

FAST-FORWARD

# SYMPOSIUM

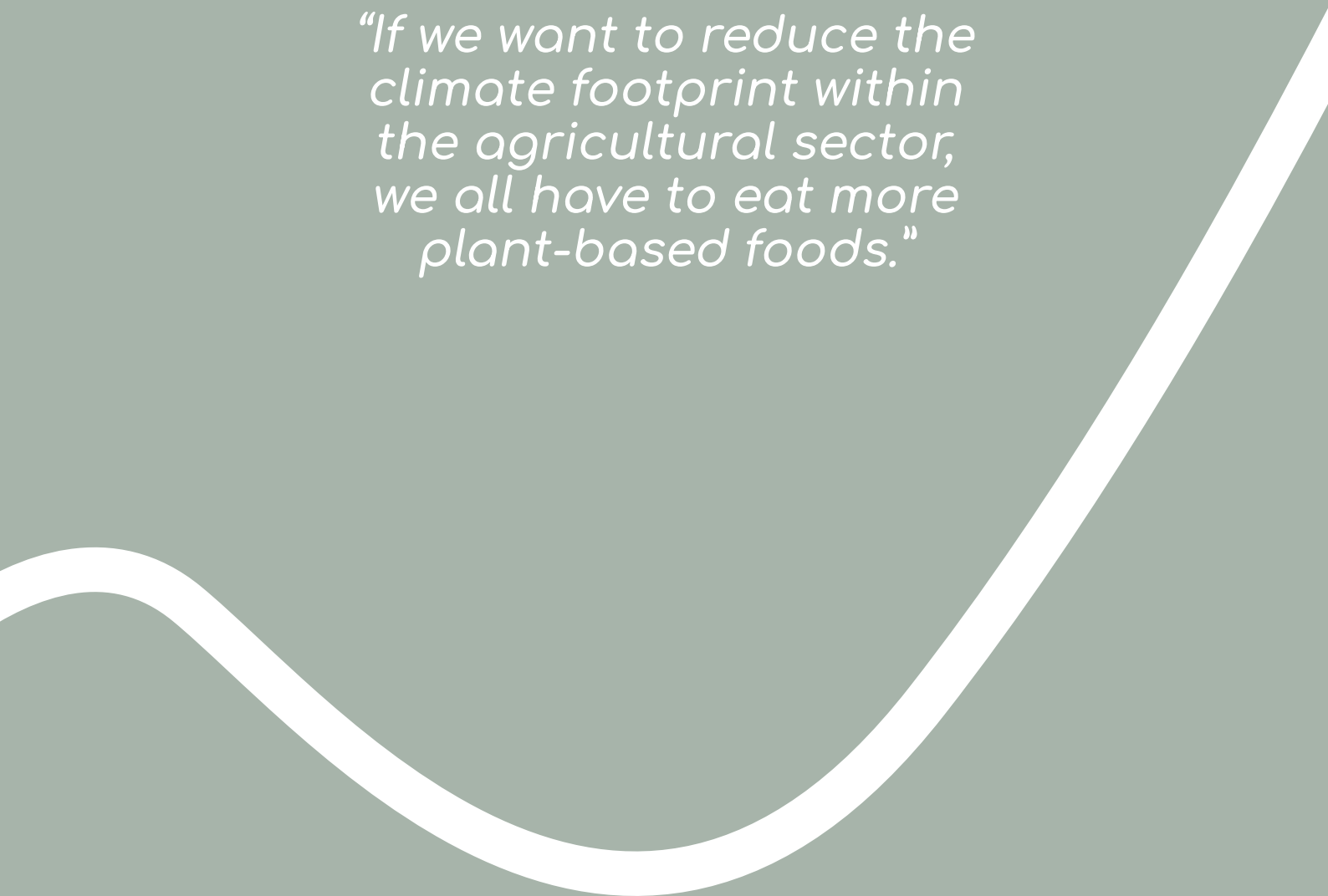
PLANT-BASED FOOD

Executive summary:

**Foundations for an increasingly  
plant-based future**

How lessons from Denmark can inspire European action

*“If we want to reduce the climate footprint within the agricultural sector, we all have to eat more plant-based foods.”*



## Executive summary

This white paper presents a comprehensive and balanced analysis of Denmark's progress in advancing plant-based and plant-rich diets, identifying both areas of notable success and the structural challenges that now limit further progress.

Drawing on extensive project mapping, document analysis, and interviews with policymakers, researchers, industry actors, and civil society, the paper shows how Denmark's political vision, funding

instruments, and collaborative culture have enabled early leadership. Simultaneously, the analysis also reveals a system characterised by a patchwork of incentives and limited institutional coordination.

The report traces the strengths that underpin Denmark's momentum and the gaps that must be addressed to build a coherent innovation system, offering lessons with relevance for Europe.



## Key Findings

### **A collaborative political culture enabled early progress**

At the heart of Denmark's achievements lies its distinctive political and collaborative culture: the capacity to find common ground among diverse, and often competing, interests while maintaining focus on shared societal goals. This culture, described by interviewees as constructive dissent, allows disagreement to be channelled into collaboration and pragmatic problem-solving rather than stalemate.

### **Political articulation created momentum—but also exposed coordination gaps**

The National Action Plan for Plant-Based Foods (2023) has acted less as a catalogue of new measures and more as a shared political commitment. By signalling long-term intent, it has aligned actors across ministries, research institutions, and industry, reinforcing Denmark's reputation as a policy innovator. At the same time, many interviewees emphasise that the action plan is only a starting point and that fully exploiting its potential requires a stronger institutional coordination to ensure coherence across the many emerging initiatives.

### **Institutionalised inclusion strengthens legitimacy, but cannot replace coordination**

Denmark's dialogue-based governance model rooted in decades of organic and environmental policy has enabled inclusive decision-making without erasing disagreement. Formalised forums and partnerships have allowed traditional agricultural interests, NGOs, and innovators to co-own the transition. Yet interviewees stress that these platforms cannot compensate for the absence of clearer mandates and more systematic linkage between parallel initiatives.

### **Narrative framing has prevented zero-sum politics**

By embedding plant-based objectives within a broader agri-food innovation narrative, Denmark has avoided polarisation. The transition is framed not as a challenge to traditional agriculture, but as a shared societal endeavour aimed at sustainability, competitiveness, and public value. Several interviewees note, however, that such unifying narratives work best when supported by clearer institutional coordination, ensuring that shared ambitions translate into aligned action across ministries and funding bodies.

## Key-findings

**1 Political articulation created momentum**

Denmark's National Action Plan for Plant-Based Foods functioned less as a list of new measures and more as a clear, shared commitment that enables accountability, coalition-building, and international signal value.

**2 Constructive dissent combined with institutionalized inclusion fosters durability**

Denmark's ability to accommodate disagreement while formalizing collaboration – rooted in the legacy of the organic strategy – has broadened ownership and strengthened policy resilience.

**3 Framing prevents zero-sum politics**

By coupling plant-based goals with support for wider agri-food innovation, the transition is seen as a shared societal projects – not an attack on agriculture.

**4 Funding mechanisms catalyze local ownership and cross-sector collaboration**

Earmarked programmes span the entire innovation chain and incentivize municipalities, SMEs, NGOs, and research institutions to form partnerships, build capacity, and implement tangible change in real-world contexts.

**5 Bridge-building is an active task**

Inclusive forums alone don't deliver; progress depends on proactive actors (often NGOs and innovators) investing in trust-building, compromise, and practical pathways for reluctant partners.

**6 The system remains characterized by fragmentation and limited coordination**

Despite progress, the landscape appears as a patchwork of overlapping mandates, limited knowledge exchange, and a lack of overarching governance. Emerging initiatives such as the Fast-Forward Plant-Based Food partnership show promise, but stronger coordination and shared platforms are needed to achieve greater impact.

**Funding mechanisms catalyse collaboration but operate largely in parallel**

Denmark's suite of funding initiatives span the research-to-market spectrum. Between 2022 and 2025, these programmes supported more than 160 projects involving 617 organisations. To date, they effectively constitute the institutional core of Denmark's plant-

based transition yet they largely operate in parallel.

Network analysis reveals a dense collaboration core linking universities (KU, AU, DTU, AAU) with intermediaries such as DTI and SEGES Innovation, alongside major industry actors. Around this core, each funding instrument activates its own constellation of organisations. While this

diversity is valuable, it also reinforces the need for stronger coordination to ensure coherence, shared learning, and strategic alignment across funding streams.

**Intermediaries fill critical gaps but cannot carry the system alone**

Progress depends heavily on proactive intermediaries—NGOs, researchers, and innovative firms—who build trust, translate goals across sectors, and create practical entry points for hesitant actors. Interviewees underline that these intermediaries are currently filling coordination gaps that would ideally be addressed by stronger institutional structures and clearer mandates.

**Fragmentation remains a systemic challenge**

Despite a coherent policy vision, the broader funding landscape remains a patchwork of incentives and a lack of an overall organisational framework, with no overarching structure to connect the initiatives. Stakeholders repeatedly highlight the need for further alignment, clearer mandates, and stronger institutional coordination to support knowledge flows, shared learning, and clarity around funding pathways.

**Cross-cutting Insights**

Denmark's portfolio spans the full innovation and value-chain spectrum—from ingredient research and technology development to consumer engagement and procurement pilots. The majority of investments, however, cluster on the supply side in midstage innovation such as product development, test and demonstration activities, and value-chain strengthening.

While early-stage research is well supported and industrial partnerships are strong, demand-side measures remain comparatively modest. Covering topics of consumer behaviour, food literacy, and public procurement, these are increasingly recognised as essential for broader societal adoption and market pull. Programmes such as the Plant-Based Food Grant and AgriFoodTure demonstrate how locally anchored, small-scale initiatives can complement larger research-driven projects. Interviewees note that linking these supply- and demand-side efforts will require stronger coordination mechanisms to ensure learning and momentum are shared across the system.



## Strategic Recommendations: Translating Danish Lessons to European Action

Denmark's experience does not provide a blueprint, but a set of transferable principles: structured collaboration, continuity across the innovation chain, and balance between technological and societal innovation. It also illustrates the importance of clear institutional coordination to ensure that diverse initiatives and funding programmes reinforce rather than fragment each other.

EU action should enable and connect national efforts rather than prescribe uniform solutions. Success depends on trust-building, inclusion, and long-term alignment across ministries, sectors, and funding instruments supported by governance structures that maintain coherence across calls, cycles, and thematic priorities.

### **Foundational conditions: governance and trust**

- Institutionalise structured public-private partnerships (PPPs) with real decision-making authority and balanced representation.
- Ensure genuine, resourced inclusion by supporting the participation of SMEs, municipalities, and civil society actors.
- Build continuity and institutional memory through stable "mission organisations" that connect projects across calls and cycles.

### **Designing instruments across the innovation chain**

- Ensure continuity from research to market by linking TRL1-9 through co-ordinated calls and shared evaluation frameworks.
- Introduce risk-sharing instruments (e.g., guarantees, advance-purchase agreements) to help firms scale promising solutions.
- Direct more funding toward demand-side innovation—including procurement pilots, behavioural interventions, and education initiatives.
- Encourage diverse participation through multiple entry points and clearer guidance on navigating funding pathways.

### **Sustaining political commitment**

- Maintain cross-sector policy alignment across ministries and funding agencies.
- Embed plant-based objectives within a broader sustainable agri-food framework to avoid polarisation.
- Recognise that durable transformation is relational, built on trust, inclusion, and repeated collaboration.



## Conclusion

Denmark's story demonstrates that transformation is achievable when policy instruments, funding systems, and collaborative culture align. Progress has been built step by step—connecting actors, experimenting together, and translating political ambition into shared action. It also shows that early momentum can emerge even within a system of parallel initiatives when trust and inclusion are strong.

Sustaining this momentum will require addressing the structural gaps identified throughout this paper: stronger institu-

tional coordination with clear mandates, better integration of funding streams, greater demand-side focus, and more equitable support between plant- and animal-based sectors. Without these elements, Denmark risks remaining a patchwork of promising projects rather than consolidating into a coherent, long-term innovation system.

For Europe, the central lesson is clear: progress is built not on consensus alone, but on constructive dissent; the capacity of diverse actors to disagree, collaborate, and co-own change.





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