritize **shorter supply chains**, responsible sourcing and **fair price policies** to contribute to the livelihood of both primary producers in the farming and fishing sectors and consumers.

The core mission remains **servicing our consumer-members** by meeting their needs and aspirations, enabling their **informed choices** underpinned by transparent labelling and innovative packaging solutions, which also enable proper recycling. Co-op own brand products represent the means to operationalise our **principles, values and ethics**. Co-ops' **societal commitment** also sees decades-long programmes for developing school materials and vigorous awareness-raising of societal challenges, such as combating food waste and obesity, especially among children.

Key Priorities within the Farm to Fork Strategy

1. The Strategy should reference examples of business models, such as consumer co-operative, conducive to the sustainability triple bottom line. A first step in this direction has already been taken by the European Economic and Social Committee, which in one of its **Opinions** stipulates: “Recently, various kinds of re-organisation of the food supply chain have occurred, with the aim of re-connecting producers and consumers and re-localising agricultural and food production. These include community-supported agriculture, short supply chains, alternative food networks, local farming systems and direct sales. **Consumer cooperatives can also play a key role by ensuring a strong connection with the community as well as a social, educational and environmental focus.**”¹ An acknowledgement within the F2F Strategy would greatly facilitate achieving the Green Deal ambitions by calling for appropriate support for consumer co-operatives.

2. A prominent focus devoted to information and education as they are key aspects for effective change. For decades, consumer co-operatives across Europe have carried out major campaigns informing and educating consumers about the benefits of **healthier and more sustainable shopping**, and ensuring that in-store product offer reflects this commitment. In particular, consumer co-operatives pioneered the uptake of organic and Fairtrade labelled goods and, thanks to their regional and local presence, favoured the distribution of locally-sourced products in specific areas. For these reasons, consumer co-operatives understand the importance of providing more information on the **origin** of food, as a means of responding to the increasing demand for full **traceability** of the products, as well as to championing radical transparency business policies. This objective could be fulfilled for example by **extending** the EU origin labelling requirements to meat in the catering sector, meat used as an ingredient in processed food, milk and milk used in dairy products. We also recognise that EU countries should be allowed to extend mandatory origin labelling to other foods, if justified by specific national exigence.

¹ NAT/711-EESC-2017-02234-00-00-AC-TRA; “Civil society's contribution to the development of a comprehensive food policy in the EU (own-initiative opinion)”; pg. 14.

3. Mandatory front of pack (FOP) nutritional labelling and nutrient profiles. At present, it has become evident that more needs to be done to curb the obesity pandemic. Nutritional labelling is an effective tool to increase **consumers' awareness** about the **importance of healthy eating**. However, it should be made easier for them to assess the overall nutritional value and compare within the same categories of products. In light of this, a **mandatory** FOP colour-coded labelling scheme should be introduced in each EU country with efforts to ensure the highest possible degree of **harmonisation**. Furthermore, this strategy offers the opportunity to establish nutrient profiles under the Nutrition and Health Claim regulation. It is important to note that the right choice should not be left on the shoulders of the sole consumer and efforts must be done for the food environments to be **inherently sustainable** so that the cheapest and easiest choice becomes the most sustainable one.

4. Revitalising rural areas through sustainable food systems is of critical importance to achieving the Strategy and the Green Deal's ambitions. Consumer co-operatives are locally-rooted, providing services to their members but also contributing to social protection to the local communities. They are traditional actors in the **promotion of rural entrepreneurship, business development and employment generation**: all functions which should be further **recognised and supported** in pursuit of rural areas becoming economically attractive, counter forcing urbanisation while promoting an enhanced territorial cohesion and overall sustainability. In this regard, **a level-playing-field which recognises the consumer co-operative distinctiveness and a toolkit to address their challenges** are essential to maximise their contribution to the Strategy's objectives, in particular, and the Green Deal ambitions, in general; as such business models are subjected to competition from other operators which are not bound by the same social and environmental statutory engagements.

5. Stringent commitments to ensuring consumers and primary producers are protected from AMR. Consumer co-operatives design and implement prevention plans where good animal health and welfare standards go hand in hand with antibiotics reduction policies to eliminate the economic and health risks associated with the presence of antimicrobial resistant bacteria in food and animals. Strict protocols to minimise the need of antibiotics in both terrestrial and aquatic species cover disease prevention through enforced biosecurity, better animal husbandry conditions and hygiene and vaccination. To guarantee product quality, enhanced cooperation with suppliers and stringent independent auditing are crucial and consistently applied. Traditionally, our members constantly invest in awareness raising campaigns to foster trust and understanding around the issue.

6. Harmonisation of National Sustainable Dietary Guidelines. National dietary guidelines should be reviewed taking into account **environmental considerations** and other facets of sustainability. The guidelines should have as a common denominator a clear set of specific nutritional and sustainability indications, such as, the consumption of higher intake of fruits and vegetables (between 400 gr and 500 gr per person per day²). The guidelines' recommendations should however also guarantee a certain degree of differentiation so to reflect **regional and local nutritional specificities**, with a specific attention to **seasonality** and their diversity. Consumer co-operatives' experience shows that shaping national dietary recommendations on the basis of countries' traditional regional and local cuisine and food products would increase consumers' acceptability and encourage short supply chains.

² WHO (2018) Healthy Diet. Fact sheet No. 394 and Willett et al. (2019) Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. The Lancet

7. Foster sustainable and healthy food environments. Key for change is to ensure healthy and sustainable food options are available, affordable and attractive to consumers. This would require numerous actions in diverse relevant sectors, as well as the commitments and cooperation of a wide range of actors. Consumer co-operatives support audiovisual communications and digital marketing strategies aiming to foster **healthy eating patterns** and to **restrict promotion** of HFSS products, especially to children and teenagers.

8. It is adamant to apply the Circular Economy thinking. It is not sufficient to arrive at the consumer level: the post-consumer implications needs to be considered and carefully evaluated to reach **a full circularity** and **a true paradigm shift**. Consumer co-operatives voluntarily prioritise circularity in their resource (re)usage. Such know-how is and should be further **promoted** through, for example, the EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste or the Circular Plastics Alliance, and where appropriate, **give basis for legislative action**.
