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Farmers' unrest: how can dialogue be restored?

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Current farmer protests in France and across the EU are multi-faceted and are likely to grow in scope. Farmers have at least three main concerns: (1) the lack of recognition of the dignity of the farming profession, (2) the increasing burden of environmental standards and (3) the lack of growth in farm incomes. This blog post investigates the origins of farmer discontent to identify the necessary conditions to this crisis through dialogue, with a view to charting a shared direction for the French and European food system.

In France and the rest of the EU, protests share common roots

The French farming profession's protests, which started in November 2023, have become more widespread in recent days following the demonstrations organised by German farmers since mid-January. These events can be seen as part of a long-standing and broadly European trend of farmers taking to the streets, which has occurred in many Member States over the past years: in the Netherlands on a repeated basis since 2019, in Spain in 2019 and 2023, in Germany again as early as 2019.

These protests reflect the difficulties faced by farmers, some of whom are struggling to keep their businesses afloat in the face of rising costs and stable, or even declining, income from sales. Many farmers also say they feel caught between incoherent policy and political signals. On the one hand they perceive a call to produce more based on a vision where European and global food security is reduced to a question of increasing production volumes. On the other hand, they feel that the accumulation of regulations, notably environmental, impede their ability to produce. When farmers say they feel like they are being pulled in multiple directions, this is the situation that is being denounced.

True and fake problems, true and fake solutions

It is true that European farmers are facing substantial challenges such as providing healthy food for a growing population, increasing and stabilising farmers' incomes, adapting to climate change, soil erosion and biodiversity loss, the growing imbalance on the domestic market between supply and demand, or the generational renewal. Given the complexity of these problems the idea that a simple solution—that of a simplification shock or a regulatory free—would suffice seems questionable at best. While the impact of the of standards on farmers' mental workload cannot be overlooked, administrative simplification alone is far from being a suitable response to such socio-economic and environmental challenges.

European farmers are indeed facing an equation they cannot solve on their own: the entire value chain, from seed production to dietary patterns and the industrial sector, needs to undergo radical change. For example, crop diversification, a key component of any transition strategy, is based on the hypothesis that market opportunities for new crops exist and that their profitability is close to that of the dominant crops (wheat, corn, rapeseed). This in turn requires sufficient demand and properly structured supply chains. The bulk of the sector's transition efforts, which are encouraged or imposed by agricultural policies, currently demand farm-level action without being accompanied by a symmetrical evolution in industrial policies and in food policies, for which regulatory options are only just beginning to be discussed¹. To engage farm managers in the transition, it is therefore necessary to discuss the economic conditions involved, which in turn relate to changes in food demand and the structuring of supply chains.

Acknowledging the need to take greater account of economic issues should not, however, blind us to the fact that the strategies developed as part of the European Green Deal's agricultural component have so far had only very limited impact on European agriculture. For example, the CAP reform scheduled for 2021 at European level has not been aligned with the Green Deal objectives; cattle farms have been excluded from the scope of the directive on industrial emissions; the European Parliament voted against the proposed regulation on the sustainable use of pesticides; the framework law on sustainable food systems and the legislative package on animal welfare have been abandoned; the regulation on nature restoration has not yet come into force and has been considerably weakened. On the other hand, the few texts resulting from the Green Deal on which negotiations are progressing well are widely demanded and awaited by the farming profession, namely one on new genomic techniques and another on the certification of carbon capture. The Green Deal can therefore not be held responsible for the difficulties farmers encounter today. The focus on "European rules" also tends to suggest that the European food system is functional as it is, and that the guidelines set out in the Green Deal are unfounded.

Ultimately, the situation facing the world of agriculture calls for a political response based on humility and rooted in long-term analyses. It is all about creating a shared vision for agriculture and the food system at both the national and European level, in order to build a coherent, clear project, and move away from piecemeal management of agricultural crises. Such transition pathways, based on no-regrets options, have already been identified in other sectors (for example, the electrification of passenger cars in the automotive industry, or the massification of renewable energies), but are lacking for the food system. Coherent, consensus-based objectives are needed for agriculture and food, to identify—and ultimately bring together—the market conditions that will ensure the economic viability of the changes needed.

The forthcoming European "strategic dialogue" as an opportunity

On January 25, 2024, a strategic dialogue on the future of agriculture and food opens at European level: it should serve to sketch out this vision. With this in mind, we can identify at least three conditions for success:

- First, there is a need for all stakeholders, including the farming profession and the environmental movement, to seriously consider both the physical realities at the heart of the transition (volumes, surface areas, yields, GHG emissions, climate shocks, soil health, water availability) and the social and above all economic conditions for it to work. This is the key to finding concrete solutions that are compatible with the objectives of carbon neutrality, natural resource preservation and biodiversity restoration, while also creating new sources of income for farmers. To this end, the debate must acknowledge that the agroecological transition will lead to a reduction in the volume of certain products, and consequently consider the safeguards required to ensure that these reductions do not result in an increase in imports, in particular by rebalancing the protein content of European diets.
- Second, the European Commission must ensure that whatever compromises come out of the strategic dialogues are translated into policy with real benefits for stakeholders. The example of the Commission on the Future of Agriculture in Germany is a powerful reminder of this. This commission, set up in 2020 by Angela Merkel following major protests, delivered a report in 2021 co-signed by all German agricultural and food stakeholders, outlining various trajectories—all ambitious—aimed at "*substantially improving the environmental sustainability of the German agri-food system, ensuring its economic viability over time and avoiding the relocation of production to regions with less stringent social and environmental standards, whether within the EU or beyond*"². However, change in governments leading to the rise of the Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals coalition did not allow the report's recommendations to be translated into policy action. Trade union leaders, who had invested significant political capital in this Commission, found themselves severely weakened and called into question by their base as a result; the current mobilisation is partly the consequence of this lack of follow-up.
- Third, the strategic dialogues must not be instrumentalised for short-term political gains.

Finally, it should be noted that the strategic dialogue at European level will not be sufficient. Rapid, concrete responses to the crisis are inevitable—and needed. But these will not solve agriculture's structural problems. Once the situation has calmed down, stakeholders in all the food value chains must get together to draw conclusions for the national level in the framework of a debate on the agricultural and food transition. The success of such a debate will also require the three above mentioned conditions to be met. The [French national debate on energy transition](#), conducted between 2012 and 2013, illustrates the fruitfulness of such an approach.

1 Brocard, C. et al. (2023). Environnement, inégalités, santé: quelle stratégie pour les politiques alimentaires françaises? (https://www.iddri.org/sites/default/files/PDF/Publications/Catalogue%20Iddri/Etude/202304-ST0123-SNANC_1.pdf) IDDRI – Étude, 01.

2 Commission on the Future of Agriculture (2021). The Future of Agriculture. A common agenda. (https://www.bmel.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/Publications/zukunftskommission-landwirtschaft.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=5) Berlin, Zukunftskommission Landwirtschaft, 135 p.

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