

Going Local: Reforming Europe's Food System

An interview with Claude Gruffat, Linda Gaasch

October 1, 2020

Zero-waste, zero-distance, zero-time: people's expectations are changing and food is an increasingly political issue. The threat of shortages during the pandemic showed how Europe needs to start producing, selling and consuming food in a different way. All roads to changing Europe's food system run through the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. We spoke to Linda Gaasch and Claude Gruffat on why Europe needs a fairer and healthier model centred on the needs of farmers, consumers and the environment.

Green European Journal: Has the coronavirus crisis changed how people consume?

Claude Gruffat: My impression is that overall this severe public health crisis and lockdown have given people a firm desire to be able to live life as they did before. This is why consumption has increased where lockdowns have been lifted.

At the same time however, the crisis has widened the circle of trailblazers for change. The world of environmental and consumer activism is growing: in Europe, it accounts for 5 to 10 per cent of food consumption, depending on the country. New issues around consumption have become prominent. Food sovereignty now occupies a significant place in consumers' minds because people are realising that we're not immune to food supply problems. Another growing concern among the citizenry is public health. Today obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and environmental cancers are on the rise and this cannot be separated from food. For consumers, these connections are gateways to a desire for change but the shift will be gradual and will have to be supported.

What needs to happen for society to shift to more sustainable forms of consumption?

Linda Gaasch: People worry about their health first, before worrying about harmful effects for the environment. In the short term, interest in eating local and organic products has increased. However, over the long term, grandparents know much better than their grandchildren which fruit and vegetables are in season and how to store food so that it keeps for as long as possible. They lived through an era in which this knowledge was vital for survival, which isn't the case for us today, fortunately. Maybe a side effect of the Covid-19 crisis will be that people realise that food shortages are possible at some point, and so have greater respect for the work of farmers and greater awareness about waste.

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The fight for healthy food is also a social justice issue. Eating healthily and buying pesticide-free vegetables is expensive; healthy food is too often a privilege enjoyed by the well off. At the same time, everyone suffers the

consequences of unhealthy food. Costs such as health issues caused by poor diet, soil degradation caused by intensive agriculture, and water pollution caused by pesticides are borne by the community. So the poor pay twice: they pay with their health and they pay for the political choice that supports our current farming model. We should be doing the opposite: ensuring healthy food for all, subsidised for its beneficial effects on the environment and biodiversity.

The coronavirus crisis and its consequences have led to calls for tighter regulation of various industries such as pharmaceuticals, but also food. What would a more resilient and sustainable food system look like in Europe?

Claude Gruffat: We need to talk about food policy, rather than the common agricultural policy, to put the idea of need back at the heart of what we eat. Agriculture is a tool for production – it comes after need. We need to put things back in the right order.

The current distribution model strongly influences food production. Reforming it is key to a more sustainable food system. Today, mass distribution through supermarkets requires a standardised system of mass production. A 12,000-square-metre supermarket just can't be supplied by local producers. In France, consumers are increasingly rejecting this model. Large superstores are being called into question to the point where some have been forced to downsize. Size is no longer everything.

The production and supply of agricultural and food products should happen at a human scale. Today, in supermarket retail, a single salad producer may supply several hundred stores.

Farming lost its local and regional supply chains through 40 years of the Common Agricultural Policy and these need to be rebuilt. We need to return to producer groups that are local, not national. This cooperation can be based on win-win co-development that supplies shops and consumers with quality food at affordable prices. I've seen this myself in the Biocoop network, which now has a 1.4 billion euro turnover.

The production and supply of agricultural and food products should happen at a human scale. Today, in supermarket retail, a single salad producer may supply several hundred stores. It's an enormous risk for the producer, who is contractually bound and at the mercy of the slightest disease or climate problem, and it's risky for shops because they depend on a single supplier. But producer collectives or cooperatives can change everything by sharing the risk. It's essential if we want to return to local production on a human scale.

What are the main problems with the Common Agriculture Policy and Europe's food system more generally?

Linda Gaasch: What's not working at the moment? On the one hand, subsidised exports create perverse effects in the markets of third countries. On the other, imports create competition between farmers in Europe. The products used to feed our livestock are often genetically modified or treated with pesticides that are banned in Europe. All this adds to a general lack of resilience and an overdependence on production located outside Europe.

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The priority for reforming the CAP should be to stop subsidising quantity and emphasise quality. However, the reality is that the number of farms is shrinking and land is increasingly concentrated in the hands of big producers. The European Council in July 2020 removed the rural development funds initially earmarked for the CAP and, at a political and institutional level, I don't know if there is enough commitment to make the necessary changes. Some EU plans, such as the Farm to Fork strategy, are promising but if the CAP doesn't line up with the new directions promised, it is hard to see how an ecological transition for food is possible.

Claude Gruffat: The harm caused by the current CAP and its consequences on food production are clear: 50 per cent of European farmland is used to feed animals rather than humans. Because quantity is subsidised, wheat is grown for feed, not bread. So, in France, 70 per cent of our high-value bread flour is imported.

Where do we go from here? Towards food sovereignty to make sure European countries can meet their own, human, needs. Cereals, legumes, and protein crops are extremely important to this process. The CAP holds a key role for the future because it is the crucial lever to move our agriculture in a sustainable, healthy and green direction. The future CAP is one that targets the production that we need and encourages anything that creates jobs in producing food locally.

These aren't just think-tank ideas: today consumers are increasingly demanding organic and local products. But the supply isn't there, it's not enough, even though this demand presents an incredible opportunity to set up many more farmers so that they can earn a decent and fair living from their work. Just to meet demand today in France alone, we need to 60 000 new local organic farmers. While what happens is that about 12 000 farmers enter the industry each year and about 25 000 retire. The net loss year-on-year increases the size of the remaining farms and is not encouraging new farmers to start out. France has barely 500 000 farmers today but needs a million for tomorrow. The CAP and national policies on regulations and tax systems must help in the reallocation of arable farmland to new producers.

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Is the political conversation opening up to include broader social, health and environmental perspectives? For example, the European Commission has proposed a Farm to Fork strategy that tries to tie together these different strands.

Claude Gruffat: There are intentions, and there are actions. Two agricultural strands of the European Green Deal – Farm to Fork and biodiversity – are promising foundations for new medium- and long-term approaches to European agriculture, but they are nowhere to be found in the CAP reform that started in 2018 and that will be concluded in late 2020. July's European Council meeting on the EU's long-term budget for 2021-2027 saw a reduction in the CAP's budget and, in particular, rural development, which is the best tool for investing in the future of farming and supporting essential changes to our production model.

The ongoing political shift requires the relocalisation of agriculture. Consumers are laying the groundwork for tomorrow's developments and they aren't being heard. One of the signs is the idea of "zero waste": consumers no longer want their food to be synonymous with over-packaging. The distribution model is challenged by the idea of "zero time": people no longer want to spend any time in supermarkets. There is also the idea of "zero distance", which calls for buying local. All these things are already found in society but aren't taken into account in political debate.

Many farmers are financially dependent on practices that are damaging to the environment. For example, long-term debt can make it very difficult to switch to more sustainable forms of production when your income depends on a certain yield. How can Greens support farmers in making the switch?

Linda Gaasch: My family, who own a farm, often tell me: “People talk about animal rights, but never about our rights.” Perhaps Greens have not been loud enough in defending the social rights of farmers. Conventional farming is hard work and also carries certain risks because of exposure to the products used. Agriculture can also bring benefits for climate change and biodiversity. Greens can push to make sure that the social value of farmers’ work is properly recognised and remunerated.

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We also need genuine belief in a particular food production model, to set a clear goal and stick to it. For years, farmers were told to specialise and now they have to transition to organic production. Without a clear goal, I understand why it’s difficult to grasp and adapt. A good way of convincing farmers to head down the organic or agroecology path is a guaranteed income. At a local level in Luxembourg, the Greens are calling for a certain percentage of food in school and company canteens to be organic, so that local organic farmers are guaranteed buyers for their produce.

Claude Gruffat: 70 years ago, European farmers adopted an agricultural model that they didn’t choose. They were told that they had to produce more so that their countries would be self-sufficient in food, and that the solution was to use technology and turn to chemical fertilisers and pesticides. At the time, we needed to convert war industries back into agricultural industries, and nobody was talking about the environment. Nor was anyone asking the opinions of farmers. One of the consequences is that between 1965 and 2010, fruit and vegetables produced in Europe lost 55 per cent to 85 per cent of their nutritional quality.

How can we lead these farmers towards another model? All farmers love their land. We’ve never explained to farmers that they have damaged their soil and harmed the environment for 40 years. Today, they are coming to this particularly bitter realisation. The Greens must use language that is supportive, upholds certain values, and frames this in terms of a social project. Greens must speak a language of truth to agriculture. A language of truth isn’t the hidden hand of the market, because we know where neoliberalism leads us. We must establish a constructive dialogue with all stakeholders in food production and, of course, with farmers, a dialogue that opens up opportunities and restores confidence in the future. It is also up to political leaders to support change by tailoring public policy and providing financial resources. In this way, Europe and politics can regain the support of farmers who today often feel disempowered and a rural world increasingly tempted to vote for extremists.

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What role can regions play?

Linda Gaasch: I would like to see a network – similar to those that exist for climate and energy – to connect farmers in different regions with each other so that they can share best practices for agroecology. Although

different regions work in different ways, it doesn't mean that sharing best practices can't be useful. What's more, environmental leases can be a way for regions to invest directly in a sustainable food system. In Luxembourg, land owned by the city that is leased for 10 years to people to work with certain environmental requirements. If a city or region owns land, it is vital that it supports approaches that are virtuous for the environment.

Claude Gruffat: Relocalisation doesn't mean the end of trade between regions. Comté cheese will always be made in the Jura, champagne in Champagne, mozzarella in central Italy. The goal is to localise and regionalise everyday food needs, and to do this as far as possible in the areas concerned. Potatoes grow everywhere in Europe; there's no reason to have areas that grow potatoes and areas that don't but, instead, we've created areas of concentration and that has brought environmental problems.

Relocalisation means sharing things out again while preserving and strengthening regional identities. There's a real wealth that regions and their communities must seize upon, as it is they who can drive local food projects that match their skills. Europe and the regions are complementary levels for discussing these policies: the European framework sets the direction and provides the resources; the regions use them intelligently within their borders. That's how we can give citizens what they need.



Claude Gruffat is an MEP of the Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament and former president of Biocoop.



Linda Gaasch is city-councillor for the city of Luxembourg since 2019, alternate member of the committee of the regions since 2019 and one of the vice-presidents of the Greens in the EU Committee of the Regions since February 2020. She works as a local assistant to the Green MEP Tilly Metz.

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