



Generation  
Climate  
Europe

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

YOUTH DIALOGUE

PLANTING THE RIGHT  
SEEDS: ARE WE ON TRACK  
FOR DECARBONISATION?



Published December 2021



Group of the Progressive Alliance of  
Socialists & Democrats  
in the European Parliament



GUE/NGL  
**THE LEFT**  
IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



**epp**  
group  
in the european parliament



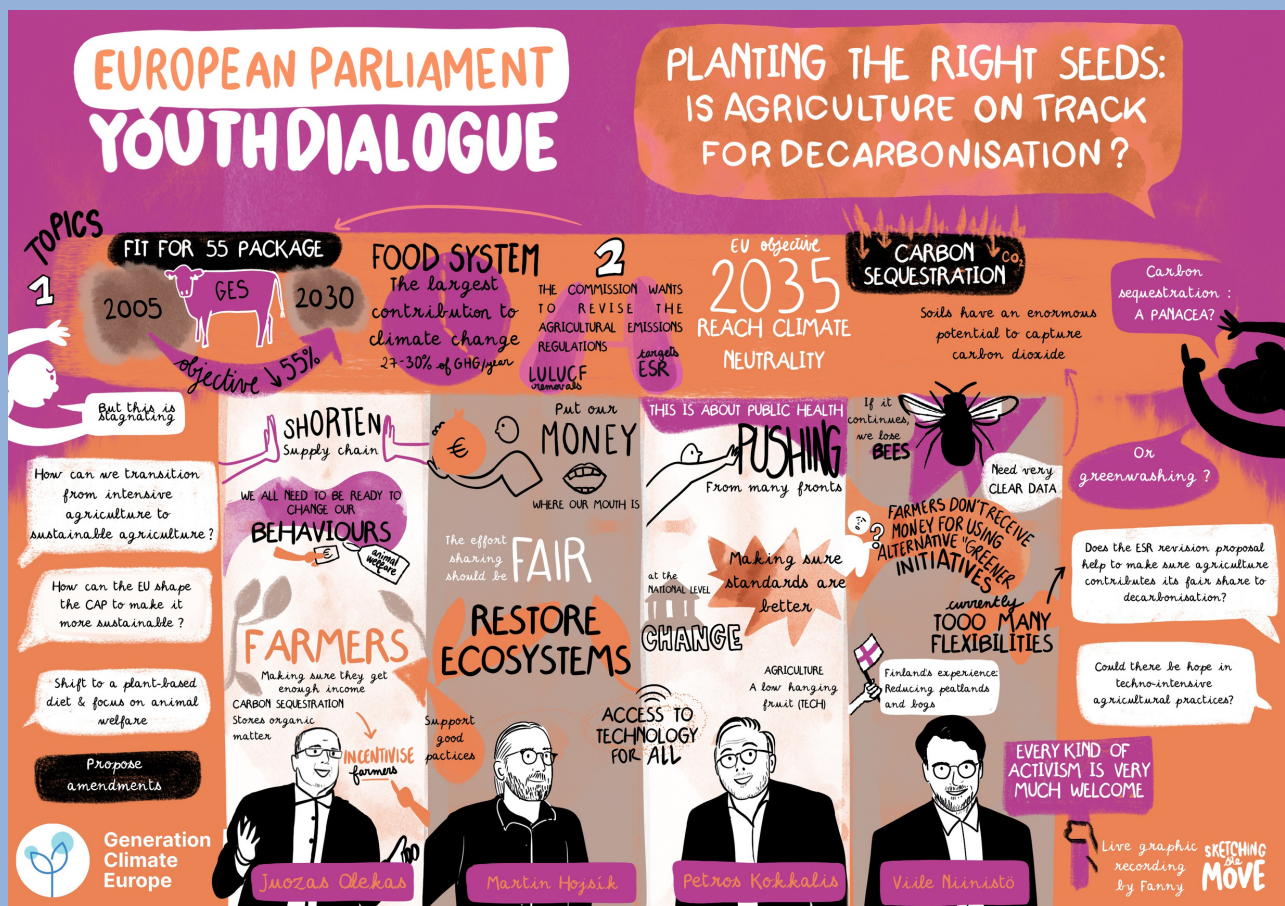
**THE GREENS/EFA**  
in the European Parliament

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europe.**

# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT YOUTH DIALOGUE

## Introduction

On 27 October 2021, Generation Climate Europe (GCE) held its second European Parliament Youth Dialogue (EPYD) with four Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from major European political groups to discuss the future of agriculture and food systems. The dialogue focused on the challenges around decarbonisation of agriculture and revisions of the regulatory framework for agriculture emissions, currently reported under the Land Use Land-Use Change Forestry (LULUCF) and the Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR). We formed recommendations from the event to help make sure that the agricultural sector will contribute fairly to reach the European Commission's new target of a 55% greenhouse gas emission net reduction by 2030 under its "Fit for 55" package. They can be found at the end of the booklet.



Visual Harvesting from the session - Fanny Dldou Sketching the Move

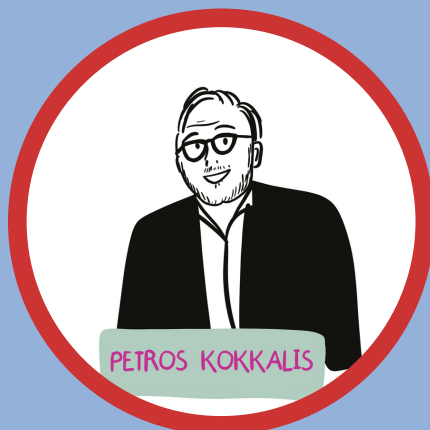
# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT YOUTH DIALOGUE

## Who we are

Founded in October 2019, GCE is the largest coalition of youth-led networks at the European level pushing for stronger climate and environmental action by the EU. We bring together some of the largest European youth networks, representing over 460 national organisations, across 47 countries, gathering the voices of over 20 million young Europeans. Uniting students, young workers unions, high-school and university organisations, and environmental movements, GCE is an inclusive forum enabling youth to get involved in today's environmental debates.

## Who was involved

Four members of the European Parliament joined GCE for the discussions: Ville Niinistö (The Greens/EFA); Juozas Olekas (Socialist & Democrats); Petros Kokkalis (The Left); and Martin Hojsík (Renew Europe). GCE Project Lead for the Dialogue, Marie Waniowski, moderated the Dialogue, with other GCE representatives – Mathieu Groffe and Michelle Stitz – taking a central part in the discussions. Fanny from Sketching the Move visually recorded the discussion through illustrations. Hosted by GCE, the event was live-streamed and publicly accessible for youth all over Europe via Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube, and participants could send in questions for the panel.



# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT YOUTH DIALOGUE

## Structure of the Event

In the 1 hour-long event, we looked at three main areas:

1. The transition from intensive agriculture to sustainable agriculture.
2. The European Commission's Fit for 55 Package.
3. Whether carbon storage is truly a solution to the climate crisis.



## The Dialogue

### The Path Towards Sustainable Agriculture

Following the opening from Marie Waniowski, GCE's representative, Mathieu Groffe, started the dialogue by giving a broad overview of what the European Commission "Fit for 55" package stands for and highlights the contemporary challenges around the decarbonisation of our current agricultural model.

### What is the Fit for 55 package?

The European Commission Fit for 55 package aims to reduce GHG emissions by 55% by 2030 compared to the baseline of 1990 and then become a carbon-neutral continent by 2050. The Fit for 55 includes the revision of two legislative proposals concerning agriculture:

1) The Land use, Land-use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) regulation

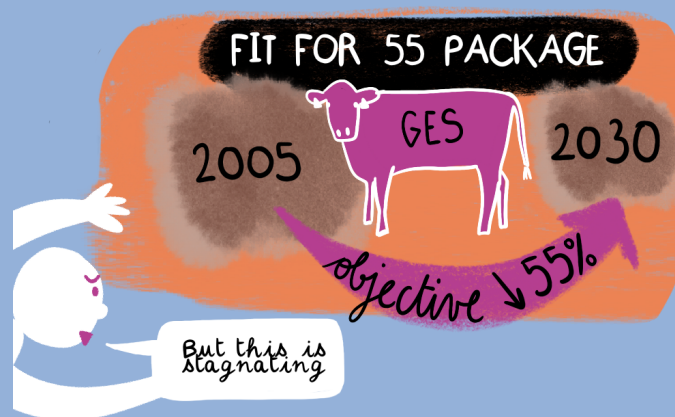
2) The Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR)

# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT YOUTH DIALOGUE

The ESR includes emissions from different sectors, aggregating more than 55% of EU emissions. It settles national-binding quotas of emissions for each Member State.

The LULUCF compensates for emissions from other sectors by sequestering emissions and by planting and preserving forests. It has compensated 9% of EU emissions.

However, since 2005, CO<sub>2</sub> emission reductions from agriculture have been stagnating while non-CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have likely progressed.



## What are the challenges of agriculture today?

Over the past 50 years, the intensification and mechanisation of agriculture as well as the emergence of new production techniques have made it possible to greatly increase yields. However, intensive agriculture is depleting ecosystem services that are essential for food production as well as human and planetary health, and therefore, it is now facing many challenges. The resources needed for production are becoming increasingly scarce or difficult to access, whether we are talking about water for plants and animals or the fuel that powers the machines. Therefore, intensive agriculture bears responsibility for a significant part of environmental degradation.

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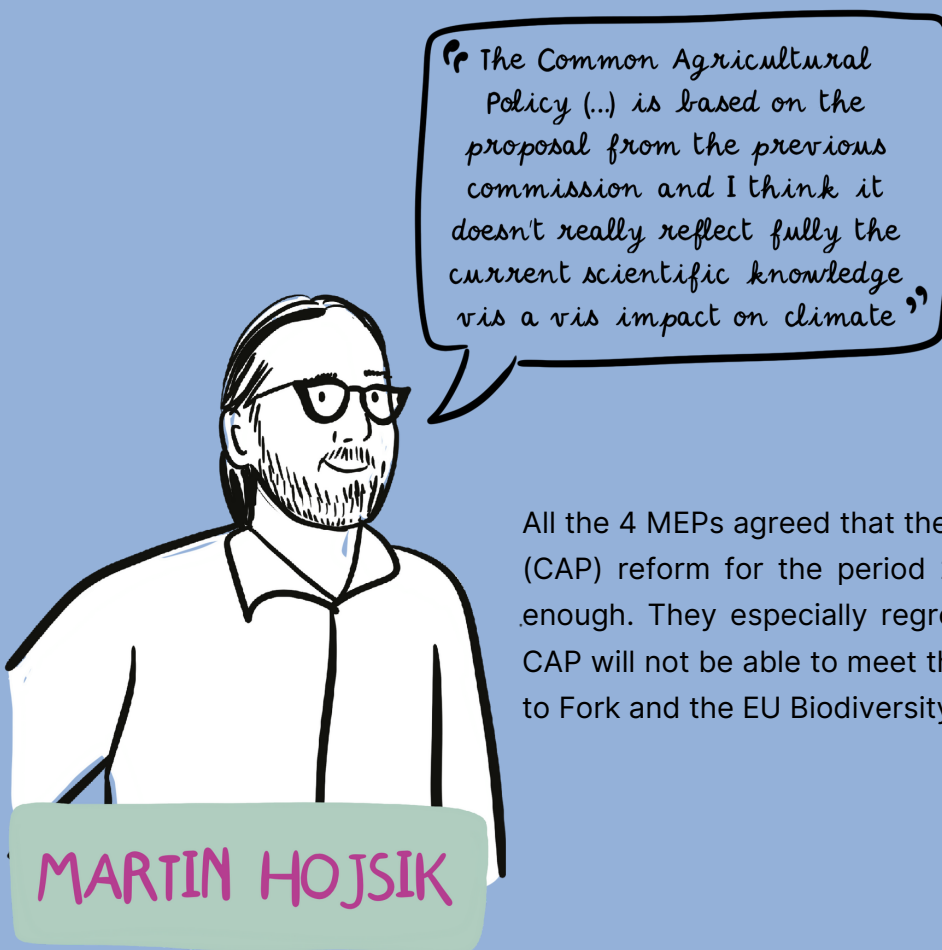
Intensive agriculture also has important social consequences, especially for the farmers, who have to take on all the risks of the agricultural sector, often with very low incomes. Farmers have to compete in a global market, with very volatile prices, and are encouraged to constantly go into debt in order to be competitive. On the other hand, producers are witnessing new demands, which gives more space to social and environmental considerations.

# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT YOUTH DIALOGUE

More sustainable production methods are gradually developing. They have the characteristics of limiting environmental pressure, ensuring the maintenance and prosperity of the territories, producing healthy food, and valorizing a heritage. Among the most well-known techniques, there is organic farming, which represented 8.5% of the European agricultural area in 2019.

## How Can We Transition From Intensive Agriculture to Sustainable Agriculture?

The 4 MEPs agreed that the current European agricultural model is not sustainable, and thus a structural reform is needed. Ville Niinistö made a clear diagnostic of the challenges, saying that the whole basis of our agricultural model is unsustainable, underlying in particular challenges with animal farming and the use of inputs (pesticides and fertilizers).



All the 4 MEPs agreed that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform for the period 2023-2027 is not ambitious enough. They especially regretted that, as it is, the next CAP will not be able to meet the objectives of the EU Farm to Fork and the EU Biodiversity strategy.

# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

## YOUTH DIALOGUE

Nevertheless, MEPs assured us that the CAP reform is not over. Indeed, with the new reform of the CAP, Member States need to prepare a strategic plan to implement the policy over the next few years. Thus, this architecture offers a new chance for the CAP reform to increase its level of ambition and comply with the EU Farm to Fork and the EU Biodiversity strategy. Petros Kokkalis called on youth to get engaged in national level CAP strategic plans, because these plans will come back to the commission to be evaluated.

Juozas Olekas agreed with other MEPs that the CAP reform is not satisfactory, but he also highlighted the need for consumers to change their consumption habits and behaviours. How and what we eat can indeed have a major impact on the rest of the world, and we should thus privilege local productions. Juozas Olekas also asked the youth if they are willing to pay more to ensure that our food is produced in sustainable conditions.

In response to the questions asked by the audience, the dialogue continued with a discussion on meat consumption and the related livestock sector. Ville Niinistö stressed the needs for animal welfare legislations. In addition, he emphasised the roles of public procurements and government policies in the transition towards vegetarian diets. As an example, he mentioned the case of Finland where the government still subsidises and promotes advertising for meat consumption. Both Martin Hojsík and Ville Niinistö, agreed on the crucial need to redirect current investments from meat consumption advertising to vegetarian protein-based products advertising with the purpose to make them more accessible in the near future. Martin Hojsík concluded by calling the youth to act at their own level in university or school canteen to solicit for vegetarian- and vegan-friendly menus.

### ESR and agricultural emissions

GCE's representative, Michelle Stitz, gave an overview of the Commission's proposal to revise the effort sharing regulation (ESR). While agriculture is a crucial sector to reach the EU's climate commitments, EU policies have failed to reduce emissions from the sector. The EU Court of Auditors attributed this failure to **the absence of both EU and national-level emissions reduction targets for agriculture** (1).

The ESR sets legally binding annual GHG emissions targets for the 2021-2030 period that each Member State must reach. However, they are aggregate targets covering all the aforementioned sectors. In other words, **Member States can choose to focus their emission reduction efforts on only some sectors to achieve their target** (2).

# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

## YOUTH DIALOGUE

Non-CO2 emissions from agriculture have been largely left unaddressed in reaching the national targets. According to the EEA, Effort Sharing (ES) emissions have declined by almost 11% between 2005 and 2018 but agriculture, the third-largest source of emissions in the ES sectors, contributed only 1% of the emissions reductions, while buildings contributed 50% (3). This means that the **current climate policy architecture has de facto given agriculture a free pass in the fight against climate change.**

Consequently, non-CO2 emissions from agriculture have stagnated since 2005 and have even increased in the 2012 – 2017 period. The Fit for 55 package offers a unique opportunity to change that.

### So how does the Commission propose to revise the ESR in its “Fit for 55” package?

#### Regarding the target

# 40%

Regarding the target: Before “Fit for 55”, the ESR emission reduction target was 30% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. The Commission’s new proposal increases the EU target to 40% and increases the national targets in alignment with this new objective (4).

#### Regarding the use of LULUCF removals:

# Article 7

Article 7 of the regulation allows Member States to use emission removals from the LULUCF sectors to reach their national ESR target (5).

### Does this ESR revision proposal help to make sure agriculture contributes its fair share to decarbonisation?

All the MEPs agreed, saying that there is a dire need to suggest strong policies allowing for a transition towards more sustainable practices in agriculture, which could lower GHG emissions and the environmental footprint of the sector.

Ville Niinistö referred to the issue with the effort sharing, which allows for too many flexibilities “If the EU’s climate target was 70% by 2030, there would be no problem to have flexibilities between the sectors to make sure that the target is achieved in a cost effective way; but the when the overall target is as low as 55, not in line with the Paris Agreement’s goals, these flexibilities create a situation where any over achievement of the targets will not happen”.



# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

## YOUTH DIALOGUE

Both Ville Niinistö and Martin Hojsík emphasised the need to restore peatlands and wetlands around Europe. Ville Niinistö also indicated the case of Finland as an example where the transition towards more sustainable agricultural practices are currently evaluated by analysing alternatives to reduce the use of peatlands and bogs, two high sources of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and to re-vet farms and fields.

According to Petros Kokkalis, exchanges considering the diversity of the local context and ecosystems is a key issue. For instance, compared to Finland, there are no bogs or peatlands in Greece which makes it hard to measure the agricultural emissions as it depends on the livestock and the way that they are fed.

In addition, Juozas Olekas pointed out the benefits of carbon sequestration, defined as a promising and significant decarbonisation opportunity for Europe since it has the second-highest potential for carbon sequestration in the world due to its land mass. According to Juozas Olekas, carbon sequestration through agriculture soils could restore organic matter in soils, boost soil fertility, and increase the resilience of ecosystems towards extreme weathers, features of great contribution to mitigate climate change sustainably. The great potential of carbon sequestration in topsoils (top layer of the soils) is estimated to reach approximately 14 billion tons of carbon, which is considerably greater than the 4.4 billion tons of GHG emitted annually in Europe, as emphasised by Juozas Olekas.

Nevertheless, Juozas Olekas underlined that the transition towards more sustainable practices in agriculture needs to incentivise local farmers to make sure they get a sufficient income to be able to apply these schemes. This idea was also shared by Martin Hojsík who considered that supporting farmers and promoting exchanges in best practices will motivate them to implement the necessary changes in the sector.

In response to the questions asked by the audience about the use of technologies in the agricultural sector. Petros Kokkalis pointed out that small farms are behind technological advancements, despite the opportunities that this sector presents in terms of carbon sequestration, lowering of emissions, shortening of supply chains, and overall providing more nutritious food. For that reason, we have to ensure that smallholder farms have access and the necessary training to technologies that will allow them to make the sector more sustainable.

Petros Kokkalis also highlighted the advantages that could come from innovating the food chain, either by making a better use of the resources or reducing the ecological footprint. He further added that, wherever the changes take place, it will require action on several fronts.

## **The Illusion of Carbon Sequestration as a Panacea**

Finally, GCE's representative, Marie Waniowski, introduced the section on carbon sequestration. Soils have an enormous potential to capture carbon dioxide, and restoring carbon-depleted soils could compensate for the increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the atmosphere from fossil fuel combustion.

## **What is planned in the Commission Fit for 55 Package?**

Considering the potential of carbon sequestration to dramatically reduce GHG emissions, it was decided that, from 2031, the LULUCF regulation will expand to non-CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that were previously reported under the ESR regulation in order to combine them and create an Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use (AFOLU) sector. The objective is to reach climate neutrality for this AFOLU sector by 2035 (6).

## **What is the problem with carbon farming and what should be done?**

While being an integral part of the European commission plan, this strategy also has its shortcomings. Indeed, some researchers, as well as environmentalists, question its true potential to reach carbon-neutral agriculture.

GCE identified a risk in the European Commission Fit for 55 Package with the creation of the AFOLU sector. With the creation of this new sector, uncertainties remain as to whether a combined target would provide sufficient incentives for all sectors to reduce emissions, rather than one carrying most of the burden. Thus, we consider that removals of GHG emission for the agricultural sector need to have its own target, separate from targets covering forestry and other land uses. In other words, we need to ensure that there won't be flexibility between the different targets in order to give the right incentive so that efforts keep going to reduce GHG emission in the agricultural sector. To stay below 1.5°C, we need BOTH reduction in emissions AND removal of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Yet, the new legislation raises concerns that this will not be the case.

## **How can we ensure that mechanisms of carbon sequestration do not turn into greenwashing?**

To guarantee that greenwashing schemes do not occur, Ville Niinistö considers that it is very important that the accounting and the way that the targets are developed are solid; every country must act, and those actions must be solidified with clear, quality data.

# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

## YOUTH DIALOGUE

He indeed explained that there are a lot of possibilities in carbon farming, but that we need to make sure that we have quality data where we can base support and subsidies. Moreover, greenwashing schemes, such as offsetting emission reductions by planting trees somewhere else, cannot be permitted.

Martin Hojsík defends that the exactness of the system needs to be well thought through, something that should be done independently and properly, and not left to the Member States. Additionally, this should be complemented with a proper motivation system which avoids some countries carrying the burden, while others do nothing. In turn, this requires effort sharing to be done in a fair manner, where everyone contributes their share.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Effort Sharing Regulation

- GCE asks for **sectoral targets for each sector covered by the ESR regulation**, including agriculture. GCE fears that keeping aggregated targets for all sectors will give a free pass to agriculture in the fight against climate change.
- An improvement in the governance and compliance rules are needed at the member state level. Therefore, GCE argues that **binding national emissions reduction targets for agriculture** are required to drive the urgent transition to climate-friendly farming in a fair and sustainable way.

### LULUCF

- GCE recognises that agriculture can be a leverage to fight climate change by maximizing its carbon storage potential, but recommends **focusing on all possible reductions before promoting sequestration**. It is crucial that the revision of the ESR and LULUCF regulations does not allow the possible lack of reduction in GHG emissions to be compensated by natural sinks.
- GCE fears that the creation of an Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use (AFOLU) sector would not provide sufficient incentives for all sectors to reduce emissions. Thus, we consider that removals of GHG emissions for the agricultural sector should have its own target in order to avoid flexibilities with other sectors.

### Sustainable Food Systems

- The Fit for 55 Package needs to recognise the importance of a transition toward **agroecology** linked with a shift in diets and other measures like the development of agroforestry and peatland restoration.
- GCE draws attention that specific efforts are needed for the **livestock sector**. GCE argues that public policies should support a **shift towards more plant-based diets** and stop promoting meat eating.
- The **Common Agricultural Policy should be aligned with the objectives of the Fit for 55 Package and the ambition of the European Green Deal**.
- GCE notes that **climate action in agriculture should integrate biodiversity issues, animal welfare, social issues and the multi-functionality of ecosystem services** in order to generate multiple benefits (8).

### The process for developing these recommendations

We formulated our recommendations by consulting young people, studying scientific reports from other environmentally-conscious NGOs and through meetings we held with specialists in the food and agricultural sector from the European Environmental Bureau, the largest network of environmental citizens' organisations in Europe. The opportunity to deliberate with the MEPs about the issues at stake was also crucial in refining our position.

In conclusion, our recommendations aim to help make this upcoming revision of the ESR and LULUCF legislations a success, and thus help the EU achieve its climate targets for 2030 and a food system more respectful of nature and people. Our aim is to ensure that the voice of young people is present in the discussions on the European Commission Fit for 55 Package and our transition to climate neutrality and a sustainable food system.

### Endnotes

(1) Special report 16/2021: Common Agricultural Policy and climate: Half of EU climate spending but farm emissions are not decreasing

(2) [Beyond-Net-zero-emissions-in-agriculture.pdf](#) (kinstacdn.com) p.4

(3) <https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/climate/trends-and-projections-in-europe/national-action-across-all-sectors>

(4) Member States contribute to the overall EU reduction in 2030 with targets ranging from -10% to -50% below 2005 levels. Proposal\_ESR - Google Docs p.3

(5) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018R0841&rid=1>

(6) 2030 Climate Target: Review of LULUCF Regulation Background paper for the workshop of the ENVI Committee on 25/05/2021. Retrieved from :

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/233827/Background\\_paper\\_LULUCF\\_Regulation\\_2030\\_Climate\\_target.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/233827/Background_paper_LULUCF_Regulation_2030_Climate_target.pdf)

(7) European Environmental Bureau. (n.d.). EEB's additional information document to the questionnaires on the revision of the Effort Sharing and Land use, land use change and forestry regulations. Retrieved from [https://mk0eeborgicuyptuf7e.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/EEB-Additional-Information-Document\\_ESR-and-LULUCF-questionnaires.pdf](https://mk0eeborgicuyptuf7e.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/EEB-Additional-Information-Document_ESR-and-LULUCF-questionnaires.pdf)

(8) Aubert, P.-M., Gardin, B., Aillot, C., (2021). Towards a just transition of food systems.

Challenges and policy levers for France, IDDRI.



## Acknowledgments

The European Parliament Youth Dialogue is a series of three events between the youth and the European Parliament in 2021. It is organized and coordinated by Generation Climate Europe, with operating support from Youth and Environment Europe. It is equally supported by the five main political groups in the European Parliament: the Greens / European Free Alliance; the Left (GUE/NGL); the Socialist and Democrats (S&D); the European People's Party (EPP); and Renew Europe.

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Published: December 2021

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**Suggested citation:** Generation Climate Europe (2021). *European Parliament Youth Dialogue on Planting the Right Seeds: Are we on track for Decarbonisation?* Brussels: GCE.

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