

# Less. Better. Healthier. Fairer.

Opportunities to transform the production and consumption of animal-sourced foods in Europe

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## Introduction

Food production and consumption can be powerful levers to promote human health and environmental sustainability. But current food systems are not healthy, sustainable or equitable, and the climate emergency urgently compels humanity to transform them.

### The shift to less meat and better food and farming is not up to speed

Current levels of production and consumption of animal-sourced foods (ASFs) such as meat, dairy, eggs and fish are placing extraordinary pressures on ecosystems. At the global level, consumption of these products is growing. Although the trend is not likely to continue for most European countries, current levels of production and consumption on the continent are considered too high, and are linked to serious environmental and human health risks. **The average European Union (EU) citizen consumes four to five times more ASFs (animal-sourced foods) than people in lower- and middle-income countries**, and many times more than that recommended by various reference diets based on assessments of ecological and health impacts of these foods.<sup>1</sup>

Output of meat and dairy in Europe is growing, mainly because of intensification of production methods. The industry sees opportunities for sales growth in other regions of the world. The production and consumption of organic meat and dairy are also increasing, as are the sales of meat replacement products. Although

the growth rates of these “less and better” products are impressive, their market share in relation to meat and dairy is still very small.

## **Current ASF consumption and production levels cannot be maintained if we are to prevent catastrophic climate change.**

ASFs are one of the largest contributors to global warming and environmental degradation. The global livestock sector is linked to approximately 14.5 per cent of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions,<sup>2</sup> as well as intensive biodiversity loss, deforestation and land degradation.<sup>3</sup> Research shows that without a significant reduction in the number of farm animals, European countries will be unable to achieve the greenhouse gas reductions needed under the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change. Without concerted and effective action, the world risks failure to meet both the Paris Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

## **Current ASF consumption and production threaten human health**

Consumption of ASFs, particularly red and processed meat, has also been linked with negative health impacts, such as colorectal cancer and other types of cancer and ischaemic heart disease.<sup>4</sup> High consumption of red and processed meat is already linked with nearly 4 per cent of all premature deaths in the EU.<sup>5</sup>

Industrial livestock is a major cause of air pollution through ammonia emissions, and is linked to outbreaks of zoonotic disease.

While meat and other ASFs are a good source of energy and provide essential nutrients, such as protein, iron, zinc and vitamin B12, similar nutrient intake can be achieved through the consumption of a variety of vegetarian and vegan foods. However, this diversity of foods may not be widely available in some regions of the world.

## **ASF production is often unfair to workers and cruel to animals**

Although livestock production plays a significant role in the economies of European countries, and can be a critical component of rural economies in lower-income countries, the industrialised mass-production of ASFs in Europe and globally is tied to widespread violations of workers’ rights and poor animal welfare. These impacts indicate that, in reality, meat and dairy are expensive, but are made cheap through the exploitation of workers, the depletion of ecosystems and the devaluation of animal lives.

## Levers for systemic change of the food system

The need for reduction of meat consumption and production, and a transition towards ecological farming, is evident. A fair global food system that thrives within planetary boundaries, tackling climate breakdown and ensuring healthy, nutritious food is accessible for a growing population, requires significant changes in how food is produced and consumed. Generating the transition means challenging the multiple actors, policies and historical obstacles that impede it and that are responsible for maintaining excessive ASF production and consumption. Dominant actors such as the meat and dairy industry, and policies geared to support large-scale industrial ASF production, frequently hinder swift systemic change.

Issues associated with the current industrialised food system call for a range of interventions by multiple stakeholders:

- At the consumer level, there is potential to increase healthier and more sustainable consumption through a mix of “soft” and “hard” interventions, such as informing better choices or changing food environments. A growing amount of experimental research shows the effectiveness of some strategies, while real-world evidence is still lacking for many others.
- Supermarkets, food manufacturers and fast-food companies have a strong influence on food environments and consumers. These actors have a broad marketing toolkit for influencing consumer choice, which could be leveraged to accelerate the transition.
- The dominant actors in the meat and dairy industry – such as breeders, feed industries, butchers, processors and pharmaceutical manufacturers – have much to lose from reduced meat and dairy consumption. Some will be able to join the transition to a better food system, while others will lose their licence to operate.
- Governments are crucial in reshaping the food system. Through more integrated policies and by deploying a range of instruments such as subsidies, regulations and communication, they can develop food systems aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement and the best standards of health and nutrition policies.
- The collective power of social movements will be instrumental in applying pressure on governments and businesses, shifting public perceptions of ASFs and building the strength of alternative food systems.

## Now is the time to gear up campaigns for less meat and better farming

There is growing momentum for action against climate change and biodiversity loss, along with increased awareness of the need to change the food system. Public perceptions around the role of ASFs in European diets are shifting, as recognition of the importance of tackling issues ranging from food insecurity to deficient animal welfare legislation. Opportunities for change are also arising in markets and political arenas.

Yet European meat producers are still gearing the industry to expand exports to other regions of the world and have a tight grip on the shaping of agriculture policies and the framing of issues surrounding ASFs. This means effective campaigns for food-system change are urgently needed, to avoid further lock-in of extractive ASFs systems and a perilous delay in reform.

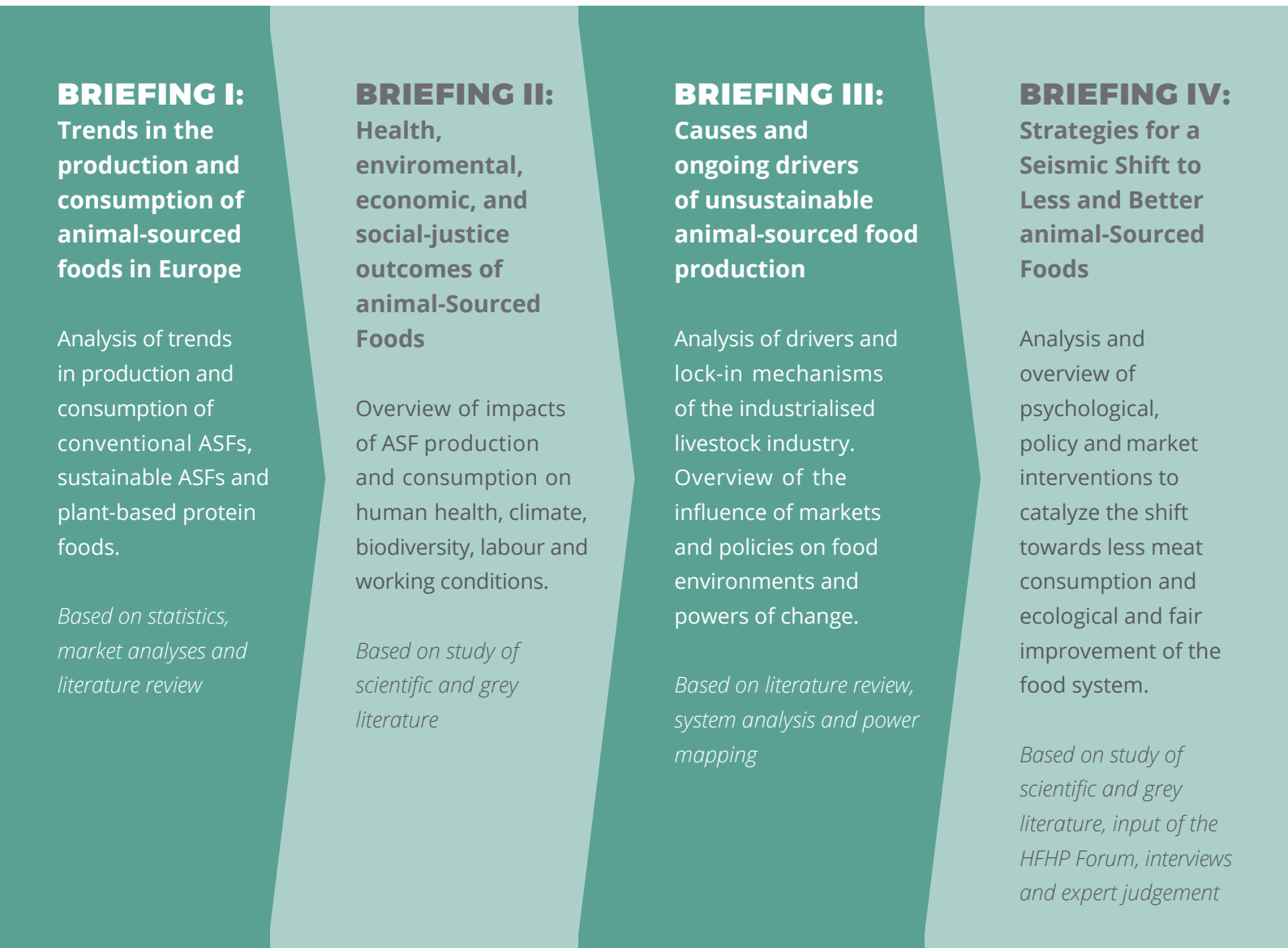
## Four briefings to drive change in production and consumption of ASFs

**Healthy Food, Healthy Planet (HFHP)** is a collaboration between civil society organisations (CSOs) and funders united by a shared vision: to align food systems with the climate targets of the Paris Agreement and the SDGs by transforming animal-sourced foods.

This research, published in four separate briefings, aims to inform smart campaigning through a detailed understanding of current trends and obstacles preventing a healthier and more sustainable food system. We know there is a pressing need for a swift transition in diets and practices of production, but this is currently impeded by industries, government policies and institutional incentives. This impasse generates important questions: what collective powers can be mobilised to overcome these obstacles? What interventions can help catalyse change? How can the movement for healthy food and better farming gain momentum? We aim to offer some answers to these questions, while providing a clearer picture of Europe's current food system.

Where relevant, the research zooms in and details the situation in European states such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the UK. Besides being the biggest producers of ASFs of Europe, this selection of countries reflects a variety of contexts. Germany, the Netherlands and the UK represent north-western Europe. Spain is known for the "Mediterranean diet", while Poland typifies Eastern Europe. France is included due to the "French paradox", in which high ASF consumption seems not to coexist with commonly associated illnesses. While the UK is no longer a member of the EU, it retains close economic ties to the Union and its strategies to promote sustainable diets are applicable elsewhere.

**Figure 1: The report's structure, content and sources.**



The report is divided into four briefings (figure 1). Briefing I examines current trends in ASF production and consumption, with a focus on meat and dairy in European countries. As well as trends and practices across the continent, it highlights six countries in particular: France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the UK. It also reviews recent trends in the production and consumption of plant-based meat replacements, organic products and pulses. Briefing II reviews the environmental, health and economic outcomes of ASFs in Europe and globally, while Briefing III unpacks the key social, economic, political and behavioural drivers that lock in Europe's currently unsustainable levels of ASF production and consumption. It also profiles the key actors shaping European food environments and systems. Briefing IV identifies interventions of potential value to campaigns to reduce and improve ASF consumption in Europe.

**Note on Data:** Different sources of data have specific limitations and strengths; there are sometimes slight differences in figures and statistics, based on differing definitions and methodologies. Acknowledging and justifying our data selection throughout, we draw on the statistics in this report to assemble a "big picture" of the production and consumption of meat and dairy in Europe. We state explicitly whether data sources used in the report refer to the current EU-27 countries or the earlier EU-28 that included the UK.

## Endnotes

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- 4** Ekmekcioglu, C., Wallner, P., Kundi, M., Weisz, U., Haas, W., and Hutter, H. P. (2018) "Red meat, diseases, and healthy alternatives: A critical review". *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition*, 58(2), 247-261.
- 5** Pushkarev, N (2021). "Meat Production and Consumption (in Europe) and Public Health: An exploration".

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