

EISA/FNL Farmers Exchange
“The CAP Leading to Sustainability
in Agriculture:
Farmers Communicate with the
Public”

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“The Common Agricultural Policy – can EU citizens still follow?”

FNL/EISA1 (Bonn): The European Commission seems to be facing a communication problem: with the re-orientation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the EU has set targets which, with regard to their composition and priority-setting, are intended to have a stronger focus towards the interests of citizens in EU Member States. However, even today, there is a common misconception amongst the public, based largely on images that persist from the 1970's and 1980's, that surplus food continues to be produced, dumped and destroyed. Added to this is a lack of knowledge and understanding, among the public, about the CAP and its impact on their lives.

During a panel discussion organised by the European Initiative for Sustainable Development in Agriculture e.V. (EISA) in Hildesheim, Germany, on 4th September 2008, representatives of EISA, the EU Commission, the German Federal Ministry for Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection and the Farmers Union of Lower Saxony discussed the importance of raising public awareness of the CAP and the challenges this will bring.

“Many EU citizens remain uninformed about EU Policies, what they mean to them and the impact they have on their daily lives. We have a moral obligation to do all we can to improve everyone's understanding of these policies” explained EISA Chairman Tony Worth.

“Since the start of the CAP, however, this has not been addressed sufficiently,” he continued. As well as covering issues such as nutrition, energy supply, environment and the protection of natural resources, EU policies would encompass a far broader spectrum of issues than before and hence there would be a need to ensure they addressed the multitude of national interests and attitudes of the 27 EU Member States.

Against this background, Dr Martin Scheele, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development of the EU Commission, underlined that emphasis should be on getting acceptance on the CAP objectives. In this context, he said that it would not be achievable to make all citizens experts on the details of the CAP and that he didn't believe that this was necessary for getting a wider support. He underlined that the latter would be a matter of gaining support for the objectives and demonstrating the capacity to achieve them.

He said: “Let me put it this way: I do not understand what makes my car function, but I trust that it does its job properly by taking me from one place to another. I live with that – and I have to.” In any case, there would be a need to continuously communicate agricultural policies in the future, Dr Scheele said. He emphasised that “sustainability” incorporates economic, social and environmental objectives that are not necessarily in a harmonious relationship. They might even be conflictive. In this context, he mentioned that competition would be a necessary ingredient of the economic dimension of sustainability, while generating winners and losers. And he continued to argue that communicating the conflictive nature of those objectives would also provide for opportunities: “It gives us a strong argument that we need to reach for striking the right balance”, Dr Scheele said.

Clemens Neumann, Head of the Department Administration/Management at the Federal Ministry for Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection in Germany, emphasised that there was a need to prepare EU citizens for the challenges in agriculture and the respective consequences of alternative political strategies. "If a consumer requests the abolition of a certain production system in his country, but still wants to buy the produce, he has to realise that the only chance to get the product will be via imports – leaving the value-adding to other countries." In addition, Mr Neumann felt that there needed to be more discussion on the individual responsibility of consumers themselves. In this context, he said it should be openly questioned why consumers in some EU countries throw away up to 30 % of the food they buy. Even the figure of 10 % of the food being thrown away in Germany would be far too high when seen against global malnourishment. In a globalised world, he said, the consequences of individual actions needed to be debated as well.

There was consensus between participants of the panel discussion that an open discussion about agriculture and the Common Agricultural Policy was needed. It would be critical that the benefits of agriculture and agricultural policies and the direct and indirect costs associated with any further agricultural developments, were demonstrated to all EU member citizens. "We consider it very important that consumers are made aware of the multitude of services which farmers provide to society on their farms and fields. If we fail to communicate that message clearly, we will risk losing acceptance of society," concluded Jörn Dwehus of the Farmers Union of Lower Saxony.

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1 EISA, the European Initiative for Sustainable Development in Agriculture, is a European farmers' organisation with 6 national associations (Austria, Germany, France, Luxemburg, Sweden and United Kingdom) for the development and promotion of sustainable development in agriculture and in particular the holistic concept of Integrated Farming as Full Members



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