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The COVID-19 crisis reveals the many fissures of the EU food system and shows us the way out

The Covid-19 pandemic affects all of us, the crucial agri-food sector included. The full impacts remain to be seen and will depend largely on the measures taken by the EU and the member states.

This “emergency response” is absolutely necessary and needs to be swift and decisive: **farmers, farm workers and employees of the food sector, including in retail, should be fully supported, and their health and rights protected.** Food should continue to circulate in the EU to avoid shortages and to maintain one of the most basic aspects of EU solidarity by not blocking the flow of food or hoarding food in one member state. Food banks need urgent provisioning, as they are becoming severely depleted. The most impacted sectors - like farmers selling to restaurants or open-air markets, and producers of fresh fruit and vegetables - should receive help through any means available: notably CAP funds, emergency funds and national measures.

However, this will not be enough. The current crisis shines an unforgiving light onto the many fissures of the EU food system. Some may wish to avert their eyes, ladle on more money and hope for the best (spoiler: it will not work), but **we would rather take an honest look at the situation and draw the logical conclusions.**

EU Food security is more fragile than we think

One of the most evident problems highlighted by this crisis is **the fragility of the EU’s food security.** Despite the fact that the Union is a net food exporter and has a wide variety of soil and climatic conditions, significant tensions surrounding food production were created by the disruption of the Schengen area.

Thousands of tons of animal feed are imported every year from North and South America: soybeans, rapeseed, sunflower meal... most of it GM. Problems at the border can cause farmers difficulty in feeding their current density of animals, leading to production loss, severe economic problems, and compromised animal welfare and, consequently, animal health. These animals also need to be slaughtered somewhere. Yet, even as EU production has risen, the number of slaughterhouses in the EU has been steadily falling; meaning live animals are being transported in trucks throughout the EU, and even beyond. With trucks being filtered at the borders, **some miserable animals had to wait up to 24hours in terrible conditions.**



Creative Commons Animal-transport

But it's not only the animal sector: for example, fertilisers were initially not considered as an urgent need, and were blocked at the borders, thereby threatening the EU's heavily input-dependent crop production. This is a striking contradiction, considering that some EU regions dedicated to animal production are suffering from **huge surplus of animal excrement**.

Meanwhile, neither climate change nor ecosystem collapse has magically disappeared during the pandemic. Agriculture is at the same time contributing to and suffering from these two crises, which are threatening our capacity for food production and influencing changes in the spread of pests and pathogens.

Industrial farming as a vector of pathogens

"Industrial farming is a disease", said the then Commissioner-designate Wojciechowski during his first controversial hearing before the European Parliament last year. This may seem exaggerated but it is not that far from the truth.

Indeed, current industrial modes of production increase the risk of **spread of zoonoses**, which may in some cases also affect humans, and are likewise a factor in the **increasing antimicrobial resistance**, which is considered our most significant health threat now and in the years to come.

Without speculating on the origins of the current crisis, previous crises such as avian and porcine influenza have been linked to industrial animal farming. **Our trade patterns also influence spread of diseases, as**

more globalised trade can mean greater risk of spreading such diseases.

For humans, then, a double threat – a risk to our food supply in case of zoonoses, and a risk to human health if the virus can transmit from animals to humans.

How can the new Farm to Fork Strategy reshape our food system?

What these events demonstrate is that reliance on global trading relations with extremely long supply chains weakens our food security unnecessarily. **Food production must be re-thought at local level with balance in mind** - no more oversized animal production that cannot be supported by the local crop production, in particular fodder production and grazing areas. No more live animals being transported for unhealthy lengths of time. A balance should also be sought for supply chains: only with a diversity of local selling points we can avoid a concentration of consumers in the same crowded spaces, and give better options than to drive long distances to buy food.

The crisis shows us that **it is of absolute urgency to walk away from industrial farming models** and to fully support more resilient, less resource intensive and less input dependent systems, such as agro-ecology, including organic farming.

Fortunately, these objectives are intended to be - partly - integrated in the future Farm to Fork strategy, that is, the branch of Van der Leyen's EU Green Deal which is dedicated to food. The current situation shows clearly why we need this strategy to protect and improve our agriculture, forest and fisheries, by addressing faults which threaten our capacity to produce food in the EU. This is the line taken by 16 Greens/EFA MEPs [in a letter written to Commissioner Timmermans in March](#).

The Farm to Fork strategy is needed to realign incentives, to empower farmers and fishers in their work towards sustainable food systems – a transition which is necessary for both continued nutrition and continuity in farmers' businesses. We can only ensure food security for the future if we learn to work within our planetary and regional resource boundaries – without this, today's food security will be meaningless tomorrow. This, naturally, can only be successful if it offers new opportunities to farmers, to access better and more local markets, to reduce their costs, and to find pride in their work.

The urgency is real - not because the midst of an epidemic is an optimum time to change our systems (it is not), but because it is the right time to draw up what we need to change after the crisis ends. The publication of this Strategy is sorely needed to **shade a greener light on the negotiations on the future Common Agricultural Policy**, which are ongoing in the middle of this crisis. If we let these negotiations conclude on the basis of the old world, and engage the second biggest budget of the EU for seven (!) more years of spending on faulty premises, we pave the way to stumble into the next crisis head first, in an even weaker state than we are now.

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