

Connecting Health and Environment with an Agroecological Europe

An interview with Clara Dassonville, Xavier Poux

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The relationship between the climate crisis, the ongoing pandemic, and our food systems is increasingly apparent. Not just an environmentalist argument, it's a reality which farmers are facing, scientists are finding evidence for, and consumers are recognising for themselves. Xavier Poux from ASca and IDDRI sees an agroecological Europe as the answer to a food system that's bad for our health and damaging our environment. How to win the support of farmers and overcome the flaws of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy remain formidable obstacles to this future.

Clara Dassonville: Panic buying ensued when governments around Europe imposed a lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. What do you think this reveals about European food systems?

Xavier Poux: What has struck me during this crisis has been the reinforcement of two conflicting models: the productivist system and the sustainable system. I have no problem in subscribing to environmentalists' critiques of productivist and intensive agriculture, but we have to admit that agro-industry in France and Europe has weathered this crisis well. Supermarkets have stayed well-stocked, even if there have been minor anxieties about some products at certain points. In terms of the food supply, the system has not shown its limitations, despite what some environmentalists might have wished.

At the same time, the resilience of local systems, short supply chains, and organic food production has been equally striking. For example, in France, the Minister of Agriculture called for labour to help farmers harvest their crops. However, organic farmers said that they didn't need any, because they had already made arrangements. That's the ultimate proof of strong organisational resilience. In short, Covid-19 has proved both the organisational resilience of both systems in Europe and the link between production and organisational models and long-term health exposures.

What link can be made between the health crisis and food systems?

The pandemic has unveiled the interconnection between our production models and health issues, globally and locally. Covid-19 has shown the significance of health issues associated with our environment in general. For example, the spreading of fertilisers and pesticides generates fine particles that have an impact on our respiratory systems which in turn makes people more likely to suffer from the virus.

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Deforestation exposes us to virus reservoirs in particular ecosystems. Of course, these factors are elusive and complex: we can't prove that the pandemic started because we produce soy milk. So, there isn't a conclusive argument linking deforestation, production models, and systemic risk to health. But systemic causal relationships are now more visible.

The European Commission recently published its Farm to Fork strategy that tries to address this interconnection between food, the environment and health. Is this strategy a step forward, or do you have doubts about its effectiveness?

The Farm to Fork strategy is a framework document drawn up by the European Commission under the leadership of its new president, Ursula von der Leyen. The conceptual strengths of this strategy lie in its holistic approach to concerns about the environment and food systems: it addresses environmental and health issues in the food system.

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But we should also bear in mind that the existing framework for thinking about agriculture remains very much guided by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Issues surrounding agricultural development have always been considered through the prism of farm incomes, so purely economically. Since reforms in 1992, environmental aspects have been added such as cross-compliance rules for subsidy payments, environmental measures, and so on. However, the dominant approach has been superimposing environmental measures onto the CAP's underlying economic rationale thus constraining them from being truly binding.

The other potentially important aspect is that this strategy runs in parallel to the EU Biodiversity Strategy. I've been working in the agri-environment field for almost 30 years, focusing on biodiversity in particular. For many years, I was told to go back to my "little flowers and birds"; that biodiversity might be nice, but it isn't important. Then the climate question came along and changed everything. Biodiversity, which had long been a blind spot in European policies, became a fundamental issue in itself.

What limitations does the EU Farm to Fork strategy have?

It's promising, but there are limitations and it is just a general guidance document. The principal debate is still centred on industrial agriculture, which has historically been heavily oriented towards exports. It is worth noting that Phil Hogan, a former EU commissioner for agriculture, became the commissioner for trade [the Commissioner resigned for breaking Covid-19 quarantine rules in August 2020]. He recently declared that he didn't see Covid-19 changing export goals.

If you were to follow Farm to Fork to its logical conclusion, you no longer have the same CAP. There's a political issue within the Commission. The President of the Commission would like the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development to shake things up, but she doesn't fully possess the political means to do so. Similar political constraints exist in France and other countries: it is hard to fight the extremely powerful conservative farming lobby to initiate reform.

As long as there is this lack of coherence between a guiding strategy on the one hand, and a Common Agricultural Policy that makes decisions autonomously and spends billions of euros on the other, the actual scope of the Farm to

Fork strategy remains in question, all the more so because it has not completely settled on its strategic choices.

Your research, *Ten Years for Agroecology in Europe*, argues that Europe can make the agroecological transition within 10 years. What are the policy tools for achieving this?

Our research aims to clarify the options for transitioning to agroecology in Europe while also highlighting false solutions. It clarifies what we need to fight for, what we need to stand firm on.

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Currently, EU policies stemming from CAP amount to a menu of choices rather than explicit environmental obligations. Defenders of the CAP say that it doesn't prevent us from transitioning to agroecology, that the CAP allows us to practise productivism, organic farming or local agriculture. But when you leave it as a choice, the stakeholders who have historically been committed to productivist agriculture will grab the resources for those ends.

Our research explains why an agroecological Europe is possible: the room for manoeuvre offered by the de-intensification of livestock farming is enormous. Livestock farming of every kind is responsible for half of our environmental problems: one such example is the phenomenon of green algae in Brittany. Two-thirds of cereals produced in Europe are used to feed animals. If you reduce industrial meat production by a tonne, you reduce demand for cereals by three tonnes, which means you can do without environmentally destructive intensive agriculture. There's a very strong leverage effect.

Livestock farming in itself isn't a problem. Rather, it's the total output aimed for at European level and the type of livestock farming that needs to be questioned. Sustainable livestock farming on pastures can make important contributions to the fertility cycle and feeding the soil with living organic matter. Grasslands are also vital to agroecological Europe.

What's the current state of farming systems in Europe? How far are we from achieving an agroecological Europe?

Some things are heading in the right direction. Organic agriculture is growing and greater social – if not political – awareness is beginning to pose some important questions that were overlooked just 10 years ago, particularly regarding biodiversity and animal welfare. But the paradigm needs to shift. We continue to plough grassland, use pesticides, and push to build irrigation reservoirs.

The goal isn't to do better with what we have, but to rethink agricultural systems. If we want to restore ecosystems, then it's not simply a matter of cutting pesticide use by half, because even at a low dose, their persistence, “[cocktail effects](#)”, and degrading properties destroy the environment. A more robust and sensible demand is to do away with them altogether. The aim of precision agriculture is to “do things better”. Precision agriculture claims to offer clean production with the help of technology. However, precision agriculture isn't thinking ecologically; the mindset of large industrial plots remains [[read more on precision agriculture](#)].

Are we moving towards a more sustainable food system at the global level? It's difficult to say because overall trends remain worrying. But there is one real hope: if, one day, the system has to shift towards something different, we'll know what to do because we've been thinking about this for 30 years; we have examples so we won't be

staring at a blank page. Everything else is a question of political organisation. But, from a technical point of view, we'll have some paths to follow.

What does a sustainable agricultural system take into account that our system currently neglects?

A food system based on agroecology changes the production paradigm. There are various ways to take the environment into account. You can, for example, take an administrative approach, with a percentage of your farmland being given over to hedgerows, without understanding why. But an ecological approach understands that a hedgerow will encourage biodiversity; you need to let it grow in a certain way so that it becomes home to useful insects and birds, and that you have to plant it here but not there. You start looking at the ecosystem.

This approach integrates what I see as the three levels of ecology. The primary basis of ecology is to ask the question: what can support the soil without the addition of pesticides or mineral fertilisers? The second point is the balance between crop production and livestock production. It's a second way in which ecology and agriculture are integrated, with fertility cycles between grassland, for example, and cultivated land. The complementarity between crops and livestock is one of the foundations of organic agriculture, with its famous complementarity between crops and livestock via organic fertilisation. The third way in which ecology and agriculture are integrated is the landscape and biodiversity: what does this type of farming mean for the landscape? What gives it biological richness?

An agroecological Europe might be possible, but do people want a different food system and diet?

How to convince people to eat less meat? Well, our food system has always shifted, more so since the Second World War. Things are shifting, and they're shifting towards less meat. We envisage a long-term transition. However, the meat with the worst image is red meat, beef, and the meat with the best image is chicken. There's work to be done on changing this misconception. Above all, we need to stop blaming cows. We need to show that chicken and pork are much more dangerous for the environment because they are driving global production.

What's desirable when it comes to food could also come from what we understand and know about our food. There's a whole image and narrative around what good food is and what it means ecologically, which will help change things. I'm struck by the fact that animal welfare and climate movements are leading to significant behavioural changes around meat. Stimulating this debate is going to have political repercussions. I don't believe that wading into the debate with technical solutions is effective. However, demonstrating an understanding of why this is an issue and how to address it is worthwhile.

What do farmers think about agroecology?

I've had some feedback on it. We presented our research to the wheat, beet and maize producers' association. Unsurprisingly, they called me a "*Khmer vert*", an eco-fascist. This reaction wasn't unexpected because agroecology goes against the model they have been following for decades.

On the other hand, at a meeting in Yonne, farmers said that they had reached the technical and economic limits of their model. These limits are demonstrated by changes in the yield curve for wheat from 1815 to 2018. Since the 2000s, yields have been declining and have become unstable. The French Academy of Agriculture, from which old productivists take their cue, blames environmental restrictions for declining yields. However, the facts are clear: the climate is out of control, ecosystems are breaking down, soils aren't working anymore, landscapes aren't working anymore. It calls for action from the world of farming.

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Will farmers make enough money with sustainable practices?

Today, it's clearly not profitable, because we don't pay for environmental initiatives. However, when farmers make disastrous environmental and economic choices, like the intensification of dairy production following the lifting of milk quotas, society picks up the tab, even though the consequences of their choices were predictable. Allocating CAP subsidies based on mixed crop-livestock and pasture systems would certainly change things.

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What's fundamental in agroecology is the link between consumers – their concerns about health, the environment, and biodiversity – and farmers who take their expectations seriously. An agroecological Europe is a winner overall, but only if policies change. There will inevitably be losers. Should food cost more, then, perhaps, housing should cost less. Today, 15 per cent of household budgets go towards food: if that has to be 25 per cent for the sake of the environment, jobs, and health then we need to account for that in policies. In such a calculation, paying 2000 euros for rent in a city like Paris is brought into question and landlords would probably lose out. It's hard to anticipate all the changes to the economic equilibrium, but we can't refuse to think about changes to the distribution of value and wealth just because that's the way the system works today. History is full of examples where the line between winners and losers has shifted over time.

What role do you see for cities in agroecology?

There's a whole approach to urban agroecology that's very "my little vegetable patch, my market garden and my local produce", just to please 10 per cent of green voters (of which I am one). It's no way near enough in terms of surface area nor is it good when it comes to feeding people. But what I find interesting in cities is the growing awareness of the connection between food, farming, and the environment. We're seeing a sort of civic education about this issue. If urban gardens can contribute to this, it would be so much the better [[read about urban gardens](#)].

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Cities are confronted by specific issues. Take, for example, the floods of fine particles that arrive in Paris in March due to the spread of fertilizer from neighbouring fields. These fine particles led to a spike in pollution in Paris this March, right in the middle of the lockdown. The supply of clean water is another major problem in cities, and this is also linked to agriculture. It's about the cohabitation between agriculture and people, rather than just food. For there to be peaceful relations between big cities, small towns and farmers, we need to resolve the question of

quality when it comes to water, air, and countryside.



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