

## Towards a Sustainable and Competitive European Meat Sector

The European Union faces the challenge of reconciling the sustainability transition of its agri-food systems with the preservation of economic competitiveness. In a global market increasingly shaped by low-cost imports from overseas, the EU can distinguish itself through its strong standards in food safety, sustainability, animal welfare and product authenticity. Rather than competing with cost-price driving meat producing countries, like China and the USA, the EU should focus on producing premium products for high-quality markets that value transparency, traceability and responsible production practices.

This aligns with a trend for meat purchase on the internal market, where even though a substantial part of consumers takes buying decision on the basis of cost-price, a growing group of consumers is not only expecting, but also willing to pay more for higher animal welfare standards<sup>1</sup>. They relate these standards to pork and broiler meat from animals that are reared under extensive conditions, in particular when kept outdoors but also with greater space allowance and local instead of conventional breeds<sup>2</sup>.

In general, consumer preferences are changing towards more sustainable and transparent food systems. Reliable and clear labelling addressing consumer expectations, as well as consumer information about product should play a central role in future EU food policy<sup>3</sup>. *mEATquality* results suggest that consumer appreciate extrinsic meat quality aspects over intrinsic aspects, since the liking of a product is influenced by knowledge of its origin<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, whilst strengthening local and regional supply chains is essential to reduce dependency on imports, improve resilience and support rural economies, it is also likely to make the meat product more valuable to critical consumers.

A trusted and transparent meat sector is essential for maintaining societal support and ensuring fair competition within the internal market. Whilst Block Chain Technology may not provide all the answers<sup>4</sup>, novel ways to provide transparency can be developed, such as isotope technology to trace origin<sup>5</sup> and omics analysis for the assessment of rearing conditions<sup>6</sup>.

Ultimately, the EU should position itself as a global leader in sustainable and high-quality meat production: regionally anchored, environmentally responsible and internationally recognised for safe and authentic products.

### **Strategic Direction**

To realise this vision, the EU policy will benefit from the following priorities:

- Strengthening and enforcing EU sustainability and animal welfare standards, including equivalent standards for imported products.
- Supporting local and regional supply chains to improve resilience, where human capital can be a key factor in extensive farming.
- Reducing environmental impact and improving sustainability on farms can be supported by providing farmers with the self-assessment tools, such as mobile applications, to evaluate their farms performance, and offer promising solutions.
- Promoting transparency through labelling, traceability and consumer education.
- Shifting competitiveness from low-cost production towards quality, sustainability and authenticity.
- Encouraging more sustainable consumption patterns with lower meat consumption and higher-quality products.

### **References to outcomes of mEATquality**

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