

Our Daily Bread Christian Faith for Sustainable Food Systems



Introduction

For many Christians across the world sharing food is a fundamental need and blessing. This can be witnessed through the Lord's Prayer, where millions of Christians pray the words 'Our Daily Bread' every day.

Yet, we must recognise that too often the way we produce and share food threatens to destroy the fundamentals of our lives. We produce food in nearly half of the habitable area of the world. On all continents, this causes the destruction of habitats, degradation of soils, depletion of water resources and pollution of the atmosphere. Agriculture is responsible for about a quarter of all global greenhouse gas emissions - primarily due to poor stewardship of soils, use of harmful chemicals, and oversized and cruel animal husbandry.

The European Union has the world's most generous agricultural subsidy system (the Common Agricultural Policy - CAP) which was established to provide food security, protection of biodiversity, promote sustainable rural development and provision of healthy and nourishing food for all citizens.

Yet the CAP not only allows the destruction of ecosystems, soils and water resources that provide the productivity of land but it also unfairly treats many farmers by favouring industrial food production.

By joining forces to establish the network Our Daily Bread, we express our Christian commitment to safeguarding our common home and all its inhabitants and acting in solidarity with those affected by injustices in food systems.

We urge the European Union to reform its food policies and financial instruments to better protect ecosystems, provide healthy and affordable food for all, ensure animal welfare, and support the rights of farmers, workers in the food supply chain and citizens who are currently disadvantaged by the existing system.

Establishing sustainable food systems is a Christian mission

Our Christian faith urges a new paradigm for food production and consumption grounded in ethical principles and respect for Creation. This calls for a shift in mindset from viewing nature as a resource to being exploited towards an integral ecology.

From the onset, Christians are invited to consider the creation as a gift that has value in itself. The repeated "*God saw that it was good*" sentence in Genesis calls for a human responsibility towards the world not as consumers but as stewards called to make that goodness flourish. Our solidarity thus encompasses the non-human world including farmed and wild animals, plants and all habitats on land and sea. We see exploitation and destruction of the natural world as directly challenging God's creative action.

As things stand, however, the current model of industrial agriculture is often driven by short-term thinking that disregards ecological and ethical limits. Scientific evidence suggests that exceeding Planetary Boundaries leads to irreversible damage to the Earth. Traditional farming methods that are often more capable of co-existence with wildlife and contribute to the preservation of rural communities are often regarded as outdated and technological innovation is seen as the only way forward. We believe that the false dichotomy of tradition or innovation is to be left behind.

Our choices will determine the fate of our planet and its people, and the consequences of inaction are clear. A disregard for nature is explicitly linked with the marginalisation of the poor, with the undermined capacity of many people to purchase healthy food at affordable prices and poses a threat

to future and present generations of people and other life on Earth. As Christians, we can never be satisfied with Cain's question, "*Am I my brother's keeper?*", and inaction is not an option. Ultimately, we will be judged on our attention to the calls and the needs of the poorest among us.

To promote such human stewardship, mindful of our responsibilities to the creation and to one another:

We must recognise the rights of farmers and rural communities, ensuring their access to land, resources, training and fair market conditions. Empowering all farmers and healthy rural societies who play a crucial role in sustainable food production is essential for building a just, resilient and ethical food system.

In Europe, food consumption patterns and lifestyle changes are necessary including reducing food waste, promoting sustainable diets, and fostering a greater sense of responsibility for the environment. These are not only the responsibility of individual citizens, who often have limited choices. We call for decision-makers on all levels to facilitate a just transition to sustainable food consumption. Changing consumption patterns will incentivise producers to adopt more environmentally friendly practices.

Scientific background

Agriculture is a major driver of global environmental change. While it provides food for billions of people, it is a major force in crossing multiple Planetary Boundaries. These boundaries represent a safe operating space for humanity, and exceeding them risks undermining the Earth system's resilience and jeopardising global sustainability. Four key Planetary Boundaries — biosphere integrity, land-system change, freshwater use, and biogeochemical flows (especially Nitrogen)— are heavily impacted by agriculture (Gerten et al. 2020; Richardson et al. 2023).

Current agricultural practices often prioritise production volume over land stewardship, leading to various environmental problems such as habitat loss and soil depletion which consequently decreases land fertility, and carbon storage and exacerbates climate change. The growing demand for animal products, especially beef, contributes to environmental pressures as livestock production systems require significant land and water resources contributing to greenhouse gases, water pollution, biodiversity loss and health problems. One of the most important intervention points for more ethical food systems is adopting plant-based diets and supporting changes towards consuming fewer but higher welfare animal products. The area requirement, water consumption, climate and biodiversity impact of plant production is much lower than that of meat production. An appropriate, more plant-based diet is crucial for human health, which is also strongly connected with the welfare of livestock (Foley et al. 2011; Muller et al. 2017; Willett et al. 2019; Kozicka et al. 2023; OECD and FAO 2023, Zinsstag et al. 2023; FAO et al. 2022).

Research demonstrates that traditional management of cultural landscapes, agroecological practices, and organic agriculture provide proven blueprints for transforming our food systems toward greater environmental sustainability. These approaches, grounded in generations of agricultural knowledge and modern technologies, consistently deliver multiple benefits: enhanced biodiversity, improved public health outcomes, and stronger economic performance at the farm level (Fischer, Hartel, and Kuemmerle 2012; Wezel et al. 2014; Reganold and Wachter 2016).

The EU's reliance on food and forestry product imports also contributes to social inequalities and environmental burdens, such as rural community displacement, deforestation and groundwater depletion, in countries outside of Europe (Nyström et al. 2019; Perino et al. 2019; Foley et al. 2011; Zhong et al. 2024). The EU's industrial agricultural system and related food consumption habits are dependent on virtual natural resource grabs in the global South.

Any agricultural policy reforms must also consider farmers' rights and rural livelihoods as outlined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, which emphasises the need to balance environmental sustainability with farmers' rights to resources, traditional knowledge, and participation in decision-making processes affecting their livelihoods (UN Human Rights Council 2018).

The upcoming reform of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy presents a crucial opportunity to transition towards a more sustainable and ethical food system. However, achieving this requires acknowledging the limitations of the current policy framework. Although the CAP integrates environmental instruments, research suggests it is failing to address environmental degradation and climate change effectively. Therefore, the CAP reform should shift its focus from production and income support to prioritising environmental sustainability and public goods in alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Pe'er et al. 2019).

The Common Agricultural Policy

The CAP must be instrumental in the transformation of our food systems, to one that is sustainable, ethical, ecologically and socially beneficial.

- 1.** We need a CAP that clearly defines and effectively implements a just transition of European Food Systems to a new model that respects Planetary Boundaries.
- 2.** We need a CAP that supports all farmers in making a decent living, supports rural societies in developing, and empowers those farmers who are the pioneers of sustainable food production. CAP should also incentivise collaboration between farmers to facilitate better economies of scale and more efficient resource use where it is necessary.
- 3.** We need a CAP that requires food producers to act responsibly, follow minimal standards for sustainability and offer transparency about their farming and supply chain practices.
- 4.** We need a CAP that supports the welfare of the farmed animals and the protection of biodiversity
- 5.** We need a CAP that is in harmony with the vision of transitioning to more plant-based diets.
- 6.** We need a CAP that provides sustainable and nutritious food at an affordable price to all European citizens.
- 7.** We need a CAP that enables all farmers to break free from their dependence on large corporations and encourages their autonomous decision in choosing their seeds, and preferred technologies and that facilitates the transition from existing path-dependencies.

Diets

Healthy Lifestyle

We advocate for a shift towards more plant-based diets in line with scientific recommendations for healthier, sustainable and ethical food consumption. It is not possible to maintain the current level of meat and dairy consumption (in Europe) if agriculture is to remain within planetary limits and respect the dignity of animals. Shifting to diets much richer in vegetables, legumes, and in some cases reducing calorie intake is necessary to have healthier lives. The European gastronomic traditions offer culturally appropriate ways to implement this vision.

It is important that new regulations in the EU should not offload the ecological burden to other continents where environmental regulation might not match our ambition. It is also crucial that the shift in protein sources does not increase the already dire pressure on fisheries and oceans - but the

opposite: sustainable fishing technologies have to be mainstream and quotas set to respect safe ecological limits.

Diet shift has to be supported with policy wherever possible, but also needs the commitment of citizens to explore new aspects of food culture and demand change in policy, institutions, and supply chains. We recognise that our diets have a strong impact on the justice and sustainability of our food systems and we call all citizens, particularly Christians to do their part in changing food culture.

Affordable food

We consider food a human right, no hunger should be allowed on this planet. Agricultural policy has to ensure a decent income for farmers, but this should not mean that the price of food is causing social problems (either in Europe or outside of it). One of the goals of the subsidies under CAP is to ensure that while farmers receive a fair income, food remains affordable.

The affordability of food is not only a question of subsidies. Regulations related to supply chains have to ensure that healthy and sustainable food is available everywhere and that no “food deserts” exist. This implies that supply chain transparency and regional food markets have to be strengthened.

Shifting to sustainable diets should lead to changing production patterns, and less land should be enough to produce enough nutritious food, potentially reducing food prices. Such a food system transformation should be facilitated by the CAP. In a similar process, higher quality, for example, organic food should also become more affordable.

Policies promoting affordable food should also promote healthier choices in all price categories. Harmful chemicals and ultra-processed food should be discouraged not just in farming practices, but also further down in the supply chain. Healthy food should not be a luxury product.

Agroecology

Integral ecology in practice

We want to transform food systems by applying agroecological principles, by uniting farmers' knowledge with natural processes to build sustainable, just, and resilient ways of growing food that nourishes both people and the planet. We need to drastically reduce the use of harmful chemicals, promote organic farming, and reduce nutrient load to protect water systems. The complexity of the landscape, and diversity of habitats, crops and seeds have to be encouraged, as these increase the resilience of agricultural systems and also provide habitat for wildlife.

Some rural communities have contributed to exceptional biodiversity in cultural landscapes, through their traditional farming techniques. We acknowledge the need to give the land back to nature but in some cases, the preservation of traditional ecological knowledge and beneficial forms of land stewardship provide the best outcome both for human livelihoods and ecosystems. We support a sustainable rural lifestyle for such communities, and value such traditional techniques and all new techniques that maintain this link between society and ecology.

The diet shift we argue for also requires changes on the production side. Less animal feed, more fruits and vegetables, and a more diverse portfolio of crops are necessary. Meat production should follow high standards of animal welfare, animal density should comply with the carrying capacity of grasslands.

Machinery, chemicals, animal density and other farming practices need to change, to achieve carbon neutrality and to re-establish agricultural land as a habitat where cultivated plants coexist with healthy habitats.

Space for nature

Climate protection, habitat regeneration, and changing diet patterns will all lead to reduced need for cultivated land. We need to give back land to nature, in accordance with the EU biodiversity strategy. This change has to happen in a way that respects all farmers' rights to land and decent livelihoods. Agricultural sprawl is one of the most important factors in declining biodiversity, it is not possible to remain within Planetary Boundaries without allowing sufficient space for wildlife.

An important element in implementing the ecological transition is to strengthen the connection between urban and rural landscapes, making food supply chains shorter where possible and facilitating urban citizens' direct experience with nature and farming. This enhanced connection leads to a better understanding between consumers and producers of food and may give rise to new, grassroots solutions to the challenges of the food systems transition.

Join our work!

Polycymakers

Our Daily Bread is a network of Christian organisations promoting sustainable and ethical food policies in the European Union. We invite decision-makers, civil servants and elected officials to collaborate with our network and work on legislation to implement the vision laid out in this manifesto.

Caring for creation means - with the words of Pope Francis - listening to the *cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*. One of the most important policies of the EU is not to remain deaf to their voice. Instead, while developing our new food policies, the teaching of the World Council of the Churches should guide us: *a narrow anthropocentric understanding of our relationship with Creation must be revised to a whole-of-life understanding, to achieve a sustainable global ecosystem. We are all interdependent in God's whole creation.*

Faith-Based Organisations

Our Daily Bread is inviting all like-minded Christian organisations, communities and groups to join forces and work together for justice and sustainability in food systems. Our network is open to all Christian organisations who share the vision laid out in this document.

Christians of Europe

Our Daily Bread speaks not only to decision-makers but all citizens, especially Christian citizens of Europe.

We invite you to contribute to the creation of a new culture of sustainable and healthy food. To be curious about what you eat and where it comes from, to be curious about the social and environmental impact of agriculture. To spread the culture of sustainable food - if you sit around the table with family or friends.

We finally invite you to stand up for these values and talk to decision-makers on all levels to promote a food policy that delivers to all humans, and to all creation today and in the future.

Faith requires action.

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