



fighting heart disease  
and stroke  
european heart network

## MAKE THE EU COMMON AGRICULTURE POLICY WORK FOR CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH

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### BACKGROUND

The Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) was the cornerstone of the European Economic Community (EEC) established by the 1957 Treaty of Rome.<sup>1</sup> At the time of its introduction, CAP was not designed primarily to address any nutritional issues. Nevertheless, the focus on priorities for subsidies did take into account original public health nutritional analyses of the need for hungry people to have more food energy, whether as fat or sugar, and for children's growth animal protein was already recognised as beneficial.

Since the introduction of the CAP, health and societal needs have changed dramatically. As, broadly speaking, CAP can define which products are produced and promoted, with big retailers having a major influence over which products are finally going to reach consumers and at what price, there is debate about the extent to which CAP promotes unhealthy diets and cardiovascular disease as well as other diet-related NCDs.

A cardiovascular health-promoting diet means a shift towards a more plant-based diet. It includes vegetables, fruit and berries in abundance. Whole grain products, nuts and seeds, fish, pulses, low-fat dairy products are also important, as are non-tropical vegetable oils in modest amounts. This everyday dietary pattern limits consumption of red meat, processed meat products and foods or drinks with low content of vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre and/or a high content of free sugars, saturated/trans fats or salt.

Yet, CAP has been shown to promote the production of beef and dairy products – both being sources of saturated fat – and therefore a driver of the huge effort in cereal production<sup>2</sup>, 70% of which goes into animal feeding, a use which is highly inefficient. Only after 2008 was fruit and vegetable production subsidised (rather than having fruit destroyed to prevent it reaching the market).<sup>3</sup> It was estimated that approximately 5 000 deaths from heart disease and 2 000

<sup>1</sup> Kay, A. *The reform of the Common Agricultural Policy: the case of the MacSharry reforms*. CAB INTERNATIONAL (CAB INTERNATIONAL, 1998)

<sup>2</sup> Birt C. A CAP on health? The impact of the EU common agricultural policy on public health. (2007).

<sup>3</sup> DG Agriculture and Rural Development. The 2007 reform. (European Commission, 2007)

stroke deaths were directly attributable to an inadequate fruit and vegetable supply.<sup>4</sup> It was also estimated that 7 000 deaths from heart disease per year and 2 000 stroke deaths could be prevented if CAP removed subsidies from products rich in saturated fat like beef and milk.<sup>5</sup>

The availability of low-cost and safe food remains an essential priority for a large share of the population.<sup>6</sup> However, the quality of food, production methods and their impact on the environment, animal welfare, biotechnology, and fair trade are also now seen as priorities.

The current CAP is the outcome of a long historical process and an accumulation of policy devices in response to emerging problems, but mostly focused around markets. Hitherto, despite all the reforms, CAP is still disconnected from nutrition and public health policies and often contradicts other EU policies that deal with competition<sup>7</sup> and consumer protection.<sup>8</sup>

The CAP, now under reform, can facilitate a transition toward healthier more sustainable diets.

## **BROAD RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A HEALTHIER COMMON AGRICULTURE POLICY**

### **1. Agriculture and food policy to align with public health policies and promote sustainable food production**

Public health policymakers need to collaborate with agriculture, food and trade policymakers to ensure that all citizens have access to nutritious and affordable food.

### **2. Shorter supply chains/food price reductions**

Farmers should be encouraged to create shorter supply chains for their products as that would give them higher prices for local purchases and thereby more bargaining power. This would help with consumers having access to fresh, local, seasonal produce at lower prices because the extra marketing costs etc. of the retailers would be limited and farmers could obtain higher prices for their produce. Food wastage could also be reduced with the use of a shorter supply chain. By avoiding large multi-national retailers, consumers' money spent on local food and local retailers would stay in the community. Overall food prices could be reduced which will have a great impact on poorer consumers that are also mostly affected by cardiovascular disease. Society would also benefit from not having to fund food support programmes for the poorer and vulnerable sectors of the population.

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<sup>4</sup> Pomerleau, J., Lock, K. & McKee, M. The burden of cardiovascular disease and cancer attributable to low fruit and vegetable intake in the European Union: differences between old and new Member States. *Public Health Nutr.* 9, 575–583 (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd-Williams, F. et al. Estimating the cardiovascular mortality burden attributable to the European Common Agricultural Policy on dietary saturated fats. *Bull. World Health Organ.* 86, 535–541A (2008).

<sup>6</sup> European Commission (DG Competition). Working Paper: The interface between EU competition policy and the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP): Competition rules applicable to cooperation agreements between farmers in the dairy sector. (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Mytton, O. T., Clarke, D. & Rayner, M. Taxing unhealthy food and drinks to improve health. *BMJ* 344, e2931 (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Birt C. A CAP on health? The impact of the EU common agricultural policy on public health. (2007).

### **3. Sustainable food production to align with sustainable dietary guidelines across Europe**

There is a need to encourage consumers to demand healthful sustainable foods and meals. This could be achieved by: 1) promoting consumer awareness of a healthful sustainable diet through the sustainable dietary guidelines; and 2) increasing demand for producers to grow and sell fresh seasonal fruits and vegetables more directly to the consumer.

## **SKSPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A HEALTHIER COMMON AGRICULTURE POLICY**

### **1. Link CAP promotion budget to dietary guidelines**

The CAP supports promotional campaigns for European agricultural. Product promotion should be seen as an opportunity to drive a transition towards more diverse, sustainable and healthy diets.

Ways to link product promotion measures better to products whose enhanced consumption is likely to contribute to more diverse, sustainable and healthy diets should be considered. Products should include vegetables and fruit, pulses, nuts, whole grains, fish from aquaculture conforming to environmental, welfare and food safety standards, nutritious varieties of cereals etc.

### **2. Apply nutrition criteria to the School fruit and milk schemes**

Through the voluntary School fruit and milk scheme, the CAP co-funds the distribution of fruit and vegetables and milk and milk products to children.

Products distributed in the framework of the School scheme should respect nutrition criteria so as to avoid that products, which have too high levels of salt, saturated fat and/or added sugar, are distributed to children under the EU co-financing regime.

### **3. Introduce a new voluntary scheme supporting public procurement of fruit and vegetables**

Taking the School fruit scheme as an example, inclusion of a new voluntary measure with the aim to support Member States in rolling-out ambitious food procurement policies for unprocessed/minimally processed fruit, vegetables, pulses and nuts could be considered.

Such scheme has the added value of being wider in scope and bigger in scale than the School scheme with potentially strong positive impact on both consumption levels and incentives to the European fruit and vegetables sectors.

### **4. Abolish voluntary coupled support for animal products and sugar beet**

In the past, the bulk of support under the CAP was coupled to specific food products and was implemented in a way that led to the now infamous food mountains. In a wave of reforms that started in the 1990s support was ‘decoupled’ from production and, as is the case at present,

became linked to the ownership of land. Nevertheless, the current CAP allows Member States to couple some of the money to production levels, including for animal products (in practice beef, veal, milk and milk products receive the bulk of support) and sugar beet.

Providing production support to these products is inconsistent with a need to more plant-based diets, and reduce sugar intake. Supporting rural communities where extensive livestock keeping is important for the maintenance of socio-economic and cultural fabric and to help perpetuate permanent grasslands with biodiversity gains should receive special attention.



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