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SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRODUCTS

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Abstract
Sustainable food products are a key component of food security in the context of climate change, biodiversity loss, rural depopulation, and the growing need to produce sufficient quantities of nutritious food. They form the foundation for the sustainable use of ecosystems for food production, ensuring the availability of resources for present and future generations. The purpose of this study is to systematize scientific definitions and indicators of food product sustainability through a review of current literature and official documents of international organizations at the European level.
The methodological approach is based on an analytical review of scientific publications and strategic documents issued by FAO, OECD, and the EU. The scope of the review includes the four main pillars of sustainability – environmental, economic, social, and cultural – and examines their manifestation across different segments of the food value chain. Source selection criteria include relevance, scientific credibility, and applicability to the European context. The review also considers policy instruments and consumer behavior as key drivers of sustainability, with particular attention to EU strategies such as Farm to Fork and the European Green Deal.
The results indicate that sustainability in food products is a multidimensional concept integrating ecological objectives (reducing carbon footprint, preserving biodiversity), economic aspects (profitability, market access, and fair value distribution), social dimensions (equity, healthy nutrition, and protection of farmers' rights), and cultural elements (preservation of traditions and local products). The study highlights the role of consumer demand and policy frameworks – ranging from eco-labeling and marketing strategies to legislative initiatives – in promoting sustainable consumption and production. Evidence from literature suggests that consumers are willing to pay a premium for sustainable products, creating opportunities for market-driven sustainability alongside regulatory measures. Practical implications include the need for transparent labeling systems, incentives for organic farming, and support for short supply chains to strengthen rural economies.
The discussion proposes a working definition of a sustainable food product as one whose characteristics contribute to achieving long-term EU objectives, provide added value to consumers, and can be leveraged as a tool for both policy implementation and marketing strategies. The conclusion emphasizes the need for an integrated approach that balances environmental, economic, and social goals to avoid unintended consequences, such as those observed in recent farmer protests against overly ambitious green policies. Sustainable solutions can be enforced through regulations or encouraged through informed consumer choices, but their adoption is essential to safeguard food security for future generations.

Keywords: sustainable food, food security, EU policies, value chain, consumer behavior
JEL codes: Q13, Q18, Q01

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Introduction

People need food. Food, in turn, requires specific resources for its production – soil, water, air, plants, and animals. These resources, by their nature, require sustainable use and management to be preserved for future generations. At the same time, all levels of the food chain – from agricultural production, processing, and packaging to transportation and retail – require energy, including fossil fuels, which contribute to the carbon footprint on the environment. This footprint has visible consequences, such as extreme climate events – prolonged heat waves, sudden heavy rainfall, strong winds, etc. Against this backdrop, there is growing discussion about the sustainability of food production and consumption.

In a broader context, the sustainability of food products is both a tool and an opportunity. It is a tool for achieving multiple goals – combating climate change, reducing greenhouse gases, addressing rural depopulation in the EU, preserving and enhancing biodiversity, and more. It is also an opportunity to realize the economic and social potential of various actors in the food chain and ensure fair distribution of added value among them, including support for small and young farmers, maximizing the utility of food products for end consumers, and more. Sustainability can be promoted, for example, by "shaping" consumer demand or enforced through legislative initiatives.

The objective of this report is to review the definitions of sustainable food products and the indicators used for their assessment in scientific literature.

Methods

The methodological approach is based on structured literature review covering the period 2009–2023 to ensure both historical perspective and current relevance. Sources include peer-reviewed scientific articles, official reports from FAO, OECD, and EU policy documents. The review was conducted using academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science) and institutional platforms. The scope of the review covers both the main pillars of sustainability and the different segments of the food value chain on European level.

The sustainability pillars comprise the economic, environmental and social characteristics of food products, which are complemented with a review of their cultural elements and characteristics.

Inclusion criteria: publications addressing food product sustainability, peer-reviewed status, and applicability to the European context; official documents providing conceptual frameworks or policy instruments.

Exclusion criteria: non-reviewed sources, outdated documents without methodological transparency, and studies outside the EU scope.

The analysis is limited to EU-level food product sustainability.

Results

The way we produce and consume food as elements of the food system impacts both the environment and society, at regional and global levels. A food system gathers all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food and the outputs of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes (Bilali et al., 2021). Sustainable food system would "deliver food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised". In this definition, FAO (FAO, 2018) considers all components used in „production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products".

Sustainable food production should be beneficial to the environment, by reducing energy consumption, respecting animal welfare, using environmentally friendly agricultural technology that reduces the use of chemicals, protecting citizens' health and maintaining human and rural communities. Sustainable agricultural production, as a part of a sustainable food system, is a systematic concept, which integrates three main objectives: a healthy environment, economic profitability, and social & economic equity. It should also guarantee fair profits for farmers, workers, and retailers, enabling a high welfare state and wellbeing. (Shanshan Li et al. 2021).

The importance of consumer behavior is recognized by Gorgitano et all. (2014). It depends on a wide array of internal and external stimuli and constraints rooted in given cultural, institutional, technological and economic environments, which are largely shaped by actions carried out by firms and governments. Firms may foster sustainable consumption in many ways: designing eco-efficient and environmentally friendly products; influencing consumer behavior through advertising and eco-labelling; observing ethical codes of conduct; engaging in corporate reporting; and so on. Policies on the part of public actors may include: market-based instruments, such as taxes and subsidies; standards and mandatory labels; communication policies; education".

Shanshan Li et al. (2021) found that consumers' willingness to pay a price premium for sustainable food products averages 29.5%, offering a good opportunity to create sustainable demand through appropriate marketing and fair value distribution along the food chain. Similarly Azzurra Annunziata et al. (2011) observed that consumers' attitudes toward organic and Fair Trade products with ethical attributes such as environmental protection, humane treatment of animals, and human rights indicate that marketing strategies must include new tools such as ethical certification labels.

Ferranti, P. (2018) define the Concept of food value chain as a network of stakeholders (producers, processing industry, sellers, consumers, government and

regulatory agencies) which rule the entire process. EU policymakers are engaged in supporting and promoting sustainability as part of long-term EU goals. According to Reisch et al. (2013) policymakers have several major instruments to enhance food system sustainability: information-based, market-based, regulatory, and self-commitment mechanisms. These instruments can be applied to achieve objectives such as promoting organic agriculture and reducing GHG emissions. L.M. Abadie et al. (2016) suggest that using food taxes and subsidies can change consumption patterns to reduce GHG emissions. Wirsenius et al. (2011) find that a climate tax corresponding to €60/ton CO2eq (equivalent carbon dioxide) on meat and milk could reduce greenhouse gas emissions from European agriculture by around 7%. If the land made available is used for bioenergy production, the decrease in emissions can be six times greater. Encouraged by the conclusions of Abadie and Wirsenius, it can be assumed that legislative initiatives may contribute to achieving long-term EU targets, such as reducing GHG emissions and mitigating climate change. The EU Farm to Fork strategy aims to make European food healthier and more sustainable, contributing to climate neutrality by 2050. Policy instruments can direct financial support and regulatory changes to actors in farming system adaptation toward sustainability (Oriana Gava et all., 2022).

Definitions of sustainability at the levels of sustainable food production, consumption, and system describe a wide range of stakeholders responsible for achieving ecological, social, and economic goals, with the ultimate objective of ensuring the sustainable use and preservation of resources for future generations. For better understanding of sustainability, four dimensions of food sustainability are examined: ecological, economic, social, and cultural.

1. Ecological/Environmental Sustainability

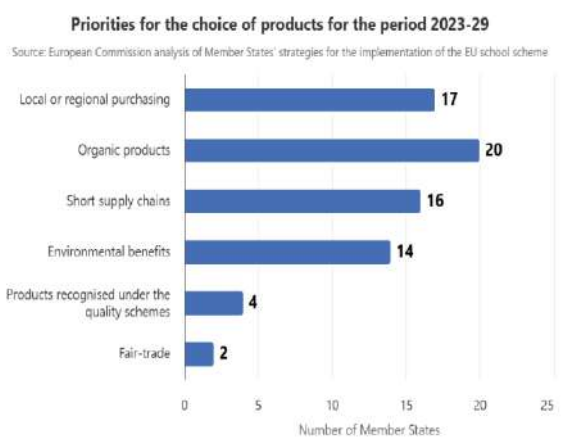
Ecological sustainability concerns the planet's capacity to feed a growing population without negatively impacting ecosystems. McKenzie et al. (2015) estimated a global consumption growth rate of 1.1% per year from 2005/07 to 2050, implying a 56% increase, while global production would need to increase by approximately 60%. Additional challenges include food waste and climate change effects, which may result in a 5–25% shortfall in projected yields by 2050 (UNEP 2009). According to Crippa et al. (2021) the food system accounts for 34% of global GHG emissions, with agriculture contributing 71%. In the EU, agriculture generates 10.3% of GHG emissions, 70% of which are from livestock

FAO (2018) defines environmental sustainability as ensuring that food system activities have neutral or positive impacts on biodiversity, water, soil, animal and plant health, carbon and water footprints, food loss, waste, and toxicity. Indicators include resource use (water, land, energy) and GHG emissions (M. van Bussel et al., 2022).

Ecological sustainability is an element of the entire process from primary production to consumption, including limiting food waste, which on a global scale is average, 24% of food loss and waste occurs at production, another 24% during handling and storage, and 35% at consumption McKenzie et al. (2015) and according to Allen et al. (2016) – food waste alone represents around 3–5% of global warming impacts, more than 20% of biodiversity pressure, and 30% of all of the world's agricultural land

Agricultural production interacts directly with key factors (soil, air, water), which may degrade, while also driving ecological change. Sustainable practices include regenerative agriculture, permaculture, organic farming, precision agriculture, and urban farming (Çakmakçı et al., 2023). Organically and locally grown products have positive environmental impacts due to the reduction in the greenhouse emissions required for their production (Tiziana de-Magistris et al., 2016). Bathaei et al. (2023) recommend evaluating farm structure, pollution, and soil as sustainability indicators. Rehman et al. (2022) emphasize ecosystem services provided by sustainable agriculture, including pollination, pest control, soil fertility, carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, water regulation, and biodiversity conservation.

EU policies support ecological sustainability and consumer demand for environmentally sustainable foods. For example, The EU school scheme supports the distribution of milk, fruit & vegetables to millions of children, from nursery to secondary school, across the EU. Seasonality, variety, availability, health and environmental aspects underpin the choice of products. Also, EU countries may encourage local, short-supply chain, organic and quality scheme products.



Organic production aims to cover 25% of EU farmland by 2030 (Farm to Fork Strategy). This horizontal objective is embedded in the Strategic Plans for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas of individual EU Member States through the introduction of various incentives for organic farming, including area-based direct subsidies, special labeling for products from certified organic farms, priority access to investment measures at the levels of agricultural production and processing, among others. According to the current legislation in Bulgaria, a minimum percentage of food procured through public tenders by public institutions

is mandated to consist of organic products. In this way, legislative initiatives and awareness campaigns help promote the demand for organic food.
Proper labeling allows consumers to choose environmentally friendly products (Kaisa Grönmanet al., 2012). The results of a study conducted by Annunziata et al. (2011) on the attitudes of 300 consumers from Southern Italy indicate that organic and fair-trade products – characterized by their 'ethical' attributes, such as environmental protection, animal welfare, and respect for human rights – are attracting increasing interest among consumers.
Civil society and NGOs act as monitors of unethical practices and promote informed consumer choices. EU legislation also encourages humane livestock rearing and supports farmers financially implementing such practices.

2. Economic Sustainability

According to FAO (2018) On the economic dimension, a food system is considered sustainable if the activities conducted by each food system actor or support service provider are commercially or fiscally viable. The activities should generate benefits, or economic value-added, for all categories of stakeholders: wages for workers, taxes for governments, profits for enterprises, and food supply improvements for consumers. Key indicators include profitability, liquidity, stability, productivity, technology, market access, and pricing (Bathaei et al., 2023). In addition, most recommended indicators for agriculture economic sustainability are technology, market access and price.
Rural areas are less attractive than urban areas due to limited services, lower incomes, and fewer career prospects. Farmers and participants in food processing and distribution are the primary residents of EU rural areas. Economic sustainability is essential for rural vitality and is recognized in the Farm to Fork strategy. Support includes subsidies to small and young farmers, family farms, and cooperatives, promoting stable and sustainable agricultural systems. Björkbom et all. (2023) determines that the true costs for public health, environmental pollution and climate impact, are not reflected in the food price because of the subsidies.
Economic sustainability is achieved through the positive difference between production costs and sales revenues – that is, through profit generation. However, increasing competition, both within the EU and from trade agreements with third countries, makes it progressively more difficult to attain this form of sustainability. To support a “guaranteed” level of farm income within the EU, various protective mechanisms have been established, including tariff quotas and customs duties aimed at controlling the volume of “sensitive” food products entering the EU market. Another important EU-level support instrument is the implementation of quality schemes, which enable producers to obtain higher unit prices by emphasizing product differentiation.

Economic sustainability may also be supported through direct or indirect subsidies. An example of this is area-based payments for land undergoing conversion or already certified for organic production. These payments serve to compensate for increased production costs, potential yield losses due to pests and diseases, the limited use of cheaper conventional plant protection products, and the reliance on more expensive organic alternatives.
At the same time, land under organic production contributes to the sustainability of ecological systems, the provision of food with higher nutritional value, and reduced chemical contamination. In the livestock sector, support is provided through per-animal payments or subsidies aimed at achieving higher animal welfare standards. These measures are intended to cover the additional costs and foregone income associated with improved farming practices.

3. **Social Sustainability**

FAO (2018) defines social sustainability as equitable distribution of economic value, consideration for vulnerable groups, and contribution to socio-cultural outcomes, such as nutrition, health, traditions, labor conditions, and animal welfare. In particular to agriculture the most recommended indicators for social sustainability are quality of product and farmers' rights Bathaei et al. (2023). Piccoli et al. (2021) adds the following definition "The distinctive feature of the Community Supported Agriculture model is the close integration between production and consumption, through consumers' active participation in the farm activities, including pre-financing and sharing of enterprise risk, as well as crop planning". In addition according to the European CSA Declaration adopted in Ostrava during the 3rd European CSA meeting in 2016, "Community Supported Agriculture is a direct partnership based on the human relationship between people and one or several producer(s), whereby the risks, responsibilities and rewards of farming are shared, through a long-term, binding agreement.
A positive trend supporting socially sustainable practices is the development of the Fair Trade movement. Fair Trade can be understood as a form of "social" regulation of food trade, aimed at ensuring stable prices and secure market access for producers, while promoting sustainable consumption patterns among consumers through the purchase of socially and environmentally responsible food products. According to Laura T. Raynolds (2012) Fair Trade has emerged over recent years as a popular initiative to socially regulate global markets, particularly in the food sector. This movement seeks to empower producers in the global South through the provision of better prices, stable market links, and development resources. In the global North, Fair Trade seeks to promote responsible consumption and provide shoppers with socially and environmentally friendly products." This leads to the conclusion that a food product labeled as Fair Trade may achieve a high degree of

overlapping sustainability – encompassing economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

4. Cultural Sustainability

Cultural sustainability supports social, economic, and ecological sustainability. It relates to heritage, traditions, and local knowledge, serving as a vehicle for sustainable development.

According to Soini et al. (2014) the scientific discourse on cultural sustainability is organized around seven storylines: heritage, vitality, economic viability, diversity, locality, eco-cultural resilience, and eco-cultural civilization. An evolving concept in scientific discourse in society, where culture is becoming a vehicle to discuss, interpret, and relate to change in the meaning and role of sustainable development.

In many studies, cultural sustainability is associated with cultural heritage, viewed as an existing form of capital possessed by local communities and inherited from previous generations. This capital can be utilized to create added value and, following appropriate preservation and safeguarding efforts, passed on to future generations. It includes both tangible and intangible cultural heritage – such as traditions, customs, traditional food products, livestock breeds, and other cultural assets.

According to a study conducted by Vanhonacker et al. (2010) among 4,828 participants from Belgium, France, Italy, Norway, Poland, and Spain the following definition emerged: A traditional food product is a product frequently consumed or associated to specific celebrations and/or seasons, transmitted from one generation to another, made in a specific way according to gastronomic heritage, naturally processed, and distinguished and known because of its sensory properties and associated to a certain local area, region or country.

EU policies support cultural sustainability through quality schemes (protected designations of origin, traditional specialty foods, voluntary certifications) and preservation of local animal breeds and plant varieties. Cultural sustainability allows positioning food products in premium segments, enhancing farmer incomes. Festivals and cultural events promote these products (e.g., Garlic Festival in Dolni Rakovets, Mechitsa Festival in Buhovtsi, Gorna Oryahovitsa Sudzhuk Festival).

Discussion

The concept of sustainable development was introduced in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Soini et al., 2014). Since then, sustainability has been widely discussed in scientific literature and policy documents. This study examined sustainability at two levels: (1) definitions varying by food value chain perspective – production, consumption,

or system, and (2) sustainability built on four complementary pillars – ecological, economic, social, and cultural.

Based on the findings, the following definition is proposed:

A sustainable food product is one whose sustainability is derived from policy instruments or legislative initiatives; whose characteristics contribute to the achievement of long-term EU targets; or which provides specific added value to consumers, whereby its sustainability can also be leveraged for marketing purposes.

Table 1. Comparative Table of Definitions and Indicators for Sustainable Food Products

Value Chain Focus/Source	Definition	Criteria / Elements Described
Sustainable food production, consumption, and system	A sustainable food product is one whose sustainability is derived from **policy instruments or legislative initiatives**; whose characteristics contribute to the achievement of **long-term EU targets**; or which provides specific **added value to consumers**, whereby its sustainability can also be leveraged for **marketing purposes**	**Policy instruments / legislative initiatives:** • Farm to Fork Strategy • EU school scheme; • Mandatory minimum percentage of organic foods in public procurement • Strategic Plans for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas in EU Member States • Food taxes and subsidies **Long-term EU targets:** • Reduction of GHG emissions • 25% of EU farmland under organic production by 2030 • EU climate neutrality by 2050 • Combating rural depopulation **Added value for consumers:** • products with ethical attributes • Food security and nutrition for future generations • Healthy environment • Chemical-free food products • Cultural identity and gastronomic heritage • Higher nutritional value • Socially and environmentally friendly products **Marketing objectives:** • Consumers' willingness to pay price premiums • Influencing consumer behavior through advertising and eco-labeling • Labeling of organic and Fair Trade products • Eco-efficient and environmentally friendly products

The proposed definition of a sustainable food product incorporates distinct yet interconnected roles of key stakeholders.

Producers are responsible for implementing sustainable practices, including environmentally friendly technologies and animal welfare standards, while benefiting from subsidies or labeling schemes that facilitate access to premium markets.

Consumers shape demand through informed choices supported by labeling systems and awareness campaigns, combined with a willingness to pay for products that meet sustainability criteria. Policymakers and institutions provide the regulatory framework, financial incentives, and enforcement mechanisms necessary to promote the achievement of strategic objectives, as outlined in initiatives such as the EU Farm to Fork Strategy and the European Green Deal.

Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to a theoretical and political understanding of the sustainable food product as both a tool and an opportunity: a tool for achieving multiple political and environmental goals, and an opportunity to realize the economic and social potential of various actors in the food chain.

As demonstrated by the study, there is significant overlap among the different dimensions of food sustainability – environmental, economic, social, and cultural. This is an important signal to policymakers at both European and national levels: when setting long-term goals, they must take into account that achieving one objective through the food system may adversely affect another aspect of sustainability. A clear example of this is the protests by farmers across Europe against the overly ambitious targets of the Green Deal, which ultimately threatened the economic sustainability of their farms.

Global environmental and social changes are an undeniable reality, and they will continue to exert a negative impact on the food chain. As discussed, sustainable solutions to address this challenge do exist and can be implemented through political initiatives or in response to conscious consumer demand – they can either be enforced or encouraged.

Ultimately, the individual – as both food producer and consumer – must decide whether to adopt these sustainable solutions or continue contributing to the threat to food security for future generations. It is up to us, as active participants in the food system, to move forward in developing and applying sustainable solutions across the social, economic, environmental, and cultural dimensions.

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