

## **SOCIETY AT WORK**

### **Citizen, consumer, organized society and farmer**

*A productive and modern family agriculture focused primarily at stocking the local and regional markets can nourish everyone. But consumers and society will have to close the gap that now separates them from this type of family agriculture.*

#### **Citizen versus consumer**

When you ask people if they are prepared to support sustainable agriculture when purchasing their food and give farmers a correct price, they will certainly agree. But what if we look closer to their shopping habits? Chances are we, as customers, prefer the cheapest discount product, a result of almost unbearable pressure on the prices food companies and farmers receive for their goods. Reality tells us there is a great gap between our intentions and our consumption. Most people are foremost consumers and choose the cheapest product in the supermarket; the product farmers make least profit on and adds least to the idea of sustainable agriculture.

At the end of the food chain, however long or short it may be, you find the ones who eat or the ones who consume what agriculture produces. Usually we call them 'consumers'. They push away the clients. Farmers who sell directly, will still refer to them as clients. The client's role is limited to going to the supermarket, shop, market or farm; choosing from the selection,; paying and preferably consuming happily.

#### **The responsibility of the citizen-consumers**

But as citizen-consumers and society we have a responsibility towards farmers and the countryside. We can and have to do more to encourage sustainable food chains and bridge the gap with the family agriculture that produces mainly for the local market. It is for our own good. Everyone who argues that food prices are already high, should realize that most farmers in our world were unable to live from their efforts for decades because of food prices being too low. They have a right to earn a living, just as everyone else. But even with the recently augmented prices (due to more expensive oil, fermenting and anti-insect procedures) little finds its way to them: the gains never go further than the distribution and supermarket chains who have enlarged their margins. Very often even we as a customer benefit from the purchasing power of the supermarket. Compare the prices of eggs, milk, chicken and porc to the prices 40 years ago. Even taking into account inflation, prices are still very low. And still the consumer is better off in the service and packing department.

However, not always are consumers better off. Sometimes they do lose, just as the farmers, when they cannot make sufficient stand on the food market. Two examples. In 2000 farmers in the USA make 20% less on what they are growing than in 1970. But the consumers do not benefit from this. On the contrary, for them it is a reverse evolution: they are paying approximately 35% more. So it's not because the slogan 'The consumer is the true winner of free agriculture' sounds good that it is true.

For coffee this is even more striking. As of the mid 90's the world is relying entirely on the free market place. Ten years later the turnover of the consumer sales of coffee have doubled whereas the income of the farmers has halved. Those who grow coffee have sustained heavy losses, but the result is invisible in the shops. The multinationals who handle and retail coffee pay less to the farmers on one end of the spectrum and make customers at the other end pay more. Even if the mechanism seems hard to explain, the profit is clear.

Another element that makes it difficult to bring consumers and farmers together is the industrial lifestyle of most consumers. To buy vegetables, fruit, potatoes, meat, bread, condiments and what else just to eat at home is no longer the rule. Home cooking isn't either. As a consumer, a lot of people choose for fast food, deep frozen meals and ready-to-eat dishes who do not favor the short food chain nor the family based, sustainable agriculture. Others eat whatever the canteens of their company, school or nursing house provide. These circuits grow fast but have nothing to do with sustainable agriculture.

The time has come to act! Consumers have a key role to fulfill to raise and support a sustainable agriculture.

## **Sustainable shopping in the supermarket**

Whoever buys cereal yoghurt in the supermarket or a ready made meal, no longer realizes how many chains are passed before his purchase: farmers, transport companies, gross traders, food industry, supermarkets... The food chain is long. Finding the fruits of sustainable agriculture in the ordinary stores and supermarkets is not always easy. Sometimes they are well hidden, barely there or unavailable. Too bad most people still resort to these places for their every day groceries.

Fortunately, if you look closer, you can notice a fast change. Even at first sight supermarket chains develop a wide range of 'green', 'eco' or 'sustainable' initiatives.

### ***Local produce***

Local produces are a rapidly growing share in most supermarkets. Local produce are those products that originate from the same area as where they are sold. Try it out for yourself when you walk along the aisles of the supermarket: where do these strawberries, tomatoes or asparagus come from? Were they grown close by or at distances of several hundreds or thousand miles? Damme cheese, Chimay beer, locally grown chicory or Elstar apples... there's a wide choice. In some countries, these local products even get a special place and unique promotions at the supermarket.

These local products encourage a form of sustainability. They help safeguarding the culinary or cultural heritage. Ecologically speaking, they often rate better as well. The distance from farmer to consumer is smaller so the 'food kilometers' are limited. Especially when one can limit energy consuming transport by lorry or plane, the ecological footprint diminishes. At the same time never hurting the producers or the local economy as more of the economical added value remains local and provides employment. Buying a local product is a token of appreciation for the farmer and can translate into a more correct price. Do not get confused: local products are not only hand made or come from small scaled companies in order to be sustainable.

### ***Biological products***

It's in the interest of the supermarkets to follow trends. Hence biological products surface in most shops. In former years, the bio industry was an economic freak, out of reach from the main chains. But at a certain moment a supermarket will spot profits to be gained and enlarges its range. Other supermarkets follow. In The Netherlands, Albert Heijn offers AH Biologisch, a homebrand of biological products. In Belgium Delhaize was the first to launch biological products in 1985 and had its own brand by 1989. They stress their collaboration with the producers who are often small and locally operating.

Colruyt started in 1991, and based its Green Line range. The company's own biological products are called Bio-Time. Colruyt puts an emphasis on the ecological profit of biological items. Low price is key for them, even when it comes to biological.

The rise of biological items is certainly good for the environment. Biological agriculture is eco-friendly and supports ecologically sustainable agriculture. But we need to finetune this. Even when it comes to bio-produce, major agricultural industries are at work. A lot of the biological products are still shipped in from other countries or even continents.

Another misunderstanding needs to be cleared out. It is not because supermarkets will sell biological products that the farmers who produce these are better off than their non-biological colleagues. The buyers of the food industry will still use all their power to lower prices.

### ***Fair Trade***

A cup of coffee or tea, bananas,... we won't refuse them. But growing bananas in a hothouse is not a very sustainable solution. If we want those products, it is better to look for them on the Fair Trade market.

In this Fair Trade with products from third world countries, we find the same evolution which we found with the biological products. They too have found their way into the ordinary supermarket, reaching from a very limited selection to a wide range. Coffee and bananas are most known and take the largest market share. The financial situation in the Fair Trade is at least better for the farmers involved. Fair Trade guarantees the producers an honest price, sufficient to maintain a living. This principle is withheld, even in the supermarket. Thus, when products reach farther than the narrow circuit of Fair Trade shops, this is beneficiary for the farmers. A higher turnover means higher profits as well.

Fair Trade aims at keeping the economical chain as short as possible by buying directly and cutting out the middle men. Elongating the chain by selling through supermarkets is accounted for by the raise in turnover. But there is a certain risk involved: producers can become too dependent on the big chains. Fair Trade has a difficult balance to maintain between the major market players and the autonomous growth of its own distribution chains.

As Fair Trade is a fast growing market, the traditional food suppliers have created their own Fair Trade-like initiatives: UTZ Kapeh, Rainforest Alliance, Efico or Coffee Alliance. The traditional companies battle for the consumer arguing that they too mean well, making it hard for the original Fair Trade companies. Their own interpretation of all that is Fair Trade in order to make a difference with the big chains is a major challenge for the original Fair Trade movement.

At the same time, the discussion on what is considered Fair Trade grows. Does it just entail the trade between North and South? Between poor and rich countries? Or is Fair Trade also possible in the South? Or in the North? Can European farmers earn a Fair Trade label?

### ***Label festival***

As the long food chain becomes more sustainable, we see a great number of labels rise, from Label Rouge poultry over 'bio' to supermarket brands. Ever more products are marketed with new labels indicating they are sustainable, biological, socially correct, locally produced, Fair Trade... They are supposed to help the consumer in picking a sustainable choice, beneficial for farmer and environment.

Sometimes this works well. Integrated fruit produce uses only a fraction of pesticides compared to earlier years, has conquered the market and has become the Belgian standard.

There are two downsides to the raise of these labels. In the early days, these labels led to an increase in income for the farmers, thus compensating for the extra investments necessary for quality checks etc... But when labels become a general tendency, as for example in the integrated fruit produce, the market goes back to its old ways, forgetting the extra costs. All these extra efforts do no longer translate into a better price. The actual income does not rise or even lowers. No one can regret labels leading to a more ecologically sustainable agriculture but it is still to be concluded what the effects are socially and economically. In other words: will farmers be able to survive off them?

Second downside: so many labels render most consumers very confused. Moreover, they can be very unclear, some good ones that started early never make it to the mainstream, others are not good enough and unfortunately there is a lot of clutter which helps neither the farmer nor the consumer.

There is an urgent need for one global code that translates the complex idea of sustainability into codes from A to F. This is the responsibility of the government. A clear label with distinctions combined with a diagram showing in which areas a product scores: is it ecological? Are workers' rights respected? Is there a minimum price guaranteed for the farmer? At the moment the task force agriculture of the VODO (Flemish discussionboard for sustainable development) and Flemish Minister of Agriculture Kris Peeters are negotiating this. We will finally find an answer to prevailing questions such as: Should we buy biological beans from Kenia? Fair Trade wine from Chili? The answer will probably be 'yes' to the wine, 'no' to the beans.

But what to do with the first downside? Who will pay? A fair and honest price should still be accounted for in the sales price at the long last.

### ***Beware of promotions***

Don't get this wrong! Of course they are very alluring but as a consumer, one should beware. Behind that bargain price, a farmer is hidden, forced to produce great quantities at minimal prices. So remember the price of a bargain next time you see one.

### ***Eat less meat***

Before it arrives on our plate, meat consumes a great deal of soil and grains. If all people would eat the same amount of meat as the average Belgian, the earth could not produce sufficient meat for everyone. Eating great quantities of meat increases drastically our ecological footprint, raising over what would be our fair share of what the earth produces. Eating less meat is thus advisable, even more: a duty! So let's all embrace the idea of 'Thursdays Veggie days' and have at least one meatless day a week.

## **Let the short chain blossom**

As consumers we have other means at our disposal apart from making a sustainable choice when buying food at the supermarket. We can also play a vital part in the short food chain between consumers and farmers. At times, consumers will even take the lead in this process!

### ***Buying at the farm***

As consumers, looking for tasty, sustainable products, we can opt to buy our food directly from the farmer.

In Flanders, people find their way to farmers who sell their products at their farm. Some even gain local popularity: de Dobbelhoeve, Catharinadal, het Bioschuurke, 't Dischhof. What we buy there can originate from ordinary agriculture or from biological source. But we are certain it is locally produced.

### ***Of ordinary markets, farmer markets and bio-markets***

Our farmers can also be found at farmer markets and bio-markets where they serve the customers themselves. Especially in the area of Ghent and 'Het Pajottenland' you may run into a weekly farmer market. In Antwerp there is a monthly biomarket and in Heist-op-den-Berg even a weekly one. Of course lots of farmers also make their way to the regular markets, both those with an ordinary agricultural background and a more sustainable one. Especially in Bruges this is striking.

Lets have a look at Brazil

'Previously, we would work from morning until night without earning sufficiently.' Rosangela tells us while she is stirring the skimmed milk. 'You cannot understand how much this means to us!' her husband Clairton adds while he's selling their home made cheese at the local cooperative market of Erechim in the South of Brazil. 'When a crisis hits the market or the prices of weath raise in the US, it no longer affects us. Our cows produce milk, we make cheese and sell it ourselves. We have local customers and that's enough!'

Valdecir Balen, the father of Clairton states: 'Our main victory is this market at Erechim. As small famers we could not survive solely on weath. We swapped to fruit and vegetables and now we sell straight to the consumer and our lives have improved. Young people no longer feel they have to leave the country side.'

### ***Vegetable subscriptions***

Especially in Eastern Flanders lots of people subscribe to a weekly serving of biologically grown vegetables. They come from companies such as De Wassende Maan, de Zonnekouter en De Kollebloem. The consumers buy their stock of vegetables directly from the farmer. Each week, they can be fetched each week at a pick up point: a store, a world shop or even someone's garage. Subscriptions are made for a fixed period of, for instance, 3 months.

### ***A viable price***

Whether it's a Brazilian cooperative market and shop, de European farm sale, vegetable subscriptions or farm shops, milk dispensers in Senegal, juice sales or whatever farmer initiative around the world, they have a lot in common. By means of the direct relation between farmer and consumer farmers can earn a viable living. The price covers their costs and lets them live correctly. Just because the intermediary chains are cut out, which usually live on the work of the farmers, consumers do not pay more than elsewhere. And farmers make a lot more. They do have to work harder but their work pays off. Price differences often result from quality differences. Especially important in the short chain is that the farmer can be guaranteed a certain amount of sales. The produce needed can be deducted from what he usually sells at the market or through the subscriptions.

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

Governments can promote these direct collaborations between farmers and consumers. And they should avoid inappropriate or too strict regulations that can hinder or even prevent the growth of the short chain.

### **More active consumers**

As a consumer we can get even more involved by organizing vegetables subscriptions, by joining a food team or assisting a food cooperative.

### ***Food teams***

Food teams first came to life in 1996. Vredeseilanden, Wervel and Elcker-Ik Leuven took this initiative to encourage sustainable growth by forging relations between farmers and consumers. Consumers team up in groups of ten to twenty, usually families. Together they order their groceries and choose from a wide selection of vegetables, fruit, dairy, often meat, bread and other wheat products. Most of the products come from local produce. This does not mean they live around the corner but more often in the surroundings of the food team. The producers deliver their goods to a local point, very often the home of a team member. The rest of the team then organizes the further distribution. Food teams require quite some effort from their members when it comes to ordering, distributing and paying the goods. Not everyone has enough time or motivation which results in quite some drop-off. Finding and keeping an appropriate storage place is not always simple.

Quite striking is the fact that lots of teams also organize other activities, swap recipes, host parties or drinks, visit the local farmers and keep each other updated on similar activities. Meanwhile the small movement of food teams gathers about 100 groups and a total of 1.800 families.

Regional differences are striking. In Eastern Brabant, especially Leuven, and in Limburg you will find the most food teams. Other provinces have a lot less. In Western Brabant, the concept is unknown, farmer markets and farm shops abound there.

It is too early to gauge what the potential of food teams can be. The effort required and the practicalities surpass the ease of going to the supermarket. Some concepts are less labor demanding.

### ***Voisins de Paniers***

In Brittany, a consumer society took a similar initiative: Voisins de Paniers. The responsible, Julie Depetitpré, explains in brief: 'Locally, we do not have markets or major cities but there are a lot of farmers. A few people got together as consumers with the local farmers. We now have a main depot where baskets leave to 4 smaller depots. After two years we have 200 members and deliver about 80 baskets a month. About 50 produces work collaborate with us. We guarantee them a correct price for their efforts and that works well. We are adding new depots and growing. Members order weekly, even over the internet.

The members of Voisins de Paniers are motivated, as you can tell from their conversations. Luc Baillaigeau for instance tells us: 'I'm against supermarkets. I find everything I need here because you now the produces, you know how they grow their goods, it is good food and it's not expensive. Sometimes a product will be cheaper in the supermarket but the quality is less. Here, I know I'll get good quality goods for an honest price. And you know where the money is going, at least not into the wallet of some major company CEO.'

Someone has another argument: 'By supporting local agriculture you can avoid traffic through France and the whole of Europe.'

Anne Héry is a teacher. She knows the farmers and knows she can track their approach. 'This way you stimulate local products. I prefer to engage people I know. And you can trace their produce. This is safe food.' Her conviction has a political side too: 'The citizens have to take matters into their own hands and help develop this alternative for supermarkets. Politics will not regulate the balance between both systems. Voisins de Paniers is a whole lot more democratic. The farmers produce good products and with our money we can reward them for their efforts.'

### ***Community supported agriculture***

Very popular in the United States is 'community supported agriculture'. In this concept, a number of customers sign a deal with 'their' farmer. This entitles them to a share of the crops, usually vegetables. Sometimes the customers pick their own crops, sometimes they do even more. In the US the concept grew from about 50 in 1990 to over 1.000. At least 100.000 families are involved. The idea of 'community supported agriculture' has reached Europe as well. 't Open Veld in Heverlee (Leuven) has about a hundred members.

### ***Cooperatives of farmers and consumers***

Sometimes farmers and consumers get together in one organization. Let's return to Brazil with Rosângela and Clairton who meet their customers not only at the market of Erechim. The shop of the cooperative Nossa Terra sells their cheese every day. Do not imagine a small store, it's more like a small supermarket. You will find almost anything, too much to list here. The responsible of the cooperative, Marlene Pasquale, explains: 'Our cooperative of family based farmers and consumers Nossa Terra was established in 2001. For some of the family-based processing companies this is their most important selling point. The cooperative has about 240 members, consumers and farmers. We put together this chain so consumers from the city could express their opinion about the quality of the food offered and their preferences.'

A few Belgian farmers are looking in the same direction. In the centre of Brussels Boeregoed-Côte Soleil opened for the second time at the end of May 2007. The first trail was no success but one learns from his mistakes. In their shop, the farmers of the cooperative Boeregoed sell their local, farm and biological products from Het Pajottenland to the Brussels public. Clients are invited to participate in the cooperative. The future will show if this will work.

Online ordering at the farm is possible as well, for instance at Hartenboer, an association used by farmers in Hageland and Limburg to sell their goods.

### ***Farmers and world shops: partners?***

Some world shops or other fair trade initiatives do not just connect with farmers in the South. They also search to connect with local, family based agriculture. For instance, they take a place in the short chain between regional farmers and consumers who pick up their goods at the world shop. They function as a pick up point for vegetable subscriptions or societies of farmers. Local farmers and world shops are natural partners. Working together could make it easier for the consumer to have access to a wider range from fair trade products from the South to very diverse products from family based farmers. Hence irregular consumers can become regulars.

## **The Short chain as a leverage for a sustainable longer chain**

The fact a short chain emerges, signals that farmers are having a hard time and consumers are making choices: they can support the family farmer by providing the straight up with a better income and more reliability. Their choice to go straight to the farmer makes a major difference. The short chain therefore is a call to action to consumers to take up responsibility.

A second very important role of the short chain is making the long chain more sustainable. Successful short chains can put economic pressure on the food industry and the distribution companies. When they reach more consumers and gain in force, the short chain becomes a valuable alternative and a competitor. Even in relatively small niches where they reach economically interesting consumers, their power is felt. Confronted by this economic pressure supermarkets are obliged to respond and make their own long chain more sustainable. It looks like a correct way of reasoning but is it?

Let's have a look at what happens on site. We have seen supermarkets importing biological products, local products, fair trade and give them all sorts of labels. One supermarket may be faster at this than another, or do it in another way. The diversity is great and one cannot be sure what their prime motivation is. Is it the short chain? Is it the consumer who's being critical? Is it society demanding more responsibility? Is it the social movement of ethical entrepreneurship? Do stakeholders play a role? It is always a merger of several factors and it depends greatly from company to company what will determine the course that is chosen. But at least there is progress! Whoever buys in the long chain of supermarkets has a varied offer and can make a choice to benefit farmers.

## **Society at work**

Wherever we're working in our society, we can support family agriculture. We can help develop things in our community: local governments, schools, companies, bars and restaurants, hospitals, cultural grounds, ... can all impact the short food chain and sustainable produce.

The success of the Fair Trade communities can serve as an inspiration. It is meant to not only enlarge the base for traditional Fair Trade products from the South. Fair Trade communities also promote the local food chain and engage local inhabitants and farmers. Many initiatives are still starting up.

As a citizen, we can insist at all times that food and drinks are ecologically and socially responsible. For all these products, the producers should get a fair price. Teachers and schools can accustom their pupils with sustainable agriculture. Consumer organizations can take all aspects of the food chain in account when judging a product. And do not forget, as citizens we all make choices: to buy straight from the farmer, to buy labeled products, to eat less meat. We can spread this message to family and friends, to our neighborhood and surroundings, to the communal media, school media, company media or regular media.