

FARMERS SAVE THE WORLD

The role of governments and good rule

We know that small scale farmers can provide the whole world with food. We also know they're more capable of doing so than the agro-industry. Given the necessary means small scale farmers are considerably more productive. In the first place they can provide food for the countryside and for the cities. Again and again they are proven to be the irreplaceable cornerstone for both a prosperous countryside and prosperous cities. In this they are remarkably more effective than the agro-industry and far more ecological.

If this is what we all want, governments will have to take their responsibility, eventually.

We are now at the point that the world has to choose for sustainable small agriculture and against agro-industrial agriculture, which leaves no place for the farmer. This is the real green revolution.

What we need now is an overall agriculture policy which allows countries and regions to establish, maintain and invest in small scale farming. The current world climate has rediscovered the importance of agriculture and is favourable towards this kind of agriculture. However, things will not change automatically. After decades of neglect in many countries, especially in Africa, governments and societies will have to free means for a productive agriculture urgently. In other words, another agricultural policy is needed, globally, regionally and nationally.

Loss-loss situation

The past decades agriculture and food production have been neglected in many countries and have been handed over to the world market. That is what we do if we leave agriculture in care of the World Trade Organization.

Many small scale farmers have become (been made) so poor that they no longer can invest in their own production. If over a couple of decades the prices of their products have dropped to a third, sometimes even a sixth of what they used to be, farmers already end up with less income for that reason only. And there is also erosion, drought or shortage of seeds, manure, draught animals and tools. These also decrease their produce, thus cutting back their income. It can not be repeated enough. Over a billion of poor farmers don't even have a draught animal, let alone a tractor. They often don't own the land. Those who still believe that the solution is to be found in a better competition on the world market, are fools. You cannot have these farmers compete with the tens of millions of farmers who have the best lands, own a tractor and other machinery, have access to the best seeds, manure, credit, even financial support and market protection. All things these poor farmers do not have. It is like a soccer match played between your own village team and the famous Milan soccer team. This is not a fair match!

Don't think that the recent increase in prices could compensate for this. Many farmers have become so little productive that they themselves have to buy food!

The conclusion is obvious. The way we let the world economy function, undermines the production of agriculture, undermines the country side, creates poverty and even hunger! This bad form of globalization impoverishes many countries and makes the gap between rich and poor wider. It destroys their environment and ruins their lives, it impairs development and prosperity, chases people away from their land and forces them to migrate.

One and a half billion of impoverished farmers and their families have ended up in slums where they become victims of this global misgovernment for the second time. The first time was when they had to leave their land, now – because of the high prices – they can no longer afford to buy food! Isn't it ironical that the reason for this is that these farmers have been denied the means and the chances to produce enough food?

Our world – and especially the farmers and the poor people in the cities – have been caught in a downward spin, in a loss-loss situation.

Liberalization gets a bitter taste

The past decades' call for liberalization of agricultural markets – export cheap food! – has developed a bitter taste. First of all that food is no longer cheap and secondly because of bad harvests and food shortage, a number of traditional exporting countries chose not to export their food produce but keep it for themselves. Who could blame them? Even in the past it was not very wise to choose for Asian rice in e.g. West-African countries. The imported products may be cheaper, but in the end they will paralyse the local agriculture. Hundreds of thousands of local farmers will lose their jobs without any prospect of another decent job in their own country. There is hardly any industry or other places to work. How will you pay for the import? It always was a hazardous question, and with prices rising; it is even more so nowadays. And there is another more alarming question to be asked: where will you buy this rice?

This is what all those scholars of the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and all those countries favouring free agriculture trade will have to explain: why is it better that countries become dependent of other countries instead of producing their own food?

Focus on worldwide misgovernment

How could it get that far? How could we be so stupid? Let's have a look at how the WTO operates. Of course, trade is given absolute priority. This approach is based on previous experiences getting rid of all kinds of obstacles for trading industrial products. Representatives of smaller countries often get lost in this unequal technical-judicial battle between small and big countries. But above all, that is how farming got entangled in this technical trade debate that narrows down every public debate in an irresponsible way. Important goals such as development or sustainable economy don't even get a chance.

To sugarcoat this pill, they perform the magic trick known as "aid for trade". We are going to help poor countries to participate in the game of international trade. Especially when agriculture is involved this is merely eyewash. It does not solve anything at all, because in this way you favour the wrong kind of trade, i.e. export oriented agriculture. Whereas solutions should come from productive small scale agriculture which aims at feeding the local and regional people. In the best scenario, the world market can only play a supporting role in this story.

When some developing countries prefer not to play along, the dominant countries have ways to persuade them. The consent of some governments can be bought with aid or by threatening them to reduce or even stop aid. "Blackmail" is a word that comes to mind.

And when in spite of all these means of persuasion an agreement can not be reached there is another alternative within the World Trade Organization. Big countries such as the US will resort to so-called bilateral trade agreements with separate countries. An institution as the European Union will seek to put up Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with groups of countries of the Caribbean, Africa or

the Pacific (the so-called ACP-countries). That is what the EU wants with countries from Central America and the Andes. What they really want is, to break open these countries' economy and agriculture for the international market to the disadvantage of their local and regional markets.

About failing national governments

Countries all over the world have to safeguard the prosperity and well being of their citizens. They have the enormous responsibility to make sure that their small scale farming is maintained. For this kind of farming can not only feed their population, it is also a strong basis for a sound economy. It is a shame that most governments don't take their responsibility towards their citizens. Whether it is within the World Trade Organization against other international institutions or against big economic powers such as the US or the EU, they simply foresake their duty to defend their small scale farmers.

The strongest advocates of a free world market are of course the main exporters of agricultural produce, such as Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chili, Pakistan, Thailand and South-Africa. We find them in the so-called Cairns Group and in the G20. China and India belong to the G20 as well.

Very dubious and disturbing on the stage of international trade is the role of agro-industrial exporting countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, South-Africa and India as well. They also have a very important small scale agriculture which plays a crucial part in their own sustainable development. Yet, they defend - in the WTO and elsewhere - a policy which is totally opposite. Together with other exporters they oppose to any form of government interference. They see it as a disturbance on the world market. They aim at breaking open the markets of the US and the EU. If they have free play the result will be a non-sustainable agriculture that will threaten the environment and exclude most farmers in the world, many of them within their own countries.

Needed urgently: priority to local and regional agriculture

"WTO out of agriculture"

It is a slogan that can be heard on many demonstrations against the WTO. It is what farmer organizations wish for, all over the world - North, South, East and West.

It is more than just a slogan, it is a reality. Because today it is obvious what is necessary for a sustainable agriculture, a productive agriculture which forms the basis of a good economical development with a fair division of income among as many farmers as possible, providing them with a good life. An agriculture with respect for the environment. That is why we need small scale farming and that is why we should chose the local and regional markets over the world market. That is what small scale agriculture is good at.

Food sovereignty: no obstacle to economical development, on the contrary.

To be able to do so, governments have to possess the inviolable right of food sovereignty. That is the right to control their agriculture and food production themselves instead of further liberalizing and surrendering it to the world market.

Don't believe that this impairs economic development. On the contrary, this is precisely what all rich countries and the EU have always done. That is what China has done.

At this moment we may live under the impression that this is not a major problem but there is a big need for price stability and minimum prices in agriculture. Governments have to realise that the market and especially the world market doesn't work as well for food products as it does for cars and mobile phones. Prices will fluctuate and will end up too low. That is why the market needs reinforcement; you have to take measures and install mechanisms to ensure minimum prices and control food supplies. Don't forget that the production of food depends on the success of the harvest. It is hard to understand that we have to keep oil supplies but do not keep food supplies. Has food become less important than oil?

Any good news?

Yes there is good news. When it comes to the EPAs, half of the 79 ACP-countries did not even sign an interim agreement with the EU. They realise that these agreements hold serious risks for their own economy and agriculture. That is a good start.

The African countries united in their African Union have come to a hope giving position on the EPAs. They only want to proceed under very strict conditions. One of them being the chance to reinforce their regional markets.

Good government makes the difference

It is obvious that the current global economy is neither good for farmers, nor for poor countries. It is strange that so many countries do not respect their farmers and do not invest enough in agriculture. That is why these countries can not provide in their own demand for food and other agricultural products. Strange also that many countries just export the result of the hard labour on the land and undertake no effort whatsoever to escape from this sad situation. They don't keep the surplus value within their country. Their economies do not process the agricultural produce themselves, they don't stock their own factories. Up till today, their farmers deliver the worst paid raw produce for the world economy.

It is true, they are victims of the dogma that even poor countries can't protect their developing industries. They immediately have to operate on an unlimited free world market. This makes it very hard and actually impossible for them to build up some prosperity. It is a shame that those who are in charge, especially the economic strong countries and our leading global controlling devices such as the WTO do not want to recognize what tragedy this is.

It should be different. West-Africans could process their own cotton in their own textile factories. In many countries and regions of Central and South America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia agriculture could be linked to a food – and processing industry which works for the local and regional market. A productive countryside could be a powerful engine for a sustainable, economic development. It is sad that these societies do not invest in the development of industry and services which could provide more prosperity.

It could be different. Take for instance South Korea or Taiwan, both rich countries now. Take Congo or Zambia, both poor. How is it possible that only 50 years ago the two latter countries were more prosperous than the two first ones? It is important to know what the differences are. South Korea and Taiwan have both chosen mainly small scale and productive agriculture, based on their own needs. That didn't do them any harm. Their agriculture enabled them to develop industry. It is important enough to repeat this in another way. All rich countries have always protected their agriculture, even if that meant they had to pay higher prices for their food. And that did not prevent them from being rich. We have to recognize again that rich countries make their protected agriculture more productive. This freed money and workforce which could be used to develop their industry and their prosperity. These are choices which have to be made and realized by societies and governments. The market is incapable of doing this on its own.

Things went very differently in so many other countries, especially in Africa. In South Korea, not more than 6 percent of the working people are farmers. Yet this industrialized country invests 13% of government money in agriculture. India spends only 16% for 60 % of the population, China 7,2 % for 45 %. The governments of Cameroon, Burundi, Sudan spend less than 2 % of their money in agriculture. And yet, 70 to 90 % of the people work in this sector and produce almost half of these countries' national income,

It should be obvious. Especially the governments of African agricultural societies but also Indonesia or Columbia leave their farmers in the cold. There is no efficient agricultural or social economic policy. They have neglected agriculture and the countryside allowing this mess to pile up in the expanding cities.

Very often it is about conflicting interests. Many politicians or their families get their wealthy income out of the export of agricultural products and/or their control over the import of rice or other food. That is one of the reasons why they don't defend the interests of the local farmers. Another reason is the fact that farmers are fleeing from the countryside towards the already overcrowded cities. High food prices as a result of the neglected agriculture may lead to anger of the capital's inhabitants. Politicians feel threatened by this, whereas the farmers are harmless to them. Instead of confronting the politicians with their demands, they starve in silence on the countryside.

The situation is changing gradually

Yet, there are signs that the world is changing. In the Maputo Declaration, African countries decided to invest 10% of public money in agriculture.

Two side notes:

First of all, this is not bad, provided they really do so. Too many statements have never been put into practice. Secondly, 10 % is not enough! Some people will think that this investment will put a mortgage on these countries' industrialization. But it will not, on the contrary!

Burkina Faso succeeds in investing over 17 % of its government budget in agriculture. There is no reason why other African countries could not do at least the same.

What can national governments do? What more than guaranteeing economical viable prices and food supplies. Look into the results of the many thousands of researches and studies made over the past decades, and over and over again you will find the same answer. First of all countries must have a healthy land policy so that many small scale farmers have sufficient land. It is so obvious that it shouldn't even be mentioned. Yet, it can not be stressed enough. High food prices make agriculture

attractive again to investors from all over the world, seeking maximum gain and if they put their money into agro industry, small scale farmers will lose even more land to the large scale agro-industry.

If they think logically, governments know what is expected from them. Their role is to safeguard the access of small scale farmers to funds so that they can invest and do their jobs more efficiently, producing more and thus realising higher profits.

But these farmers do not only need money, they also need good seeds, manure, herbicides and pesticides. The availability of these so-called "inputs" has to be guaranteed. It is not important who takes care of small scale agriculture, whether it is the government, the private sector or farmer cooperations. If governments want their small scale farming to be efficient and sustainable they will have to invest in research and education. Sufficient information about sustainable, agro-ecological agriculture is of major importance. Unfortunately this is often overlooked, nowadays.

At harvest time other needs will appear: good infrastructure to get the agricultural products to the local and regional markets, roads of course, but also other means of transport, stocking capacity, a good organization of the market, useful market information over the radio, mobile phone, the internet or whatever. What a good market policy means, will have to be analysed carefully. Shall we allow big international supermarkets into the country or shall we give priority to our local shopkeepers? Also how agricultural products can be processed is something that should be considered. It is a good thing to set up a food processing industry to supply the local market. In this way the food chains will add to the income of many local people. This will bring along more prosperity and well being for the community.

If governments are smart they will realize that no policy whatsoever will be successful if it isn't negotiated with the farmers and their organizations.

A big responsibility

The question asked to governments worldwide, locally as well as globally, is obvious. Will they keep up their support to global agro-industry and large scale distribution? Or will they give priority to mainly local and regional small scale agriculture, thus giving new opportunities to a couple of billions of people all over the world. Not only will these people receive a fair price for their work, but the production, processing and distribution of their products will provide them with a decent income.

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