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Eucolait's response to the roadmap for an EU contingency plan ensuring food supply and food security

In our part of the world, permanent access to safe and nutritious food in abundant quantities tends to be taken for granted by many citizens. The food security fears experienced especially during the first weeks of lockdown in spring, as demonstrated by widespread hoarding, taught us to better appreciate the crucial role played by actors all along through the food supply chain, from farm to fork. The dairy as well as other sectors of the food supply chain have operated efficiently since the beginning of the pandemic and there was never a real threat to food security.

Nevertheless, the initiative arising out of the Farm to Fork strategy to introduce a crisis response mechanism could not have come at a more appropriate and timely moment. Overall, trade responded well to the demands of the pandemic, notwithstanding certain challenges such as border issues caused by unilateral actions of Member States, sharp drops in demand for certain products due to the collapse of food service consumption, or logistical problems caused by port congestion. Some of these challenges could be avoided in similar scenarios in the future with the help of a solid contingency plan. Trade has a huge role to play in any future contingency plan rolled out by the Commission, by ensuring that offer and demand are balanced. Food security is achieved through a combination of local, national, European and international supplies and in that spirit, we need to 'keep the milk moving'.

A harmonized approach is crucial

The unprecedented events of the last year have proven that a harmonized EU approach is the best way to ensure that food and ingredients can move across national borders, thereby guaranteeing food security.

Unilateral actions and Member States choosing to 'go it alone' created disruption and problems, particularly during the early days of the pandemic in spring 2020 until the creation of green lanes and other recommendation and coordination measures taken by the Commission. In addition to consignments being delayed at borders between Member States, labour shortages were faced in cases where workers were not allowed to get to their work place in another Member State, or were forced to observe a lengthy quarantine when returning to their home country. Such actions limiting free movement need to be necessary, proportionate, and co-ordinated to avoid fragmentation of the single market during crises. Given the global nature of trade and of the present crisis, the EU should also strive to co-ordinate on a multilateral level with third country partners and organisations such as the WTO.



Scope of the initiative

In order to be fit for purpose, the contingency plan should look at food security in the broadest possible manner, including related sectors, as outlined in the roadmap. From our perspective, it seems crucial that stakeholders from different sectors are invited to participate in the forum as otherwise valuable on the ground experience and knowledge would be missed.

The EU food safety system has proven itself to be fit for purpose with key components such as the official controls regulation and the TRACES system appearing to be functioning well. Nevertheless, increased resources to enable a further move towards e-certification and digitalisation in general will create a more efficient environment for operators going forward. A solid framework in which critical information can be shared across borders in a timely manner should be a core element in any future contingency plan. Scope should also be there for the sharing of best practices, so that Member States' can benefit from each other's experiences and lessons.

Contribution of trade to food security

Trade in agricultural products is a vital component in ensuring accessibility, affordability and availability of high-quality food and should in no way be sidelined in pursuit of self-sufficiency. Due to multiple cultural, historical, culinary, environmental, geographical and economic reasons, production of a given food product tends to be more prevalent in some regions than others. When it comes to dairy, the EU is a large net exporter but there are huge differences across the continent when it comes to the amount and kind of products produced. The single market ensures that the largest possible variety of foods can be enjoyed all over Europe and indeed about 1 out of every 3 liters of European milk is consumed in a Member State other than the country of production. In this respect, care must be taken in the drafting of a contingency plan to ensure that the distinction between 'food security' and 'self-sufficiency' is recognized and well understood by all stakeholders. Ensuring free movement of food products in a crisis should therefore be one of the main priorities of the response mechanism.

Next steps

We look forward to discussing the scope and the specifics of the contingency plan in further detail with the Commission in the context of the upcoming consultation process.