

## **FARMERS SAVE THE WORLD**

### **The real green revolution**

- **2,5 billion persons live from agriculture and are perfectly capable to provide enough food for everyone.**
- **Industrial country South Korea spends a larger part of its budget to agriculture than most African countries.**
- **Or eat, or fight climate change: a false contrast.**
- **It is a nice truth: family agriculture can feed the world's population.**
- **Companies also have a crucial responsibility.**
- **With a world food supply for only forty days, there is no more time to put off choices.**

Are you worried about the food crisis? In fact you shouldn't be, as the solution to the food crisis is very simple. Read along before you decide we're nuts. 2,5 billion persons on this planet are living of agriculture; farmers (m/f) and their children. They are perfectly capable of providing enough food for the world. Anywhere where family farmers own sufficient and good land, as well as the resources to invest in a productive agriculture, they deliver a truly splendid performance. They can be the solution to the stress we, all of us, have been chasing all through the world: we have abandoned agriculture and the farmers, halted the food production, let the prices increase as well as hunger and malnutrition; we'd rather fill our fuel tanks with so-called bio-fuel than have people eat. Until recently, hunger was mainly a rural phenomenon. Now, even the ever more numerous poor city dwellers can no longer get food at affordable prices.

#### **A nice truth**

However, it can be different. Very different. Small and medium-scale farms produce in the entire world for local and national markets. And they prove they can be more productive and more efficient than the large, industrial exportation companies. Research in tropical Latin America shows that farmers who have several crops on the same field – a much used practice over there – realize yields twenty to sixty percent higher than in monoculture. Moreover, they create more labour so that more persons have a good income. Whereas the large-scale agro-industry lets the farmers die and the surrounding cities decay, a performing family agriculture is scoring better beyond comparison. To a large extent, it contributes to the economic development and wealth in these regions where it can take the lead because its income is mainly spent in the own region. That is why in places where mainly family farms are thriving, the surrounding cities also bloom: there is more local commerce, more streets and sidewalks are constructed, and there are more schools, parks, churches, clubs, newspapers, a better service, a higher employment rate and a more important participation of citizens to community life. That is what studies, the oldest of which remounts to California of the forties of the past century, show. And it's not all yet, because if such agriculture is also functioning in an ecological way, it preserves the environment better. An agro-ecological agriculture minimizes as much as possible the inputs from the outside, like imported cattle feed, chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Its energy balance is much more positive, it is more economical with the scarce water supplies and increases the fertility of the soils... and still it yields more than the modern high-tech agriculture which is entire supported by external inputs.

And so we can be quite happy with this nice truth: family farming can feed the world's population, tomorrow and in fifty year, and even in a sustainable way. That is the force of farming.

#### **The role of the governments**

Indeed, the solution is simple. Only, some important conditions will have to be fulfilled then. For instance, governments should finally take their responsibility. The world should really choose now for this family agriculture and against an agro-industrial agriculture which leaves no place for farmers. That is the real green revolution. There is a need for a global agriculture policy whereby countries and

regions have the right to install such agriculture and invest in it. Even if the present world conjuncture, which is rediscovering the importance of agriculture, is favourable, such does not come by itself. After tens of years of neglect in many countries, certainly in Africa, governments and communities should urgently liberate resources for a productive agriculture.

For now it is not the number one problem, however there remains a need for stability of prices and viable minimum prices in agriculture. Governments should be aware again that the market, and certainly the world market, doesn't work as well for food as it does for cars or mobile phones. That is because prices fluctuate too much and are usually too low. And it is why the market needs to be strengthened. Measures should be taken or mechanisms installed to ensure viable prices and to guide food supplies, as also agricultural yields can strongly differ from one harvest to another.

For a good economical development and for sustainability, the operation of local and regional market deserves to get priority above the world market.

In other words, governments should be able to have food sovereignty, the right to take their agriculture in their own hands, instead of ever further liberalizing their agriculture and food production and handing them down to the world market. Do not believe that this will pull a brake on economical development, quite the contrary. Because this is exactly what all rich countries and the European Union always have done, it is also what China has done.

If they are intelligent, the governments will realize that no policy can yield results unless it includes consultation and full cooperation with farmers and their organizations.

### **A sustainable chain, from farmer to supermarket**

Food is not just being grown, it also has to be processed and sold. That is not merely a matter for farmers; it is a long economical chain. We have seen that governments have a part to play. And of course, the enterprises also have a crucial responsibility, merchants as well as the processing industry and major distributors. If they want to be truly socially responsible entrepreneurs, they obviously will have to be financially beneficial. But just as well will they have to assist in watching over a socially and ecologically sustainable agriculture. It is essential that the farmers, who are at the front of the chain, producing the food, get their rightful place. They have to watch out that farmers get paid for their work and can farm under good circumstances. Front runners are already showing the way. Alpro for instance, a company from the Vandemoortele group, is signing long term agreements with soybean farmers. Moreover, Alpro supports them in their production process and takes care of a compensation if the harvest does not succeed. Unilever in Indonesia, for example, pays a number of small-scale farmers a higher price than the market price. This is for a good reason, because the company is in urgent need of more and better soybeans, an ingredient of its successful sweet sauce Kecap Bango. Therefore, Unilever buys directly from the farmers in order to improve quality, increase production and ensure supply. The farmers also benefit: as there are no more intermediaries, they obtain a price which is between ten and fifteen percent higher. Also, they obtain a better spot in the production chain.

We are not simple-minded. Of course these companies also want to continue to make profit. However, if they can make a profit and at the same time give the farmers a spot under the sun, we are on the right track.

### **Or eat or fight climate change, a false contrast**

In recent years, the conviction has grown that energy crops, the so-called biofuels, are needed to fight climate change. It is already clear that very huge quantities of food are being converted into fuel for our cars. Or have food for everyone, or fight global warming; or have food now, or safeguard the planet for future generations; this dilemma seems to be what we get on our plates nowadays.

However, even in this case, the solution is simple. There is no dilemma, it is a false contrast. Because on the one hand, the climate friendliness of the present production of energy crops – the first generation – is very low. It destroys among other things the rainforests in Brazil and Indonesia and thus liberates enormous quantities of greenhouse gases. On the other hand, our sustainable family

farming is running to our assistance, taking care of climate cooling as it is much more CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral than industrial agriculture.

So we have to stop organizing a competition between food and energy crops. The absolute priority today is food, not energy. So pull out the plug of the biofuel industry, better today than tomorrow. With a food supply for 40 days, there is no more time to postpone this choice.

In the second place, we must look very critically at all the animal food that is being transported around the globe. To produce ever more meat requires a multiple of grains that are no longer available for humans to eat, and its production is often not very environment-friendly. That too causes a lot of rainforest to succumb.

### **Good governance makes a big difference**

Take South Korea or Taiwan, both rich countries these days. Then take Congo or Zambia, both poverty-stricken. How is it that these last two only fifty years ago were wealthier than the first two? Look for the differences, it is important to know. Well then, South Korea and Taiwan have opted for a mainly family and productive agriculture focused on its own needs. This has done them no harm, as their agriculture has given them the opportunity to build up their industry. How different it has been in so many other countries, especially in Africa! Even with only six percent of the labour force being farmers, industrial country South Korea is still spending 13 percent of government money for agriculture. The governments of Cameroun, Burundi or Soudan, where seventy to ninety percent of the inhabitants are active in agriculture, good for nearly half of the national income, less than two percent of their money is spent in this important economical sector.

No drawing is needed to explain this. In these agricultural societies, the governments do not bother about farmers. More than once, also a clash of interests is involved. Many politicians or their families earn their huge incomes because they have interests in export agriculture or because they control rice or another food crop from abroad. That is why they don't defend the interests of the farmers.

The African countries have now decided, in the declaration of Maputo, to invest ten percent of their public resources in agriculture. If they really do so, that would be good, but still far too little. Will this put a mortgage on their industrialization? No, it won't, quite the contrary.

### **A very urgent 'to do' list**

Food commotion is quickly rising, in rural areas and even more in the cities. How would you be if you were hungry?

Everything mentioned above is urgent now, but what is most urgent? A list, in order not to forget. Do not hesitate, not even a second, liberate money for the World Food Programme of the United Nations.

Avoid all mistakes made previously. When the World Food Programme and other food support initiatives buy food, they have to do so locally and regionally in the first place. That way, they offer the farmers locally or in the larger area a better income and stimulate them towards higher production. Finally, take agriculture and food production away from the World Trade Organization and out of the free trade agreements that, amongst others, Europe and the United States are signing. Do so because food is not a merchandise like all the others.

Therefore, hand over the torch to the Food and Agriculture Organization; give them a mandate to take care of sustainable agriculture in the world.

Finally, for all the rich countries, for the international financial institutions and aid organizations, open up your agriculture budgets in international cooperation.

**Jan Aertsen**  
**Director Vredeseilanden**  
**15/04/08**

## ***Background information***

Barrez Dirk, Koe 80 heeft een probleem. Boer, consument, agro-industrie en grootdistributie, EPO i.s.m. Vredeseilanden e.a., 2007, 254 p.

[www.vredeseilanden.be](http://www.vredeseilanden.be)

[www.pala.be](http://www.pala.be)

Altieri Miguel en Nicholls Clara, Agroecology And The Search For A Truly Sustainable Agriculture, University of California, Berkeley, 2005, 291 p., zie o.a. p.150-151

<http://www.agroeco.org/doc/agroecology-engl-PNUMA.pdf>

FAO, Low-Income Food-Deficit Countries' food situation overview, april 2008

<http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/ai465e/ai465e07.htm>

DFID, Heath John, 2005 agriculture policy: an interim evaluation, 2007, 70 p., zie o.a. p.68

<http://www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/performance/files/ev672.pdf>

Clay Jason e.a., Exploring The Links Between International Business And Poverty Reduction: A Case Study Of Unilever In Indonesia, Oxfam GB, Novib Oxfam Netherlands & Unilever, 2005, 67 p.

<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/trade/downloads/unilever.pdf>