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T7 Task Force Climate and Environment

POLICY BRIEF

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

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Executive Summary

This policy brief calls for a non-atomistic ecological approach. Among the G7 priorities, food and agriculture should be mentioned since they illustrate a non-atomistic approach of ecology, combining its four pillars: the environmental dimension (mitigating climate change and the erosion of biodiversity), social justice, health, and animal welfare. Food systems constitute 21% to 37% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Citizens' choices can make a big difference to climate change by reducing their consumption of meat, fish and dairy products. Simultaneously, the World Health Organization insists upon the necessity to create a healthy food environment that enables people to adopt and maintain healthy dietary practices and that reduces public health burdens of diseases and obesity linked to an excessive consumption of meat and foods containing high levels of saturated fats.

Therefore, it is necessary to generate support for change by helping farmers and ranchers to move from an intensive model generating pollution and disease to a more extensive model. Under current conditions, the problems cannot be changed from within the involved sectors. A predominant atomistic approach and the instruments in place in the policy fields of agriculture and food, in combination with a market-based production model that ignores the environmental, ethical and social consequences of such a model, are impeding the transformation efforts of single actors and creating wrong incentives to the detriment of all, humans and non-humans. The G7 and their partners should implement proactive public policies, both at the national and the European level, allowing for the transition to an ecosystemic agriculture, programming the end of intensive livestock farming and vegetarianizing diets and food supply at large. This applies to different sectors of public life, starting with public catering and education.

First, financial aid is needed to implement the logistical changes and to compensate and incentivize farmers who move from an intensive to an extensive agricultural model. An ecological transition income is proposed as an effective instrument to achieve these requirements. Moreover, a complementary income for farmers whose mission is not only to produce quality food, but also to maintain landscape and ecosystem services, is presented. The G7 should consider the implementation of these structural financial instruments.

Second, food prices need to reflect the negative externalities, such as the carbon footprint stemming from energy consumption, methane emissions and transportation. In order to achieve policy coherence, it is crucial to envision a re-discussion of the terms of trade treaties and economic partnership agreements that do not sufficiently take into account environmental standards and animal welfare. The G7 and the EU should build alliances and push for global trade rules promoting policy coherence with sustainable food systems and climate policy. In addition to that, an overall paradigm shift is needed in the treatment of

living beings, not seeing them as mere commodities, subordinating them to norms of efficiency and competition.

Third, it proposes the vegetarianization of food supplies, starting with public catering, and the creation of linked educational programs for different age groups to encourage a healthy diet. The proposed food education programs will effectively support the individual and collective efforts to reduce the consumption of animal products, to reduce our carbon and ecological footprint, to support local production of quality food, and to rediscover the meaning of the daily act of eating. The latter is not reduced to a food intake. Its emotional, ethical and economic dimension deserves to be placed at the heart of any food policy.

A non-atomistic approach to agriculture and food places agriculture and food at the core of a political project whose axis is ecology, thought as an opportunity to promote a more just and sustainable development model. In addition to the mentioned goals in terms of environment, health and animal welfare, such an approach will strengthen social cohesion and justice. Starting with the implementation of the three proposed measures, citizens will gain confidence in themselves and in institutions, being involved in the cooperative project of the urgently needed ecological transition that can relaunch a civilizing process to the benefit of all.

Challenges

Food systems constitute 21% to 37% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Kluczkowsky et al., 2020). Citizens' choices can make a big difference to climate change by reducing their consumption of meat, fish and dairy products. It is necessary to generate support for change by helping farmers and ranchers to move from an intensive model generating pollution and disease to a more extensive model (Poore and Nemecek, 2018).

Intensive agriculture, which requires the use of herbicides and other pesticides and leads to an erosion of soils and biodiversity, is associated with several problems: Environmental pollution, health problems, antibiotic resistance and zoonoses generated by intensive breeding are denounced by numerous scientists and intellectuals in all European countries, but also by a great majority of the population, which for instance deems animals' living conditions under industrial husbandry as incompatible with their ethical norms. There is an expectation in society that when we talk about reducing greenhouse gas emissions, we also take into account the impact of meat production and consumption on the environment as well as on human and animal health. The public expectation also includes to improve the conditions of farm animal that can only be raised in an intensive manner disregarding their well-being due to the underlying logics of the current system which regulates production and trade and encourages the daily consumption of animal products. Simultaneously, the World Health Organization insists upon the necessity to create a healthy food environment that enables people to adopt and maintain healthy dietary practices and that reduces public health burdens of diseases and obesity linked to an excessive consumption of meat and foods containing high levels of saturated fats (WHO, 2020).

The challenges are interlinked, connecting the fight against climate change and the erosion of biodiversity, health concerns, animal welfare, and, in particular, social justice, which includes a fair distribution of resources, the guarantee of food security and sovereignty as well as the dignity of farmers and breeders. This implies a non-atomistic approach to ecology, understood as the progressive and democratic effort to inhabit the earth in a wiser and fairer way—in order to provide human and non-human beings a dignified life. Such a non-atomistic approach combines the four pillars of the ecological transition (the environmental dimension, social justice, health, and animal welfare) and aims at a reorientation of the economy, which can be put back at the service of life and which can contribute to the creation of employment areas in sectors of the future and in rural areas left in disarray nowadays (Pelluchon, 2021).

It is therefore essential to implement proactive public policies, both at the national and the European level, allowing for the transition to an ecosystemic agriculture, to program the end of intensive livestock farming and to vegetarianize the diets and food supply at large. This applies to different sectors of public life, starting with collective catering as well as supermarkets and restaurants so that individuals learn little by little to feed themselves healthily by taking care of themselves and of others—humans, non-humans, and of the Earth—as well as to gain self-esteem and a feeling of common participation in the collective effort to repair the world (Pelluchon, 2019).

Proposals

This policy brief contains three main proposals: First, financial aid is needed to implement the logistical changes and to compensate and incentivize farmers who move from an intensive to an extensive agricultural model. Second, food prices need to reflect the negative externalities, while an overall paradigm shift is needed in the treatment of living beings, not seeing them as mere commodities, subordinating them to norms of efficiency and competition. Third, it proposes the vegetarianization of food supplies, starting with public catering, and the creation of linked educational programs to encourage a healthy diet.

1) Targeted financial aid is urgently needed to implement the necessary logistical changes and to remunerate farmers and agricultural workers who practice, for example, agroecology or agroforestry and thus maintain ecosystem services or contribute to the preservation of landscapes. This instrument allows for an agricultural model change, which simultaneously enables to provide quality food to consumers. This also applies to farmers wishing to switch to a farming model that is more respectful of animal welfare.

Concretely, this could take the form of an ecological transition income (Swaton, 2018; cf. also Pelluchon 2019). This system differs from the universal basic income since it is conditional: It offers logistical and financial assistance to individuals and groups with a project with high added social and ecological value, allowing them to receive training but also network opportunities to find economic outlets. This system, which supports people wishing to change their job into a socially and ecologically useful activity or to change their production model, is perfectly suited for agriculture and livestock farming. It can therefore help farmers to develop organic farming, permaculture, or agroforestry, which require significant knowledge and time before they can be economically viable. It could also help farmers to make all the necessary restructuring in order to offer their animals decent living conditions, moving from the intensive model and building farms to free-range farms. It also revalorizes the profession of agricultural worker in general, creating spaces also for young people to contribute societal value. The recipients who are eligible for this program receive financial aid, giving them time to make the necessary adjustments and to organize business structures, granting the support necessary for the feasibility of their projects and its insertion into an economic and social fabric. The ecological transition income has attracted several regions in France but also some developing countries such as Burkina Faso.

Another important measure is the establishment of a complementary income for farmers whose mission is not only to produce quality food, but also to maintain landscape and ecosystem services, opting for an ecosystem-based agriculture that respects the soil and ecosystems (Pelluchon, 2017; 2021). This monthly supplement in the form of a stipend would allow farmers who abandon an intensive production model to earn a living and be paid in a decent way, taking into account the role of ecosystem services that are part of the meaning of agriculture as well as the composition of landscapes. This would also prevent them from excessively increasing their products' prices and thus allow for passing on this change of model to the consumer. To a certain extent, remunerating farmers for maintaining landscapes and ecosystem services is in line with the concept of payments for ecosystem services, as implemented in Costa Rica and other countries (WBGU, 2021).

2) Moreover, it is necessary that food prices reflect negative externalities such as the carbon footprint stemming from energy consumption, methane emissions and transportation, and the consequences of the mode of production. This measure will lead to a fair price, while under current conditions meat from industrial farms, sometimes having crossed eight countries before landing on the consumer's plate, is cheaper than regional and organic food.

This insistence on negative externalities which have to be taken into account in the price of products must lead to a re-discussion of the terms of trade treaties and economic partnership agreements that do not sufficiently take into account environmental standards and animal welfare. The G7 and the EU should build alliances and push for global trade rules promoting policy coherence with sustainable food systems and climate policy.

In general, food products can no longer be considered as commodities nor traded like cell phones in a market subject to unbridled competition. Since agriculture has a social role, linked to people's knowledge and know-how, and because it has an impact on the health of soils and ecosystems and, of course, on human health, it must be considered as a care activity. Thus, agriculture and animal husbandry, which are relationships with living beings, cannot be subject to the same rules as the production of manufactured goods. Their efficiency and performance must be measured according to their meaning and the value of the beings involved (Pelluchon, 2019). On the contrary, when these activities are completely subordinated to the law of the market, not only the industrial model is victorious. Moreover, the agricultural sector ends up with food safety scandals, or farmers are forced to systematic overproduction, resulting in excessive food waste as well as export of the European surplus at low prices, for instance towards African countries, ruining their agriculture and local breeding (De Schutter, 2014). Already Amartya Sen (1989) had pointed out that hunger and malnutrition do not exist due to a shortage of food but are a matter of justice. Furthermore, it is advisable to withdraw certain basic foods (cereals, wheat, etc.) from speculation in order to prevent populations from starving, as has been observed for instance in 2008 with hunger riots in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mexico, Bolivia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and other countries.

3) Finally, it is essential to promote a plant-based diet in public catering. As a consequence, citizens from an early age can learn to enjoy eating healthy food and reduce their consumption of animal products. In restaurants, supermarkets and the upstream supply chains, a considerable effort must also be made to diversify the food offer and to allow for the distribution of plant-based dishes. Finally, a food education program including dietary knowledge and cooking classes must be offered in early childhood education, in schools, universities, and throughout life—in the context of lifelong learning programs. Such food education programs will effectively support the individual and collective efforts to reduce the consumption of animal products, to reduce our carbon and ecological footprint, to support local production of quality food, and to rediscover the meaning of the daily act of eating. The latter is not reduced to a food intake. Its emotional, ethical and economic dimension deserves to be placed at the heart of any food policy. Our way of feeding ourselves and incorporating food testifies to our relationship to others and to ourselves, to our capacity to make room for them in our lives. For this reason, it is the paradigm of a philosophy which underlines our being-with-the-world-and-with-others, human and non-human.

Implementation

The three measures proposed above make it possible to reach three major objectives: The end of intensive animal breeding within ten years, the creation of new jobs in the agricultural sector and the improvement of health, food security, and food sovereignty.

The G7 is the right forum to address this policy challenge since it does not make sense to speak of the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions or to fight against climate change and the erosion of biodiversity without taking account the consumption habits and the environmental cost of meat production, in particular in the G7 countries. Policy coherence is of utmost importance.

An atomistic ecological policy, which does not articulate the four pillars of the ecological transition (environment, health, social justice, and animal welfare), can only fail and will not arouse the support of the citizens who will judge that it is necessary to choose between the end of the world and the end of the month. Moreover, the credibility of democratic governments depends on their capacity to make of the ecological transition a stimulating and inclusive project for society. For all these reasons, it is essential to promote this transversal and global approach of ecology understood as the wisdom of our habitation of the Earth which is always a cohabitation with others, human and non-human. It is therefore necessary for the G7 to take up this approach. Conversely, a non-atomistic ecological approach can rebuild citizens' trust in institutions and governments, whose decisions often seem abstract, decontextualized or inconsistent. This will also require an articulation of the vertical level of norms and an empowerment of horizontal and local levels where innovations and experiments can take place.

In other words, by placing agriculture and food at the core of a political project whose axis is ecology, thought as an opportunity to promote a more just and sustainable development model, we can hope that citizens will be more confident in the future. They will understand that the ecological transition is a cooperative project that can re-launch a civilizing process, where technology, innovation and the economy are serve the lives of all, not only a few. As a consequence, ecology will cease to be seen as a burden, which only demands sacrifices and distributes these in an inequitable manner. Moreover, there is the chance that individuals, regaining confidence in themselves and in institutions, will be less prone to misinformation, fundamental opposition and the slogans of populist and extremist parties that exploit the criticism that can be directed towards any technocratic, atomistic and decontextualized management of environmental and social problems.

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