

Dairy contribution to social sustainability

The European dairy sector is continuously working on improving its long-term environmental, economic and social sustainability. Key to these efforts will be aligning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 17 goals whose aim is to bring the world onto a sustainable and resilient path.

From a social perspective, the SDGs most related to dairy are:



- The dairy sector plays a key role in **ending poverty**, especially for rural communities. Nearly one billion people earn their livelihood from dairy. (1) More in EDA nutrition factsheet "[Health benefits and nutritional value of dairy](#)"



- Dairy has an important role to **end hunger, achieve food security and improve the nutritional value of diets in a sustainable manner**.



- Dairy products contribute to **good health and well-being** at all stages of life. Its nutrient-rich pack ensures a nourished and healthy population (2). Dairy has been linked to protection against non-communicable diseases. More in EDA nutrition factsheet "[Health benefits and nutritional value of dairy](#)".



- Dairy helps ensuring an inclusive, equitable **quality education** and lifelong learning. Its production provides incomes that can support education** and its nutrients promote students' performance.



- The dairy sector is committed to **gender equality and women empowerment** through the whole dairy chain: production, processing and retailing.



- The dairy industry provides **decent employment** to many people, symbolises their financial livelihoods and contributes to **Europe's (and wider) economic success**.



- The European dairy industry is establishing a more innovative and **resilient infrastructure** and a lot of effort is being invested to improve its overall sustainability (production, processing and retailing).



- Despite the current urban growth, the dairy sector contributes to the **maintenance of safe, resilient and sustainable rural areas**.



- The dairy sector plays a key role in **reversing land degradation, restoration of grasslands and carbon sequestration in soils** (3).



Society

Where we want to be:

- Continued status as the economic backbone of rural areas
- Ensure fair living standards
- Equality between all sexes, religions and nationalities
- Continue to provide valuable cultural and economic input

Where we are:

- Dairy contributes significantly to the development of the youngest in societies
- Dairy animals are a regular source for food and wealth
- Women have key functions in the dairy processes
- Milk is rated the top agricultural commodity in value terms
- The dairy industry ensures liveable wages and living standards

The dairy sector maintains rural areas socially attractive

- The economic backbone of rural areas is **agriculture and food production** – the people living and working there, the infrastructure, all is centred around it and furthermore **contributes greatly to making rural villages and towns a worthwhile place to live.** Without agriculture and food production several areas of Europe would have a bleak future ahead of them. That is why the **Common Agriculture Policy (CAP)** is committed to rural areas development with a budget worth €100 billion over the period 2014-2020 (4).
- **Dairy cattle are a popular asset in rural areas because they support livelihoods** (5,6): they are a regular source of food (dairy products) and income that can be obtained from selling dairy products, the whole animal or they can even be used as collateral for loans. Dairy cattle also generate dung, which is a valuable fertiliser, fuel and construction material that can also be marketed (6).
- **Milk is one of most produced and valuable agricultural commodities worldwide.** The dairy sector contributes around €10 billion annually to the EU trade balance and is a key European industry. This sector will continue to experience economic growth producing a big development payoff for people's livelihoods, the environment and public health (6).
- This industry represents a **large employment market.** With nearly 700 000 dairy farms across Europe, 300 000 people directly employed in the dairy processing sector and many more involved in retail; there are **nearly one million people in Europe and one billion people globally (6) that earn their livelihood through contact with the dairy sector.**
- **Many dairy farms are managed by families.** This fact makes rural territories a better place to live and work. Family farms keep generations together living in the countryside, so **maintain the rural population** in a world in which is more and more common to live in urban areas. They also encourage **young people** to get involved in rural life, **strengthening the socio-economic features of the countryside.**

Dairy farms enhance the natural, social, cultural and economic potential of rural areas.



700,000
dairy farms



300,000
industry
employees

The CAP pays special attention to young farmers when promoting agricultural practices, environment preservation and countryside safeguard.



- Family farms are also important for the **transmission of values like hardworking, unity and equity.** Families, specifically women, are empowered by their responsibility for cattle rearing and dairy production. Milk production **reduces gender inequalities** as livestock is possibly the most popular asset among rural women in developing countries. Over 37 million of dairy farms are female headed.

Dairy farms keep landscapes alive

- **Dairy farms have an important role creating and maintaining a unique countryside scenery with a rich variety of landscapes and habitats** that make rural areas attractive for the establishment of enterprises, places to live, and tourist and recreation businesses (7). **Dairy animals are the principal contributors:** they provide environmental, economic and patrimonial advantages to rural areas.
- **Farming different species of dairy livestock** (cows, sheep, goats...) help to preserve animal biodiversity. They also **grant land preservation and revitalise landscapes.** Efficient grazing of cow herds, not only keep plants growing, it contributes to the restoration of grasslands, carbon sequestration in soils (3) and lands quality. Sheep and goats can keep a green cover where else nothing would grow (dykes, mountains or arid areas).

- Moreover, ruminant animals, such as cows, can **convert economically unusable and inedible peripheral landscapes (grass, crops) into nutrient-rich food for human consumption.**
- Furthermore, dairy farms also partake in the **rural patrimony and territorial vitality**, especially in **rural tourism**. Nice landscapes and animals have beneficial effects on rural tourists that look for relaxing scenarios to disconnect from the urban world.

The dairy sector is a hub for innovation

- The dairy sector is facing challenges related to its use of natural resources and the impacts that are generated because of dairy production. That is why **dairy industry is committed to sustainability maintenance in its full complexity – economic, environmental and social.**
- The EU pursues three objectives through its Common Agricultural Policy (CAP): **securing viable food production; ensuring sustainable management of natural resources** and **climate action** and contributing to a **balanced territorial development**. Delivering these objectives requires **creating, sharing and implementing new knowledge, new technologies, new products and new ways to organise, learn or cooperate (7).**
- The European dairy sector is establishing a **resilient and more innovative infrastructure to promote sustainable methods of production, processing and retailing.** From new breeding methods, to feed modifications and production technologies. **Innovation keeps the sector active.**

Horizon 2020 and the CAP Rural development policy are two funding streams that contribute to rural areas development, research and innovation.



Rural areas are essential for cultural heritage

- Rural areas are very important in terms of cultural heritage because they have always been the **origin of many traditions**. Family companies play an important role because they are the birthplace of artisanal procedures and knowhow transmitters from generation to generation.
- One example of this are dairy producers. They can produce a **whole range of different highly nutritious, tasteful and pleasurable dairy products** that continues to seduce more and more consumers across the globe. These companies also contribute keeping traditions alive when they produce in an artisanal or traditional way, which give their products an added value highly appreciated by consumers.
- To maintain the diversity and protect the cultural richness of these products and their manufacturing, the **European Union has developed the geographical indication (GI) labels:** Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG).



Over 260 cheeses and dairy products are registered as GIs in Europe. The number of registered products is constantly increasing, giving more traditional products added-value, visibility and the chance to reach new markets.

- These labels are part of the EU's quality scheme and are a strong asset for **producers, consumers and for the promotion of European culture and history**. They ensure certain quality standards of the food or drink; benefit farmers producing these products and are also positive for external trade.

References and further reading

1. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The Dairy Declaration of Rotterdam. The dairy community accepts sustainable change [Internet]. 2016. [Available online](#)
2. The Global Dairy Agenda for Action (GDAA). The Dairy Sector: Ready to Help Achieve The Sustainable Development Goals. [Available online](#)
3. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Soil Carbon Sequestration [Internet]. [Available online](#)
4. European Commission. Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development. Common Agricultural Policy. Rural development 2014-2020 [Internet]. [Available online](#)
5. European Commission. Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development. EU dairy farms report 2013 [Internet]. Brussels; 2014. [Available online](#)
6. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Dairy Sector Global Facts. 2016; [Available online](#)
7. European Commission. Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development. Common Agricultural Policy [Internet]. [Available online](#)

EDA Publications

- EDA Statement "[Dairy Sustainability Synopsis](#)"
- EDA factsheet "[The European Dairy Sector & the Sustainable Development Goals](#)"