

Speech by Ms Hanny Van Geel, Member of the Coordination Committee of the *European Coordination Via Campesina*, at the Meeting of the Chairpersons of the Committees on Rural Affairs

More farmers, better food

“First of all, I want to start by thanking for the hospitality that I have experienced here in Lithuania. I am very honoured to be invited to speak here. Firstly, I will explain what the ECVC (European Coordination Via Campesina) is. It is a platform of 27 European farmer organisations from 19 European countries. The *European Coordination Via Campesina* is a part of the world-wide movement of *La Via Campesina* which connects 300 million food producers. These food producers might be peasants, fishermen, indigenous people, shepherds, including women and young people. In our organisation, we think that the visibility and involvement of women is very important. Therefore, for instance, half of the members of our Board and the boards of all regions of the world-wide movement consist of women and young people as well.

The title of what I want to talk about is *More farmers, better food*. Being raised on a farm and living and working a big part of my life on a farm, also working in the middle of civil society, I am convinced that farming forms the backbone of our society.

Farming defines the way we eat, what we eat and how it is prepared. Farming has great influence on the environment and shapes the landscape we live in. It forms a great part of our relation with nature. Because of that farming is, at least partly, responsible for the way we live. Taking this into account, we should rethink the direction agriculture is heading for and rethink the strategy of our policies on agriculture.

The lately reformed CAP is a result of negotiations followed by more negotiations. On some parts, first steps have been set towards recognition of small-farmers: the greening, the capping of the subsidies, the free first hectares for support, the exclusion of support for companies that are not real farmers and support for young farmers. We think these reforms are just small gestures in the total framework that is supporting a system that is very unfriendly to small-scale farming. As a result of that, a quarter of European farms have vanished since 2007.

Due to the wish to reach an agreement on the CAP reform, further decisions and implementation of this CAP reform has been laid back into the hands of national governments. This is an opportunity for more locally adapted policies; on the other hand, it requires again fighting against other stakeholders. Stakeholders that have considerably more power, more money and more influence. It is again a struggle for those who are not in a powerful position.

Europe’s people are experiencing the structural adjustment policies which governments are imposing on their populations. This is because governments think within an economical model. Society since the last age has been built on this economical system. Economics should be support for the life of people and the planet (the wealth of nations). In the current system, it is not the people and the planet that benefit; they are exploited to the benefit of the happy few (private banks, investment groups and transnational corporations). In this model, food systems have been reduced to a model of industrialised agriculture, controlled by a few transnational food corporations together with a small group of huge retailers. It is a model designed to generate profits. Therefore, it completely fails to meet its obligations of being dedicated to the production of food which is healthy, affordable and benefits people. Instead of that, it focuses increasingly on the production of raw materials such as agro fuels, animal feeds or commodity plantations. This industrial model of production is dependent on finite fossil fuels and chemical inputs. It does not recognise the limitations of resources such as land or water; it is responsible for drastic losses of biodiversity and soil fertility and contributes to climate change.

This has also caused the enormous loss of agricultural holdings and people who make their living from those holdings. It causes forced migration. It is the cause of rural poverty and hunger for more than a billion people in the world. Industrial foods end up being wasted or dumped in markets both within and outside Europe. Exported agricultural products are destroying farms and local production and livelihoods in all regions. And the processed food promotes a diet which is harmful to health and which contains insufficient fruit, vegetables and cereals.

This situation is the result of food, financial, trade and energy policies which have been imposed by our governments, the EU (especially through its Common Agricultural Policy), multilateral and financial institutions as well as transnational corporations. They realise policies of deregulation, liberalisation of agricultural markets and speculation on food.

This is happening in Europe and it is comparable with what is happening in Africa. I want to share a part of a testimony of a farmer from Mali, member of our organisation, which is an example of how farmers all over the world suffer from the same system.

He says: “We were told that the state was inefficient and that we needed to make more room for the private sector. [...] We were told to cut all support to sustainable family farming, which was termed unsuccessful [...]. We were told to produce even more cash crops, such as cotton, coffee and peanuts, for export at very low prices that were set abroad. With these slogans we were told to buy rice from Asia or flour and dried milk from Europe, all of which are now so volatile. Then we were told to become competitive according to the criteria of international financial institutions, and also that our states were no longer authorised to protect us. Our customs tariffs were dismantled and our markets liberalised. Food products from elsewhere were unloaded onto our markets, making us even more vulnerable to price volatility. [...] And yet none of these “solutions” imposed on us pulled us out of poverty. On the contrary, we became even more vulnerable. [...] Today, we are subjected to new challenges: climate change, financial speculation, unpredictable international markets, countries that grab our land. [...] In spite of all of this and without any aid, sustainable family farming has not disappeared. Unfortunately, we had to suffer the current crisis for our governments to become once again aware of the necessity for food security based on food production at the national level.

To solve the problem of price volatility, we, the sustainable family farmers, with the support of other actors in civil society, believe that it is necessary to:

- give priority to our local markets and regional integration [...];
- halt all forms of competition between farmers and production modes with a very large disparity in productivity [...];
- stop the policies which are destabilising our systems of sustainable family farming. In times of overproduction we suffer from dumping, in times of shortage we suffer from restrictions on the export of food we have been told to no longer produce.
- Our governments must aspire to policies that will support us, so that we can invest to feed our populations.
- Instruments exist to stabilise prices: appropriate customs tariffs, strategic stocks at different levels, regulations against speculators.
- Sustainable family farmers, women and vulnerable groups in rural areas must be granted real access to the funds mobilised in their name so they can finally begin to live with dignity from their work.”

This is the testimony of the African colleague.

As sometimes it seems that the current system is an unchangeable reality, a law of nature, we must realise that it is a man-made system and that we can change to another reality, another system, if we, the citizens and peasants, choose to change it.

We are people who share values based on human rights. We want free movement of people, and not free circulation of capital and merchandise which contributes to the destruction of livelihoods and, therefore, forces many to migrate. Our aim is cooperation and solidarity, as opposed to competition. We commit to reclaiming our democracy: all people should be involved in all issues of public interest and public policy making, deciding collectively how we organise our food systems.

Changing the direction of this dysfunctional food system will only be possible through a complete reorientation of food and agricultural policies and practices. It is vital to redesign the food system based on the principles of food sovereignty, the right of peoples to democratically define their own food and agricultural systems without harming other people or the environment.

Numerous experiences and practices already exist here and now at local, regional and European levels which are based on food sovereignty and which demonstrate how it can be applied. Peasants play a decisive role at national and international levels in feeding the world population. We are convinced that food sovereignty is not only a step forward towards a change in our food and agricultural systems, but it is also a first step towards a broader change in our societies. A change that we need to face the crisis.

What do we want in Europe? We want to change how food is produced and consumed. We are working towards resilient food production systems, which provide healthy and safe food for all people in Europe while also preserving biodiversity and natural resources and ensuring animal welfare. This requires ecological models of production and fishing and a multitude of smallholder farmers, gardeners and small-scale fishers who produce local food as the backbone of the food system. We recuperate a wide diversity of non-GM varieties of seeds and livestock breeds in these systems. We promote sustainable and diverse forms of food culture, in particular the consumption of high quality local and seasonal foods. This includes a lower consumption of meat and animal products, which should only be locally-produced using local non-GM feed. We engage in re-embracing and promoting knowledge of farming, cooking and food processing through education and sharing of skills.

We also want to change how food is distributed. We work towards the decentralisation of food chains, promoting diversified markets based on solidarity and fair prices. We develop short supply chains and intensified relations between producers and consumers in local food webs. We want to provide the building blocks for people to develop their own food distribution systems and allow farmers to produce and process food for their communities. This requires supportive food safety rules and local food infrastructure for smallholder farmers and to counter the expansion and power of supermarkets. We also work to ensure that the food we produce reaches all people in society, including people with little or no income.

We also want to work on valuing and improving work and social conditions in food and agriculture systems. We struggle against the exploitation and the degradation of working and social conditions and for the rights of all women and men who provide food as well as those of seasonal and migrant workers. For us, this includes decent living wages.

We reclaim the right to our commons. We oppose and struggle against using our commons such as land, farmers, traditional and reproducible seeds, livestock breeds and fish stocks, trees and forests, water, atmosphere and knowledge. We think we have to use these conditions for life as commodities, and not for financial speculation and patents. Access to these should not be determined by markets and money. In using common resources, we must ensure the realisation of human rights and gender equality, and that society as a whole benefits from them. We also acknowledge our responsibility to use our commons sustainably while respecting the rights of mother earth.

We ought to change public policies governing our food and agricultural systems. Our struggle includes changing public policies and governance structures that rule our food systems – from the local to

the national, European and global levels – and delegitimising corporate power. Public policies must be coherent, complementary and promote and protect food systems and food cultures. They must be based on the right to food, eradicate hunger and poverty, ensure the fulfilment of basic human needs and contribute to climate justice both in Europe and globally. We need legal frameworks that guarantee stable and fair prices for food producers, promote environmentally-friendly agriculture, internalise external costs into food prices and implement land reform.

These policies would result in more farmers in Europe. Public policies must be designed with the help of publicly accountable research to achieve the objectives outlined above. They must ensure that speculation on food is banned and no harm is done to existing local or regional food systems and food cultures either by dumping or by land-grabbing in Europe, particularly the Eastern Europe or the Global South. We work towards new agriculture, food, seed, energy and trade policies, which are internationally sound, to ensure food sovereignty in Europe. In particular, these must include a different common agricultural and food policy, the removal of the EU Biofuels Directive and global governance of international agricultural trade located in the FAO and not the WTO.

Food production is in the current system seen and counted as output per m² of products, mostly raw material (plants and animals), to be used by processing industry. The more processing and transport, the more added value. The terms ‘production’ and ‘added value’ are used in a narrow economic way of speaking. Producing unhealthy products like processed food and, for example, cigarettes, might have quite a high added value (starting from the several parts of raw material transported all over the world and put onto a product somewhere that is transported to logistic centres and supermarkets, and then after consumption, the added value continues in long healthcare actions, pharmaceutical industry or funeral business). Added value in this way has nothing to do with wellbeing and happiness.

Production should mean production of valuables such as healthy food, healthy environment with clean water, biodiversity of plants and animals and micro-organisms, healthy and fair-paid employment, livelihood of rural areas, social coherence of rural and urban areas. This is the real added value in the basic meaning of the word.

We need a paradigm-shift towards a new system that is holistic, inclusive and balanced. A food production, trade and consumption system that is balanced in giving and taking and, therefore, is able to feed, to last and to sustain further generations. Not the techniques, not economics, but life in the centre of our lives. When we will have achieved this, I am sure that we will have more farmers and better food.

Thank you.”