

More food and a cleaner environment

Today agriculture and environment are facing numerous dilemmas. In a debate hosted as part of the National Environment Day, a lively discussion took place on the solutions that are open to farmers and the environment. One of the key questions asked was "Are our Scientists, activists and farmers speaking the same language?" The event was a great success and it turned out that scientists, activists and farmers really can speak the same language!

Is the current Dutch agriculture and food system reaching its limits? Reducing the adverse consequences of the existing system is seemingly a dead end. Instead, the system has to change itself. This means working towards a production and consumption system in which we share the interests of fertile soils, clean water, biodiversity as well as a decent income for farmers.

During the National Environment Day 2016, an initiative of VVM in partnership with HAS University of Applied Sciences, ZLTO, Louis Bolk Institute and Schuttelaar & Partners, viable agriculture and environmental management was at the heart of the debate. The venue the HAS School in Den Bosch, where teachers and students are busy with trying new cultivation methods and it was striking to see the large number of young people participating in the event.

People in Farming

National Environment Day was kicked off by Anne Reijnders from the Youth Food Movement (YFM) who underlined the importance to engage the professionals not just organisations. "It is essential that people listen to each other, feel and see! She advocated a better position for many male animals which are an almost worthless by-product now in our all too efficient food system. All too often, male cattle and hens are superfluous. The food production system has become short term with animals being slaughtered earlier and earlier to be processed into animal feeds and low quality meats. "She argued that the course and direction of our food production industry has become complex and skewed.

Dual challenge

PJ Beers, a transition manager at DRIFT and lecturer at the HAS, then outlined the challenge facing agriculture in terms of sufficient food for the rapidly growing world population and the environmental impact associated with the food production

In searching for solutions, Beers sees much ingrained behaviour along the lines of "you are bad because you have a mega stall. Dilemmas are also there. "Take the option that has the lowest environmental impact, but scored less in terms of animal welfare. Thus, the organic tomato is worse for the climate than the ordinary one, whilst the latter brings hardly greater use of pesticides than the other"

What also has an impact on changing directions is that economically farming is not in such a great shape. A pig farmer earns on average the minimum wage. Dairy farmers are struggling with low milk prices and greenhouse growers are struggling too. Some additional financial resources are necessary, because the reduction of the environmental impact of the production will in the first instance lead to higher investment costs. From the banks perspective, a business plan should at least 'break even' after three years but renovation costs do take longer. In addition, there are other obstacles.

We are accustomed to a new product through retail, but increasingly this means that another party determines the margin share. This situation proves, according Mr Huijbers, that an alternative financing and retail system is needed to actually achieve successful innovations in the agricultural sector. Hans Dagevos (LEI) in turn indicated that many more initiatives should be given the opportunity to develop. He pleaded for more room for experimentation and more support. "An entrepreneur in financial difficulties, just cannot innovate." He said.

Animals vs. vegetables

In the debate on the agriculture of the future, the protein transition of animals to crops is very topical. Personally, "I'm not ready for this kind of choice" says Rob van Brouwershaven (Department for Economy). "For now it is a big search. I think rather than naming some things good and bad we need to face up to a number of problems in the system.

Huijbers agrees: I am not gonna tell the rest of the world to eat less meat. "In our country this is going to otherwise happen anyway, but I don't care. Many of our Members may as well care a pig as a plant. "Central should be the question, according to him how we organize the transition to more vegetable based diet. "Shorter chains for example, sounds nice, but then at North European level and not a local level. For certain chains we have to even operate on a global scale in order not to get stuck.

Jacomijn Pluimers (activist) in this connection asked for more attention to the production of animal feed that is needed for producing all meat proteins. This often comes from afar and it involves huge quantities. "Just for our own consumption we use three times the area of our country. This ensures deforestation and social problems elsewhere. Furthermore, our country is left with the residual product, manure etc. "Over there no manure processors can stand up. "The solution according to her lies in the regional production of animal food. When asked what is regional, Pluimers suggested to begin with feed from Europe. "It also helps cycles to close. Jan Willem Erisman (Louis Bolk Institute) called this a good choice.

Regional production makes the system more resilient, so that it can handle by itself with external pressure to come back into balance. However, he pointed out prices are too low. This applies to soya as well as lupine. This means the production of vegetable proteins here will not yet start.

Pluimers looking for a solution in good trade agreements with retailers on fair pricing. Further, the consumer must be willing to pay a little more for meat products. Huijbers expected little of the latter. "Society is absolutely not stimulating farmers to innovate. In the store one acts different from the commitment one had at home." Anne Reijnders not think that regional feed the engine will be necessary for the transition. "It is too far away from many consumers off. "Instead, she advocates more business to business. "Farmers need to be able to make more and need to be facilitated in that. That could bring about an integral change. "

Dot on the horizon

The key question is of course which ways we will have to go? "The title 'Choosing for farmer and the environment' of the National Environment day articulates well the way the Department has in mind said RvB etc.- We look to agriculture as a solution to social problems.

My personal ambition is that we work towards a global system in which everyone has sufficient access to safe, healthy and sustainable food. Erisman argued that achieving high good quality food that is grown sustainably begins at home. True sustainable agriculture seeks to balance the three P's. - People, Planet, Profit. Biodiversity and the strength of the soil must be the starting point.

With a view to the future, Beers argued, that further intensification of agriculture is NOT possible. Our agricultural area remains the same or reduces. even though I'm not against intensification or extensification. All I want to explore are the possible paths that focus on sustainable business practices. But he is convinced that the innovation is already on its way, think of glass production using geothermal warmth, more animal friendly farmers and rise of farmers directly supplying to consumers.

"Which way it goes, I dare not say". We must above all look for opportunities instead of controversies. This requires searching, experimentation and collaboration. "As an example he mentioned the greenhouses. All greenhouses in 2020 can be energy neutral, but not in the current market situation. So we have to transfer money from users to innovators, otherwise it does not work.

Pluimers in turn thinks that it lacks a clear vision, a dot on the horizon. "We leave all options open." Bottlenecks in her eyes, in particular, the ongoing globalization and the unbalance of power in the chain. "Therefore, we bet on more regionalization, other ways of consuming and more empowerment of farmers and consumers. "Huijbers suggested to broaden the discussion. "We are talking mainly about the food, but energy, nature and biodiversity is also an case of agriculture. It is important to see the role of the farmer in full perspective. For thirty percent of the costs of the energy transition at sea we can do it. At the question of chairman Vera Dalm or we have to be very happy with our farmers, he said then affirmative. "You should honour them."

The European dimension

Dutch MP Fatma Koser Kaya believes that the Brussels agricultural policy needs to be overhauled. But that is difficult. "France needs to go on the road and gets an extra cookie. "As an example of the inhibitory role. Brussels she called a halt around natural pest control. For years Netherlands herein ran ahead, but we have let go in order to conform to other countries. Such learning experiences, according to the parliamentarian that we much more our own course to decide, but that requires the government with more ambition. We have to do battle on the quality and sustainability which will give us price advantages too, but we make too little efforts in that direction.

Former Chairman of Executive Directors of the HAS University of Applied Sciences and VVM president Jeroen Naaijken closed the debate on an optimistic note.

We must have to face deficient EU policy, but at any given moment if you do nothing, ultimately the problem solves itself in a harmful way. People in their early twenties, the students walking around here, they will bring us the necessary change. "