

Ireland's Food Systems Transformation Pathway

The agri-food sector has been central to Irish domestic economic planning and its foreign policy over many decades. Since 2000, strategy for the Irish agri-food sector has been developed by stakeholder committees, working in collaboration with the government. The most recent iteration of this is Food Vision 2030, (1) published in August 2021, which represents Ireland's Food System Transformation Pathway to 2030.

This paper outlines the approach used in developing FV 2030; discusses its central objective that Ireland should become an international leader in Sustainable Food Systems; sets out the four Missions (sets of policies) and the monitoring and implementation arrangements to achieve this objective; and specifies how Ireland plans to promote food system transformation pathways within partner countries and internationally.

Approach used to develop Food Vision 2030

Food Vision 2030 is the fifth stakeholder-led strategy exercise for the Irish agri-food sector since 2000. An analysis of the different strategies, against the background of shifting politics and policies, is provided in a study by FAO/Wageningen University (2).

A public consultation process in 2019 was the starting point for work on the 2030 Strategy. This was based on a questionnaire document aimed at ascertaining the priorities of the respondents. Further consultation took place in an 'Open Policy Debate' which saw over 400 delegates discuss some of the key issues in a series of parallel break-out sessions. The composition of the 2030 Agri-Food Strategy Stakeholder Committee was announced in November 2019: it consisted of 32 members with Mr Tom Arnold as Chair. The Committee's Terms of Reference (TOR) were to develop a Strategy for the Irish agri-food sector that would outline the vision, and key objectives, to ensure the economic, environmental and social sustainability of the sector by 2030.

At its first working meeting in January 2020, the Committee decided that it would use a 'food systems approach' in developing its Strategy. This would recognise the interconnectedness between policies for food, environment and health; and acknowledge that each actor in the food chain, from farm to fork, has an important role in developing a sustainable food system. Adopting this approach represented a significant change in direction by comparison to the

four previous agri-food strategies, albeit acknowledging important continuities with them.

The original deadline for the Committee to finalise its report was mid-2020: however, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic changed that deadline. After its first three meetings in-person in January-March 2020, the Committee suspended its work. It resumed its meetings in virtual form in June 2020, completing it in July 2021.

Two other major factors impacted on the context and the timeframe within which the Committee developed its Strategy. First, in December 2019, the EU Commission announced the European Green Deal (EGD), which represented an increased level of environmental ambition, including two flanking strategies relevant to the agri-food sector, Farm to Fork and Biodiversity. Second, the outcome of the Brexit negotiations was of critical importance for any future strategy, given the high level of trade in agri-food products between Ireland and the UK. EU/UK negotiations on Brexit were only finalised on Christmas Eve, 2020, after which drafting of the 2030 Strategy became possible.

Finalisation of the draft 2030 Strategy occurred during the first quarter of 2021 and this draft was published for a two-month public consultation process in mid-April 2021. This process elicited some 100 submissions. In addition, the draft Strategy served as the basis for a set of National Food System Dialogues (NFSDs), which served the dual purpose of informing the public of the draft Strategy and situating it within the wider debate on food systems as part of the national preparation for the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS). In light of the submissions made, the outcome of the NFSDs, and monitoring and mitigation recommendations from a separate environmental assessment of the Strategy, the draft Strategy was adjusted and was signed off by the Committee in early July. Food Vision 2030 was endorsed by the Government in late July and launched on 3rd August 2021.

Irish Leadership in Sustainable Food Systems and the policies to achieve this Leadership

The Committee decided at an early stage of its work that Ireland should aim to become an international leader in Sustainable Food Systems and that the Strategy should spell out the policies to attain such a leadership position. The key to such leadership should be to achieve a genuine balance between the three dimensions of sustainability – economic, environmental and social. Four

high level Missions, underpinned by key goals and actions, were identified as appropriate to Irish circumstances for the decade ahead:

1. A climate-smart, environmentally sustainable agri-food sector
2. Viable and resilient primary producers with enhanced wellbeing
3. Food that is safe, nutritious and appealing: Trusted and valued at home and abroad.
4. An innovative, competitive and resilient agri-food sector, driven by technology and talent.

Food Vision 2030 acknowledges that the market and policy environment over the next decade will be more challenging than experienced in any recent decade. Sustainability will be the requirement from the domestic and international consumer and citizen. The sector must operate within planetary boundaries as well as meeting Irish society's demands in terms of sustainability.

Irish policy on the environment and climate change has become significantly more ambitious in recent years. Food Vision 2030 has set the objective of achieving a climate-neutral food system by 2050, with verifiable progress by 2030, encompassing emissions reduction and improvement in water quality and biodiversity. Other policy strands to achieve the sector's climate neutrality objectives are measures to increase its role in carbon sequestration, especially through forestry, and the scale-up of renewable energy resources, through anaerobic digestion, solar energy and greater energy efficiency.

Food Vision 2030 put more emphasis than previous strategies on the role and wellbeing of the primary producer, spelling out goals and actions aimed at increasing his/her economic and social viability. It signalled policies to make the sector more diversified, based on circular economy principles, including targets for reducing food waste; and proposed expansion in nature-based production systems, tillage, horticulture and organic production. But the core of Ireland's agri-food output would continue to be grass-based livestock production, in line with the country's recognised comparative advantage in this area.

Of key importance from a Food Systems perspective is the inclusion in Food Vision 2030 of policies around health and nutrition. This is the first time this aspect of the food system has been included in the agri-food strategies and there is a key commitment to improve the coherence of policies for food,

health and nutrition through the establishment of a high-level group co-chaired by the Departments of Health and of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

The success of Food Vision 2030 will depend on effective implementation and oversight. A Monitoring and Implementation Framework is included in Food Vision 2030: this highlights areas for collaboration and partnership within the sector but also with key external stakeholders. A High Level Implementation Committee chaired by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine will be established, with its key task to ensure the delivery of the four Missions and deal with emerging issues.

Ireland's role in Food Systems Transformation Pathways internationally

An innovation in Food Vision 2030 by comparison to earlier strategies is its commitment to achieving policy coherence and synergies in Sustainable Food Systems between Ireland's domestic policy and its foreign and development cooperation policy. The ambitions set out in Food Vision 2030 reflect current Irish circumstances, with a well-developed agri-food sector that is a major exporter of safe and high quality products. But it is believed that the Irish experience of agricultural and rural transformation over recent decades is of relevance to countries at different stages in their transformation process, particularly to those developing countries mainly in Africa with whom Ireland has a long-standing partnership through its development cooperation programme.

Ireland's well established process of social partnership involving Government and the main social partner organisations (unions, employers, farm organisations, other civil society actors) represents an important source of political and social capital. The stakeholder-led cooperation with Government in developing five national agri-food strategies since 2000 is a significant example of this social partnership.

Another example of political and social capital to build on is the centrality, over many decades, of the role of food to Irish foreign and development cooperation policy. Tackling global hunger and its root causes has been at the heart of Irish foreign policy for the past 50 years. That remains the case but Irish policy now brings a broader food systems approach to its foreign policy, with sustainability at its heart and promoting systems to tackle all forms of malnutrition – undernutrition, micronutrient deficiency, overweight and obesity.

This is the wider context within which Ireland was an early supporter of the concept of a UN Food Systems Summit and has played an active role in preparing the Summit. Ireland will commit to supporting a number of the likely priorities emerging from the Summit, including the Support Facility for Developing Countries Food Systems Transformation Pathways; the Zero Hunger Coalition (with a particular focus on wasting prevention and treatment under this Coalition); and the Coalition around Healthy Diets. Ireland supports the idea that the momentum from the UNFSS would be carried forward into synergies with forthcoming international meetings, including COP-15 on Biodiversity, COP-26 on Climate, Nutrition for Growth (N4G) and UN Oceans Conference.

Summary

The UNFSS will highlight the critical importance of sustainable food systems in achieving the SDGs. Following on from the Food Systems Dialogues as part of the preparation for the Summit, many countries are now planning to use a food systems approach, connecting policies for food, environment and health, in planning their future. This more integrated approach towards planning will represent a significant change and challenge. It will involve enhanced collaboration across Government and the public sector; more substantial engagement with stakeholders and the private sector; and new approaches on how to achieve economic, environmental and social sustainability.

Ireland has a decades long tradition of developing its agri-food strategy involving stakeholders and Government. Its most recent iteration of strategy, Food Vision 2030, was developed using a food systems approach. This Irish experience brings up to date and practical insights into how a country can proceed along its food systems transformation pathway and may be relevant to other countries on a similar pathway.

1. [Food Vision 2030](#).
2. FAO; Wageningen University and Research. [‘Ireland’s journey towards sustainable food systems: The processes and practices that made a difference’](#). 2021.