

Agriculture in transition

The European Initiative for Sustainable Development in Agriculture (EISA) was founded in May 2001 with the common aim of developing and promoting sustainable farming systems, which are an essential element of greening future processes. A significant focus of EISA's is placed on promoting Integrated Farm Management, which the initiative defines as a whole farm management system that enables farmers to identify opportunities and threats, to act accordingly, and to consider consumer interests in their business.

Integrated Farm Management, EISA says, is not based on a set of fixed parameters but on informed management processes. This knowledge-based flexibility of integrated farming includes attention to detail and managing all available resources.

In an interview with Pan European Networks EISA's policy officer, Martijn Buijsse, explains some of the issues facing sustainable European agriculture, including issues in the regulatory environment and challenges in moving innovative new technologies to the marketplace.

What are the biggest challenges facing (sustainable) agriculture in Europe and how can they be better addressed?

Agriculture in Europe is in a transitional stage in that we are coming from an era when resilience was required in terms of enough 'affordable and safe' food for everyone, towards an environment in which food is 'sustainably produced' in the context of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, Paris Agreement (Climate Change) and the Cork 2.0 Declaration.

This transition requires a continuous improvement from farmers, not only in more 'resource efficiency', but also on social and environmentally

relevant aspects such as biodiversity, soil and water management, and so on. If farmers are unable to provide continuous improvement, they stand to face problems in receiving their 'licence to produce' from society, and this can also lead to a situation in which regulations can make it too hard for farmers to actually farm in an economically viable way.

This shift also requires transparency; for example, in the management processes applied by farmers on these socially and environmentally important themes, as well as in the actual results the farmers see.

Within EISA, we call this approach 'Integrated Farm Management' (IFM) (Figure 1).

Innovative technologies used to ensure sustainable agriculture and productivity concerning areas such as modern irrigation systems, improved varieties, improved soil quality and conservation technologies have a crucial role to play. How are these types of innovation supported in Europe?

It is absolutely true that innovative technologies play a crucial role in the sustainable development of agriculture. Within this, we have seen significant successes breaking through in areas such as, for example, assuring animal health (and therefore also public health) by extremely well-developed medicines in combination with good (preventive) management approaches by farmers and the public authorities.

Looking back at 30 years of collaboration in the animal health industry, the success we have had in preventing zoonoses (animal diseases that can eventually harm public health) is exemplary. Similarly, when we look at the effective use of crop protection products, we often forget how far we have come in the last 30 years with regards to developing products





to protect plants from diseases and plagues. It is difficult to imagine how the agriculture sector would have developed without these innovative solutions and, indeed, it is perhaps not too much to say that affordable and safe food would have been almost impossible to realise without these developments.

Of course, challenges remain – the fact that in the field of precision agriculture the question of why so many great technologies are developed but fail to reach the level of adoption is a significant one. For example, the use of field-mapping techniques in combination with the spot-specific application of nitrogen or plant protection products is simply not being utilised in Europe today, despite the fact that the contribution of these techniques to environmental sustainability could be significant. There is thus a sense that this is an area in which policies from both the government and from the supply chain can help – perhaps via incentives from the CAP (for example, rural development), or otherwise the knowledge developed and shared by companies from the supply chain could both contribute to a greater degree of adoption of new techniques.

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Is the regulatory environment in Europe able to meet the objectives of poverty reduction, agricultural production and environmental sustainability? How could this evolve?

From EISA's point of view, the current regulatory environment in Europe is not robust enough to meet these objectives. We believe that farmers applying IFM practices on their land offer a win-win scenario in terms of having a viable economic farm practice whilst also contributing to modern EU policy in line with the SDGs, Paris Agreement and the Cork 2.0 Declaration.

IFM delivers value in agriculture, enriches the environment, and engages local communities. Farmers implementing IFM deliver measurable agro-ecological and societal services with regard to soil, water, biodiversity, animal health and welfare, and climate change, while also ensuring economic viability.

The EU believes that to reduce poverty and hunger and promote inclusive growth, substantial investment in rural areas and in agriculture is needed. In which ways could this be best approached?

EISA proposes to political decision makers that the EU formally recognises farming businesses adopting IFM practices, specifically for their proven commitment to more sustainable farming practices and their ongoing development and improvement, and which leverage sustainable development in agriculture.

IFM is an holistic and progressive approach which focuses on setting targets, evaluating measures taken, and subsequently adapting actions



and measures for improved performance. The implementation of IFM can be accomplished by self-assessment, contracts and certification. It has to be emphasised, however, that all farmers following the guidelines of IFM need to take a multitude of measures to improve their sustainability performance, and this deserves recognition in the next CAP.

Alongside self-assessment and contracting, more than 1,000 farmers are LEAF Marque certified; in the Netherlands, approximately 400 farmers are Skylark certified, both systems having independent external verification. Skylark farmers already receive recognition for their certificate within the current CAP as an equivalent package for greening – a promising model for IFM in future CAP reforms.

Another important aspect is that many food supply chains, particularly in members of the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) Platform, recognise farmers adopting IFM on their farms. On several occasions this has led to a preferred supplier status for these farmers, or to premiums or benefits in knowledge.

When it comes to sustainable animal production, how do the challenges differ from those discussed above? How could initiatives such as the silvopastoral system, for instance, contribute?

Collaboration between the animal health industry and public authorities has led to safe and affordable food. However, we should be aware that the transition towards sustainable production, above all, requires freedom of choice for farmers. This is in contradiction to the previous era, which focused on providing affordable and safe food, which was, to a large extent, the result of regulatory work.

It is important that the concepts of ‘freedom for farmers’ and ‘regulations’ do not go hand in hand, which is a big challenge moving forwards. To provide an example: in order to address the issue of soil health there is no one single solution that fits all farms and all soils; there are multiple approaches, one of which could be silvopastoral farming, while another could be to apply conservation agriculture techniques, and yet another could be applying balanced fertilisation without any of the aforementioned approaches. If farmers are faced with a regulatory framework in which

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there are limited choices, this will by definition have a negative impact on the farmer’s ability to perform optimally in terms of environmental and economic sustainability. Therefore, we place a much greater emphasis on ‘collective action approaches’, wherein, based on the sharing of knowledge by groups of farmers and other knowledge providers, farmers are enabled to continuously improve their farm’s sustainability performance. Sustainability is not an accomplishment at a certain moment; it is a journey that never ends.

What are the next steps or challenges for integrated farming?

In the context of the debates around the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and, to a lesser extent, the Cork 2.0 Declaration, much of the dialogue is now centred on how to scientifically prove that the environmental and social services IFM farmers deliver can feed into policy and CAP payments. For example, when a farmer applies measures in order to attract birds to his farm, should we quantify this effort in terms of the amount of habitat he has created for the birds? Or should the number of birds be counted in order to provide evidence to the authorities?

Finally, where will EISA’s priorities lie moving forwards?

In the Brussels representation, which is the core activity of EISA, there are currently two priorities. First, we want IFM to gain recognition in the CAP and/or other European policies on agriculture. We believe that IFM is mutually beneficial for Europe, as farmers who are applying IFM contribute to UN SDGs, the Paris Agreement and Cork 2.0. Furthermore, in many cases, IFM farmers are certified, which can also bestow advantages for the CAP.

The second priority refers to the issue of precision farming, as many EISA members can have an influence on the better adoption of precision agriculture and thus also on the sustainability effects this would have.

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