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Attention in Brussels is focused once again on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The cycle of reforms that is now underway could see further adjustments of the CAP for the post-2020 period. The success of these reforms tends to be gaged in political terms: a ‘successful’ CAP reform is one in which a policy created 60 years ago is ingeniously reframed, rebalanced, and rebranded to meet changing expectations and spread dissatisfaction more or less equally.

A ‘successful’ CAP reform thus defined, however, can come and go without any meaningful progress in addressing the challenge of building sustainable food systems in Europe. The problem with the CAP is not only what it does, but what as an *agricultural policy* it does not and cannot do.

Europe urgently needs a *food policy* (or a ‘Common Food Policy’). There are five key reasons why this shift is required, and why the time is now ripe for it to occur.

1. ALIGNING POLICIES ON THE SAME OBJECTIVES (BRIDGING POLICY AREAS)

The first reason is the most obvious. How we produce food and how we eat is influenced by a range of policies – from subsidies going to farmers to choices made by school canteens, from health

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claims labelled on food products to marketing strategies of the food industry, from land zoning ordinances to the role of charities in distributing unused food to poor families, from income support schemes to educational campaigns about healthy eating, and from work-life balance policies to trade policies. These various policies fall under the remit of different departments : agriculture, health, environment education, social affairs, and trade are all relevant.

Current policies at EU level remain highly sectorialised and poorly aligned. For example, while some rural development measures in the CAP seek to support the viability of small-scale farms, the EU's food safety policies are often considered to impose a regulatory burden that those farmers cannot afford. Similarly, while EU development policies support developing world farmers to compete on their own markets, and while the EU pledged to ensure “policy coherence for development” – in other words, that policies affecting developing countries shall support, and not obstruct, development efforts – agri-trade policies continue to encourage European farmers in sectors like pigmeat and dairy to seek new export markets (e.g. through export promotion measures), resulting in unfair competition on the domestic markets of developing countries' producers. Or, to take a third example: through the Paris Accord and the Sustainable Development Goals, the EU has made bold pledges to address climate change. However, although greening agriculture can have a major impact on the ability of the EU's to meet its stated commitments on climate change, most policies in place still encourage economies of scale in large production units, and highly industrialised means of production and processing food – the exact opposite of what would be required to attain these climate targets.

These discrepancies demonstrate the limits of the current approach, where policies pull in different directions, reach for different objectives, and fail to strike synergies. These policies do not fit together and are not delivering – neither individually or collectively. A food policy is needed to bring these policies into coherence and align them around common objectives.

2. HARNESSING LOCAL EXPERIMENTALISM (BRIDGING POLICY LEVELS)

A second disconnect can be observed between the different levels at which food systems are governed. As we speak, food systems are being reshaped by fast-moving innovations, from sustainable public procurement practices to the emergence of citizen-led initiatives to reconnect local producers to urban consumers. However, few attempts have been made to systematically link local-level initiatives to policies adopted at the national or EU levels. Food systems are therefore subject to imperatives that potentially conflict and counter-act each other.

In all areas in which the EU has been attributed powers, EU-level policies must continue

to set the direction of travel and ensure a level playing field. But this is only one piece of the puzzle, and we need EU policies to be better complemented by measures at other levels. For example, national governments can lead the way in ushering in a new generation of farmers by putting supportive fiscal regimes and training programmes in place. And it is often local authorities who are best-placed to improve access to healthy diets, through urban planning and public procurement practices. Indeed, the Food Policy Councils springing up in municipalities across Europe are already leading the way in putting sustainable territorial food systems in place.

Rather than replacing one top-down vision with another, the real added value of a food policy for Europe (or Common Food Policy) should be to set common objectives and put everything under one roof, while fostering experimentation and promoting diverse and complementary pathways to sustainable food systems. The dispersion between policy levels could be seen as an asset, as it may support a form of experimentalist politics, in which different authorities launch policies that – whether they are deemed successes or failures – others may learn from. However, the ultimate objectives and underlying vision

for food systems must be coherent. Far from providing freedom to experiment, the current lack of coordination discourages experimentation, since the mainstream system remains inert and, in the absence of a single food policy, obstructs change, or at least fails to support it. Experimentation in food systems requires an enabling environment, which a Common Food Policy can provide. Not to impose uniformity; but instead to support a diversity of approaches and accelerate collective learning.

3. MOVING BEYOND PRODUCTIVISM AND ADAPTING TO NEW CHALLENGES

The current lack of coordination across sectors and across levels of government reinforces the tendency for policies to be heavily path-dependent. Since the 1950s, our food systems have been focused on increasing productivity per surface of land. We have been obsessed with supplying large volumes of food, so as to ensure that food shall be affordable for all, including low-income families. Farmers were gradually encouraged to become providers of cheap raw materials for the food processing industry, and

consumers' needs were considered to be satisfied by the dumping of cheap calories on the shelves of supermarkets. The keywords were efficiency, economies of scale, low-cost, and quantity.

This model is locked in by a series of pieces that have co-evolved over the years. Technological choices, subsidies and taxation, investments in infrastructure, the regulatory framework, are all converging to maintain the system in place. These components are aligned with hurried lifestyles that prioritise convenience, and play such a large role in explaining the success of processed and ultra-processed foods.

Since the turn of the century, a different set of priorities has emerged. Resilience in the face of weather or economic shocks, rather than efficiency alone, has emerged as a major concern. This has placed a premium on the need to support smaller-size farms and to stem the process of land concentration, as a prerequisite for preserving the social fabric and ecological integrity of Europe's rural areas. Moreover, food and farming systems are now expected to provide not simply a sufficient amount of calories – but high quality, nutritious foods, and diversity in diets.

These revisions did not come by chance. They are a 'counter-movement', as Polanyi might have said, resulting from a growing awareness of the challenges that the productivist approach of the past now presents us with. Poor families, especially women, are the most affected: the low-cost food economy, that was meant to support these families' access to food, is in fact making them sick. The EU is confronting a rising public health epidemic, with more than half of adults in the EU now either overweight or obese. Diet-related diseases such as type-2 diabetes and heart disease account for 70% of deaths in the EU. With as many as one third of children aged six to nine now overweight or obese, the problem is clearly getting worse. The socio-economic fallout has been equally problematic. Between 2003 to 2013, one out of four farms disappeared from the European landscape while the total farming area remained stable, suggesting that too little has been done to support the viability of small-scale farms.

However, the current system remains largely inert in the face of these challenges. Dispersed policies with disconnected and poorly aligned objectives are ill-adapted to shift the priorities and the outcomes of a

system that is locked in on multiple fronts. Amending one part of the system (taxing junk foods, say, or tinkering with the subsidies scheme to support small farms) shall do little to change the system as a whole. Any such reform shall be easily absorbed and the mainstream system shall perpetuate itself, adapting to the evolving expectations but remaining wedded to outdated priorities and ill-adapted to the challenges we face. Only a coordinated policy, bringing about changes in all of these different components, can have a systematic impact and overcome the inertia of the system.

4. MOVING BEYOND THE TYRANNY OF THE SHORT-TERM AND SPARKING A TRANSITION

Fourth, we need a food policy to escape the tyranny of the short-term. The challenge of moving towards sustainability requires nothing short of a transformation of our food and farming systems. The industrial-productivist model described above has reached its limits, and is no longer succeeding on its own terms (i.e. continual yield expansion), let alone delivering environmental and social sustainability. What is required is a fundamentally different

model of agriculture, based on diversifying farms and farming landscapes, replacing chemical inputs, optimising biodiversity and stimulating interactions between different species, as part of holistic strategies to build long-term fertility, healthy agro-ecosystems, and secure livelihoods.

This shift cannot happen overnight. It raises a set of important questions and trade-offs. Can we move away from the low-cost food economy without hurting the poorest families, who can only afford the low-quality foods that discount grocery stores provide? Can we impose further environmental constraints on farmers without reducing levels of production, and thus increasing the dependency on imports? Can we combat overproduction, without depriving charities from the ability to use unsold foods to distribute them in low-income neighborhoods?

These are key questions that would need to be addressed through carefully sequenced steps, as part of a long-term, integrated vision for transition across food systems. However, in the absence of that vision, we are simply paralysed by the trade-offs, and continue to look to short-term fixes – despite the problems they leave unaddressed.

Current political and economic systems are indeed trapped in a short-term rationale. The nature of electoral cycles creates regular turnover and a need for rapid results. This is ill-adapted to supporting a transition whose advantages will not be immediately visible, given the time needed to rebuild soil health and fertility, to increase biodiversity in production systems, and to reap the full benefits of enhanced resilience. Meanwhile, short-term bottom line results are the main considerations and motivations for investors, thereby limiting the ability of large traded companies to invest significantly in long-term changes. Short-term concerns are particularly prevalent in the retail sector, where mass retailers are bound by the expectations they have nurtured among consumers: for cheap, varied food year-round. This ripples down the chain. With few alternatives to the dominant buyers and retailers, farmers have found their margins squeezed to breaking point, and often struggle to break even – let alone to be able to consider a transition to the sustainable practices increasingly demanded by consumers.

The challenge, therefore, is not only to shift from one set of priorities to another, but to shift from short-term to long-term

thinking. Only by opting for a multi-year strategy, defining clear timelines, building alliances to deliver these shifts, and allocating responsibilities across different branches of government, can we move towards a different vision. This requires pathway thinking. Not just an end vision, but also a sense of how to get there. We need backcasting, metrics to measure progress, policy tools to coordinate changes at different levels and in different sectoral areas : in other words, a food policy.

5. REVIVING FOOD DEMOCRACY AND REBUILDING LEGITIMACY

There is a fifth reason why we need a food policy : because it can be a *people's* food policy. Policy choices in the past have largely been based on what political scientists once called a “garbage can” logic: problems have been framed depending on which solutions were at hand, and unless such ready-made solutions were available, they were conveniently ignored. That such ‘solutions’ came, in general, from the agrifood industry, largely explains the dominance of the actors of the industry in the political system ; the other part of the explanation of course is the sheer power of their lobbying efforts. In the process, however, long-term concerns for the health of the soils and of the people risk being neglected. We must reclaim control of food systems : food democracy is both an end in itself, a way to deepen democracy beyond the ritual of elections, and a means to ensure that the general interest shall not be sacrificed on the altar of narrowly defined economic interests.

Crucially, citizen engagement with sustainable food systems is already there – it is simply under-exploited in the current

environment. European citizens care about their own health, and are generally concerned by the rising epidemic of obesity and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). They also care about maintaining the countryside and the local economy, which in many parts of Europe is highly dependent on the agri-food industry. In addition, many people are involved in local initiatives to buy food directly from a farmer, to improve school food, or to support sustainable development (e.g. by sourcing Fair Trade products for their organisations, workplaces etc). These people have a shared interest and a key stake in the EU policies that shape food systems. The challenge is to unify these dispersed groups and to make their voices heard in debates which are currently framed around *agriculture* (or other sectorial policies) and are focused on EU policymaking, from which many people feel disconnected. By widening the lens from agriculture to food systems, and by building from local initiatives upward, a food policy can harness people's growing engagement around food.

The resulting food policies will be more efficient, in that they will be aligned with the interests and initiatives of a diverse range of constituents. But they will also help

to rebuild the legitimacy of public policy, and the European Union in particular. The legitimacy crisis Europe is facing provides an opportunity: it obliges us to rethink democracy and to ensure that people become co-authors of European integration. We must move beyond current attempts either to mimic representative democracy at European level (as has been done since the first European Parliament elections in 1979), or to involve national parliaments in the EU decision-making process (which in practice has meant multiplying veto points in the system, at the risk of making it even more difficult for Europe to respond to emerging challenges). We also must move beyond the idea that any initiative taken at EU level means less room for the Member States and sub-national actors to design policies that correspond to their specific needs. There is not necessarily a tradeoff between more EU and more leeway at national and sub-national levels. Instead, EU policies can enable local and national efforts at food systems reform, empowering local actors to realise changes and promoting learning through experimentation across the EU.

A food policy for Europe that meaningfully involves people in diagnosing the problems

and finding the solutions, a policy that takes back control over food systems from agribusiness and farm lobbies – in other words a people’s food policy – can help to rebuild the legitimacy of the EU in the eyes of its citizens.

For these five reasons, a food policy for Europe is an urgent priority. The time has come to realign policies with one another, with the challenges we face, with the wishes of citizens, and with the revival of the European project itself.



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