

## 8 Lessons to be learned from innovative farming systems elsewhere in Europe

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Efforts to promote sustainable agriculture in France and the United Kingdom are reviewed. In France, sustainable agriculture is largely initiated by public authorities. Sustainable agriculture aims to strengthen the economic viability of agriculture. In doing so, the social dimension of sustainability is interlinked with economic viability. In the UK, stakeholder engagement (private industry co-operating with public authorities, extension service, NGOs and experts) is considered vital to the success of implementing sustainable practices. In conclusion, economic factors are critical in achieving sustainable agriculture. However, socio-cultural factors are vital in understanding consumer behaviour, cultural dimensions of agriculture, food and the farming community.

### **Introduction**

Sustainable agriculture has a strong international dimension. Sustainable development is an explicit objective of the EU as mentioned in the Amsterdam Treaty, and the integration of environment into EU policy sectors is required to all policy sectors (including agriculture). Policy proposals made by the European Commission should be accompanied by an appraisal of their environmental impact. This principle recognises that environmental policy alone cannot achieve the environmental achievements required as part of sustainable development. Policies, including the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) need to be made more consistent with the requirements for environmental protection, social development and economic viability.

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This contribution aims to improve the understanding of the international context of sustainable agriculture. It provides an overview of the experience in France and the UK on efforts undertaken to promote sustainability in agriculture. The experience in these countries focuses on:

- What definition of sustainable agriculture is adopted?
- Who took the main initiative and who else is involved (policy, private organizations, NGOs and research organizations)?
- What judgements are made regarding the economic, ecological and social dimensions of sustainable agriculture? If so, how is it done and who are involved?
- What efforts are made by public authorities to promote sustainable agriculture?

The contribution draws from a review of initiatives in these countries, with a view to identify key messages on the international dimension of sustainable agriculture. The two countries selected for this paper reflect different political systems with divergent approaches of public-private co-operation.



### **France: sustainability is adopted only recently**

#### *Introduction*

Intensification of production has been the mainstream model for agriculture for long. In this context agricultural policy measures, extension services and research were in support of this main trend in French farming. This model was adopted until recently and other types of farming (e.g. mountain farming and farming in remote areas like marshlands) were marginalised. Nowadays, this has changed with the efforts to promote organic farming and regional produce.

Sustainability is adopted only recently in the French policy debate. The national strategy on sustainable development has adopted some guidelines only on agriculture, including the development of agricultural practices that is favourable to the environment. Second, organic farming is promoted as well as 'Agriculture Raisonnée Respectueuse de l'Environnement'.

France has a strong tradition of state involvement in agriculture and the agricultural sector is strongly administered. This is reflected by the Agriculture Raisonnée, aimed to standardise good agricultural

practices, and regional and national committees are established to adapt national rules to local conditions with a view to test and improve them. A basic idea of Agriculture Raisonnée was to protect farmers against the contracts established among farmers and the agrifood sector.

Agriculture Raisonnée is introduced to design a model to standardise good practices in agriculture. Almost 100 items are taken into account, and around 80 of them require farmers to respect the legal constraints, among others regarding environment, occupational health, and human and animal health issues. The approval system started during the first half of 2004 and by the middle of that year less than 100 farmers were formally approved by the Ministry of Agriculture. Rather ambitious objectives are formulated with 50,000 farms that should be approved in 2005. Eighty percent of the farmers should qualify to meeting the requirements of Agriculture Raisonnée by the year 2008.

#### *Initiatives taken by the Ministry of Agriculture*

The French government designed measures aiming at the multifunctional character of agriculture, the farming territorial contract (Contrat Territorial d'Exploitation or CTE). It builds on agri-environmental measures (with higher payments than those to agri-environmental programmes). It essentially includes a contract between farmers and state, aiming to shift agriculture to strengthen the multiple functions they sustain, and taking into account production, environmental constraints and social conditions (e.g. labour conditions and efforts to promote viable rural areas).

Social conditions were largely ignored and no ceiling was introduced in the system to the upper level of compensatory payments and farmers could be eligible for up to 50,000 euro. The policy objectives are to maintain an agricultural sector with many farmers, to place the farmers in the centre of an integrated rural policy and to transfer significant parts of CAP support from large specialised farms towards holdings that strengthen multifunctionality. CTE has been signed for a period of 5 years, and they remain to be the main tool to implement the Rural Development Regulation. Following an evaluation in 2002, the implementation of the CTE scheme was suspended. However, the CTE entered into the Contrat d'Agriculture Durable, CAD (Sustainable



Farm Contract). Under this new scheme, farmers have the option to formalise the contract on the environmental part only, or on a mixture of economic and environmental measures.

The basic idea on sustainable agriculture is to support practices that improve the economic viability of agriculture. Quality produce - with agriculture having a firm economic basis - is linked to the social dimension of sustainability. A main criterion is that a sufficient number of people, both farmers and other inhabitants, should be in the position to sustain viability of such a region. In doing so, the social dimension of sustainability is interlinked with economic viability.

Although the economic dimension seems to dominate, the environmental dimension is respected as well.

Except for CAD, the concept of sustainable agriculture is not available yet in France. Essentially, the meaning of sustainable agriculture is not clearly understood, and the main question is how to manage diversity in agriculture. In response, there is a tendency to privatise innovations with farmers seeking for niche markets.

### **United Kingdom: many actors involved in promoting sustainable agriculture**

In the United Kingdom (UK) farmers are seen as guardians of the landscape and the providers of public services. In the context of sustainable agriculture, there is concern on small high-tech companies that increasingly move into the rural countryside. In fact, rural communities are dependent on farming in some areas, among others in mountain farming areas. Long-term viability of agriculture is critically affected by the age of farmers and the perspective for continuation of farming. There is serious concern by the farming community on the international competitive position and the overwhelming argument provided by farmers is to stop adding more rules on their practice. There is concern by the farming community on the implementation of the Water Framework Directive, and the possible high costs involved for meeting its requirements. Sustainable agriculture is not seen as the main trend for the future. The Sustainable Development Strategy is currently being reshaped, essentially aiming to develop a toolkit for sustainable development. Focus is also on sustainable land use, and critical to the achievement is how environmental targets are delivered in agriculture.

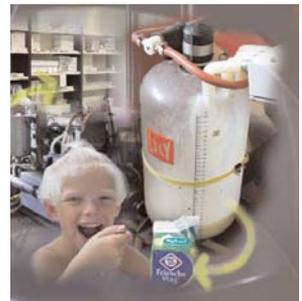
Public authorities are keen to make operational the degree of integration of the environment in agricultural practices. Rather than developing a set of indicators of sustainability, emphasis is given to indicators that can be operationalised. Measures on rarity of flora and fauna were designed, and gradually moved into the establishment of management agreements. The importance of this trend is also reflected since 'agricultural birds' is a key indicator by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in their attempt to operationalise sustainability. It was chosen because it is perceived as a good measure of sustainability in agriculture. Birds are sensitive indicators of the health of the environment and sustainability, being responsive to change, high in food chains, inexpensive to survey and widely known component of Europe's wildlife (RSPB, 2003). Populations of farmland birds have nearly halved since the late 1970s, and modern farm management practices have contributed to the decline. The index of farmland birds stabilised since the mid 1990s.

### **Efforts taken by food-processing industry**

One of the main food-processing industries in the world - Unilever - began an initiative in 1998 to address the pressures facing agriculture. Together with external stakeholders the following definition of sustainable agriculture was adopted:

'Sustainable agriculture is productive, competitive and efficient while at the same time protecting and improving the natural environment and conditions of the local communities'.

The promotion of sustainable agriculture should ensure the continued availability of Unilever's key crops by defining and adopting sustainable agriculture practices in the supply chain. A factor critical on the success of the company is the societies in which the business operates continue to develop well. In doing so, five key crops were identified, including peas, spinach, oil palm, tea and tomatoes. Guidelines on Good Agricultural Practice are developed for the cultivation of each of these crops and stakeholders and opinion formers have participated in this effort, and published on [www.growingforthefuture.com](http://www.growingforthefuture.com). Essentially, stakeholders are engaged at every phase. Indicators are developed to monitor progress on



achieving sustainable agriculture (See Box 1), and data are collected for all indicators and published on [www.growingforthefuture.com](http://www.growingforthefuture.com). In 2002, the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) Platform was launched by Unilever, Nestlé and Danone ([www.saiplatform.org](http://www.saiplatform.org)). The objective of this partnership is to promote implementation of standards for sustainable agriculture, contribute to the development of sustainable practices, support other research programmes in this area and communicate key stakeholders and consumers about this work.

*Box 1 Sustainable agriculture indicators, developed by Unilever*

1. Soil fertility and health
2. Soil loss
3. Nutrients
4. Pest management
5. Biodiversity
6. Product value
7. Energy
8. Water
9. Social/human capital
10. Local economy

Indicators are important tools to provide evidence on improvements achieved in production methods. Stakeholder engagement (private industry co-operating with public authorities, extension service, NGOs and experts) is considered vital to the success of implementing sustainable practices.

**Concluding remarks**

Economic factors are critical in achieving sustainable agriculture. However, socio-cultural factors are vital in understanding consumer behaviour, cultural dimensions of agriculture, food and the farming community.

*CAP promotes the integration with environment*

CAP encourages the agricultural sector to respond to changes in public demand. The second pillar of the CAP promotes the transformation of agriculture into sustainable practices. Measures

developed in the context of the Rural Development Programme (RDP), for example, embrace both farm and non-farm developments, as well as agri-environment measures. RDP aims to (1) support a viable and sustainable agriculture and forestry sector, (2) develop the territorial, economic and social conditions necessary for maintaining the rural population on the basis of a sustainable approach; and (3) maintain and improve the environment, the countryside and the natural heritage of rural areas.

#### *Agri-food sector promotes uniform standards*

Codes of Good Agricultural Practices are promoted by the agrifood sector (e.g. retailers and food processing industry through the market standards they introduce). Such Codes of Good Agricultural Practices that are beyond legal standards reduce the possibility for compensatory measures from the CAP. Such Codes include measures to control the physical environment. In addition, economic and social indicators are included as well.

The interpretation of sustainable agriculture is perceived differently, but long-term economic viability seems to be a common thread through the various examples examined. The social, cultural and institutional dimensions also seem to be of considerable importance since they reflect the diversity of agriculture and the different approaches of involving partners in efforts for sustainable farming practices. The terminology of transitions for sustainable agriculture does not seem to be adopted widely. However, the long-term perspective of agriculture, managing the integration of economic ambitions, environmental constraints and social demands is a major concern to agriculture across the globe.

#### **References**

RSPB, 2003 Birds as biodiversity indicators for sustainability: a pan-European strategy. Sandy, Bedfordshire, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.