R4 A Harvest of Change: A Resolution to Reap Fairness in Agricultural Lobbying

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Motion text

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Introduction

Based on last year's resolution on agroecological transition (here), we aim to identify key accelerators to foster dearly necessary transitions in the European agricultural sector. It has long been proven that these transitions are necessary. However, most unfortunately, political actors are failing to react appropriately. Due to this, alternative solutions that challenge the status quo are still considered niche innovations, while the incumbent regime of socio-ecologically harmful practices remains the undefeated norm. As established in FYEG Resolution 2022 ‘Towards an agroecological Europe by 2030’, the current agricultural system does not only cause tremendous environmental harm, inter alia via soil pollution and erosion, depleted and polluted waters and desertification, but also ultimately the degradation of whole landscapes. This is not only a major issue for the people whose livelihood depends on the fertility of the land, but also the loss of precious resources that future generations will have to rely on. Thus, FYEG calls for fundamental reforms in agricultural policies and the re-prioritisation of policy goals.

A vast body of research suggests one or several socio-technical transitions in the agricultural sector to be imperative in order to achieve desired social and sustainability goals (references here). Socio-technical transitions are a completely normal, constantly ongoing process that simply ensures sectors to renew themself, fitting to changing times; the agricultural transition, however, seems to experience a lock-in effect (references here).

Lock-in effect

Taking a closer look at an example that demonstrates this lock-in effect. In May 2020, Euro Commissioner Frans Timmermans presented the ‘Farm to Fork Strategies’ as an important component of the European Green Deal. In the name of aiming for

a more healthy, fair, sustainable and environmentally appropriate food system, the European Commission set up goals to ensure the recovery and perseverance of biodiversity, such as a reduction of 50% of pesticides used within Europe by the year of 2030 (reference here). Pesticides manufacturers, most of which are multinationals with sales volumes of over 2 billion Euros each (reference here), responded to these proposed measures by stating this goal was not realistically attainable to them, and pleading for more research (reference here). Sabotage, says Nina Holland, a researcher of the agriculture lobby. She explains how agriculture lobby groups try to convince the public of their good will regarding the goals proposed by the Green European Deal, whilst simultaneously doing everything in their power to try and delay the measurements that have to be taken in order to accomplish these goals. Lobby groups sow doubt by stating a lack of scientific proof, as well as sowing fear by claiming that Farm to Fork poses a risk to food security (reference here).

The lock-in effect becomes visible when looking at the ways these lobby strategies have forestalled the social-technological transition, both in the past and now. When in 1962 scientist Rachel Carson warned of the damaging effects of pesticides, the industry responded with threats of a shortage in food supply - quite interestingly, similarly to recent examples (reference here). In 2009, the EU implemented a framework directive on Sustainable Use of Pesticides (SUD), however, member states and other institutions have not managed to successfully implement the SUD directive (reference here)

To ensure better implementation of SUD, it is being revised and adjusted, so that, in this revised framework directive, the Farm to Fork reduction target is incorporated (reference here). However, mostly on the level of member states, the Farm to Fork reduction target faces a lot of backlash, to say the least. Agricultural lobby promotes a narrative where it is said we ‘have to look at science first’. A slogan that is reinforced by paid research and skewed media coverage that focuses on the pretended negative economic consequences of the Farm to Fork Strategies (reference here). Conservative and populist parties point to these lobby-funded articles and studies and declare bad timing; in the recent past with regards to Covid-19, today in regards to the war in Ukraine (references used here). In sum; for decades, the same arguments have been preventing the agriculture sector from moving forward.

Policy feedback

This lock-in effect is amplified by policy feedback. Reinforcing policy feedbacks are created when, e.g., policy favours a specific interest group, which will then work towards expanding that policy or policy creates interlinkages between agencies and political leaders (reference here). Hence, so called, stable states are created in which incumbent (i.e. dominant, occupant) regimes can make use of reinforcing feedbacks by generating more political support for their incumbent position; which makes change even more challenging.

This is what we see in agricultural policy making. The agriculture sector makes up for almost 40% of the EU budget; between 2014 and 2020, the EU invested over 400 billion dollars in the industry (reference used here). It is then not surprising that the sectors' lobby is huge compared to the lobby of other stakeholders. It has been reported that in 2020 and 2021, the prime actors in the agriculture business spent over 50 million euros on lobby activities, although these reported numbers usually turn out to be much higher in reality (reference here). Environmental and civil society organisations are unable to compete with those kinds of numbers. But this also counts for small-scale farmers, who definitely do not always feel rightfully represented by big lobby organisations. Many independent farmers express a positive attitude towards the price increases that would arise from incorporating the environmental cost of agriculture and focussing on fair trade practices. (reference here). On top of this, it is known that 80% of the EU agricultural funding ends up at only 20% of the biggest farms within the European Union (reference here). A research by Lighthouse Reports, Dw, Follow the Money, Mediapart and Domani, paints the following picture:

"What emerges is a portrait of wealthy industrial pressure groups – from petrochemical companies and multinational meat-packing giants to pharmaceutical businesses – that have a stubborn hold over EU policy as well as critical differences with the family farmers whose welfare they say they aim to defend." - reference here

Deliberate acceleration of sustainable alternatives by policymakers or powerful actors is required in order to enable diffusion and movement within the system (reference here). In order to increase the likelihood of bringing about change in such a set up, it is found that two developments should intersect. Namely, (1) bottom-up development and mobilisation for alternative solutions that challenge the stable state, needs to be paired up with the (2) weakening of factors that are reinforcing the stable state (reference here and here).

While bottom up action has been building up for decades (reference here), the stable state seems to be so locked-in, that deliberate weakening of the incumbent regime is required in order to enable fair conditions for necessary change to be possible.

Conclusion

The EU is setting out ambitious sustainability goals, such as described in the European Green Deal, in which the 'Farm to fork' strategy is integrated (reference here). One of the goals of this policy is the reduction of the use of pesticides by 50% in 2030 (reference used here). However, due to the lock-in effect, the anticipated changes are slowed down. Agricultural lobbyists sow doubt about the effects of the transition, based on lobby-funded research. Wherever possible, these lobbyists try to stall the reforms. The same arguments

(for example that the topic hasn’t been researched enough) have been used for decades.

Then there is also the policy feedback-system. Reinforcing policy feedback happens when policy makers prefer a particular interest group. Environmental and civil organisations are not able to compete with these kinds of sums. This strengthens the policy feedback of the dominant agricultural stakeholders.

These kinds of imbalanced proportions are unacceptable. But how can we change these systems? While public action and technologies are being mobilised and developed, the first factor needs to be tackled by politics and policies. The aim of our propositions is to deconstruct the imbalanced lobbyism power in the agricultural sector. Therefore, we, the Federation of Young European Greens, call upon the European Union and its Member States to:

- End privileged access to the fossil industry. In some formats lobbyists have repeatedly been granted privileged access to politics, which other actors did not enjoy in the same form. Advisory bodies and institutionalised exchange rounds in the context of the energy transition and the regulation of the agricultural industry must not be one-sided, either in terms of personnel or topics. Interest groups such as environmental and consumer protection associations, must be adequately represented and must not be given a fig leaf function.

- Ensure balanced and broad participation by establishing balanced contacts and integration of interests. Stakeholders with concerns in the areas of climate, environmental and consumer protection, social affairs and human rights are often not listened to by political decision-makers on energy policy issues to the same extent as the large energy companies and their associations. Relevant actors who do not have the necessary financial resources and privileged access, but who nevertheless contribute important social concerns and expertise, must therefore be proactively involved by policymakers. Innovative formats such as citizens' councils or regional transformation councils could be good starting points for broad participation and have already proven their worth in many places.

- Research the establishment of a budgetary limit for the agriculture lobby in order to regulate their spending on lobby activities. The financial means of the agriculture lobby are wildly out of proportion compared to other stakeholders as named above, so that equal representation of interests is seriously disturbed. A budgetary limit on lobby activities could possibly create a more balanced playing field, so that other stakeholders can have an equal say and their interests are taken into account.

- Tighten existing rules on lateral moves from politics to business and, in

particular, to lobby jobs. Time and again, politicians turn the knowledge they have acquired in a democratic office or mandate into money by switching to lobby jobs. This promotes existing power imbalances, since only a few actors can afford highly paid former top politicians. In addition, there is a danger that politicians will look for lucrative lobbying jobs while they are still in office and base their political decisions on them. That is why clear rules are needed for blocking periods and waiting periods. The existing waiting period is too short, and it is still possible to change sides very soon after leaving politics. The waiting period for government members must be significantly extended and changes in lobbying activities must be ruled out. There also needs to be more effective monitoring options. Plans for the European Parliament to prohibit Members of Parliament from taking up paid lobbying activities after leaving Parliament for a limited period of time are positive. In addition, former Members of Parliament should lose their access privileges, which have been valid for life until now, and they should be allowed to work as lobbyists after the expiry of the time limit.