

TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FOOD POLICY

BUILDING A FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR ENVIRONMENT, HEALTH, ECONOMIES AND TASTE

11 MARCH 2016

PERMANENT REPRESENTATION
OF THE KINGDOM OF THE
NETHERLANDS IN BRUSSELS



Conference Report

Opening remarks

Opening remarks by Pieter de Pous, Policy Director, European Environmental Bureau. Mr. de Pous opened the event and thanked the Dutch Presidency for hosting. As an opening remark he stressed that the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) would need a fundamental change in direction post-2020. According to the latest evidence, the recently agreed reform represented a step backwards for the environment. To be able to truly address today's challenges we may actually need to start policy development from scratch. This is why the EEB is calling for a 'Fitness Check' of the CAP to prompt a deeper analysis of the policy's objectives and assess implementation in light of persistent problems in the sector.

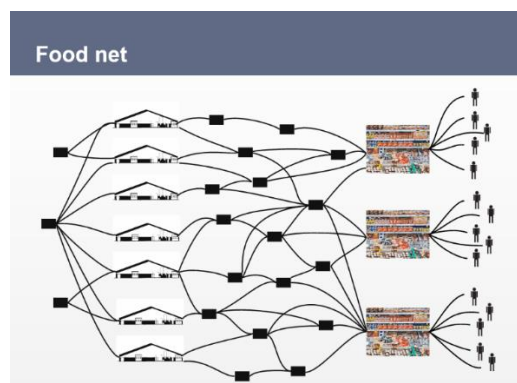
Rob van Brouwershaven, Director, Plant Supply Chain and Food Quality Department, Netherlands Ministry of Economic Affairs. Mr. van Brouwershaven confirmed that the idea of a food policy has been on the Dutch Ministerial agenda since publication of the report 'Towards a Food Policy' by the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy in 2014. The Dutch government adopted this report in autumn 2015 agreeing that changes need to be made to the food system to ensure long-term sustainability and health. *"Consumers want to make informed choices, to know about the health and sustainability credentials of food."* Typically, a healthy food choice is also a sustainable one. The Dutch Government would therefore like to team up with all relevant sectors to promote better consumption and production practices. The entire supply chain is needed for the creation of a sustainable food system.

*Presentations & other
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Keynote intervention

Josta de Hoog and Prof. Gerard de Vries, co-authors of the report 'Towards a food policy', Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy. Ms. de Hoog outlined the main messages from the report which identifies 1) ecological sustainability, 2) public health, and 3) robustness of the food net as the three main global challenges facing the food system today. The report analyses the main changes that have faced the food system in recent decades making the 'farm to fork' process more complex. Changes include the industrialisation of agriculture, globalisation of food supply, increased role of non-agricultural players and changes in consumption patterns.

The traditional approach of an 'agricultural policy' is no longer sufficient as it dates back to the time when food and agriculture were not so far apart and does not appropriately address the main challenges the food net is facing today. As the food net expanded, the interactions and challenges changed and therefore policy thinking must now change in order to find relevant and lasting solutions. This is why the report concludes that *"we need to move from an agricultural policy towards a food policy"*. Some of the first steps to be made towards a food policy are to develop food strategies, anchor ecological sustainability and health in core policies, facilitate diversity in the food net, improve learning capabilities and enhance the sustainable management of resources.



Conceptualising a sustainable food policy

Professor Tim Lang, Centre for Food Policy, City University London. Professor Lang started by saying that the CAP as it exists today is in trouble. Times have changed since its creation. But does the CAP reflect this change? The world now faces a number of new food-related problems at the same time: overproduction and over-, under- and mal-consumption; obesity and hunger; cheaper food which is still too expensive for many; a shift of power from the land yet reliance on farmers. While the CAP has been in a constant state of flux, if we were to start today *“DG AGRI would not have been created, but rather a DG Food”*. The image of the world waiting to be fed, a relic from the 1943 Hot Springs Conference, is also in urgent need of revision. Global brands have usurped health education in shaping diets.

A food policy should be about linking environmental, social, health and cultural aspects together. *“We can no longer talk about human health without talking about environmental health”*. Therefore ‘ecological public health’ should be seen as one of the most promising conceptual frameworks for a new direction for EU food policy. This suggests different indicators to the normal ones of today such as output, price to earnings ratio, or market share. New indicators should focus on the relationship between land and people, for instance, speaking about ‘people fed per hectare’ rather than ‘yield produced per hectare’, and the importance of producing plants rather than animals. We need to debate different models for a future CAP. Should we create a ‘Third Pillar’ for health? Or aim to inject health into Pillar II? Or be more ambitious and aim for a completely new set of policy signals? It may seem fanciful to think this big, but often it is in times of crisis that new good thinking arises and current systems are challenged. Most academics and analysts now agree that the food system is already edging into fundamental long-term crisis. There is a large gap between evidence and policy, and thinking big about bridging this gap is crucial for a sustainable food policy.






Panel debate

Moderated by Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC (The European Consumer Organisation). Ms. Goyens gave panellists the opportunity to make opening statements and then followed each intervention with a number of questions on consumer issues – after all, any kind of transition in the food system would need to be accepted by consumers as well. Questions covered a wide range of topics, including: what could sustainable agriculture look like; are food taxes part of the picture; should all food businesses apply the same food safety standards; do we need origin labelling; what action should the EU undertake to facilitate a sustainable food system? Interventions and replies to consumers' questions were followed by an open debate with the audience, which has been incorporated into the summary per speaker.

Ms. Goyens started by noting that trust in the product and producer is key to sustainable consumer behaviour. When consumers receive confusing messages they tend to turn away from such messaging.

David Baldock, Executive Director, Institute for European Environmental Policy. Mr. Baldock underlined that a sustainable global food system needs to be resource-efficient and much better at restoring resources such as water and soil as these are in limited supply on the planet. With this in mind *"it is important to analyse the sustainability of the entire supply chain, not just single components. Climate change could be used to argue for the need of systems change"*. A policy response could be to ensure that 1/3 of the CAP budget goes exclusively to supporting sustainable agriculture.

There are two important preconditions for moving towards a European food policy. The first is to have a long-term vision on sustainability which is acceptable to farmers, consumers, public health stakeholders and for biodiversity and climate change, and the second, a common understanding of sustainability and other relevant terms to enable effective discussion about the food system. It can be helpful to focus on specific issues where sustainability and nutritional goals can be advanced together, for instance in relation to meat and sugar.




Dr. Aileen Robertson, Public Health Nutritionist at the Metropolitan University College, Copenhagen. Dr. Robertson focused on food and inequality in light of the increased prevalence of overweight and obesity in Europe. On average over 50% of Europeans are overweight and 20% are obese. However average percentages hide the exponential rise in overweight and obesity among lower socio-economic groups, where levels can be more than 5 times greater than those in the higher income populations. This results in increasing health inequalities, especially in women, leading to inequalities being transferred from generation to generation. Therefore *“we can’t just tax “junk” food, high in fats, sugars and salt. Taxes alone just make products more expensive, whereas taxation in combination with removal of VAT e.g. on vegetables, fruits and fish will support healthier diets being less expensive”.*

Dr. Robertson identified five areas to be addressed: 1) better coordination and coherence between public health, agricultural and environmental communities; 2) local and national governments to play a leading role in creating markets for sustainable food, including through public procurement; 3) more democratic sustainable food systems with fairer prices to producers; 4) realise that food and nutrition policies are at the heart of achieving all 17 Sustainable Development Goals and the COP21 climate goals; 5) a ‘Health in All Policies’ approach applied to CAP reform to reduce the amount of cheap energy from sugars and saturated fats available in the European diet. Also, Europe-wide legislation is needed both to restrict the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and to label the “country of origin” of sustainable products.

Peter Beznec, Director, Centre for Health and Development Murska Sobota. Mr. Beznec explained that the organisation he represents was established with the aim of reducing health inequalities in his region. He works in Pomurje, a region with the lowest socio-economic and health indicators in Slovenia. The area has good agricultural land which is however primarily under grain monocultures. The ‘Investment for health’ concept by the World Health Organisation (WHO) was taken further by the Slovenian government which resulted in the multi-stakeholder ‘Programme Mura: Investment for health and development in Slovenia’. One of the main pillars of this programme is ‘Healthy food’ which aims to develop more sustainable food production systems while at the same time improving population health.

The healthy food pillar focused on making locally grown food more available to consumers and to grow food in a more sustainable way. Through intersectoral regional partnerships and various initiatives and projects, we were able to generate more demand for sustainable and healthy foods. However, production did not change fast enough, which resulted in a gap between demand and supply. Therefore the focus shifted towards educating farmers. The successes of this approach are already visible as it has benefitted locals by creating remunerative jobs in farming and reducing health inequalities. One of the main lessons learned is that *“regions, municipalities and states need to facilitate the selling and buying of local products”.*





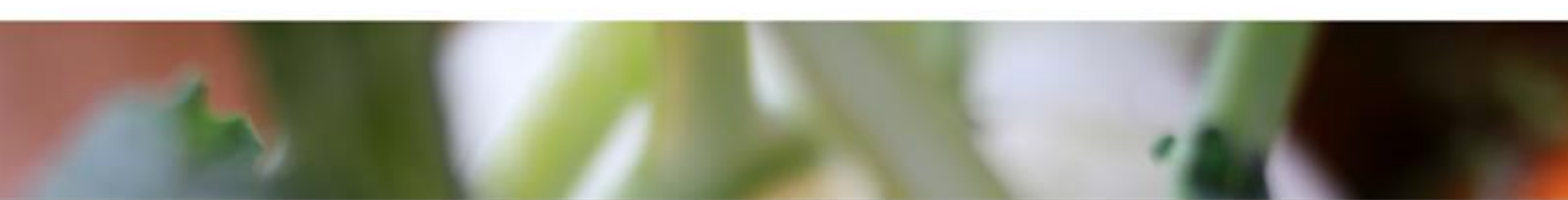
Jean-Pierre de Leener, Organic vegetables grower, Member of Slow Food. Mr. De Leener worked as a farm business consultant for several years, but having got tired of the sad stories he encountered during his job, he decided to start his own farm. The main idea was simple: to make an income from what he was doing. But in order to do that he needed to get better prices. And the only way to get better prices would be to sell directly to consumers. In the 1980s short supply chains were still a new concept and he had to experiment a lot. From his experience he explained that producing organically and selling locally is better ecologically and economically while benefitting both farmers and consumers alike. *"All the people I know who are doing well on their farm are those who are reducing their farm size and are selling directly to the consumer."*

His produce is sold 100% in Brussels and at his farm shop. The model is successful because there is consumer demand for such products. The consumer prices are also reduced because less people in the chain need to make money on a product. Because of the closer producer-consumer relation, micro-businesses can be exempted from certain regulations (e.g. food safety rules) which are tailored for big enterprises sourcing products on the global market. A small producer has the food chain under their own control and cannot risk any shortcomings.

Katrien Barrat, Consultant on food initiatives, Co-founder "De Fermetisten", a direct food sales platform. Ms. Barrat started by emphasising the importance of good storytelling. She mentioned two examples, one being "NOMA", a first class restaurant in Copenhagen which managed to change the Nordic Cuisine through storytelling, the other Jamie Oliver who influences consumer behaviour by telling good stories about why one should eat healthily.

Consumers want to know where food comes from and it needs to be sustainable as well. However, the food system is experiencing a permanent 'Volkswagen-gate', referring to consumers' lack of trust in food industries. *"You can say local, you can say green but no one believes you anymore. This happens because one of the current system's major failures is the lack of accountability"*. In order to change consumer behaviour it is crucial to re-establish this accountability. To provide opportunities to the many sustainable food business start-ups, easier access to financing is needed. As a reflection on the state of agriculture Ms. Barrat mentioned that during her whole previous professional life she had never seen grown-up men cry, until she started working with farmers.

Monique Goyens ended the debate by summarising that the *"main lessons learnt are to think big and go local"*. The discussion must also go further than just Europe and it is crucial to look at trade too because trade policy is both about agriculture and about consumption.





Closing remarks

Peter Power, Head of Cabinet European Commissioner Phil Hogan. Mr. Power noted that the question of whether the EU needs a food policy has been an important subject of debate in recent years. *“But we should realise that Europe already has many policies supporting and underpinning a sustainable food policy”*. Sustainability is at the heart of the CAP and the CAP is a central dimension of the EU’s sustainability strategy. The CAP furthermore makes food accessible to consumers and is successfully boosting trade. Public health, while no core EU competency, is taken into account with respect to food safety, educational initiatives on better diets and the school fruit and milk scheme. Food information to consumers, origin labelling, designation of origin schemes all ensure the consumer is informed. Rules on how food is produced, covering animal welfare, environment and climate change are there, but will need to be upgraded, also in the framework of the circular economy package. So is the fairness of the food supply chain to which Commissioner Hogan is especially committed.

Closing remarks by Nina Renshaw, Secretary General, European Public Health Alliance. For Ms. Renshaw today’s event made abundantly clear that health considerations run all the way through the food system, not just food safety and consumer choice, but upstream in agricultural policies which have an important impact on nutrition and health. Currently we are facing many different food-related problems at the same time, including obesity as a form of malnutrition, health inequalities, antibiotic resistance, excessive meat consumption contributing to both climate change, biodiversity loss and diet-related chronic diseases. There is a long way to go to find the right path for the CAP to evolve into a sustainable food policy. A CAP Fitness Check would be the ideal opportunity to identify where we are in terms of health, agriculture and the environment. We need to be asking ourselves if what we are doing now is coherent with a vision of a sustainable future food system and identify where we are going off course. But it is clear that policy has more to do to provide an answer to the ecological, health, cultural and economic challenges our societies are faced with today. Given the urgencies involved it is a task that cannot wait.

Reception

Kindly made available by the Permanent Representation of the Netherlands to the EU.



Presentation Materials

For presentations, reports, participants list and other materials please visit the event [webpage](#), or follow links:

- ['Towards a food policy' report by the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy](#)
 - [Presentation by Josta de Hoog and Prof. Gerard de Vries \(WRR\)](#)
 - [Presentation by Prof. Tim Lang \(City University London\)](#)
 - [Speech by Peter Power \(Head of Cabinet European Commissioner Phil Hogan\)](#)
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