

Food Policies: ideas for an Italian, European, and Global Agenda

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In Italy, we talk about food often and willingly; it's one of the things that most fascinates tourists. Most of us have an opinion, some form of expertise, memory, or connection to food that we consider worth sharing.

But how often — and how knowledgeably — do we talk about agriculture? Here, the frequency drops significantly, along with interest on one hand and competence on the other.

When we try to get closer to this sector to understand it better, we are often overwhelmed by the quantity and complexity of the problems afflicting primary production, processing, distribution, and — not least — consumption.

The world of politics doesn't help: issues related to agricultural production are almost always dealt with only among the actors directly involved, using technical and specialized language that makes these discussions essentially incomprehensible to the general public — assuming they even have access. Alternatively, the tone is one of superficial triumphalism (as is often the case when speaking of “Made in Italy”), or else of equally superficial and fleeting bursts of interest, usually triggered by sector protests that force institutions and mass media to take an interest — only for that attention to vanish once the emergency (or novelty) fades.

Yet this is what we're really talking about — even without realizing it — whenever we talk about food: about agriculture, production, sustainability, income, public health, employment, culture, and the rights — often denied — of both producers and consumers.

It is worth, then, trying — together with three experts — to offer a concrete vision of the food systems we need, in Italy and beyond. A conversation about so-called food policies: those that, as we do in everyday chats, start from what we eat — but unlike those chats, don't stop there. On the contrary, they expand to involve not only all actors in the food chain but also the many relevant institutions, along with the world of research and education.

The three experts who took part in this discussion are:

- **Monica Di Sisto**, journalist and consultant specializing in international trade, and vice-president of the Fairwatch observatory on global trade and climate;
- **Antonio Onorati**, farmer with the Associazione Rurale Italiana, member of the European Coordination Via Campesina, and honorary president of the International Center Crocevia;
- **Claudia Paltrinieri**, founder and president of Foodinsider.it, a web platform focused on collective catering. Foodinsider is accredited as a national observatory on school canteens and organizes various initiatives to promote healthy, balanced, and sustainable food.



What food policies are needed in this country and, in your opinion, are immediately achievable?

Let's start with a daydream: if you could set the political agenda of the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, with the power to implement the proposed measures, what guidelines would you suggest? In other words: what food policies are necessary and immediately feasible in this country? Antonio, would you start? It seems fair to begin with the producer:

ONORATI

Yes, let's begin here: the starting point of any agricultural and food policy, whether national or at EU level, must be the recognition of the existence of *multiple* forms of agriculture. Or at least two major types: one is characterized by heavy capital investment, aiming for profits that justify the invested capital. This is necessarily highly specialized agriculture, operating through monocultures and a steadily decreasing need for dependent labor — both in numbers (outsourcing is increasingly common) and in the share of wages paid by the agricultural enterprise. There are many examples in the livestock sector, but not only there.

The other type is made up of labor-intensive farms, often diversified — not just in their production plans, but also with supplementary or even entirely external sources of income. If I could choose which of these two models to support with public funds, I'd remember that the ecological transition is made possible by the labor intensity dedicated to caring for the land and its relationship with the intended production. Producing *with* nature, not against it, is only possible when skilled, attentive labor can manage and implement the adaptation processes needed to counter climate change. The result is usually higher-quality raw materials — essential for high-quality food products.

Therefore, we must make space for and support, with public funds, what you in your book call the “peasant economy,” where the productive outcome is aimed at fairly compensating labor. Monica, do you agree?

DI SISTO

I agree. And to wisely direct public funds toward supporting this “second type” of agriculture — rooted in the territory, diversified, and labor-intensive — I believe the first step should be a public evaluation of national production, processing, and consumption. We need to cross-reference all the fragmented data held by various research institutions to understand how to strengthen domestic consumption and what food policies to implement, focusing on building city-level food policies — like the examples in Milan and Rome — leveraging neighborhood markets, farmers markets, and public procurement.

I interrupt you here because I know that when we talk about public procurement, Claudia's ears perk up...

PALTRINIERI

Exactly! Because school canteens — my focus with Foodinsider — become strategic as a driver of food policy: they're not just a social service, but a lever for changing behaviors, stimulating the local economy, supporting the ecological transition, and promoting social cohesion.

Food is the intersection of health, environment, culture, economy, and social cohesion. Every food choice reflects a model of society: the way we produce, consume, and share food affects the quality of life, the well-being of communities, and the planet's sustainability. When this vision is applied to school canteens, we see how the service can become a strategic pillar of a national food policy capable of steering the food system towards

sustainability. The canteen is no longer just an accessory service or a budget line to cut, but a high-impact public investment — economically, educationally, and environmentally — and a true social infrastructure that creates shared value and strengthens ties between schools, communities, and citizens.

Italy has introduced several regulatory commitments aimed at pushing public catering toward real ecological transition: the Certified Organic Canteen Decree (2017), the Minimum Environmental Criteria (2020), School Catering Guidelines (2021), and the new LARN (2024). They all point in the same direction — shaping the canteen into a sustainable model — but despite coming from different ministries and showing shared sensitivity, there's still no unified governance or long-term vision.

Over the past ten years, our school menu surveys show that many municipalities have already translated the Minimum Environmental Criteria into concrete practices: more local ingredients, seasonal menus, less red meat, more legumes, and greater diversity in whole grains and vegetables. But alongside these excellent canteens, which serve as models, there are others stuck in standardized models, hindered by a lack of resources, skills — both cultural and technical — and above all, vision.

Yet this is where the real challenge lies: imagining school canteens as an integral part of a national food strategy means restoring the relationship between food and citizenship, acknowledging that how we feed our children reflects the vision of the future we choose to build as a country.

To achieve this, we need a central authority to draft national guidelines, entrusted to an inter-ministerial body (Economy and Finance, Environment, Agriculture, Health, Education) working alongside key public catering stakeholders (Regions and Municipalities, local health authorities, school principals, school canteen committees and family associations, unions, and third-sector organizations).



The need to integrate data

It would already be a big step forward to recognize that food policy must be an inter-ministerial issue. Monica, we left off at the need to evaluate national production, processing, and consumption, and the importance of integrating currently fragmented data.

DI SISTO

Yes, and I would accompany this with an analysis and qualification of agricultural income — both at farm and worker levels — assessing the potential for compensating ecosystem services provided to local territories.

A third non-deferrable action is the implementation of a protection mechanism for producers against speculation and excessive price drops: there are virtuous private initiatives around negotiated pricing — from Filiera Italia to fair trade schemes — that should be generalized through public intervention. In my view, it's also time for a final evaluation of the role of local commodity exchanges, which set prices for major cereals like wheat. Is the market-driven model truly the one that guarantees food security and resilience in these complex times? Or does it instead feed concentration and speculation? The answer to that question will

determine a country's food policy choices.

And on the income issue, I believe Antonio has useful insights to better clarify the situation.

ONORATI

In Italy, as in Europe, small farms (under 10 hectares and/or with a gross marketable output below €25,000) are the vast majority — a testament to their extraordinary resilience, given that they receive little or no support from national or EU public policies.

Then there are structural limits. None of us aspires to poverty: we need to scale up farms under 5 hectares and multiply the total number of farms in Italy and the EU to combat both sector aging and the limited productive capacity of small and medium farms. There's no longer any control over the agricultural land market in Italy, nor effective safeguards to ensure land remains in agricultural use. A new redistributive land reform is urgent and necessary — in line with our Constitution — along with a national law to stop soil consumption, by completely revising legislation on “public utility” expropriations. A possible model is the ECVC's proposal for a directive facilitating land access and ensuring agricultural use.



Green Deal and Farm to Fork: Are They Now Useless?

The national agenda is already quite full. But since we are part of the European Union, we must also consider what food policies we want at that level — or at least identify the most pressing problems we currently face, which are not always on the political agenda. The Green Deal was “born old,” and the Farm to Fork strategy showed signs of weakness from the start. Is it all unworkable and useless? Can anything be saved? What are the most urgent reforms? And where are we, really, with that vision that aimed to build sustainable food systems in Europe without harming third countries?

ONORATI

Yes, a national vision is not enough. We need radical reforms, like reorganizing the EU internal market, introducing non-tariff barriers to counter neoliberal policies and protect the internal market with standards based on quality — of agricultural raw materials and food products, whether imported or exported (ending EU dumping in developing countries). Public policies must shift their innovation focus away from “digital leaps” toward thorough impact assessments on agrarian systems — based on the precautionary principle.

Specifically for seeds and reproduction materials (including animals), we must preserve current GMO regulations for the new GMOs (NGTs), ban patenting of genetic traits and digital information (DSIs), in full compliance with Article 12 of the ITPGRFA.

But returning to your question, the approach must be as I outlined earlier: the Green Deal — and within it, the Farm to Fork strategy — attempts to counter the damage of industrial agriculture. But real solutions lie in promoting peasant agroecology, which considers not only ecological aspects of food production but also social, cultural, economic, and political ones. This demands a multifaceted, complex approach to agrarian systems and their internal differences — which include irreconcilable elements between peasant economies and industrial farming. We don’t need a checklist of good practices.

Take carbon farming, for instance: the European Commission presents it as a miracle cure for climate change, without acknowledging its structural limitations and the risk it poses to food sovereignty. This model allows private companies to pay farmers to “offset” emissions — giving those companies too much power and no real incentive to change their practices. Carbon farming could further imbalance agriculture: small and medium farms are disadvantaged, land is acquired by external actors, and farmers become dependent on

unfair payments.

These “innovative” policies are doomed: they were never implemented as binding directives or regulations. They remained a vague political stance that national governments should have referenced in their CAP Strategic Plans. We know how that ended: major agricultural lobbies dismantled the few environmental measures in EU documents — from the return of chemical pesticides to deregulation of NGTs (which may soon extend to all biotech). Even environmental conditionality is being diluted in the next CAP program under the guise of “bureaucratic simplification.”

The new CAP proposal focuses on support measures, “green” and innovation criteria, and mandatory use of NGTs. The Commission defines this CAP as “more targeted and less punitive,” supposedly helping farmers through the ecological transition. Translation: reward those applying “green best practices” and let the others keep doing damage. No obligation to adopt ecological measures.

This forecast document will be debated in the European Parliament in 2026 and approved in 2027. There’s still time to fight it.

So, does everything need to be redone? Is there no hope for the Green Deal?

DI SISTO

The Green Deal tried to reconcile the old-style globalized market economy with the food, environmental, and social security of our territories. I don’t think that’s possible in today’s multipolar world. Developing countries have long been asking within the WTO to use public stockpiles and to halt exports in case of excessive price fluctuations — to prevent the poorest from being priced out of staple foods. The U.S., EU, and other major economies have always opposed such tools. China, on the other hand, has continued to implement similar public policies thanks to its size and international influence. The U.S. helped shape WTO competition rules to allow its own anti-dumping and subsidy policies. The EU, uniquely, presented itself as one of the most open and liberalized markets in the world, relying instead on non-tariff barriers like food safety standards, social clauses, and — through the Green Deal — environmental conditions from farm to fork.

But by doing so, the EU has trapped itself: without policy tools to manage prices and production — tools every other major power has — it plays the top student of neoliberalism. Meanwhile, companies operating in the EU demand looser environmental, social, and quality standards in order to remain competitive.

So when it comes to the Green Deal, I wouldn't focus on individual measures but on the overall model. Consider that with "framework" laws accompanying rearmament policies (the so-called Omnibus laws), many of the product and production quality standards we took for granted — like Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC) — are being gutted, even in protected areas.

Are we willing to eat polluted food just to let companies — even foreign ones — operating in our market lower their standards to match those of multinational groups that have always seen the European precautionary principle as an unnecessary obstacle to profit? Are we ready to give up the basic "do no harm" principle? These are choices. And with the new CAP and Omnibus laws, it seems clear that the European Commission and Parliament are already making them. Perhaps we in Italy are simply unaware — or pretending not to notice.



Has Agriculture's Entry into the WTO Forever Separated It from Local Territories?

And now we come to the global dimension — which often emerges when discussing agriculture. Like a matryoshka, it forces us to adopt ever-wider perspectives. One wonders if it still makes sense to talk about European policies in an era of global trade, unilateral tariffs, and deals like the EU-Mercosur agreement. What policies of caution — rather than protection — should we implement today, and do we have the technical tools to do so? Or, by bringing agriculture into the WTO more than thirty years ago, did we essentially abandon the idea

that agriculture must be rooted in territorial specificity?

DI SISTO

The WTO — which Trump once threatened to defund — has now been refinanced by the U.S. The BRICS nations, led by China, are also supporting it. This proves that, despite ongoing trade disputes, all major global players understand that a shared regulatory framework is necessary to keep exchanges flowing.

The real issue, in my opinion, is that by choosing the WTO's rules — especially for agriculture — we are clinging to a free-market model that compresses production factors, starting with raw materials and labor. This has fueled today's polycrisis, now intertwined with the global arms race. Faced with a persistent social and environmental crisis that has weakened the middle class and frozen economic growth, rather than pivoting to rights — at least the core ones guaranteed by UN conventions — we've chosen a "war economy" as a stopgap. But this risks artificially inflating the GDP of a few nations while diverting funds away from solving the climate crisis.

The explosion of bilateral trade agreements is another symptom: any smart entrepreneur knows the planet has real limits. Resources aren't infinite, and the number of wealthy people who can afford luxury exports is shrinking. There are no new markets left — unless we start trading with Mars. So we must choose: change the model, or keep profiting the old-fashioned way — at the expense of the environment, by consolidating a new class of slave laborers, and replacing resilient human workers with docile AI, erasing any chance of a future.

I believe a new phase of redistributive planned economy — based on core principles like precaution, antitrust, territoriality, and food/environmental/social security — must emerge, ideally under the umbrella of the United Nations (with all its flaws), not Bretton Woods. Delaying this will only deepen current rights violations and conflicts.

And yes, if this new way of thinking became the guiding principle, we could finally demand that agriculture exit the WTO. What do you think, Antonio?

ONORATI

The idea that the same rules applied to auto parts trade could be applied to agricultural products has failed — long before today's tariff wars. In fact, the WTO's agreement on agriculture is still largely theoretical. It's worth noting that global agricultural trade only covers a modest share of total production. One of the most traded commodities is cereals.

According to FAO data (Oct. 3, 2025), only 16% of total cereal production ends up on the global market. So we need to put international trade in perspective. The real issue is the transmission of global prices — set by futures markets in Paris and Chicago — to consumer prices in domestic markets, as Monica rightly pointed out earlier. This price transmission is clearly abusive, since global trade involves only a residual portion of agricultural output. Why should the price of pears in Italy depend on the price of the tiny percentage of pears traded globally? Why should flour prices be pegged to international wheat prices?

Food market “protection” policies aren’t a scandal if the measures aren’t tariffs, but barriers based on high standards of quality (environmental, social, health-related, etc.). And the EU — being the top global agri-food player (both importer and exporter) — certainly has the technical tools to implement this, especially if it adopted a “Trump-style” negotiating logic: imposing quality standards on both exports and imports. But it doesn’t do so, due to the total subservience of the Commission and Parliament to a handful of European multinational corporations — and to their loyalty to Atlanticist and neoliberal ideologies.

Claudia, at first glance, school canteens may seem far removed from global trade dynamics. But the multinationals that dominate the global food system are the same ones providing many of the ingredients — if not the finished products — in those canteens. So do our school menus reflect European and international politics too?

PALTRINIERI

Yes, absolutely. But in this context, public administration becomes the key strategic actor — where decisions and purchases originate. It makes sense to talk about European policy only if we start truly using the tools already at our disposal for concrete missions — starting with Green Public Procurement in school canteens. This approach allows us to raise standards for everyone and to mend the relationship between schools, local areas, and food supply chains. Ten years of Foodinsider data confirm it: it works when governance is public, criteria are clear, and performance is measured.

In a world of global trade and chaotic tariffs, the difference is made by European tools that act on public demand, market rules, and environmental/social safeguards. School canteens are a perfect testing ground: when public tenders require healthy, traceable, low-impact food, they really do shift markets — not just menus. Our last four Foodinsider reports showed the concrete impact of the Minimum Environmental Criteria: where the criteria are used in tenders and service management, we see more organic food, plant-based variety, and

territorial ties. Where the criteria remain “on paper,” progress stalls.

So, at the European level, we need to **use and strengthen** green public procurement (GPP), with economic support for each country.

Every euro invested in school meals — including those urgently needed for training all involved actors — generates public value. That value becomes health for children, social cohesion for communities, and sustainable development for local areas.

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