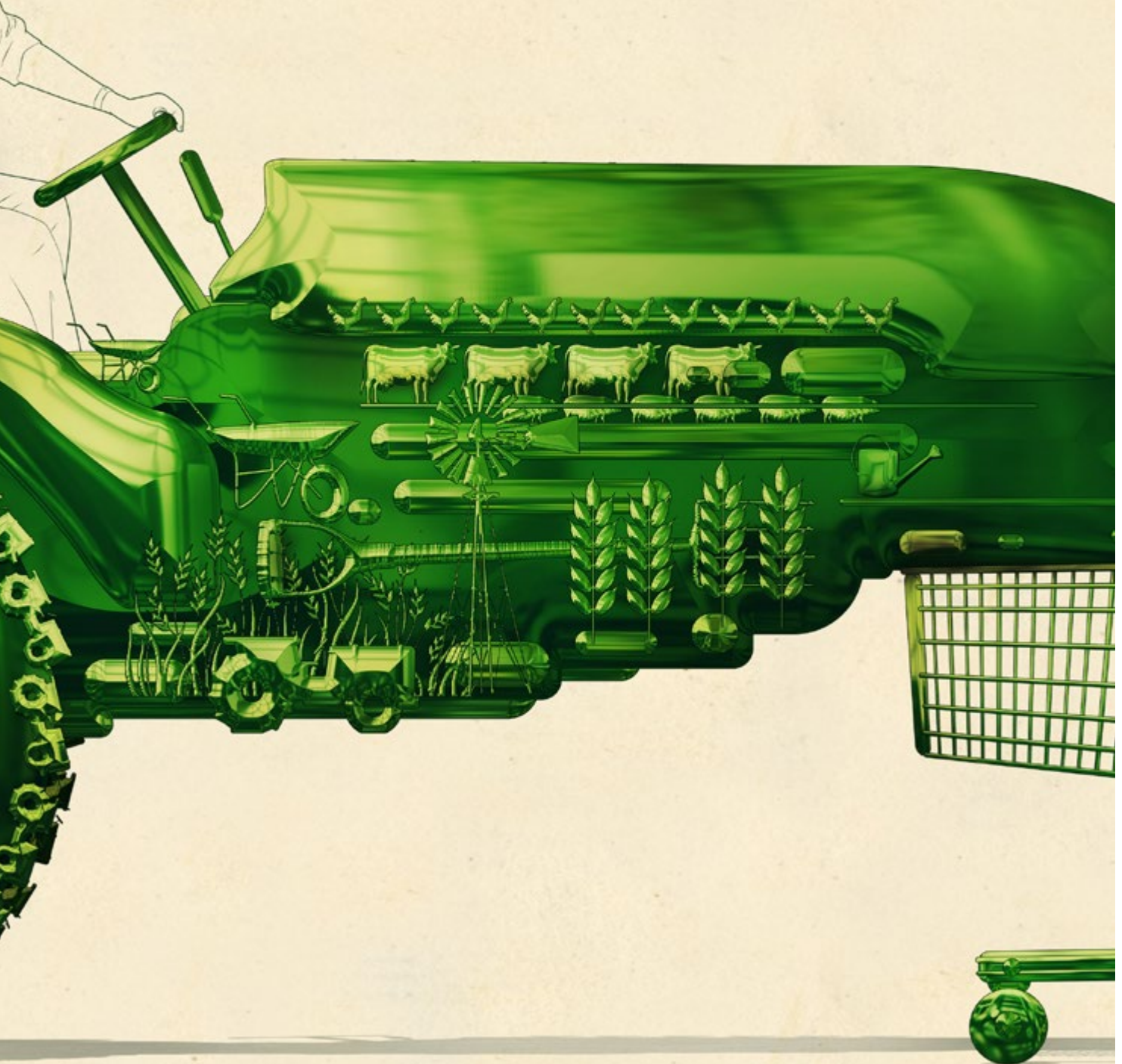


Wageningen appeals for Brussels food policy

European agricultural policy must stop focusing on the needs of farmers and pay more attention to consumer demands. So say Wageningen president Louise Fresco and economist Krijn Poppe. 'Scientific ideas sometimes need a bit of time but they are not just flights of fancy.'

TEXT KORNE VERSLUIS **ILLUSTRATION** RHONALD BLOMMESTIJN





Two years ago the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) began appealing for a coherent national food policy. The Netherlands is a food country, wrote the council. It is a hub in the international food trade, has a highly productive agricultural sector and plays a major role in research on agriculture and nutrition. But Dutch policymaking on food is dispersed across

several different ministries and is too concerned with agricultural production and not enough with other food-related issues, noted the council.

Louise Fresco Wageningen University & Research president, and economist Krijn Poppe, research manager at Wageningen Economic Research, have drawn on the same idea for a plan for European agricultural policy. This currently suffers



from the same flaw, they say. It is overly geared towards farmers and agricultural production and not enough to the wishes of European taxpayers. These taxpayers expect to find an adequate supply of affordable food in the supermarket, but they also want food production to go hand in hand with consideration for the climate, animal welfare and a fair social system. Farmers rarely meet consumers face to face and, according to Krijn, that makes for a shaky support base for European agricultural subsidies. ‘One of the main points in our proposal is to close the gulf that divides the city from the countryside.’

OUTDATED

European agricultural policy is based on outdated ideas, say the two academics. The emphasis on production had a logic to it in the 1950s and 60s, when memories of food rationing were still fresh in the minds of many Europeans, but the situation is very different now. On other points too, the EU’s agricultural policy has failed to keep up with the times. Poppe: ‘Take the multinationals, which have grown tremendously in recent decades. They play a very important role in the food supply, but European agricultural policy ignores them. That is not sensible if you want to make agricultural policy sustainable. Unilever, for instance, wants to play a pioneering role in making the food chain more sustainable. It probably has more impact if you make agreements with big companies like that about greening their production systems than if the EU sharpens up regulations about things like ploughing up grasslands.’ Other multinationals invest large sums of money in monitoring crops. Poppe: ‘Pepsico has a system for measuring the growth of their suppliers’ potatoes. If the EU collaborates with the multinationals on standards, such data could also be used to provide farmers with information about the status of their crops, so they don’t use too much pesticide and artificial fertilizer.’

LAKES AND MOUNTAINS

The agricultural policy has been one of the main subjects of discussion in Brussels meeting rooms right from the start of the EU. Until recently more than half the

European budget went on agricultural subsidies, and the figure is still at 40 percent. In the early years of the union most of that money went towards giving farmers guaranteed prices. When that led to overproduction and the infamous milk lakes and butter mountains, the agricultural policy was adjusted bit by bit. The latest round of changes was in 2013 when the first pillar of the common agricultural policy – production support – was ‘greened’ and the second pillar – rural development – was reinforced with measures to stimulate innovation. To qualify for a subsidy as of 2014, crop farmers have to select from a menu of nature-friendly measures such as flowery field verges or catch crops which help prevent too many fertilizer nutrients in the soil ending up in the water.

FURTHER EXPANSION

‘We propose further expanding the policy and basing it on five pillars,’ says Poppe. A first pillar with income support for farmers, intended to ensure a stable market for food; a second based on the ecosystem services farmers provide, and a third which focuses on innovations in agriculture and living conditions in the countryside. These are the subjects which are divided over two pillars in the current policy. There does need to be a ceiling on income support for farmers. Currently a large proportion of the budget goes to a small number of big farms. Twenty percent of European farmers get 80 percent of the available funding. By establishing a maximum grant per farm, more money will be left over for the small farms. Poppe: ‘That way you ensure the grant ends up with the farms which really do need a safety net.’ The policy should also address issues of nutrition and health (the fourth pillar) and monitoring and research (the fifth pillar). With European countries less and less prepared to invest in research on the food chain, the proposal argues that the EU should provide crucial infrastructure such as experimental farms. It also argues for better harmonization of the EU’s research agenda and the agricultural and food policy. But it is the fourth pillar that is really new. >



PHOTO GUY ACKERMANS

KRIJN POPPE
Research manager at Wageningen Economic Research

‘The gulf between city and countryside must be closed’



JAN HUITEMA
VVD MEP

‘At the moment farmers don’t understand why they do or do not get subsidies’



HENRY UITSLAG

Campaign leader on food and nutrition at the Consumer Association

'If you leave it to the companies, salt reduction won't get off the ground'

VEERMAN WANTS A DIFFERENT AGRICULTURAL POLICY TOO

Poppe en Fresco are not the only people arguing for a broadening of European agriculture policy. In november a thinktank led by ex-minister and ex-WUR president Cees Veerman proposed reforming the agricultural policy to make European agriculture more climate-friendly and better able to contribute to healthier eating habits among Europeans.

The thinktank was part of a 500 million-euro package of support for European farmers, intended to soften the blow of the sanctions against Russia. Agriculture commissioner Phil Hogan promised that the package would be put together with input from experts on the position of farmers in Europe.

The thinktank, which included Louise Fresco, not only looked at the European grants but also proposed ways of strengthening the position of farmers. By creating more opportunities for collaboration, for instance. This is something farmers do not do at present because they think it is in conflict with the EU's competition.

The European Union should stimulate the food industry to get Europeans on a healthier diet, write Fresco and Poppe. But the Greek diet is different to the Dutch one, making it seem more logical to leave the member states to figure out the measures they need to put in place. Why should bureaucrats in Brussels start deciding how the Greek or Dutch diet should become more healthy?

Poppe: 'It is certainly quite a puzzle to come up with the best division of tasks, but there are areas in which it helps to adopt European-wide measures. Take a sugar or fat tax, for instance.' In 2011 Denmark brought in a tax on products containing a lot of saturated fat. The tax bit the dust a year later, however. Poppe: 'That was partly down to new political relations after elections, but it was also due to complaints that Danish shopkeepers were doing their purchasing over the border to evade the tax. You prevent that if you establish a European policy.'

A CRITICAL LOOK

Louise Fresco presented the proposal in Brussels at the beginning of September in the first Mansholt lecture. Jan Huitema, a Wageningen alumnus and an MEP from the right-wing Dutch party the VVD, was there. 'I don't know if I agree with all those new pillars. As a liberal I will certainly take a critical look at whether they will generate excessive legislation. But what I do appreciate very much about the proposal is that we have started thinking about a new basis for the agricultural subsidies. The way it works at the moment is not logical. Not for farmers, who do not understand why they do or do not get a subsidy. And not for consumers either. The next time it is revised it would be very good to have a better story.'

There were some critical noises too from people who were afraid that the proposal would siphon off money from farmers to other links in the food chain. Poppe: 'That is not what we proposed; we haven't made any proposals about the allocation of the money, only about the subjects the policy should be addressing.'

According to Poppe, policymakers in both The Hague and Brussels were impressed by

the proposal. 'I've had positive responses from all sides. From Brussels and from the ministry of Economic Affairs in The Hague.'

There are positive noises coming from another office in The Hague too: that of Henry Uitslag, the Dutch Consumers' Association's campaign leader on food and nutrition. 'This plan fits in with other initiatives. We are positive about the ideas for a food policy, especially because consumers are getting to play a bigger role in it.' Uitslag himself is often in Brussels for consultations on the labelling of food products. He and his colleagues do not focus on agricultural policy. 'That is such a big and complex subject; we choose to target other issues.'

So would he be interested in being involved in a broader agricultural and food policy? 'It depends whether anything practical is going to be achieved. You can't be against an integrated food policy but I have become suspicious of that term: 'integrated' is often used as an excuse for doing nothing. We argue, for instance, for a ban on targeting children with marketing of unhealthy food. Those who would stand to lose from such a ban like to bandy about the term 'integrated policy' because it stays nice and vague about whether anything actually has to change. To us it is important to achieve tangible results. If you leave it to the companies themselves, things like salt reduction or the curbing of antibiotic use in livestock farming won't get off the ground. If agreements can be made on that in Europe, I am keen to be involved.'

BROADER TREND

Governance expert Jeroen Candel got his PhD at the Public Administration and Policy Group in Wageningen for a study including the latest round of negotiations on the European agricultural subsidies. He too agrees with the main points of the position paper. 'This fits well with a broader trend which is especially popular in the Netherlands. The Dutch government is already working on a food agenda; in Ede there is even a municipal councillor with food in his portfolio.' But the negotiations he studied for his thesis tell a cautionary tale. All too often in such

'Grants should go to farms that really need a safety net'

negotiations, ideals end up being sacrificed to national interests.

In the previous round the concept of 'food security' played a role which could be given to Fresco and Poppe's 'food policy' in the next round of negotiations. After the food crisis of 2007 and 2008, in which food prices shot up, the fear of shortages suddenly reared its head again. So 'food security' became the buzzword in the preparations for the decision making. 'Nobody is against food security,' says Candel. 'That's why many parties used the concept as window dressing for their interests.' But at the end of the day, food security did not play a significant role in the formation of the new policy. Candel: 'In the final negotiations about budgets, countries look primarily at how much they can get out of it for their own farmers.' The term 'food policy' could, he thinks, play an important role in the next round of negotiations to decide on the policy after 2020. 'Before the final negotiations there will probably be some fine speeches made about it, but in the end it's all about how the euros are distributed.'

TAKEN SERIOUSLY

Louise van Schaik, senior research fellow at the Clingendael Institute, adds her voice to the warnings against high expectations of the plan's feasibility. 'It addresses appealing themes. I would imagine the European Commission is happy with the proposal. It does propose reforms. What is more, Fresco and Poppe are well-known names in Brussels; they are taken seriously.' But that does not mean other countries will immediately be won over to the ideas.

Van Schaik: 'It is a very Dutch proposal. We worry about the question of whether we can explain why we give subsidies to farmers. In other countries that is not an issue. A Greek doesn't wonder whether it is sensible

to give subsidies to tobacco farmers; with the economic crisis there, they've got more important things to worry about. The same goes for many countries in which the rural population is in decline: France or Portugal, for instance. They are happy that there are European subsidies. Otherwise they would have to come up with the money themselves.' Van Schaik also thinks the Netherlands' negotiation position is weakened by the approaching Brexit. 'The British supported reforms too. Now we only have Denmark, Sweden and Finland left.'

SMALL STEPS

So is the proposal nothing more than a nice academic exercise that will soon disappear into the archives of Brussels bureaucrats? Candel: 'That is not doing it justice. The discussion is worth a lot and will have an impact in the long term. The European agricultural policy has a long history. Change is often gradual. There has been talk of greening since the 1990s. That has been integrated into the system now, albeit in a way that makes it easy for farmers to use it to their own ends. It is good to work on an integrated food policy. A policy in which there is a bigger role for health, climate and other values will lead to a different type of agriculture. Just don't imagine that's something you can achieve in a hurry. But that doesn't make it okay to become cynical.'

Whether this plan will be introduced in the short term is by no means certain, confirms Poppe. 'It is a Dutch approach and there is a great deal of uncertainty for the coming years, not least because of Brexit. But that doesn't mean it's just a flight of fancy. Scientists' ideas sometimes need time. What counts now is for people to take it seriously and for the idea to stick.' ■

www.wur.eu/foodpolicy



JEROEN CANDEL
Governance expert and
assistant professor at WUR

'Countries look primarily at the benefits they can obtain for their own farmers'



LOUISE VAN SCHAIK
Senior research fellow at
Clingendael

'In other countries, no one questions subsidies for farmers'