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The link between long-term food security and sustainability in Europe: Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy 2014-2020

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1. Introduction

According to the Food and Agricultural Organization (1996), food security is “when all people... have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. In the European context, especially after the Second World War, food security has been perceived to “depend on significantly increasing agricultural output and the formulation of market measures aimed at guaranteeing the income of farmers, as well as ensuring affordable prices for consumers” (Epstein, 2017, p. 23). Therefore, food security was assumed to be achieved by maintaining

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high levels of productivity. As a consequence, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has consisted, until a couple of decades ago, in encouraging food production; with the technological advancements, it entailed “increased intensification and specialization of agricultural production” (p. 24). Already with the Agenda 2000, the European Council called for a “multifunctional, sustainable, and competitive” agriculture throughout the European territory (Massot, 2020); in 2003, the CAP has undergone a major reform that not only condemned intensive agriculture, but also greater attention has started to be paid to the ecological component of agriculture and to sustainability¹.

The relatively recent inclusion of the “greening” aspect in the CAP², nevertheless, could only limit the damages that the long-term focus on agricultural output had brought. Thus, the European Union (EU) currently produces much more food than it can consume (Zahrnt, 2011, p. 47), which means that it suffers from overproduction. More dramatically, intensive agriculture has been the praxis for a long time; furthermore, insecticides, herbicides and fertilizers have been used to increase agricultural productivity. Both practices can have side-effects: the former in particular can lead to increased soil degradation and erosion (Stewart et al., 2005, p. 1). Today the measures taken by the CAP 2014-2020 are overcome by recent and more sustainable EU measures (as it will be discussed in the conclusion), which prevent the destruction of the European breadbasket. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how the EU learned from its mistakes. Therefore, this paper answers the following research question: **why the CAP 2014-2020 threatened long-term food security?** A comprehensive analysis of EU legal instruments, where the main concepts that revolve around food security are disentangled, is provided. It is important to point out that sustainability discourses will be analyzed only from an environmental perspective in this paper; therefore, the economical aspect will not be considered.

¹ Decoupling of aid from volumes produced indeed aimed at making farms more market-oriented, in order to reduce distortions in agricultural production and trade. Aid decoupling needed to be included in the “green box”, in compatibility with the World Trade Organization rules. For more information, see: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/107/the-common-agricultural-policy-instruments-and-reforms>.

² See henceforth: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32013R1307>, further discussed at p. 3.

2. Analysis

2.1. Food security and sustainable agriculture

Food security can be unraveled into many, interconnected concepts; among them, sustainable agriculture (rather than agricultural output) can be used as a lens to explore it empirically. The interdependence of food security and sustainability is getting more and more acknowledged: as argued by Marcuta et al. (2021), “food security is closely linked to the terms of globalization and sustainable development, being part of human security and referring primarily to national security, and then to regional security or world security” (p. 1). Alongside this growth, also sustainability discourses and rhetoric have increased in these last decades (Alons, 2017, p. 1605) and “sustainable development has been made an explicit objective of the EU in the Amsterdam Treaty” (Lowe & Baldock, 2000, p. 31).

Nevertheless, there are some shortcomings within the EU context. First, every country implements agri-environmental policies differently, as every country requires “specific measures to manage biodiversity and water resources, and control soil erosion problems” (p. 46); this can lead to a jeopardization of a homogeneous policy implementation across the EU. Second, on an academic level there is not much debate: even if food security is becoming more and more popular in academic journals, only a very limited number of these studies has focused on the EU context (Brunori et al., 2013; Fish et al., 2012; Grant, 2012; Kirwan & Maye, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013).

This has detrimental consequences for the policy-making: there is a “fractured consensus” about the meaning of food security: it means that “while there is a broad consensus that food security is a vital future challenge, there are significant fault-lines in terms of how to re-structure and develop socio-technical innovations to make agri-food systems more resilient” (Maye & Kirwan, 2013, pp. 96-97). Similarly, Epstein (2017) states that “it has since long been recognized that food and agricultural systems must become sustainable if the productive capacity is to be maintained in the future”; however, translating this knowledge into “coherent policy objectives with corresponding instruments” has proven to be incredibly challenging (p. 43). The next section explains why.

2.2. CAP 2014-2020 and the ecological problem

The troubled relationship between CAP and the environmental dimension of sustainability has been taken into account by Alons (2017), who focused on the role that the Environmental Policy Integration (EPI) has assumed in the CAP since the 1990s in respect to: “decision-making process, the policy output in terms of both substance and underlying policy ideas, the policy outcome in terms of effectiveness” (pp. 1604-1605). The findings were worrying: in these three areas, environmental objectives were not a priority for the EU (Lowe & Baldock, 2000, p. 42)³. Moreover, there has been an incomplete transformation “from exceptionalism to post-exceptionalism⁴” in European agricultural policy over the last two decades, which made the EPI in the CAP ineffective (Daugbjerg & Feindt, 2020). Furthermore, this transformation did not result in a full “reframing” of European agriculture as a sustainable one (Persson, 2007).

“Food systems is one of the key drivers of climate change and environmental degradation in Europe” (Saba, 2020, p. 91); this is partly given by agriculture which in Europe is “among the most intensive in the world” (Epstein, 2017, p. 34). For the European institutions and for the Member States accordingly, it would be particularly challenging to change their systems of production. Nevertheless, at the EU level, “numerous measures have been taken over to reduce the food risk [...] which is closely related to the ‘environmental risk’ that is caused by human actions through [e.g.] intensive agriculture” (Marcuta et al., 2021, p. 1). Furthermore, the objective of “sustainable agriculture” has been taken seriously by the Commission in the White Paper antecedent to “The CAP towards 2020”, which listed three principal goals: 1) the sustainable management of natural resources and climate action, 2) viable food production and 3) balanced territorial development as the focus of the post-2013 framework (2009). Undoubtedly, the main novelty of 2013 was the “greening component”, introduced by the Regulation 1307/2013, which contained the so-called “direct payments

³ It is worth mentioning that the authors published their article over twenty years ago; the situation has substantially improved.

⁴ Agricultural exceptionalism refers to a range of laws which insulate agricultural producers from regulation and promotes specific farming models. The two authors coined the term “post-exceptionalism” to indicate that these measures (which mainly consist in the exclusion of farmworkers from most major worker protection laws) have been only partially overcome.

regulations”. Specifically, the greening component ties 30% of direct payments to the observance of three agricultural practices “beneficial for the climate and the environment” (Epstein, 2017, p. 33). Despite the initial excitement and high expectations, “the final measures left much to be desired in the opinion of numerous commentators” (p. 34).

According to Bureau et al. (2012), the direct payment regulations is responsible for market distortion “as they do not provide incentives to produce, only to turn around and justify them back home in the EU on the grounds that they are needed to make sure Europe’s farmers produce enough food” (p. 324). Moreover, the authors investigate the logic behind the request to farmers to produce more, concluding that this logic is not supported by empirical evidence; “if the market demands more, then prices will signal that clearly to the farming community” (p. 324). As the butter mountains and wine lakes of the 1970s and 1980s cases⁵ demonstrate, “Europe’s farmers have shown how well they can respond to rising prices” (ibid.). Furthermore, most of the European citizens have never experienced any food shortage (Zahrnt, 2011, p. 47): therefore, “in order to guarantee the globe’s long-term health, we must dramatically reduce agriculture’s adverse impacts” (Foley, 2011, p. 62). Sustainable agriculture could be definitely the most suitable tool to conciliate the nutritional needs of future generations (which would be food secure) and the planet itself.

3. Conclusion

This paper has shown that the CAP 2014-2020 may have had detrimental consequences for the future European *demos* for different reasons, among which the “fractured consensus”, the stimulation of food production, and the inefficiency of EPI. Despite acknowledging the difficulty of the transition from one system of agricultural production to another, we need to pursue the path that has been initiated by the EU and think about long-term food security in relation to sustainable agriculture. An adequate policy not only prevents the destruction of the European land as we know it today, but also will save future generations from food insecurity. Thus, as Candel et al. (2013) argue, “it is a task for those who are truly engaged in

⁵ After suffering from an agricultural underproduction in the 1950s, CAP stimulated the output of dairy products throughout various policies, which eventually led to an overproduction of wheat, milk, butter and correlated goods in the 1970s.

enhancing global food security to navigate through the labyrinth of food security frames and to establish a holistic and coherent vision in the European food security debate” (p. 57).

Ten years ago, Charles and Godfray argued: “a rapid transition to sustainable agriculture is essential” (2011, p. 814). If we consider all the measures that have been undertaken in the last decade, we shall conclude that this is actually taking place: thus, the current shape of the CAP “contributes to the attainment of social goals and provides environmental public goods” (Guth et al., 2020, p. 4). It is indeed undeniable that the EU has evolved to find more ecological and green solutions for agriculture: after all, “the CAP has undergone significant changes during the nearly 60 years of its existence” (Alons, 2017, p. 1). There are modern legal instruments that today limit the problems derived from the CAP 2014-2020: most notably, the European Green Deal (2019a), the Farm to Fork Strategy (2020) and the CAP post 2021 (2019b). As the name of the first may suggest, these three documents contain “greener” elements that should, first, try to reduce the practice of intensive agriculture Europe-wide, and second, provide some feasible economic facilitation to stimulate sustainable practices. Furthermore, as suggested by Pe’er et al. (2020), the CAP post-2020 “acknowledges the need to address environmental and sustainability challenges and introduces a new Green Architecture and a delivery model that offers Member States higher flexibility as to how they implement the CAP” (p. 306). As further challenges are just around the corner, we should auspice that further EU policy legislations will be adapting fast to them, learning from their own mistakes as it was the case for CAP post 2020. These shall be the starting point of future research.

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