

# THE EUROPEAN BOARD ON AGRI-FOOD: ROLE AND OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK

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**Contact:**  
Axel Godfroy (IEEP)



## ABOUT:

A growing polarisation of debates regarding the agricultural sector has been observed in recent years, particularly concerning efforts to enhance the sustainability of agriculture. Recognising the growing polarisation and discontent among farmers, as manifested by the multiple farmer protests taking place in Europe at the beginning of 2024, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen pledged to address these concerns through the creation of a Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture. On 4 September 2024, the Strategic Dialogue (SD) adopted its final report<sup>1</sup> by consensus among the 29 participants. This outlines a shared vision for the future of farming and food systems in Europe. One of its proposals, which was welcomed by Ursula Von der Leyen<sup>2</sup>, is the establishment of a **European Board on Agri-Food (EBAF)**.

This blog outlines the main questions surrounding the implementation of the EBAF concept, notably **its possible composition, role, and operational framework, as well as the consideration that will be given to the recommendations it generates.**

The EBAF is envisioned as an advisory board to the European Commission, bringing together EU institutions, agri-food value chain stakeholders, civil society organisations, and scientists to discuss collaboratively the different options and solutions to achieve sustainable and resilient agri-food systems in Europe. The report underscores that the EBAF could have an important role in integrating agriculture and food systems knowledge and needs into EU governance and policy design, as well as making policy decisions more inclusive and transparent. Details of the proposals put forward in the Strategic Dialogue report are set out in Annex 1.

The establishment of a platform such as the EBAF could contribute to **making the decision-making process for agricultural policies more inclusive and more transparent.** However, its implementation requires the adoption of a robust framework by the EU institutions, that should ensure that the EBAF serves as an inclusive, well-balanced, and effective advisory body to the European Commission with a role similar to other substantive advisory groups.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/171329ff-0f50-4fa5-946f-aea11032172e\\_en?filename=strategic-dialogue-report-2024\\_en.pdf](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/171329ff-0f50-4fa5-946f-aea11032172e_en?filename=strategic-dialogue-report-2024_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT\\_24\\_4541](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_24_4541)

## 1. HOW WILL THE COMMISSION ENSURE A FAIR AND BALANCED COMPOSITION AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF A WIDE RANGE OF PERSPECTIVES AND INTERESTS?

The composition of the EBAF will be crucial to its legitimacy and effectiveness. The SD report suggests that participants should be appointed by the Commission to include a wide range of stakeholders, including farmers, industry representatives, scientists, and civil society. Some members of the Strategic Dialogue have already expressed their interest in participating in the EBAF<sup>3</sup>, with some suggesting that at least half of the EBAF should be composed of farmers<sup>4</sup>. Given the already visible push for EBAF membership, ensuring that its composition is genuinely balanced and not dominated by larger, well-resourced groups is thus essential. This raises the question of which criteria the European Commission would apply to appoint members. One approach to ensure fair representation would be the introduction of a public call for applications, similar to the Advisory Group on Sustainability of Food Systems (AGSFS)<sup>5</sup>. This option was notably mentioned by the designated Commissioner for Agriculture, Christophe Hansen, during his hearing in front of the European Parliament<sup>6</sup>. This would allow diverse actors to apply, increasing the transparency of the process and reducing the risk of bias in appointments. It should also be noted that not all participants have the same resources to allocate to this platform. Therefore, to address disparities in capacity, **the Commission should provide financial and logistical support to smaller organisations to ensure their full participation**. This could include travel stipends, administrative assistance, as well as capacity-building initiatives. Likewise, enabling smaller organisations to collaborate and appointing one representative to voice a range of organisations' opinions could assist them in addressing capacity issues related to individuals and available time. Effective measures to maximise the chance of a well-balanced representation in the EBAF, including by smaller organisations, would also contribute to ensuring public trust in the process and prevent the perception that certain interests are favoured.

## 2. WHO WILL COORDINATE AND LEAD THE WORK OF THE EBAF?

The governance arrangements of the EBAF, including its coordination model and governance rules, will be central to its effectiveness and perceived legitimacy. In this regard, multiple options could be considered. In the first option, the work of the EBAF would be led by the Commission, similar to the set-up adopted for the

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, CropLife Europe sent a letter to the Commission expressing their interest:

[https://croplifeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CLE-Letter-to-President-COM\\_EBAF\\_02OCT2024.pdf](https://croplifeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CLE-Letter-to-President-COM_EBAF_02OCT2024.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-farm-agenda-agri-lobby-copa-cogeca-backlash/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/expert-groups/advisory-groups-action-platforms/advisory-group-agsfs\\_en](https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/expert-groups/advisory-groups-action-platforms/advisory-group-agsfs_en)

<sup>6</sup> <https://acs.europarl.connectedviews.eu/embed/meeting/?refid=20241104-1830-COMMITTEE-CONFIRMATION-HEARING-A&audio=qa&language=en>

functioning of the Civil Dialogue Groups (CDG) on agriculture<sup>7</sup>, where meetings are initiated by DG AGRI and are chaired by a Commission representative<sup>8</sup>. A second option would be to make the EBAF stakeholder-led which may give stakeholders a stronger sense of ownership of the process, increase their ability to shape the work of the advisory board and ensure continued participation. This was notably the functioning of the CDG before 2022: a chairperson was elected for one year and would be in charge of drafting a report summarising the meetings, while the agenda was decided jointly between the chairperson and the relevant Directorate General<sup>9</sup>. A hybrid structure where the Commission and stakeholders co-chair the meetings could bring about a reasonably balanced representation of both public and stakeholder interests. This approach would allow for greater flexibility in agenda-setting while ensuring alignment with the process of setting EU policies and goals. In all three scenarios, **there is a need for clear rules on agenda-setting, decision-making, and stakeholder participation to enhance transparency and prevent any one group from disproportionately influencing the discussions**. Ideally, these rules would be drafted and adopted by all EBAF members or drafted by the EU institutions with the collaboration of the members, before being formally adopted.

### 3. HOW CAN THE EBAF FOSTER TRANSPARENT DECISION-MAKING?

The EBAF reflects the desire to continue the positive dynamic initiated within the Strategic Dialogue. However, the Strategic Dialogue followed a specific process that required strong confidentiality, and the adoption of a final report by consensus. This process is very unlikely to be reproduced and would be unsuitable for a mechanism that aims to provide a platform for continued dialogues on specific policy actions. EBAF's role in contributing to policy will involve more contentious debates, particularly when discussing legislative proposals. Following on from the point above (#2), defining clear decision-making rules will be crucial. In addition, **discussions and decisions should be documented in publicly available reports** to prevent behind-closed-doors influence. Likewise, documenting the discussions could encourage evidence-based discussions, instead of opinion-based recommendations. Moreover, Citizen dialogues, as proposed by the SD (see annex 1), would serve as a critical feedback mechanism to inform EBAF discussions.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/committees-and-expert-groups/civil-dialogue-groups\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/committees-and-expert-groups/civil-dialogue-groups_en)

<sup>8</sup> COMMISSION DECISION (EU) 2022/1368 of 3 August 2022 setting up Civil Dialogue Groups in matters covered by the common agricultural policy and repealing Decision 2013/767/EU, Article 5 and 6. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022D1368>

<sup>9</sup> 2013/767/EU: Commission Decision of 16 December 2013 setting up a framework for civil dialogue in matters covered by the common agricultural policy and repealing Decision 2004/391/EC. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32013D0767>

#### 4. HOW CAN THE EBAF FOSTER TRANSPARENT DECISION-MAKING?

The EBAF is intended to provide “politically influential advice,” yet its recommendations will need to fit within the broader EU policy framework, including existing consultation processes. To be influential they will need to add a distinctive and incisive as well as broadly based perspective and get to grips with the more fundamental questions and challenges of the decade ahead. The current interactions between the Commission and stakeholders, which tend to rely on specific formal mechanisms (e.g. public consultations) or on informal meetings, inevitably lacking in transparency, could benefit from the establishment of a platform dedicated to the exchange between stakeholders and the institutions on the broader framing and implementation of the mechanisms needed for the transition to a sustainable food system. However, as described in Annex 1, EBAF’s mission might go beyond providing feedback and involve formulating potentially influential recommendations on technical subjects (e.g. the implementation of the benchmarking system). To avoid duplicating the work of other advisory groups, EBAF should closely coordinate with CDGs and other bodies. Facilitating this collaboration may be enhanced through a comprehensive review of the governance structures of existing advisory bodies and their respective roles. This would streamline stakeholder engagement and ensure consistency in feedback across different mechanisms. As the nature of the EBAF suggests, its recommendations would be non-binding to the Commission. However, a clear framework should be developed for responding to EBAF’s input, ensuring that recommendations are considered and, when rejected, justified transparently. Indeed, some of EBAF’s recommendations might diverge from the European Commission’s policy direction, especially on contentious issues like agricultural subsidies or emissions reductions. These disagreements are inevitable, even within the EBAF, but they should be managed constructively. In this regard, **the EBAF should prioritise finding common ground** where feasible, which could help build broader support for policy proposals, even if some divergence of opinion remains.

#### CONCLUSION:

Keeping the consensual and depolarized spirit of the SD alive through the establishment of the EBAF appears a relevant initiative, welcomed by the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen<sup>2</sup>. However, for the EBAF to contribute to increasing the transparency and inclusiveness of the decision-making process of agricultural policies, and not just represent another layer of bureaucracy, its recommendations should feed the debate within a clearly defined framework. This framework should address several key matters, including **fair representation and equal participation of the members**, as well as **clear governance** and a **defined articulation between the EBAF and other consultation processes**. Implemented as such, the EBAF could be an efficient tool for the EU institution, able to ease the discussion with stakeholders and to increase the transparency and the inclusiveness of the decision-making process.

## Annex 1: The composition, role and tasks of the European Board on Agri-food (EBAF) proposed by the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture

The report of the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture proposes to the European Commission the establishment of a European board on agri-food (EBAF). The European Commission is asked to appoint high-level representatives covering **all relevant perspectives and interests in a balanced and inclusive manner** to the board *“in order to adequately address the very complex issues of agriculture and food systems and **provide politically influential advice**”* (p. 51). According to the document, this includes “farmers in their diversity”, upstream and downstream sectors of the food chain (agribusiness, manufacturers and processors, wholesalers and retailers, traders, financial institutions), and science and civil society (consumer, environmental, health, and animal welfare organisations and social partners). Observers from the different European institutions, bodies and agencies can be invited to attend the meetings.

The overall purpose of the EBAF is to provide a **“forum where the overall development of agriculture and food is discussed on a regular basis, and where the EU institutions, together with agri-food value chain stakeholders, civil society organisations and scientists **jointly discuss strategies necessary to make agri-food systems more sustainable and resilient in Europe**”** (p. 51).

To maximise the potential of this body, the European Commission is asked to offer not only high-level political backing but also **ensure sufficient financial and organisational resources**. This support is considered essential for facilitating the meaningful participation of EBAF members and stakeholders from across the agri-food value chain.

The key responsibilities of the EBAF are described as follows:

- **Shaping strategies for sustainable food systems** in the EU, considering both supply and demand, and identifying conditions necessary for a fair transition.
- **Providing early-stage input on planned EU policies** with implications for food systems, while assessing socio-economic impacts.
- Advising on the functioning of the **Single Market and the agri-food value chain**.
- Monitoring the **consistency between public regulation and private food value chain initiatives**, ensuring alignment between EU standards and market developments.
- Additionally, the EBAF would serve as a **platform to exchange best practices for implementing sustainability mechanisms across all governance levels**—local, regional, national, and EU-wide.

Specific tasks highlighted by the Strategic Dialogue report include:

- “[...] play an important role in developing, implementing, overseeing, and refining the **benchmarking framework**, addressing and resolving inconsistencies and monitoring progress” (p. 42).
- “[...] to **assess sustainability indicators**, to test data collection methods for farmers and to monitor sustainability” using the FSDN (p.41).

## The European board on agri-food: role and operational framework

- Should be consulted by the European Commission in **setting “science-based, aspirational emissions reduction goals** tailored to the different types of agriculture including livestock, ensuring that these goals are ambitious, aligning with the broader EU climate objectives while considering the unique characteristics and capabilities of different agricultural systems” (p. 58).
- **Monitor**, “in cooperation with similar regional governance bodies [...] the implementation of **buy-out schemes** to ensure that the regional agricultural infrastructure will remain intact (p. 60).
- Support the **definition of the content of the animal welfare law**.
- Be involved in the development of a **dedicated action plan for generational renewal** to be launched together with the new Multiannual Financial Framework.

According to the recommendations of the Strategic Dialogue, the EBAF should be responsible for **organising a high-level EU Agri-food Systems Conference to invite input from a broad audience** on agri-food policies. Additionally, the Commission, working closely with EBAF, is asked to facilitate, every three years, citizen dialogues on agriculture and food systems, ensuring that grassroots feedback shapes future policy directions.

The report explicitly highlights that the **relationship between EBAF and Civil Dialogue Groups (CDGs) will need to be clarified**, and the work aligned to improve the quality of stakeholder feedback and ensure that the voices of diverse participants, including young people, are heard and incorporated into EU decision-making processes.



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