



Diverging Stories on food system transitions. A qualitative analysis of policy narratives in the public consultation on the European Commission's Farm to Fork Strategy

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ABSTRACT

The transition towards more just and sustainable food systems is a major challenge which requires persuasive policy narratives for motivation and coordination. However, research about how relevant European actor groups view crucial elements of food system transitions is scarce. The consultation on the European Commission's Farm-to-Fork Strategy provided an opportunity to analyze how elements of food system transitions are represented and connected in the policy narratives of European stakeholders. A deductive-inductive content analysis of 164 public responses, using an analytical framework based on the multi-level-perspective of food system transitions, found twelve distinct narratives, mostly focused on agricultural production. Ten of them showed clear connections to three established agricultural policy discourses: neomercantilism, multi-functionalism and market liberalism. While the narratives together provided a comprehensive account of transition drivers, challenges, opportunities and responses, individually they presented rather partial perspectives. For example, market-liberal narratives emphasized the role of value chain actors and "consumer choice", whereas multifunctionalist narratives called for more regulation. Farmers' associations mainly deployed neomercantilist, NGOs multi-functional and industry representatives market-liberal narratives, revealing dissent on the importance and desirability of change. The findings indicate that shifting the discussion venue away from core agriculture policy arenas broadened entrenched discourses only marginally.

1. Introduction

Technological innovations have increased agricultural productivity in many parts of the world (Mazoyer and Roudart, 2007; Tilman et al., 2002). For example, cereal yields grew by about 2.5% annually between the 1960s and early 1980s, and by slightly below 2% annually between 2005 and 2014 (FAO, 2017). Despite these remarkable successes, food systems face serious economic, environmental, social, and institutional challenges (Meuwissen et al., 2019). These include increasing global food demand, a diminishing natural resource base, transboundary transmission of plant and animal diseases, biosecurity threats, social inequalities and poverty, climate change impacts, poor economic perspectives for rural populations, or volatile input costs (FAO, 2017). In

addition, food systems themselves generate significant negative environmental impacts, such as land degradation, freshwater overuse, pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, or biodiversity loss (Halpern et al., 2022), and are linked to problematic social developments, such as depopulated rural areas or a global obesity pandemic (FAO, 2017). A transition towards more sustainable and resilient food systems is therefore one of the biggest global tasks for the 21st century (Feola, 2015; Meuwissen et al., 2022). The European Union plays a crucial role in this regard. It is not just a powerful actor in terms of market size but also enjoys ideational power (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016; Feindt, 2018) to shape the ideas and paradigms that underpin agricultural and food policies, for example through its influence on transnational policy fora such as the FAO and OECD and on international trade (Daugbjerg

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and Swinbank, 2009).

In May 2020, the European Commission published its Farm-to-Fork (FtF) Strategy (COM(2020) 381 final) to promote fair, healthy, and environmentally sound food systems. Although the FtF Strategy presents neither a complete vision of future food systems nor a clear definition of sustainable food systems (see below), several elements of the strategy can be seen as an attempt by the Commission to address the challenges outlined above. Examples include the objective to reduce the use of pesticides by 50% to fight biodiversity loss, or the goal to increase the availability of sustainable food to consumers in order to address the environmental pressures created by food demand.¹ FtF was a crucial component of the Commission's executive program 2019–2024, the “European Green New Deal”, and proposed a comprehensive strategy for every stage of the food value chain. It represented a novel approach to food-related policies in the EU, which had been focused on Single Market regulation and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (Schebesta and Candel, 2020). The FtF Strategy promoted a transformative approach and addressed the entire food system. By spring 2024, however, several key elements of the strategy had stalled or died in the legislative process or saw their ambition reduced (see next section).

These setbacks are rooted in the complexity of system transitions, which involve the interplay of many different sectors and actors at micro, meso, and macro levels (Jacob and Ekins, 2020). They are shaped by larger macro trends, powerful incumbent actors from established systems (Avelino et al., 2016; Stirling, 2008), emerging players, initially marginal actor constellations, and innovations emerging from niches (Geels, 2002, 2019).

Transitions imply the devaluation of long-established business models and create opportunities for new ones, thereby creating perceived and actual losers and winners. Combined with the large number of different actor groups affected, contrary problem framings and conflicts are likely to arise in debates about food system transitions. This makes it extremely difficult to develop a shared understanding of transition needs and a joint vision, both of which are crucial for enabling collective action towards a system transition (Loorbach 2007; Anderson et al., 2021; Jacob and Ekins 2020).

The starting point for developing a shared understanding is to better comprehend the narratives and related positions on food system transitions among relevant actor groups. Despite an increasing body of literature on sustainable food system transitions (e.g., El Bilali, 2019; Gaitan-Cremaschi et al., 2019) and ample research on peoples' perspectives on agriculture, food production or diets (see SAPEA-Consortium, 2020), few attempts have been made to reconstruct how EU actor groups view food systems (cf. Candel et al., 2014) or what they perceive as the crucial elements of food system transitions in the context of recent policy debates. To address this gap, this paper seizes an opportunity provided by the European Commission's public consultation on its FtF Strategy which took place between February and May 2020. The broader scope envisioned in the FtF Strategy can be understood as an attempt by the Commission to open up a debate that has so far been heavily focused on agricultural policy by inviting new actors and creating opportunities for new discursive coalitions (Alons and Zwaan, 2016; Erjavec and Erjavec, 2021; Feindt 2018). The public consultation can therefore serve as a probing experiment into the narratives used by different actor groups when asked to engage with the proposal of a transformative food-related policy.

Examining these actors' narratives can aid in understanding ideal barriers to food system transition and might even point to

possibilities to overcome entrenched positions (Soliva, 2007). The main research question of this article is therefore: To what degree did the responses to the consultation on the FtF Strategy follow or accommodate long-established lines of argumentation in agricultural policy? Did new narratives about food system transition emerge and create new policy and coalition opportunities? In order to answer this question, we (i) identified which narratives were articulated in the FtF consultation and how they arrange central elements of food system transitions, (ii) explored which actor groups used which narratives and (iii) assessed to what degree the narratives either reinforced and accommodated or transcended and contradicted the worldviews espoused in established CAP discourses.

The findings contribute to current debates on the development of agricultural, rural and food policy discourses and the representation of elements of food system transitions in these discourses. They provide insights into the discursive context that led to the relative failure of the FtF Strategy and contain lessons for attempts to integrate entrenched policy areas with transformation needs into broader transformation-oriented discourses.

2. EU agricultural policy discourses as context for the FtF strategy

The publication of the FtF Strategy was both the launch of a legislative program and an attempt to embed the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in a broader discourse on food systems that would transcend the focus on agricultural producers. To better understand the origins of FtF and to assess if the strategy has indeed broadened the debate, we briefly review the development of EU agricultural policy discourses.²

The Treaty of Rome had established the CAP as a particular European policy for the farm sector and enshrined a “productivist paradigm” (Wilson, 2001; Evans et al., 2002) which understands agriculture as an exceptional economic sector because it provides an indispensable public good, food security, while farmers face a structural income problem due to reduced factor mobility, natural and biological risks. From 1962 onwards, support for farmers through interventionist policies, e.g., minimum prices, buying-up of surplus, and import levies, dominated the CAP (Daugbjerg and Feindt 2017). These ideas are still present in a *neomercantilistic discourse* (Potter and Tilzey, 2005), which articulates an exceptionalist view on agriculture, calls for farm income support and state intervention and adopts environmental and social counter-narratives against liberalization in order to “defend policy entitlements in more regressive neomercantilistic terms” (Potter and Tilzey, 2005, p. 596).

Since the mid 1980s, a *market-liberal discourse* has challenged the assumption that agriculture is different from other sectors and requires specific interventions. It calls for reduced state intervention, and envisions a European agricultural sector that is competitive on liberalized global markets. Productivity is best achieved through market dynamics rather than state intervention and production should follow demand (Potter and Tilzey, 2005). In response, a *multifunctional discourse* emerged in the 1990s emphasizing that farms produce marketable and non-marketable goods, in particular environmental and landscape externalities, and provide social and ecological functions beyond food production, such as maintaining rural landscapes, cultural heritage and biodiversity, which require public policies to address market failures (Moyer and Josling, 2002).

The new discourses diagnosed multiple policy failures in the CAP. Under pressure from budget and trade policy, as well as rising environmental concerns, a series of reforms between 1992 and 2021 shifted CAP instruments to less market-distorting forms of income support

¹ The main areas of action of the FtF strategy in this regard are: ensuring sustainable food production; ensuring food security; stimulating sustainable food processing, retail and service; promoting sustainable food consumption; reducing food loss and waste; and combating food fraud (European Commission, 2020b).

² There are other policy debates about food and related narratives at EU level (see SAPEA Consortium 2020). Given our research focus, we focus here mainly on EU agricultural policy discourses.

through area-based direct payments and programs for integrated rural development (Swinbank and Daugbjerg, 2006; Daugbjerg and Swinbank, 2016). The result is an increasingly “post-exceptionalist” policy field (Daugbjerg and Feindt, 2017) in which neomercantilist, market-liberal and multifunctional ideas and policies co-exist and compete (Daugbjerg and Swinbank, 2016; Feindt, 2018; Grohmann and Feindt, 2023a). This is accompanied by an ongoing ideational struggle between the three main discourses in this policy field (neomercantilist, market-liberal, multifunctional) (Potter and Tilzey, 2005; Erjavec and Erjavec, 2009, 2020; Rutz et al., 2014; Leduc et al., 2021; Feindt et al., 2022). All three main agricultural policy discourses are prominent among different established actors and are regularly merged into a hybrid discourse in Commission documents (Erjavec and Erjavec, 2015). They are ‘systemic’ discourses because they align with the established political system and do not call for fundamental change (Potter and Tilzey, 2005). More radical ‘a-systemic’ discourses such as the food sovereignty discourse – which emerged during the 1990s mainly among farmer activists to criticize shortcomings of a globalized food system (Fairbairn, 2012) – have remained marginal (Tilzey and Potter, 2015).

Against this background, the FtF Strategy, published in May 2020 as a cornerstone of the New European Green Deal, had primarily an agenda-setting function. It set objectives for “building the food chain that works for consumers, producers, climate and the environment” (European Commission 2020b, p.7) and was accompanied by a draft Action Plan with 27 measures, including (i) a call for overarching systemic legal frameworks for sustainable food systems; (ii) substantive measures for agricultural production and agriculture, which mainly build on ongoing initiatives such as the sustainable use of pesticides; (iii) ad hoc interventions in other parts of the value chain, for which proposals were already in the pipeline; and (iv) actions to create an enabling framework for private actors to adopt sustainability-enhancing practices (Schebesta et al., 2020, 423f). Five quantitative targets for agriculture epitomize the transformative ambition: reduced use of artificial fertilizers, pesticides, and antimicrobials, reduced nutrient losses, and more organic farming. In contrast, concrete targets or a proposed binding framework for other parts of the value chain are missing (ibid.). Hence, FtF was most concrete in challenging the productivist approach to agriculture. However, politically this turned out to be mostly unsuccessful. Attempts to attune the CAP reform 2021 to the FtF objectives were not effective (Daugbjerg and Feindt, 2022) and key pieces of legislation stranded: By spring 2024, the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation was voted down in the Council. The Nature Restoration Law prevailed in the Council only after an internally contested vote from Austria. The projected soil law was reduced to a Directive on Soil Monitoring and Resilience. The legislative framework for sustainable food systems was not proposed by the Commission by end of 2023 as intended. In March 2024, in response to farm protests, the Commission even proposed to revoke environmental and climate requirements for direct payments under the CAP, which Council and Parliament adopted in a record-breaking fast-track procedure. As a result, the Commission clearly did not muster enough support for its transformative FtF agenda and is instead launched “a strategic dialogue on the future of agriculture in the EU, further engaging with farmers, stakeholders in the food chain and citizens” (European Commission, 2023, p. 5).

3. Conceptual framework

To better understand how the transformative agenda of the FtF Strategy was taken up by relevant actors, we analyzed the narratives in the submissions to the public consultation. Our overall analytical strategy was to identify salient narratives and reconstruct their framing of food system transitions. We then assessed if narratives reproduce or contradict established agricultural policy discourses. To this end, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the responses to the FtF consultation, using a deductive analytical framework that includes the main elements of food system transitions. This allowed us to identify

distinct narratives that arrange these elements in particular ways.

We conceptualize narratives as patterns of stories shared among particular groups that provide explanations for certain phenomena (Riedy, 2020), frame or present a particular problem and its causes, and justify specific solutions (Guske et al., 2019, p. 6165). As shared stories, narratives have some persistence within an interpretive community so that individuals can draw on them to make sense of a situation. Because they provide problem framings and explanations, narratives shape and coordinate actors’ understandings of the systems in which they operate (Tomlinson, 2013). Identifying narratives is a useful strategy to understand how actors in a public debate construct (causal) relations between ideational elements of food system transitions and to identify shared or competing arguments. Narratives are connected to broader discourses (Riedy 2020), i.e., changing patterns of socially constructed knowledge that reassemble social practices which systematically construct the objects and subjects actors speak about (Foucault, 1969). Each discourse constitutes a “particular way of talking and understanding the world” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 2). Narratives convey and contextualize the underlying worldviews of a discourse in a given situation (Riedy, 2020; Tilzey and Potter, 2015). As mentioned above, the field of EU agricultural policy is characterized by three systemic discourses: the neomercantilist, the market-liberal and the multifunctional discourse, which provide backgrounds of meaning for narratives. The FtF Strategy aimed to broaden the debate beyond agriculture and to include all parts of the food system. Therefore, narratives focusing on agriculture as well as other parts of the food value chain could be found. If a narrative focuses on agriculture, it should be possible to assess whether it is directly linked to one of the established CAP discourses. If it focuses on another part of the value chain, it should still be possible to assess whether these narratives show connections to the worldviews of established CAP discourses or contradict them. For example, market-liberal narratives about consumption could be identified that were well aligned with a market-liberal CAP discourse. Additionally, also new, a-systemic discourses could influence narratives in the FtF debate.

To identify key elements of food system transition in narratives, we draw on the multi-level-perspective (MLP) concept (Geels, 2002, 2019), a recognized heuristic for systematizing key elements of transition drivers, impacts and (suggested) responses that has influenced many studies of socio-technical transitions (Köhler et al., 2019) and food system transitions (e.g., El Bilali, 2019; Gaitán-Cremaschi et al., 2019; Fiala and Jacob 2024). The MLP conceptualizes transitions as a complex, dynamic and non-linear interplay of processes at three levels: an incumbent socio-technical *regime* where dominant market structures, technologies, consumer preferences, policies, scientific knowledge etc. mutually stabilize each other; a range of different *niche* innovations; and a *landscape* of factors beyond the control of the regime actors, such as geo-political shifts or climate change (Geels and Schot, 2007).

The MLP informs our understanding of food system transitions. Building on Ericksen (2008) and Ingram (2011),³ we understand food systems as the activities of actors and related structures associated with the production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food. These activities, actors and structures are influenced by internal and external social and ecological drivers. Established food systems at the regime level are characterized by stable and mutually reinforcing structures such as markets, knowledge or policies (El Bilali, 2019; Gaitán-Cremaschi et al., 2019). While most niches contain technological, organisational or social innovations, some might constitute emerging food systems that are somehow protected from the regime. Regime and niche dynamics are affected by long-term developments at

³ We acknowledge that there are more recent and elaborate definitions of food systems, such as HLPE (2017), that build upon those used in this article. For our purpose, the initial definitions are detailed enough to provide the broad categories for our analytical framework and are not in conflict with prominent later definitions.

the landscape level such as climate change, biodiversity loss, digitization, demographic change, etc. These broader trends affect incumbent and emerging food systems by creating pressures, disruptions or favorable conditions for actors and innovations at niche and regime level (Geels, 2002, 2019). We have deployed the MLP to deduce relevant categories for the reconstruction of elements of food system transitions in narratives, because it helped us to conceptually distinguish between drivers of change, their impacts on food systems and possible responses.

Drivers of food system dynamics are “endogenous or exogenous processes that deliberately or unintentionally affect or influence a food system over a long-enough period of time so that their impacts result in altering durably the activities [or actors’ behaviors], and subsequently the outcomes, of that system” (Bene et al., 2019, p. 152). We can differentiate between internal drivers, which are situated within at the food regime level, and external drivers, which are pressures originating from the landscape level. External drivers are pressures or opportunities originating from the landscape level. They include slow-changing variables that represent long-term trends, e.g. demographic change (Geels and Schot, 2007; Upham et al., 2020), but also short-term shocks such as a war or a global financial crisis. Long-term trends in particular constitute external food system drivers (Ericksen, 2008; Ingram, 2011). External drivers likely affect not only food systems, but also other socio-technical systems. Internal drivers are endogenous processes within a food system. They typically emerge at the food regime level. But developments in niches can become drivers of change as well, for instance if a niche innovation becomes a competitive alternative and replaces a regime product or practice. Internal and external drivers interact, their effects mutually reinforcing or balancing. For example, agricultural practices at the regime level can reinforce climate change through emissions or mitigate its effects through adaptation.

Challenges and opportunities for food systems: Slow or sudden changes of external and internal drivers can exert additional pressure on food systems or create novel opportunities. To characterize the narrated effects of drivers on a food system, we distinguish between positive (food system opportunities) and negative impacts (food system challenges). Our analysis does not aim for an objective assessment, but for the reconstruction of the discursively constructed and presented impacts in the material analyzed.

Affected parts of food systems: Food system drivers may affect different parts of the food value chain. In line with the structure of the FtF Strategy, we distinguish between agricultural production, food industry and trade, and consumption (European Commission, 2020a,b). Again, we aim at a reconstruction of how the affected parts are presented in the narrative.

Proposed responses: Responses are active measures taken by food system in the face of actual or expected impacts of drivers. In our analysis, this category refers to measures that are proposed to address challenges or to exploit opportunities and can entail visions for future food systems.

We consider statements in each of these dimensions as idea elements. Narratives that are relevant for food system transitions connect several idea elements through stories about interactions between external and internal drivers, resulting challenges and opportunities for incumbent and emerging food systems, and proposed responses. The relationships are not necessarily unidirectional from driver to impact, etc., because linear and non-linear feedback loops can connect the elements in multiple ways. Reconstructing narratives along the idea elements in the relevant dimensions (external and internal drivers, impacts, affected parts, responses) and the discursive construction of their interplay allows us to systematically analyze and compare the policy narratives. Fig. 1 illustrates the conceptual framework and connects it to the methods used.

4. Material and methods

In December 2019 the European Commission (2019) announced to

develop the FtF Strategy. The draft strategy’s publication was followed by a public consultation process that was open for submissions from January to April 2020. In May, the European Commission (2020a) published an action plan to the FtF Strategy. The submissions to the public consultation allow to capture a broad variety of viewpoints from different actor groups. Anyone could upload a written response to the European Commission’s consultation platform.⁴

Respondents were asked to name their institution, their country of origin and the type of institution with the following options: academic institution, business association, citizen, company, consumer organization, farmer association, trading association, NGO, environmental organization, trade organization. Not all respondents declared their type of institution. We aimed to identify the organization type through additional research where possible. Overall, 507 unique responses were retrieved. Most responses came from business associations (148) and single companies (46), followed by NGOs (140), citizens (69), farmers’ associations (41), public authorities (27), academic institutions (24) and consumer organizations (4). Regarding the country of origin, most of the respondents declared that they were based in Brussels (140), followed by Czech Republic (53), Germany (51), Spain (37), France (31), Italy (28), the Netherlands (26), Poland (21), Ireland (19), Portugal (14), Finland (13), United Kingdom (12), Sweden (11) and Austria (10). Less than 10 responses were received from other countries.

Due to the high number of responses submitted to the consultation and because of limited resources, we opted to randomly select 30% of the responses for each actor group. To avoid very short statements unlikely to contain elaborate narratives, only responses with more than 300 words were included. This resulted in the analysis of nine submissions by academic institutions, 59 from the private sector (business associations, companies, and trading groups), 24 responses from citizens, one from consumer organizations,⁵ and 13 from general farmers’ associations (not from specialized groups such as organic farming or sector-specific associations), 47 from civil society organizations, and 10 from public authorities (in total 164 submissions). The longest response counted 9461 words. 76% of the analyzed responses were written in English or German, both of which the researchers are proficient in. Responses in other languages were translated, using Google Translate.

To reconstruct the narratives in the material, we employed a tailored variant of qualitative content analysis. First, responses were analyzed using qualitative structural content analysis following Kuckartz (2012). Here the categories from our analytical framework provided the main deductive analytical categories for the analysis, i.e., the material was coded for (i) external drivers, (ii) internal drivers, (iii) challenges and opportunities; (iv) affected parts of the food system, and (v) responses. Within these main categories additional sub-categories were created inductively. E.g., particular external drivers were identified within the overall deductive category “external driver”.

Definitions and anchor examples were laid down in a coding manual. One of the authors created the inductive codes and analyzed the coded segments. After coding 20% of the responses, the inductive categories were checked and refined by comparing the coded segments. The refined categories were re-applied to the material already coded and used for the coding of the remaining responses. The coding process was supervised by another author and the coding manual as well as preliminary results were regularly discussed.

In total, we found 15 different external drivers, 11 internal drivers, 19 challenges or opportunities and 28 proposed responses. Below we focus on the description of the narratives, explaining their most salient drivers, challenges/opportunities, etc. A detailed description of all

⁴ Submissions can be found here: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12183-Sustainable-food-farm-to-fork-strategy_en.

⁵ Organizations that represent the interests of consumers, not individual “consumers” (those would fall under citizens).

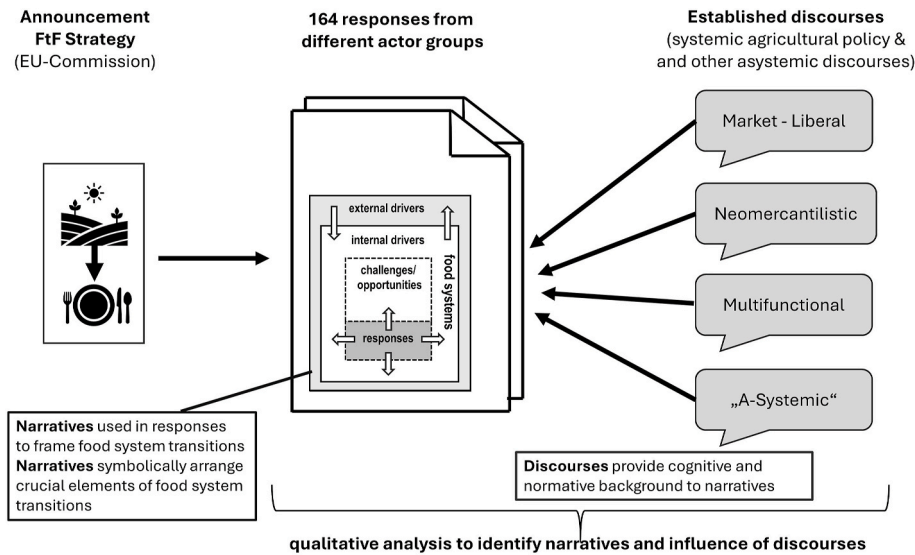


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework: narratives about food system transitions in submissions to the European Commission’s public consultation on the FTF Strategy and potential connections to established farm policy discourses.

categories can be found in the electronic supplementary material (ESM) 1.

Based on the coding, a case excerpt was created for each submission, summarizing the main content by category. Case excerpts with similarities were grouped. A detailed comparison allowed to identify recurring arguments which linked inductive categories in particular ways. Over several rounds, excerpts were reorganized to minimize within-group differences, resulting in groups of excerpts that mainly used similar argumentation. Following the approach of Kluge (2000) this means that types were generated from the empirical material that combine and describe responses with similar subcategories, each type representing one narrative. In a final step, we assessed how categories were related in the main lines of argumentation of the different types. On this basis, the core narrative of each group of responses was named and its storyline summarized. ESM 2 gives an overview of the key drivers, value chain elements, opportunities/challenges and responses articulated in each narrative.

Once the narratives were identified, we assessed whether they were strongly linked to one of the three established CAP discourses (if they focus on agriculture) or fit/contradict their worldviews (if they focus on another part of the value chain). To this end, we looked mainly at the challenges and suggested responses in the narratives, which were more explicitly articulated than the other idea elements, and assessed whether they matched the argumentative lines in the respective agricultural policy discourses. The categories were selected because they can be clearly connected to policy measures promoted in the different discourses (for a similar approach see Alons and Zwaan, 2016).⁶ To answer the question which actor groups used which narratives, we used cross-tabulation to map which narratives were used by each actor groups (see Table 1).⁷ To mitigate the risk of overlooking narratives due to the limited number of responses analyzed, we finally compared the results with the Commissions summary report on the FTF stakeholder

⁶ The narratives were reconstructed by qualitative content analysis and not by counting code frequencies. However, to provide an overview which narratives align with which discourses, ESM 1 shows the salience of the analytical categories in the narratives that are linked to different discourses.

Table 1

Salience of narratives among different actor groups, source: authors’ analysis of n = 164 responses to the EU Commission’s public consultation on the draft FTF Strategy.

Narratives	AC	BS	CI	CON	FA	NGO	PA	Sum
Market-liberal narratives								
N1_Feeding the world		6	1		1			8
N2_Free business		17						19
		2 ^a						
N3_Voting with the Euro	4	4						8
N4_Technological innovation ^b	4	6 + 8 ^a	1			2	1	22
Neomercantilistic narratives								
N5_Protect European producers		7	1		8		1	17
N6_No ‘one size fits all’		1	8		4	2		15
Multifunctional narratives								
N7_Environmental foundations	2	1				19	2	24
N8_Small traditional and beautiful			3			2	4	9
N9_Animal welfare						4	1	5
N10_Sustainable diets			6	1		6		13
„A-systemic“ narratives								
N11_Need for drastic changes			2			6		8
N12_Public health						4		4
Sum	10	52	22	1	13	49	9	152^c

ACI: academic institutions, BS: businesses (associations and single companies), C: citizens, CON: consumer organizations, FA: farmer associations, NGO: non-governmental associations, PA: public authorities.

^a The first number refers to business associations, the second number to single companies.

^b The ‘technological innovation’ narrative shows some proximity to the market-liberal discourse. However, it barely addresses the role of markets. It has therefore only comparable weak links to the market-liberal discourse

^c In total we were able to identify the employment of consistent narratives in 152 of the 164 responses.

⁷ For sake of simplification we assumed that each response follows one main narrative.

consultation (European Commission 2020c).⁸

5. Results

5.1. How narratives reconstruct elements of food system transitions

Based on the analysis of the submissions to the FtF consultation, we were able to reconstruct 12 distinct narratives. Ten of them show strong links to the established agricultural policy discourses (market-liberal, neomercantilistic, multi-functional) or focus on different parts of the value chain but are still in line with the overall worldview of the discourses. Two narratives qualify as 'a-systemic'. Below we describe how the different narratives arrange the elements of food system transition and the commonalities of the narratives associated with each of the discourses. For a detailed description of all narratives see ESM2.

5.1.1. Market-liberal narratives

Three narratives reflect a market-liberal worldview: *N1_ "Feeding the world"* focuses on agricultural production and tells the story that efficient and intensive European agriculture is necessary to ensure food quality and security in a globalized world under pressure from climate change and population growth. Food producers should not be impeded in developing (mostly technological) innovations and should use the opportunities of free markets. This narrative emphasizes agricultural productivity and presents free trade as a solution. *N2_ "Free business"* applies the same logic to the food industry highlighting that Europe's highly competitive food industry can provide solutions to current challenges through innovations if not hampered by regulations. *N3_ "Voting with the Euro"* emphasizes the role of consumers as central change agents in food systems because their choices (how and where they spend their money) determine what kind of food is produced and how. In addition, *N4_ "Technological innovation"* promotes technological solutions to specific agricultural problems and technological-organizational system optimization as solution to the broader problem of non-sustainable food systems. This technological optimization and innovation approach resonates with the logic of the market-liberal discourse but, because of its narrow focus it does not explicitly address the role of markets.

5.1.1.1. Shared market-liberal views on drivers and impacts. The external drivers that are narrated as having the most impact are climate change and technological progress. In line with the FtF Action Plan, climate change is presented as a major challenge to society with negative impacts on agriculture and long-term food security. However, due to their efficiency and sustainability, incumbent European agriculture and food production systems are depicted as the answer to climate change. Technological advances and digitization are presented as new opportunities for European food producers to innovate and make the European food system more sustainable and efficient. Globalization and free trade are portrayed as opportunities for European food companies, enabling European food producers to "feed" a growing world population.

Second, market-liberal narratives portray consumers as actors with great influence on the food system because producers would follow consumer demand. Changing lifestyles and population growth are important external drivers. They interact with internal drivers for the future development of the food system, in particular dietary habits and related consumer choices. Agricultural policy frameworks, regulation

and bureaucracy play an important role, but are often portrayed as hindering the exploitation of opportunities created by trade and technological progress. Excessive market regulation and ensuing market fragmentation through different regional standards and rules are depicted as potentially confusing consumers.

Overall, the market-liberal narratives present the European food system as highly efficient and quite sustainable, providing consumers with safe and affordable food and contributing to "feeding the world". Societal challenges such as climate change, long-term global food security or diet-related health problems are recognized, but the established agriculture and food production systems in the EU are presented as problem-solving rather than problem-causing. External drivers are portrayed in a relatively positive light. Technological progress, digitization and innovation provide opportunities for European agriculture and food producers to advance comparative advantages against international competitors.

5.1.1.2. Shared market-liberal view on proposed responses. Market-liberal narratives portray European agriculture and food businesses as already highly sustainable and successful in addressing many food system challenges. Sustainable food businesses should be enabled to continue their success in European and global markets. To achieve this, no new environmental regulations should be imposed that would reduce the competitiveness of European businesses. Rather, the private sector should be enabled to take advantage of technological progress to innovate and become more sustainable and competitive. Bureaucracy and administrative burdens should be reduced and legal frameworks harmonized. Large and stable markets should be created, and research and development should be funded. Consumers are ultimately responsible for the future development of the food system. It must be ensured that they have appropriate information to take the right decisions. Fig. 2 summarizes the findings using the MLP framework.

5.1.2. Neomercantilistic narratives

The neomercantilistic narratives focus mainly on agricultural production. *N5_ "Protect European producers"* highlights that to maintain European food security, food and environmental quality as well as producers' livelihoods, European farmers must be protected against unfair international competition. In contrast, *N6_ "No 'one size fits all'"* emphasizes the specificities of regional farming systems and necessary national flexibility within the EU, claiming that one-size-fits-all EU regulations ((in particular environmental regulations) hamper the productivity of producers.

5.1.2.1. Shared view on drivers and connected impacts. Neomercantilistic narratives present globalization and the associated international trade system as the main external drivers, which pose threats to European agricultural production because they expose Europe's farmers to unfair competition. Another major external driver, the EU's sustainability agenda, in particular the European Green Deal and associated regulations, is also portrayed as creating unfair competitive disadvantages by forcing Europe's farmers to adopt less productive agricultural practices. Because of high European environmental and quality standards, foreign competitors could produce at lower costs. The neomercantilist narratives argue that imports of cheaper food threaten the livelihoods of European farmers and, in the long run, also food security (and rural development) in Europe. Therefore, the costs of transitioning to a more climate-friendly European Union would not be evenly distributed among stakeholders, and food producers would be disproportionately affected. This is presented as problematic because efficient European agricultural production could provide opportunities for sustainable development.

Climate change is also seen as an important driver, putting additional pressure on farmers, as climate change related hazards affect agricultural productivity. Additionally, regional differences between farming

⁸ The stakeholder meeting took place before the public consultation on 18th February 2020. 58 stakeholders participated, representing NGOs, professional associations, policy stakeholders or scientific organizations. Several of the stakeholders also submitted responses to the public consultation process. While some of them were part of the analyzed material (e.g., "fooddrinkeurope"), others were not (e.g., IFOAM).

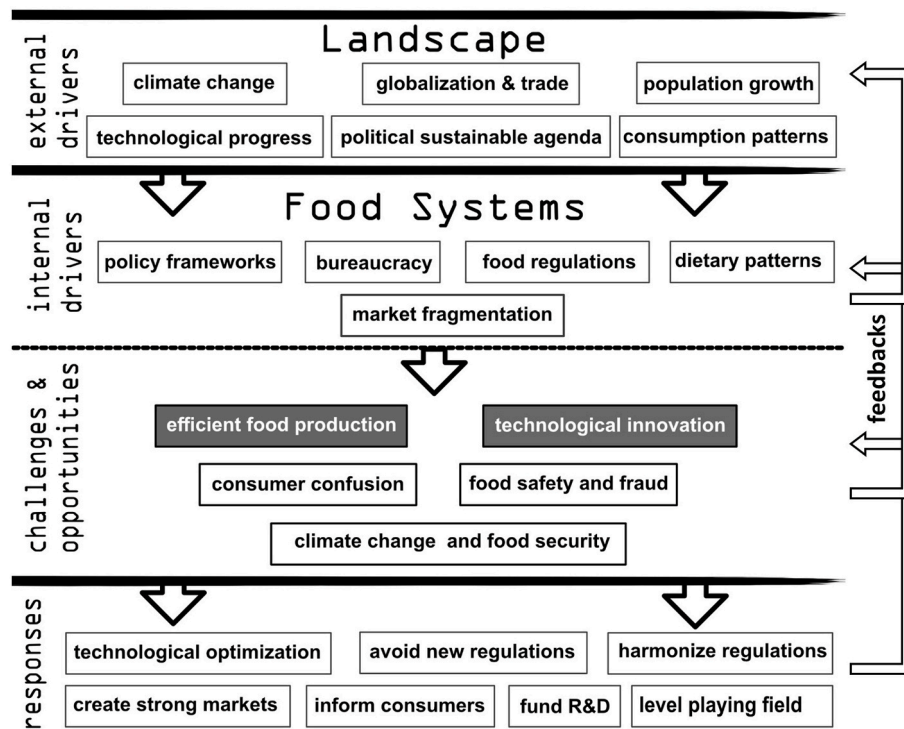


Fig. 2. Shared drivers, challenges/opportunities and responses in market-liberal narratives based on the MLP framework. In the challenges and opportunities area grey squares represent opportunities, white squares challenges.

systems within the EU are seen as an important internal driver, which complicates EU-wide policy measures. Other important internal drivers are EU agricultural policies and regulatory frameworks, such as the CAP, since they can be used to protect or burden European food producers. The power of consumers' dietary habits and consumption patterns in determining agricultural production is also acknowledged, but plays a lesser role than in market-liberal narratives.

5.1.2.2. Shared neomercantilist views on proposed responses. According to neomercantilist narratives, the EU must maintain high agricultural productivity and secure the livelihoods of food producers. Measures that reduce agricultural productivity should therefore be avoided. Instead, highly productive farms should be supported through the CAP and practicable, flexible regulatory frameworks. The trade system should be adjusted so that food imports into the EU are required to comply with the same quality standards, otherwise tariffs should be imposed so that the final price of imported food reflects its true costs. Consumers must be informed about the benefits of food produced in Europe. New technologies should be used to further increase agricultural productivity and competitiveness in a sustainable way. Different regional conditions for agriculture within the EU should be considered by policy makers. Fig. 3 illustrate the findings.

5.1.3. Multifunctional narratives

N7_ "Environmental foundations" was the most prominent multifunctional narrative in our data. Focusing on agricultural production, it tells the story of how industrial agriculture and corporate food systems contribute to the destruction of ecosystems, thereby undermining their own foundations. This dynamic endangers long-term productivity and food security. In contrast, *N8_ "Animal welfare"* emphasizes the harm to animals caused by industrial animal husbandry. *N9_ "Small, traditional and beautiful"* claims that small, traditional agriculture would be sustainable, but is threatened by industrialization and environmental destruction. By linking agriculture to rural development, this narrative includes other parts of the value chain but also resonates with neomercantilist narratives. Finally, *N10_ "Sustainable diet"* focuses on

consumption, proclaiming that climate and environmentally aware diets must be established to make the food system more sustainable and to stop the destruction of agriculture's ecological foundations. However, the burden does not lie entirely with individual consumers, as structural conditions such as consumer prices and the availability of sustainable food must also be addressed.

5.1.3.1. Shared multifunctional views on drivers and connected impacts.

Multifunctional narratives strongly emphasize the importance of ecological conditions for agriculture and food production. Ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss and climate change are presented as external drivers that pose significant threats to the ecological foundations of farming, long-term food production and food security. Other important external drivers are globalization and international trade are presented as threats because of the associated negative impacts on climate change and animal welfare, and the risk of importing food produced under low environmental standards. Multifunctional narratives foreground many internal drivers of food systems. In contrast to market-liberal and most neomercantilist narratives, the current European food system is often portrayed as failing. Incumbent agricultural systems are presented as destroying the environment and, by extension, their own ecological foundations. Industrialization and intensification of agriculture, as well as unhealthy and unsustainable diets, facilitate this process. Multifunctional narratives also emphasize the power of political and regulatory frameworks to steer agriculture and food production in the wrong or right direction.

In summary, the main challenge in multifunctional narratives is the destruction of the environment (including biodiversity loss and climate change), for which incumbent agricultural systems are seen as a major cause. At the same time, environmental degradation also threatens agricultural productivity and long-term food security, as well as food producers' livelihoods and rural development, and exacerbates poor animal welfare conditions. Hence, agriculture appears as both, villain and victim.

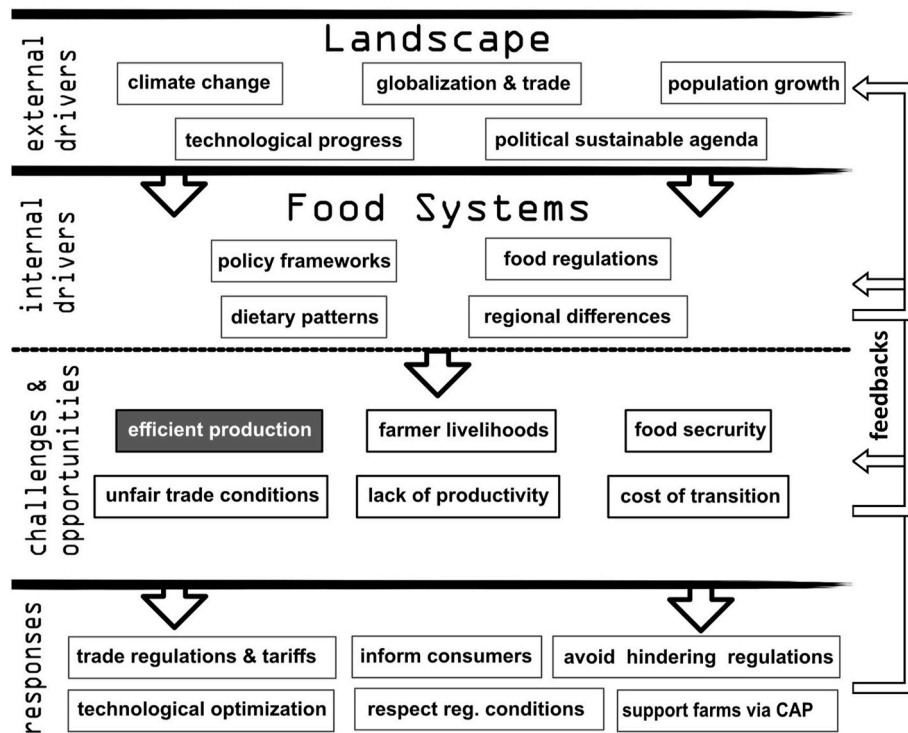


Fig. 3. Shared drivers, challenges/opportunities and responses in neomercantilistic narratives based on the MLP framework. In the challenges and opportunities area grey squares represent opportunities, white squares challenges.

5.1.3.2. Shared multifunctional views on appropriate responses. Multifunctional narratives argue that current growth-oriented patterns of food production and consumption cause large-scale environmental destruction and undermine the ecological foundations of agriculture. Food consumption and production must be rebalanced with the

capacities of their connected ecosystems. To overcome market failures, regulations and governmental incentives are needed for 'greener' agricultural and food production practices and for better animal welfare. Trade standards should prohibit outsourcing of environmental pollution, and binding reduction targets for pollutant emissions should be

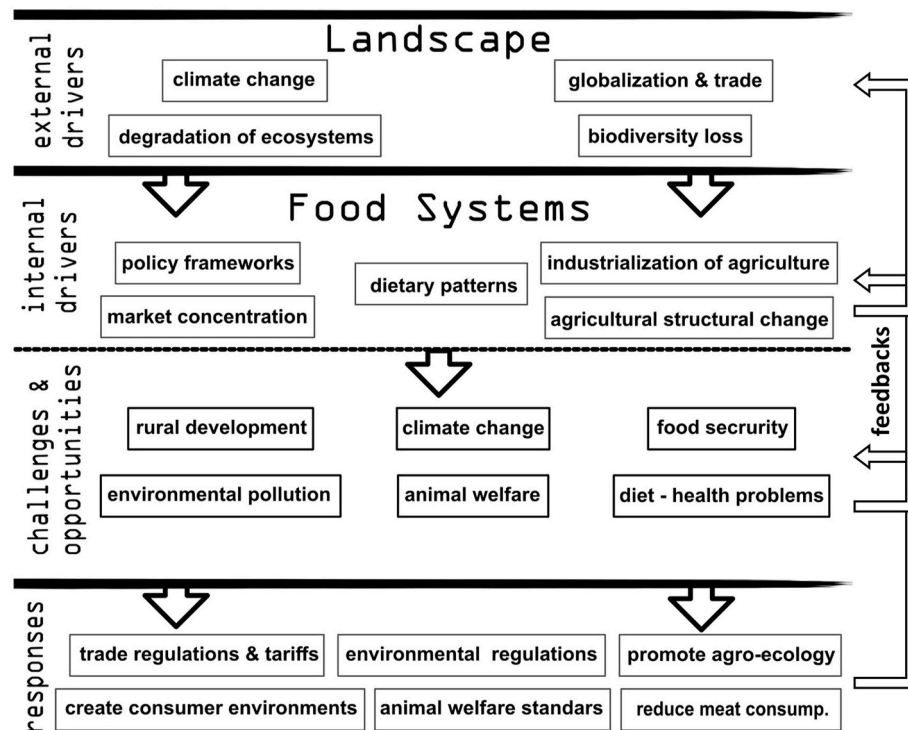


Fig. 4. Shared drivers, challenges/opportunities and responses in multifunctional narratives based on the MLP framework; In the challenges and opportunities area white squares challenges.

adopted. Agroecological practices and organic farming should be encouraged. Finally, information and supportive structures should enable consumers to adopt more sustainable and climate-friendly diets and reduce meat consumption (see Fig. 4).

5.1.4. „A-systemic“ narratives

Two narratives did not align with the three CAP discourses. *N11_“Need for drastic changes”* shows strong linkages to the discourse on food sovereignty. The dominant production- and market-oriented economic paradigm and liberalized global trade fuel the industrialization of agriculture, structural change, degradation of ecosystems, climate change, market concentration and poor living conditions of many food producers. In this narrative, the CAP reinforces these problematic dynamics. The consequences are massive social and ecological challenges, power inequalities and threats to food security that need to be addressed with a package of policies to bring about fundamental change.

N “Public health” does not primarily address food but health issues. Although working conditions sometimes play a role, the focus is on the consumer side and not on the health of food producers. This narrative was only used by NGOs which explicitly address public health issues. The main drivers in this narrative are unhealthy lifestyles and diets that cause health problems, but also have negative environmental impacts. There are no easy solutions to diet-related health problems. Therefore, healthy consumer environments should be created. This means changing the structures of the food system in a way that healthy food becomes easily accessible and affordable to consumers (see Fig. 4).

5.1.5. Mapping the narratives and their users

Fig. 5 maps the identified narratives onto the main discourses and the different parts of the food system. It shows a strong alignment of the narratives with the three established CAP discourses. Most of the narratives focus on agricultural production and can connect directly to one of the CAP discourses. Four narratives center on other parts of the food value chain, but resonate with one of the three CAP discourses and extend their respective worldviews to other parts of the food system. Only narratives linked to the market-liberal discourse addressed all parts of the food system, while neomercantilistic narratives were confined to agricultural production and regional development. Narratives about processors and retail were generally rare. For each discourse, we found narratives which address agricultural production. Four of them bridge several discourses at least to some degree. The two a-systemic narratives articulate views that counter the established discourses at the levels of production and consumption.

To corroborate our findings, we analyzed the summary report of the stakeholder consultation on the roadmap of the FTF strategy (European Commission 2020c), where participants were asked for feedback on the roadmap of the F2F strategy and on challenges and future strategies of the European food system. We found no indication that our analysis had missed any other prominent narratives. For example, regarding agricultural production, farmers’ representatives demanded an assessment of socio-economic impacts. Business associations wanted pesticide and fertilizer reduction targets to be science-based and fewer regulatory bottlenecks. NGOs called for action on animal welfare and animal farming. Processing and retail were discussed mainly in the context of international trade and with calls for a coherent approach to imports produced to different standards. Concerning consumption, different participants called for better consumer information about healthy and sustainable food choices and the creation of sustainable food environments. Finally, regarding the roadmap, stakeholders stressed the need for FTF to be coherent with other parts of the Green New Deal and other strategies. In addition, the strong role of the CAP was recognized, with NGOs stressing that reduction targets should be integrated into the CAP and that hard measures are needed to implement the strategy.

All of these positions are part of the identified narratives (e.g., “Voting with the Euro” calls for more consumer information, or *Sustainable diets* for sustainable food environments). However, the stakeholder consultation also revealed specific themes or nuanced positions that were not prominent in the described narratives. One example was the call by certain actors to consider food reformulation, including a shift to new plant-based or insect-based products, or a critique of ultra-processed foods. Another example is the hybrid position of the organic farmers’ association IFOAM, which called for a sustainable transition in agriculture, but also emphasized that changes should keep farms viable.

The salience of the narratives among the different actor groups is summarized in Table 1. While farmers’ associations used almost exclusively neomercantilistic narratives, NGOs mostly deployed multifunctional or a-systemic narratives. Participants from the business sector mostly employed market-liberal or, to a lesser extent, neomercantilistic narratives. Participants from academic institutions often employed the ‘technological innovation’ narrative, but also market liberal narratives (voting with the Euro) where the need to inform consumers was emphasized. Of course this does not represent the full range of academic opinions on food system transitions and raises the question which institutions participated in the consultation and were included in the analysis. Public authorities – which were represented mainly by regional authorities – tended to use multifunctional narratives and adopt

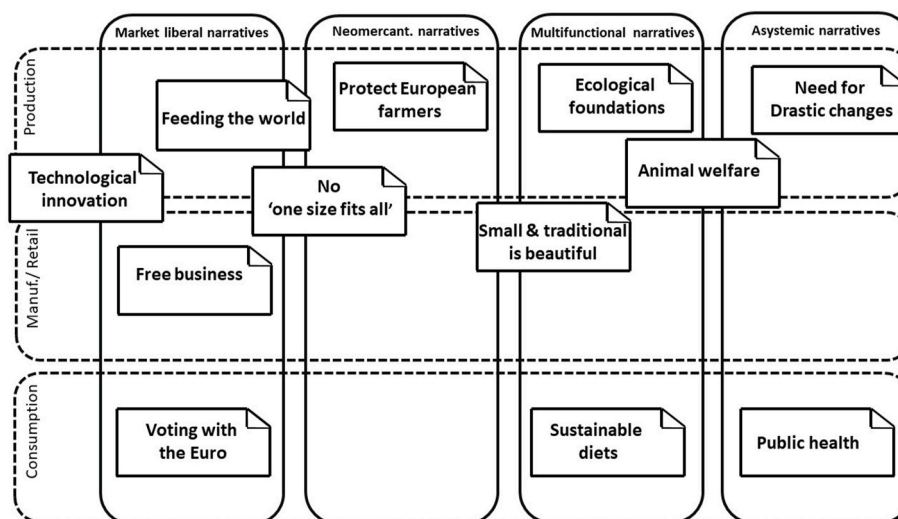


Fig. 5. Overview of identified narratives The figure positions the identified narratives with regard to which discourse they have the strongest connection to and which parts of the food value chain they focus on.

positions similar to those of NGOs. Contributions from ‘citizens’ were scattered across all main CAP discourses as well as a-systemic narratives, indicating that this category did not contain a coherent group and also reflected national differences. For example, Polish or Czech citizens were more likely to use neomercantilist narratives, while citizens from Western European countries⁹ tended to foreground multifunctional narratives. Findings suggest that there was little overlap in the use of narratives between actor groups. This may indicate competing positions on food system transitions along established lines of conflict (e.g., NGOs vs. business associations). However, these indications need to be discussed in a broader context (see discussion sections B and C).

6. Discussion

This research aimed to analyze the extent to which responses to the FtF strategy followed long-established lines of argumentation in agricultural policy or whether novel narratives about food system transition emerged that created new opportunities for food system transition. Several key findings emerge that (a) shed light on the extent to which narratives go beyond long-established lines of argumentation, and (b) explore how relevant actor groups present food system transitions. Both can help to (c) understand the current struggles over the implementation of the FtF strategy. Finally, this study faced also some limitations (d).

A) *Small movements beyond established lines of argumentation*: The narratives transcend the long-established European farm policy discourses to a limited extent. On the one hand, our analysis shows that many submissions to the FtF consultation reproduce competing and long-established CAP discourses. Accordingly, most narratives in the consultation submissions are well aligned with either the neomercantilist, the multifunctional or the market-liberal discourse, and thereby probably reinforced the Commission’s hybrid discourse (cf. Potter and Tilzey, 2005; Erjavec and Erjavec, 2015; Feindt, 2018; Feindt et al., 2022). On the other hand, some narratives focus less on agricultural production and address other parts of the food system, but are still in line with the worldview of market-liberal and multifunctional discourses. In contrast, neomercantilistic narratives only address agricultural production. The broader range of perspectives articulated from parts of the food system beyond agricultural production resonates with the diagnosis that European agricultural policy is characterized by an increasingly post-exceptionalist arrangement. In this arrangement farm income support is maintained but linked to a broader set of ideas from a wider range of actors and interests (Daugbjerg and Feindt, 2017). The FtF Strategy can be seen as another expression of a post-exceptionalist vision for agriculture and food policy. However, if the aim of the consultation was to find support for a transformative legislative agenda, the narrative analysis indicates that success was limited, since most narratives still focus on agriculture and reproduce established lines of argumentation. For example, only the market-liberal discourse generated narratives about all parts of the food system, but replicated well-known calls for less regulation.

B) *Competing and partial framing of food system transitions among actor groups*: Taken together, the narratives present a fairly complete picture of possible drivers of food system transitions and include a very exhaustive list of challenges or proposed responses (cf., Bene et al., 2019; FAO, 2017). However, the narratives connected to each of the three main discourses include only selected drivers, challenges and opportunities, reflecting the different respective worldviews. Few external drivers (climate change and globalization), internal drivers (diets and policy frameworks) or challenges (consumer confusion) are shared across narratives from different discourses. Instead, crucial food system elements are constructed quite differently. Consequently, narratives from the three main discourses are likely to present the legitimacy and

effectiveness of the proposed measures in the action plan (European Commission, 2020b) in contrasting ways. The FtF goal of increasing competitiveness of European food producers, its emphasis on the economic opportunities of sustainable food system transitions, the call to develop green trade alliances to spread sustainable food production globally, the salience of voluntary ad hoc measures, and the key role of informed consumer choice resonate with the market-liberal narratives N2_“free business”, N1_“Feeding the world” and N3_“Voting with the Euro”. In contrast, the ambition to bring food into the realm of the European Green Deal resonates with the multifunctional discourse. In particular, the reduction targets for pesticides and fertilizers, higher animal welfare standards and making sustainable food the most accessible option for consumers resonate with narratives N7_“Ecological foundation”, N8_“Animal welfare” and N9_“Sustainable diet”. However, few mandatory measures and the framing of food as commodity and business opportunity show the influence of market-liberal and neomercantilistic ideas (Jackson et al., 2021) and indicate weak implementation of multifunctional ideas. Finally, elements of the draft FtF Action Plan that resonate with neomercantilist narratives, such as the recognition of Member States’ different starting points or the call for appropriate trade agreements, are presented not merely as means to protect European food producers, but in terms that resonate with all three established discourses.

Because narratives represent food system transitions differently, the finding that participants from the different actor groups used different groups of narratives is important. Farmers’ associations mainly deployed neomercantilist, NGOs multifunctional and representatives from the food industry market-liberal narratives. NGOs, for example, used multifunctional narratives to emphasize the degradation of ecological foundations as driver of future change, whereas market-liberal narratives rarely include this topic. Note that the mutually exclusive positions in our text corpus could be partly a result of genre and discursive context, as responses in consultation procedures are likely to emphasize particular agendas and partial interests. Still, the findings are consistent with earlier studies on CAP discourse (Candel et al., 2014; Grohmann and Feindt, 2023b) and point to an ideational struggle between deeply entrenched discourses in the food system transition debate. The resulting divergent problem framings are likely to inhibit consensus for collective action towards sustainable transitions (Anderson et al., 2021; Jacob and Ekins 2020). Only sometimes did we observe actor groups using similar narratives (e.g., certain business and farmer associations using neomercantilist narratives, or regional authorities and NGOs using multifunctional narratives). These overlaps could be the basis for new actor coalitions or reflect old alliances and should be further explored. Similarly, the few issues that feature prominently in many narratives, such as climate change or globalization, may prove to be entry points for further collective action, as their role in food system transitions is perceived differently, but at least their importance is acknowledged. Finally, the findings also suggest that European consumers are unlikely to act as a coherent group.

C) *Insights into the ongoing struggles connected to the FtF strategy*: The set of narratives reveals a lack of consensus on the importance and desirability of internal and external drivers of change. Since the Commission needs qualified majorities in the Council for its legislative agenda, hybrid discourse and ambiguous visions are almost indispensable. Therefore, the vague definitions of sustainable food and food systems, criticized as a weakness of the FtF strategy (Schebesta and Candel, 2020), serve a political purpose. They allow for a wide variety of different viewpoints in the debate. The result is on the one hand the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders and content. On the other hand, this leads to (i) content fragmentation through selective attention to drivers and measures for food system transition and (ii) social fragmentation through the reproduction of established divisions. The consequences of this (unavoidable) ambiguity can be seen in the ongoing struggle over the implementation of the FtF Strategy, which has been shaped by existing power structures as well as new crises and events. For

⁹ Most responses from western European countries were from Germany (2); Ireland (2), Spain (2) Sweden (1), Belgium (1).

example, after the consultation, industry actors pushed for a more market-liberal innovation investment policy at the expense of stronger regulation (Omar and Thorsøe, 2024). Simultaneously, the CAP arena saw a resurgence of neomercantilist and productivist ideas during the farmers' protests across Europe in the winter of 2023/24 against low prices, high costs, unfair competition, environmental regulations, bureaucracy and trade liberalization, which could also point to the comparatively weak inclusion of neomercantilist positions in the FtF action plan. Simultaneously, the Russian attack on Ukraine and its effects on agricultural commodity markets revived food security narratives and made new regulations seen as hindering agricultural productivity unviable. Hence, the Commission's strategy to gain momentum for a food system transition by shifting the venue away from the core CAP arena was not successful. In the ongoing discursive struggle, productivity-oriented narratives gained the upper hand in the legislative institutions, the Council and the Parliament, but also within the Commission. Transformative ambitions gave way to defensive approaches.

D) Limitations of the study: We acknowledge several limitations of our research design. First, relying on data from a self-selective participatory process can lead to underrepresentation of views that do not have the means to participate in such a consultation or feel they have better channels to influence the process. Second, submissions to a European Commission consultation are a very specific format, and the content is not necessarily representative of narratives shared in other genres or communication channels. Third, the deductive-inductive data analysis strategy might have overemphasized the representation of drivers, impacts (challenges/opportunities) and responses, and the MLP elements. As a result, our findings provide exploratory insights in the different understandings of food system transitions among European stakeholders, triggered by the transformative FtF agenda, but not a full and inductive reconstruction of discursive articulations. Fourth, 30% of the responses were analyzed. Although a wide range of different narratives and very short responses (which are unlikely to convey elaborate framings of food system transitions) were not included in the analysis, there is still a risk of missing some aspects. However, the comparison with the summary of the stakeholder consultation provides confidence that the list of narratives is comparatively exhaustive and shows that most of the arguments put forward by stakeholders can be found in the narratives identified. However, the comparison also highlighted some nuanced positions and specific aspects missing from the narratives that need further exploration, such as the role of organic farmers' associations in bringing together ecological and agricultural positions or the issue of food reformulation (i.e., food from insects or cultured meat).

7. Conclusion

Sustainable food system transitions are extremely complex. From a multi-level-perspective, such a transition requires an interplay of external and internal drivers, aligned responses from the actors in the dominant food regime, and suitable niche innovations. Coherent responses in turn depend on a shared understanding of the situation. The European Commission's FtF Strategy can be understood as an attempt to articulate an encompassing vision on challenges to Europe's food systems and possible ways forward. Analyzing the submissions to the Commission's public FtF consultation provided insights how crucial elements of food system transitions are constructed by different actor groups. Combining the narrative analysis with the multi-level-perspective allowed us to reconstruct the participants' arguments about external and internal drivers of food system change and proposed responses.

As a result, we (i) identified 12 distinct narratives, most of which show strong links to established CAP discourses and consequently present food system transitions in different ways; (ii) observed that the majority of narratives still focus on agriculture and not on other parts of food systems; (iii) found a reproduction of existing patterns in the use of neo-mercantilist, market-liberal and multifunctional narratives by

agricultural interest groups, agribusiness and NGOs, respectively. Our analysis extends previous research on CAP discourses to current debates on food system transitions, and adds an ideational dimension to the MLP analysis of food system transitions.

Overall, our findings indicate that understandings of food system transitions among stakeholders in the FtF debate were strongly shaped by long-established and competing discourses with a traditional focus on agricultural production. Competing actor groups, in particular farm interest groups, agribusiness and NGOs, articulated narratives that highlight different internal and external drivers of change, provide diverging assessments of their impacts on food systems, and promote competing suggestions for responses. These insights help to explain why many elements of the FtF strategy were stalled or watered down in the legislative process. It seems that the broadening of the discursive space was not sufficient to secure enough support for an ambitious legislative package for a transition towards more sustainable and resilient food systems.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Valentin Fiala: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Klaus Jacob:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Christiane Barnickel:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Peter H. Feindt:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data availability

Data (responses) are publicly available; used data can be shared

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103374>.

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