

Mapping of EU policies on Sustainable Food Consumption

Key findings from the CUES policy mapping (2015–2025) — briefing for the Policy Dialogue on Sustainable Food Consumption, Budapest, 29–30 September 2026

Why this mapping was done

Consumers' Understanding of Eating Sustainably (CUES) is a Horizon Europe project building a more sustainable food system by focusing on consumers, one of the main levers being public policy. But the European Union's (EU)'s food sustainability policy landscape is large and fragmented. This mapping, published February 2026, fills that gap: this systematic, evidence-based review of a decade of EU sustainable food policy, benchmarked against national good practice, shows where EU policy engages substantively and where it falls short.

Policies' selection criteria

The mapping covers both published (adopted) and unpublished (proposed, withdrawn or stalled) EU legal acts from 2015–2025, across three Parliament legislatures. Unpublished initiatives were included deliberately, as they reveal what the EU was willing to attempt even where resistance later blocked it, and, as shown below, they're consistently more ambitious than what becomes law. More than 1,500 documents were screened for relevance, producing a final set of 78 published and 23 unpublished policies (101 total), each assigned to one of six thematic codes (citizens' initiatives, health claims, food labelling, monitoring, agroecological practices, food environments). All 101 were also searched for 34 keywords across five themes (environment, consumers, value chains, cross-cutting issues, health), generating exact frequency counts.



Policies analysed

The 101 policies span six governance approaches ("codes"), each representing a different way EU policy tries to shape sustainable consumption. Ranked by relevance to CUES's aims:

Food labelling and consumer information (17 published + 5 unpublished), the largest relevant group. Covers geographical indications, organic labelling, pesticide and environmental-impact disclosure, and consumer-safety rules. Most of this group informs consumers about sustainability; very few actively promote sustainable or ethical consumption outright, only one published policy (the green-transition empowerment directive) does so directly.

Policies analysed

Promotion of agroecological practices, including research (9 published + 10 unpublished), large-scale research and innovation programmes (PRIMA, LIFE, Horizon Europe) plus environmental-management standards. Published policies fund research; unpublished initiatives (Farm to Fork, the Green Deal, the Biodiversity Strategy) go further, targeting whole food systems directly, this is where EU ambition is most visible on paper.

Monitoring and compliance (14 published + 7 unpublished), animal welfare and plant-health rules, organic-production standards, sustainability reporting, unfair trading practices, and a ban on forced-labour products. Published policies concentrate on food safety and organic certification; unpublished initiatives reach further into soil health, unsustainable fishing and packaging waste.

Support for citizens' initiatives (7 published, 0 unpublished, active only 2018–2022), formal registration of citizen-led proposals (e.g. on pesticide phase-out, mandatory origin labelling, wider availability of vegan alternatives). Important because they meet both CUES relevance criteria at once, but limited in practice, registration creates no legal obligation to act, and none of the seven led to binding legislation.

Food environments (0 published, 1 unpublished), the only code with essentially no published policy at all. This is the code that shapes consumption through everyday settings (schools, canteens, procurement) rather than through information, and its near-total absence in published law is itself one of the report's central findings.

Health claims (31 published, 0 unpublished — the single largest code, but least relevant), authorisations or refusals of specific claims (e.g. whether olive-leaf water may claim to reduce glucose intolerance). Included because it shows how much EU bandwidth goes to health communication that never engages with sustainability or ethics at all — a structural separation the report returns to repeatedly.

How the policy landscape changed

Across three Commission mandates, the centre of gravity shifted markedly: 2014–2019 (Juncker European Commission) concentrated overwhelmingly on food labelling and research funding, with almost no food-environment or monitoring measures, a pattern the report attributes directly to the “Better Regulation” agenda's preference for soft, market-compatible tools. 2019–2024 (von der Leyen I European Commission) is when food-environment and monitoring measures first appear in volume, driven by the European Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy, the most ambitious period in the dataset, but also the period with the largest gap between announced and delivered measures (roughly half of Farm to Fork's 31 actions were not delivered). 2024–2029 (von der Leyen II European Commission) opens with the Vision for Agriculture and Food explicitly re-centring priorities on competitiveness and resilience rather than consumption-shaping regulation, signalling a lower-ambition trajectory for this mandate so far.

The pattern that emerges : measures that inform consumers (labelling, organic certification, greenwashing bans) pass relatively smoothly, because they don't reallocate cost or power along the supply chain. Measures that would bind producers, farmers or public budgets to specific sustainability outcomes, pesticide targets, mandatory procurement criteria, a horizontal food-systems law face organised resistance from incumbent agri-industrial interests and are far more likely to be delayed, narrowed or withdrawn. This is precisely why national and regional measures matter disproportionately: they are often the only place these harder, structural measures actually get adopted.

Main results: what the data shows

1

EU policy talks about sustainability constantly, but almost entirely in environmental terms

“Sustainability” appears 1,321 times across the policy set, by far the dominant term, alongside environmental impact (366) and biodiversity loss (308). Explicitly ethical or social language is almost absent: ethical food consumption appears just 6 times; economic inequality is barely visible.

2

Consumers are addressed as shoppers, not as citizens

Consumer information appears 224 times and food labelling 521 times, while food democracy and food culture appear 0 times each across the entire ten-year period reviewed. EU frameworks equip people to choose better within existing food environments, but rarely involve them in reshaping those environments.

3

Ambition is consistently stronger in unpublished than published policy

Unpublished food-labelling initiatives propose removing unsustainable products from sale, not just labelling them; unpublished agroecology initiatives target whole food systems rather than funding research. This gap between ambition and delivery is the same pattern visible in the specific policy files above.

4

Fifteen named gaps emerge, grouped into six clusters

- **Food environments, culture & citizen agency** — food culture/food democracy: 0 occurrences; procurement never made binding.
- **Ethics, fairness & distribution** — ethical consumption/production near-absent; no EU distributive mechanism for affordability.
- **Health, diets & consumption patterns** — non-communicable disease: 1 occurrence; no binding dietary guidance or targets.
- **Governance architecture** — no binding horizontal food-systems framework; labelling framework repeatedly delayed.
- **Economic levers** — fiscal incentives for sustainable diets remain national, not EU, tools.
- **Production-side ambition** — pesticide-reduction targets lost EU coordination when the SUR was withdrawn.

Main results: what the data shows

5

National and regional action already filling these gaps :

- **Hungary — Public Health Product Tax (2011):** the report cites Hungary's own “junk food tax” as a model fiscal instrument, reducing processed-food consumption and earmarking revenue for public health — direct proof the fiscal tools EU frameworks avoid are already proven at home.
- **France — Egalim Law (2018):** binding public-catering reform requiring 50% origin/quality-labelled products and one vegetarian school meal per week — labelling + procurement + health in one instrument.
- **Barcelona, Spain:** a Food Policy Council institutionalising citizen participation

EU rules generally permit these measures but do not drive them, so “access to sustainable food through public institutions varies considerably across the Union”, where EU measures stay voluntary, in some instances national and regional authorities step in, producing innovation but also fragmentation.

What this means in practice: four concrete considerations

Fiscal tools	Binding rules	Combined instruments	Avoiding fragmentation
Fiscal tools work and are already proven domestically, Hungary does not need to wait for an EU fiscal framework to expand or refine instruments like the Public Health Product Tax.	Binding beats voluntary, every national/regional example that closed an EU-level gap (Egalim, Bonn, Denmark's PLI) did so through a binding rule with a measurable target	Combine instruments rather than choosing one, the most effective examples (Egalim, SchoolFood4Change) stack labelling, procurement and health/education measures inside a single policy vehicle rather than treating them as separate tracks.	Fragmentation is a risk, because the EU enables rather than drives these measures, ambition and citizen access to sustainable food already varies significantly by Member State and region.

The EU has built a strong foundation of common minimum standards and consumer-information tools, but has consistently deferred the more structural, binding and redistributive measures (fiscal tools, mandatory procurement criteria, consumption targets, social-justice mechanisms) to Member States and regions. That deferral is not neutral: without stronger EU-level direction, the report's own conclusion is that progress will remain “patchy” and increasingly uneven across the Union.

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