

Race to the bottom

Significant challenges to voluntary measures, significant challenges to mandatory measures

In a context of a failing European sustainability policy, a continuation of existing agricultural practices results in further environmental degradation and impacts on profit margins, due to the costs of increasing amounts of inputs needed to maintain production levels. The worsening environmental quality requires quick and more structural solutions to meet the ever-increasing demands from internal and external markets.

Technological innovation is booming in a quest to find more efficient and effective farm practices, with applied research focusing on achieving significant efficiency gains, reducing input costs whilst increasing outputs, and a privatized advisory services with a close link to industry facilitating their uptake. However, the side effects of these new technologies on the soil and environment are often unknown. As many of the smaller farmers are not able to afford these technologies, the proportion of large industrial farmers increases, as does service provision by contractors.

With the large farms operating with contractors across contiguous blocks of land or even moving to soil-less forms of production, there is a decline of stewardship of the rural areas as the one managing the land is no longer the owner. Heritage and traditions become less important and with the loss of local knowledge built up over decades or even centuries, resilience to deal with unexpected and undesired events is reduced. This alienation from the land also leads to a reduced appreciation of farmers and food production, as the connection between farmers and consumers is distant and agricultural areas are seen as production facilities rather than mixed environments with various uses. There is however scope for rewilding marginal areas where production cannot profitably be pursued.

The focus on quick financial gains implies that decisions are typically driven by a short-term outlook, making it hard to build a case for improvements in soil quality and the environment in general. Politics are heavily impacted by market forces, with large agricultural industries becoming very powerful actors in society and politics. Europe has a strong role in the further globalization of the agricultural sector, which is facilitated by an increase in free-trade agreements, and is leading in the export of not just agricultural production, but agricultural technology and machinery as well.

Some groups in European society are able to play a role in new technological developments, either as a producer or a user/consumer of them, and benefit from the economic gains they bring. However, others see few benefits and are unhappy with the direction Europe is headed in, leading to a polarization in society. This division frustrates the ability of governments to pass laws and safeguard agricultural soil quality. Citizen initiatives to change production systems remain small-scale niche solutions for a minority of producers, as small farmers are not organized and corporate value chain actors focus on large volume, low margin food supplies.

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