

4. European Health Forum Gastein
(EHFG) 2001
vom 26. Bis 29. September 2001



Press Information, September 28, 2001

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Challenging the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) from a health perspective

Can health objectives be integrated into the CAP?

Forum IV “Building a healthy Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)”

Forum IV under the chair of Genon Jensen, General Secretary, European Public Health Alliance, and Dr. Tim Lang, Thames Valley University, discussed from various angle-points the necessity of taking public health objectives on board of a future agricultural policy and the need of a reform of the current CAP from this perspective.

A critical view on CAP

Due to the lack of a representative of the European Commission on agriculture, Jeannette Longfield, Sustain: The Alliance for Better Food and Farming, opened the Forum after a brief introduction by Genon Jensen with a poignant, critical overview over the CAP. She highlighted the cultural-emotional importance of agriculture for citizens in terms of food production and the vital role the agriculture plays regarding the maintenance and enhancement of landscapes, which partially illuminate, why half of the European Union’s expenditure is spent on the CAP. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the contribution of the

agricultural sector to the total GDP, for example, in Great Britain accounts just for 1 percent.

Meat and dairy products in excess

Additionally, a lot of farmers are asking themselves, “Where is all the money of the CAP budget?”, of which 90 percent are spent on the first pillar of CAP “individual commodities”. In an attempt to approach an answer to this question, Jeannette Longfield presented, by means of data from a draft paper by the UK Food Group Project, which conclusions one might draw concerning the priorities of agricultural production of the EU when looking at world trade, for:

- 60% of the totality of world trade on wine are exported from the EU;
- 40% of the totality of world trade on cheese, 30% on milk powder, 28% on milk and 20% on butter are exported from the EU.

Yet, the WHO is trying to reduce the consumption of alcohol, dairy products and meat, the production of which is also promoted by the EU, while 2/3 of the healthy cereal production of the EU is used as animal fodder. Based on these figures, Jeannette Longfield raised convincingly the question “What does this say about our health policy and the CAP?”, as the EU heavily subsidises the production of meat, dairy products, cereals, etc.

Furthermore, she questioned the ability of the CAP to help small-scale farmers, for the budgetary means of the CAP end up to a large part in the pocket of the richest and biggest farmers, not to mention the impact of the CAP on poor non-EU-countries and on the environment.

Jeannette Longfield’s elaborations were complemented by references to the historical development of the CAP, that can additionally explain the major budgetary importance of the CAP within the EU budget, as it was set up after 1945 to make Europe self-sufficient, to prevent rural depopulation and to give money to small and poor farmers. Furthermore, it was pointed at the European climatic conditions that suit Europe apparently for the production of wine and dairy products.

Sustainable food supply for a healthier Europe

Dr. Aileen Robertson, WHO Regional Office for Europe, illustrated vividly in her lecture the vital impact of nutrition or rather of nutrition insecurities on the emergence of chronic diseases, as cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases and cancer. The high emergence rates of these diseases in the CEEC and former Soviet-union republics underpinned Dr. Robertson's argumentation in this respect clearly.

Regarding the EU, Dr. Robertson called for a significant changes in eating habits and in the CAP to prevent obesity, that according to her estimations will crippled the European health systems in the next decades, if nothing is done to combat this trend. That measures can be adopted to change eating habits, shows the example of Finland, that could significantly reduce the emergence of chronic diseases by positively tackling the consumption of vegetables and fruits.

A healthy diet according to WHO recommendations consists of > 400g/person/day of vegetables and fruits, including > 30g of pulses, nuts and seeds, and of potatoes (or bread and pasta) to cover 50 to 70% of the daily energy demand. But the EU's food production does not reflect these results, for since the 1950s the EU production of bread and potatoes has been decreasing, while milk and meat production has increased. The dietary targets of vegetable and fruit consumption are exclusively achieved in the Mediterranean countries of the EU and Finland. Dr. Robertson, therefore, stressed the need for more education, practical experience, and for increased vegetable and fruit production to raise the consumption of these in the EU. To achieve this objectives, she also recommended to build alliances with the successful environmentalists for joint efforts for a sustainable food supply.

The time to tackle CAP reform has come

The food scandals of the recent years and the agricultural crises have generated a public, that is now more aware of the importance of agricultural policy and more concerned about the health dimension of the CAP. Therefore, Dr.

Robertson emphasised that now it is the time to tackle the problem of too little information about the CAP among the population, and better information levels would in her opinion consequently lead to more public pressure for reforming the CAP.

Looking at the proportion of 58% percent of the CAP's budget spent on meat, dairy and animal fodder production, and at the WHO dietary target of just 25% of meat, fish and dairy product consumption per day, helps to illustrate the big inconsistencies that the integration of health objectives into the CAP will have to tackle.

In the subsequent comments on Dr. Robertson's lecture, the current lack of an positive image of fruits and vegetables in the public was further highlighted and was set against the "excellent" public relations work of fast food chains, that promote highly-processed food.

Vegetables on the Roof

Jeannette Longfield illustrated next the surprising possibilities to build up local food chains, in order to get into contact with practical food production, even in our urban society. Looking at the example of London, she pointed at the enormous opportunities for gardening and planting vegetables and fruits for the 30.000 allotments holders and the numerous numbers of private garden owners in the centre of London, which already have led to a "gardening is the new rock'n roll"-boom. Additionally, Jeannette Longfield emphasised the forgotten flat roof-top space that could be used for the same purpose.

Shortening the food chain as a possibility

Food production in the urban area could shorten the food chain, and could thus contribute to less food poisoning, more nutriently dense food, and to more quality awareness of the citizens, who might even return to cooking themselves meals. Furthermore, this development could increase the vegetable and fruit consumption and create new jobs. But the lecturer did not forget to point also at

the potential problems of this process, as the climate in Northern Europe and seasonality pose restrictions to the realization of a shorter food chain, and promoting local food production uncritically might even increase the consumption of food products with saturated fats (see local cheese, pies, sausages, etc.).

Jeannette Longfield on behalf of every women added in the end, that the shortening of the food chain should, of course, not lead to an increase of female household work, in a time where people have less and less time to cook for themselves and eat convenient food instead.

The need for a CAP favouring small-scale farmers

Elisabeth Baumhöfer, Austrian Mountain Farmer Association, presented the critical voice of the Austrian Mountain Farmer Association, that has been criticising the CAP for the last 15 years, for they believe that the CAP undermines sustainable and small-scale agriculture, while facilitating large-scale monocultures. Dioxins and salmonella in food, BSE and the foot-and-mouth disease, the destruction of surplus fruit crops – all these excesses illustrate, that the CAP has to be changed, for small- and medium-scale farmers are suffering from the consequences of, for example, the BSE crisis, although the source of this crisis can be found in the industrial food production. Studies from the USA have not only shown that small-scale farmers constitute the majority of farmers, but also that they produce better food.

Elisabeth Baumhöfer calls for a CAP, that focuses on the real needs of the population, like protection of sustainable production and biodiversity, fair trade, adequate pay for farmers, preservation of jobs in rural areas, etc.

Especial emphasis put Elisabeth Baumhöfer on the internalisation of costs into the prices, which in the consequence would make regional environmentally produced products more competitive than highly-processed products.

Furthermore, the Austrian Mountain Farmer Association advocates food sovereignty, that is, farmers should produce for their own people. We have to

realise that food is not just a simple good, but that its is linked to a variety of other policy sectors, and that we, therefore, need big alliances to move the agricultural policy at the EU level.

No CAP reform before 2006 cause of internal obstacles

Dr. Anton Reinl, COPA/COGECA, European Farmer's Organisation, stressed the importance of a CAP, that provides framework stability and continuity for farmers. Although the food crises caused by BSE, the foot-and-mouth-disease, etc. have indicated, that there is a certain need for reform of the current CAP. Only excessive budgetary expenditures and / or severe deteriorations in several agricultural sectors would justify in the eyes of COPA/COGECA a CAP reform before the year 2006.

Necessary preconditions

COPA/COGECA prioritises the farmers' needs for stability and continuity of CAP over a unquestionably necessary reform, as long as the EU has not solved the inconsistencies of its policies, that impose contradictory demands on food production within the EU. To illustrate this point, Dr. Reinl gave among others the example of the ban of 4 antibiotics as supplemental animal feed components, which does not count for imported products. EU trade policy pushes towards lowering the prices of food products, but restrictive regulations put on the farmers like the described "internal" ban of antibiotics increase their production costs in comparison to imported food products. Therefore, a reform of the CAP can just be useful, if a reform tackles this inconsistencies and allows for an effective agricultural policy.

Additionally, it is necessary, especially in relation with the coming WTO negotiations, firstly, to develop food safety rules that are also applied to imported products, secondly, to promote the precautionary principle in the agricultural sector, and thirdly, to recognise the farmers' work for preserving the landscape as a public good.

Responding to questions, Dr. Reinl pointed out that the current direct payments are subject to negotiations between the Commission and the central and eastern European countries which will be finished next year. He does not see any reason to change the current system of direct payments prior to 2006.

WWF – Environmentalists as future alliance partners

Elisabeth Guttentstein, European Agriculture and Rural Development Policy Officer for WWF, underlined the potential alliance basis between environmentalists and promoters for public health.

Environmentalists seek a multifunctional agriculture that covers environmental protection, food safety, preservation of landscapes, etc. WWF recognises that natural resources are at the heart of farmers, a fact which often causes conflicts, as the CAP “forces” the farmers to choose between productivity and environment.

Progress within CAP possible

Elisabeth Guttentstein emphasised that the current model of the CAP can already be geared towards a more concrete integration of public demands for a healthier and more sustainable CAP. But we also have to ask ourselves given the market restraints, which policy framework of CAP would be most likely to deliver a multifunctional agriculture. Aiming at creating such a framework has to start with a clear definition of the health objectives, that are supposed to guideline the integration of a health component into CAP.

The enlargement presents according to Elisabeth Guttentstein the best opportunity to reconsider the fundamental principles for agricultural policy in Europe, for “it would be criminal of us not to learn about impact of CAP on the candidate countries”.

At the present time, WWF recommends

- (1) to focus pragmatically on reforms in the market regimes, for example like the environmentalists, who have been trying for several years now to change the environmentally harmful olive oil regime, and
- (2) to strengthen agri-environment instruments.

Response of retailers and suppliers to consumer demands

Nigel Garbutt, Independent Chairman of EUREPGAP, introduced as last panel speaker EUREPGAP. This organisation was launched in 1997 as an initiative of major retailers and suppliers and constitutes a partnership of food retailers and suppliers implementing independently verifiable Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) on a global basis. In order to achieve this aim, EUREPGAP has set up normative documents for international certification, so that one standard is applied and accepted everywhere for all retailers. EUREPGAP focuses with its measures on farm production, that is fresh vegetables and fruits, not on packing, processing, or transport. Its goals comprise the risk reduction of food safety lapses in agricultural production, the verification of best practice (benchmarking), cooperation to encourage continuous improvement of standards, and maintenance of a consumer focus on GAP issues. EUREPGAP contributes with its work to enhancing consumer confidence, to promoting supply chain efficiency and providing a level playing field for producers, etc.

Discussion and conclusive recommendations

The tone of the subsequent discussion set Dr. Tim Lang, providing principles for integrating health objectives into the CAP to trigger a debate on them

The Forum recommends

- (1) the recognition of a multifunctional agricultural policy which comprises a health component;
- (2) the promotion of fruit and vegetables;
- (3) the establishment of an inter-service working group on CAP and health;

(4) the setting up of an “Action Plan for Nutrition Policy” according to the European Commission’s programme by 2002.