

Full focus on sustainability



Sebastian Emig

reflects on the new initiatives our industry is taking to promote more sustainable food systems

THE European Commission launched the Code of Conduct for Responsible Business and Marketing Practices at the start of the year. It is one of the first deliverables of the EU's flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork strategy, and reflects the goals and ambitions at the heart of the European Green Deal.

The Code will set out actions that actors throughout the supply chain - including food processors, food service operators and retailers - can take voluntarily to tangibly improve and communicate how their actions impact on sustainability and contribute to sustainable food systems. It will consider economic, social and environmental factors, so it might include tackling areas such as food waste, nutrition, biodiversity, sustainable diets, climate, deforestation, sustainable agriculture and more. Organisations can implement some of these actions directly within their own operations. Other actions may be designed to encourage collaboration with industry peers and other food system stakeholders such as farmers and consumers to affect more wide-ranging changes.

The Code aims to facilitate sustainable practices across all relevant actors in the food system and make it easier for consumers to choose healthy and sustainable diets.

It invites companies and other actors related to food systems to voluntarily put forward ambitious sustainability commitments that are tangible, quantifiable (if possible) and measurable.

Since the beginning of the process and over recent months, ESA played an active part in a tour de force of working group meetings that were dedicated to one pillar of the Code; namely "food consumption patterns (for healthy and sustainable diets)". Together with our members we helped draft, shape and design the final version of the Code launched on 5 July, ready for the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit in the autumn. The Code sets seven objectives, accompanied by aspirational targets and indicative actions, covering the three pillars of sustainability (environmental, social, economic):

1. Healthy, balanced and sustainable diets for all European consumers
2. Prevention and reduction of food loss and waste
3. A climate-neutral food chain in Europe by 2050
4. An optimised circular and resource-efficient food chain
5. Sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all
6. Sustainable value creation in the European food supply chain through partnership
7. Sustainable sourcing in food supply chains

The Code does not pretend to be a golden bullet. Rather it is a set of complementary measures that will roll out in step with the many legislative initiatives that are part of the Farm to Fork strategy. It aims to build a strong momentum and inspire food actors of all sizes and categories to integrate sustainability into their business strategies. It will also help them transition into agents of change that can lead the way in answering the sustainability challenge.

The ESA Secretariat, together with our members, are determined to do our part to move towards more sustainable food systems, building on the significant achievements of recent years. There is a need for a holistic, fair and coordinated approach. We believe that food systems should be sustainable, climate-adapted, nutritious and efficient while not losing sight of small-scale producers. This transition requires engagement and co-operation from all actors throughout the food supply chain and beyond, both individually and collectively, at national, regional and global level. The European savoury snacks industry looks forward to joining forces with allies within and beyond the food supply chain to support this transition and further demonstrate the sector's ambition - quite literally from farm to packet!

Our recently published infographic illustrates the key steps and main target areas for action from our members.

In addition, we have developed with the help of our members an internal overview of 12 ESA aspirational commitments inspired by the three

thematic pillars of the Code. Bearing in mind our diverse membership and the acknowledged complexity of establishing sector-wide commitments, these are meant to provide a framework for members to identify their own most relevant areas for action and facilitate the implementation of concrete initiatives. The commitments are designed to be as inclusive as possible for the membership, allowing every member to contribute to one or more of the aspirational commitments. As per the requirement of the Code, we will submit a monitoring report every year, reflecting on what members have achieved and illustrated by concrete examples, stories and best practices.

The inclusive nature of our internal aspirational commitments means there is a way for every ESA member to make a meaningful contribution by assessing ways to improve sustainability in their own operations and in partnership with suppliers, customers and consumers.

I warmly invite you to join the Code of Conduct for Responsible Business and Marketing Practices, which is an opportunity to show your company's commitment to sustainability.

IS THE GREEN DEAL KNITTED WITH A TOO-HOT NEEDLE?

Before the summer, I came across an article about EU politics in a well-known news provider. The article claimed that delivering on the numerous promises of the European Green Deal is putting Commission staff under increased pressure. According to an internal source the workload is "insane", "deadlines are often impossible [to meet]" and "colleagues [are] in burnout".

The Green Deal contains hundreds of legislative (ordinary and secondary) proposals and initiatives and aims to make the EU

climate-neutral by 2050. It is causing strong internal concerns. The process involves revising existing legislation to integrate several new strategies and proposals into existing rules. Since the Commission wants to put forward all proposals by the end of its term in 2024, this already time-consuming work is putting enormous pressure on civil servants that often have just a few months to draft impact assessments that would usually take several more months or a year. This extra stress is already resulting in delays for several pieces of legislation.

Apparently, there are also no resources to hire additional staff owing to budget constraints, which leads to the bizarre situation that the Commission is currently offering managers training in how to deal with colleagues' burnout.

The problem is likely to increase as we shift from the legislation drafting phase to the implementation phase. Several pieces of legislation within the Green Deal require additional oversight and enforcement, again increasing the workload and threatening to overwhelm staff and create further backlogs unless more resources are made available.

Matjaž Malgaj, the head of unit in the Commission's environment department, said: "It simply will not be credible to set out the ambition that we did [under the Green Deal] without having a proper improvement in how things are enforced."

Meanwhile, EU lawmakers in the European Parliament such as Renew Europe MEP Martin Hojsik are very conscious of the difficult situation inside the Commission: "We see legislative proposals and policy actions being postponed, we hear about officials burning out or running away ... The European Green Deal is the flagship of this Commission, the institution should adapt its HR strategy accordingly."

In light of this uncontrolled avalanche of law-making that is apparently suffocating Commission officials, I wonder about the quality of some of the resulting proposals. Are proper stakeholder consultations planned and executed? Has an aligned impact assessment been performed? Is all the robust and peer-reviewed scientific data and evidence being properly taking into consideration for each topic? Will the European Parliament and Council have the time to adequately assess and review the proposals?

It is important to remember that well-prepared and sensible proposals tend to get adopted faster and implemented better. In contrast, politically inspired proposals that lack baseline evidence and are "moulded in the fire of political adrenaline", tend to be received poorly by the Council and the Parliament. These are the measures most likely to be sent back to the Commission for an overhaul. Furthermore, relevant external stakeholders such as civil society, industry, universities and so on will not have the time or resources to keep pace with the Commission, resulting in an insufficient, ineffective and ultimately unsatisfactory proposal that is even more likely to be rejected by the Council and Parliament. What's more, if an ill-thought-out proposal does make it through and becomes law, the consequences for external stakeholders could be disastrous. That would then require urgent revision of the unsuitable legislation. ●



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