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Regional Forum for the Future of Agriculture: revolutionizing the European countryside to keep up with our global commitments

It has now been a year since countries signed on to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and some months after they have ratified the Paris Climate Agreement. These global goals now unite us, but how can individuals relate to them at the national and local level? This was the focus of the recent Forum for the Future of Agriculture (FFA) Regional Conference, held in Ljubljana (Slovenia) on December 2nd.

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William de GRUNNE, ELO



The Regional FFA in Ljubljana was opened by Franc BOGOVIČ, Slovenian Member of the European Parliament and host of the event. There needs to be more dialogue between stakeholders, especially since policy creation usually reacts too slowly on the latest agricultural and environmental issues, he stated; *“this key mixture usually never sits together in Slovenia to discuss agriculture related matters.”* Agriculture and humanity are facing monumental challenges, needing both to feed an expanding world, while vastly reducing our ecological footprint, the MEP continued. The key player, agriculture, does provide food and jobs but also provides a heavy burden on the environment, under most of its current

production methods. According to Mr BOGOVIČ, the solution lies in the sustainable intensification of agriculture; producing more with less while taking better care of the environment. While these issues create many questions, there is one thing everyone should agree on; the importance of innovation. New skills, local know-how, technologies, digitization and training for young and old farmers are needed to meet the needs of tomorrow. Such tools would also help attract a new and dynamic generation to the countryside.

Now that people all around the world have signed on to changes in mentality, actions, and responsibilities, we can begin

to define Slovenia’s contribution to food and environmental security; *“I believe Slovenia has a role to play”*. Slovenia’s membership to the EU is the biggest free trade agreement that it ever had, he continued. This membership brought many different consequences, both negative and positive. The exchange of knowledge, services and goods can be considered beneficial, while small farmers are somehow feel they are in on the losing side, as have a tougher time competing on the large European market.

Mr Janez POTOČNIK, Chair of the FFA2017, in his opening keynote agreed with Mr BOGOVIČ on the fact that the key issue of combining food and environmental se-



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curity is not an easy task. In fact, it is a task that requires fundamental changes in agriculture but as well further down the whole food value chain including the consumers' behaviour and mentality. We need to get rid of this consumerist attitude, especially visible on days like Black Friday (editor: Black Friday took place just a week before the event). As climate change affects everyone, everyone has the duty of fighting it argued Mr POTOČNIK. *"Change will not come from big debates on UN level in New York, it comes from you and me and everyone else from our actions at home. Remember that our planet is not a car with warranty and return policy; it is our common home, our only home."* he said.

Another issue that can be seen in Slovenia and in many other countries is that this integrated problem is tackled in a highly fragmented way, sector by sector. According to Mr POTOČNIK the solution lies in inter-sectorial cooperation and government level changes. He described three critical steps in order to reach the change *"First there is a need for better cooperation and stop thinking in individual sectors and stop blaming others for problems created by our own actions. Secondly we need to realize that the problems we face are global and affect everyone; we need to stop export the task of solving the problem to other countries. We need to help to the best of our capacity. Third we need to integrate public and private sector; they are more related and linked than we think. By working together public and private can reach higher goals."*

The messages of these introductory statements were then taken on to two panel sessions where the first handled the topic of 'Food self-sufficiency vs food security' and the second panel focussed on 'Sustainable management of natural resources'.

During the discussions participants agreed that there is a serious problem of food waste within Europe and around the world. While in the developing world a third of the food is wasted due to poor technology at the farm and processing levels; in the developed world even more is wasted, mainly due to quality or aesthetic standards and consumer behaviour.

Furthermore, although Europe as a whole is the largest net exporter of food there are still member states that are not self-sufficient and depend on the free trade within the EU to feed their population. This means that for several countries the balance between food security and food self-sufficiency plays a key role. Maybe it would be worth putting food security on a lower priority at EU level and first perfection redistribution of the produced food.

Even if Slovenia is a small country with a small scale agricultural sector that is beginning to familiarise with the concept of food self-sufficiency it can still help solving these global scale issues. Sending food resources might not be in its best interest; sharing its knowhow, technology and new competences with those in need can make a big difference.

Europe must also be careful to change from its past ways, where intensification was viewed as the solution; today we realise that further intensification is too much of a strain for the environment. We need innovation, precision and development of new strategies.

Sustainability in the farming sector starts by having a farmer that earns enough money to live and maintain his livelihood; this is the basis of durable European agriculture. Sustainability has a price which is too often paid by the farmer; the consumer should be similarly held responsible for the consequences of their behaviour. Food security remains a priority for farm support systems like the CAP, but it should be modified to include more incentives to create sustainable farming. Another issue is that farmers need maintain life-long learning, including not just new technologies and production methods, but also about the vital importance of biodiversity.

We too often forget that at its essence agriculture is sustainable; however it has been greatly influenced and modified by our modern concept of industrialisation, intensification and globalisation. Taking a step back, rethinking and changing is now urgently needed to meet the demands of the 21st century.

For more information, please visit the FFA's website at www.forumforagriculture.com. Next regional FFA will take place the 25th January in Reims.