



The future will not be monocultured

*Alexander Heubuch**

I would like to tell you something about myself and my background. I am a 29 year old mechanical engineer now operating our small family farm in the south of Germany, close to Alps. In this area the soil isn't the best. Most winters we have a lot of snow and in summer there is usually plenty of rain. It is predominantly grasslands with a lot of dairy farming. Being rather young, I am not able to look back to the twenty years of La Via Campesina's history; at the age of nine, I dealt with smaller problems than agricultural policy. But I want to take this chance to share my perspective on the current situation of agriculture in the German-speaking areas of Europe (of course I am not able to speak for all of Europe, as the situations are very different in every region) and to share some ideas and wishes for the future.

Like many other parts of this planet, the farms in the region I come from are getting bigger. Most of them are still owned and run by families, but every year farms are closed; because there is no successor, because the owner found a better job in the industry, or other reasons. And the remaining farms grow bigger. If you want to stay in business, you have to grow, get more efficient, make your land produce higher yields, and your cow's produce more milk. You have to be world-market and export oriented, because that is the future. Meat and milk from Europe for China and Africa is what the world needs. That is what you can hear from so-called experts, from politicians, from the farmer's magazines, that's what you are told from the big and influential farmers associations. They even tell you this at the farming schools and agricultural courses at the universities.

What they don't tell you is that today Europe is importing feed for its animals from an estimated area of 18 to 20 million hectares: more than all the agricultural land in Germany (which is estimated to be around 17 million ha.). In 2008, according to the FAO, Germany imported 6.2 million tons of soy, mostly from South America, to feed its animals. This was a new record. As European public opinion is strongly against GMOs, their production and import is heavily restricted in Europe. This causes problems, as GMO-free soy is getting harder and harder to find. As a reaction to this, the big farmers associations are talking about the "protein crisis". Everywhere you can hear and read that Europe's protein self-sufficiency is impossible, although more and more farmers are starting to grow local protein crops and, in the case of cattle and dairy farming, additional protein is not required as cattle produce the protein they need in their digestive system.

Fortunately not everyone agrees with that opinion and other models are growing. There are many positive examples of change. More and more farmers are selling their products directly at local markets, setting up small shops on their farms, or delivering pre-ordered products directly to customers. Usually, these farmers buy and produce locally in a more sustainable way and they don't try to squeeze the last cent of profit out of their land. Based on my own observations, these farmers seem happy with their income and they are able to make a good livelihood from farms smaller than the size that economists say is viable.

Organic farming is becoming more widespread, a trend that is supported by consumers. New food processing cooperatives are being set up as an alternative to the few large companies that are dominating the market. Family farmers are even re-entering branches of agriculture that were completely controlled by the agro-industry. For example, by the end of the 1990s the poultry sector was totally industrialized, almost 100 per cent of the egg and meat production in Germany was controlled by a handful of companies.

The EU banned caging and poultry producers had to change their systems; by 2009 for Germany and by 2012 for the whole of the EU. But the industry didn't change, thinking they could ignore the law and do business as usual. Unfortunately for them, the customers didn't want this system anymore and this created the opportunity for family farmers to reenter the business. Today about twenty per cent of the poultry production is done by family farmers: of course it could be more, but is a success.

Unfortunately, because there is no lobby or powerful interest group backing these farmers, these projects of change often happen without knowing or learning from each other and they have to solve their problems on their own. In contrast, most of the large farmers associations here in Germany, but also in Middle- and Northern Europe

are very closely linked to the industry and propagate a large-scale, industrialised, world-marked oriented agricultural production.

In most cases, the farmers associations working on different models are rather small, such as AbL, the organisation of which I am member. AbL brought me in touch with La Via Campesina, an organisation that I had never heard of before. Although it was founded in Belgium in 1993, LVC is not well known amongst farmers in Europe and Northern America, which is a shame, as we need to link all these projects and efforts of change amongst themselves and with efforts in other parts of the world. Who else could do this, if not LVC? What's more, LVC needs to be strong in Europe and North America, because these regions have such a big influence on international agriculture policy.

One of the reasons for the lack of influence in Europe might be that LVC is associated with socialist ideas. There is no doubt that the current capitalist system only works for a very small group of people and the rest of the world has to pay for them, including of the majority of people in the rich countries. But in the socialist systems we have seen in the past, it wasn't much different. Here in Germany, the east of the country was under the influence of the Soviet Union for 50 years and the consequences of that system are one of the key problems in agriculture today. During the socialist era in Eastern Germany, small family farms were closed by the government and collectivized into large cooperatives farming several thousands of hectares. Today, more than 20 years after the collapse of the socialist system and the German reunification, when you visit the former East, there are no farms in the villages, and in most regions you can find only large agro-industry surrounded by mono-culture agrarian deserts. It is the same in many other former socialist countries, such as Hungary for example. When Germany was reunified, there was the chance to rebuild small-scale family-farmer based structures in the regions, but this didn't happen. Since 1989, the land in the former East is managed by a government agency called BImA (Bundesamt für Immobilienaufgaben), which is renting and selling the land. This would be a great chance to give access to land for young people who want to start farming, but the BImA doesn't give land to small farmers, even if they are willing to pay higher prices than the big farmers. As justification we hear things like "We cannot break up and destroy these large highly productive structures as it was so hard to get there", by which they mean the process of collectivisation when land forcibly taken from small farmers.

In addition, in most parts of the former East Germany, the social democratic party (SPD) and the left party (Die Linke) are very powerful, and they support these structures and agricultural policies, both politically and financially, thus preventing a more sustainable development.

For these and other reasons, the model of socialism is very unpopular in large parts of Europe, especially amongst farmers, and I don't like it either. But although I am not a fan of socialist ideas, I cherish working with and in LVC because LVC has a production model that is far better than either the capitalists or the socialists: agro - ecology.

I don't want to produce for the Chinese market, using soybean from Brazil, traded by bankers -- who don't even know what a soybean looks like -- to squeeze the maximum amount of milk out of my dairy cows. I want to produce for the local market with the resources my land is offering, because that is more efficient in the long term. Not, of course, for the bankers, but for the farmers and also for the consumers. Despite the efforts of politicians, the industry and associations of large-scale producers, the number of farmers thinking this way is growing and they have a strong ally: the consumers. Of course not everyone in the civil society is interested in agriculture, but many people are, and they don't want an *industrial* agriculture. Every January for the last three years there has been a large demonstration in Berlin organized by an alliance of over 40 organizations, with more than 20,000 participants, including farmers, consumers, environmentalists and animal rights activist, demanding agricultural policies that allow and support sustainable, regionally-oriented agriculture. The politicians are overwhelmed: they don't know what to do, and the people are tired of what the politicians are saying.

During my activities in LVC I learned that the same thing is happening in many regions and countries all over the globe. People are demanding that politicians listen to them, people are demanding a different type of agriculture and food supply, they are demanding their sovereignty. And it seems that the reaction of the politicians is the same everywhere: They tell people that they are just a small group of ideological misguided idealists, living on an island of dreams not realizing the reality in the world outside. If, for example, you fight against GMOs in Europe, you will be told that everywhere else in the world the people want GMOs, they grow them everywhere, it's their daily bread, and they demand more of it, eventhough in the US, the home of GMOs, no bread is made from GMO wheat because the consumers and the bakeries have concerns. Another example: Last year I met people working in LVC's campaign against agro-toxics in Brazil, where the use of DDT is very popular. They were really surprised to hear that the use of DDT has been prohibited in the US since 1972 and in most European countries since the 1970s because of its negative effects on the environment and humans.

This is the type of information we need to help our local activities. In my opinion, the main focus of LVC's work should be to provide this kind of information to the people working in the regions and to bring people who face similar challenges together so they can exchange strategies, or even better, solutions to specific problems. I think it is far more important to bring people together to learn from each other than it is to

discuss political theory or focus on a specific political idea, which in the end may actually prevent people from joining, even if they have similar ideas of how the food supply system in this world should work. Yet these people are needed because in this specific case more and bigger *is* better, as it gives us the strength we need to successfully compete with the lobby of the agro-industry.

In some parts of Asia people say: "Don't look for the guilty, solve the problem!". That is what we have to do and I can't think of any other organisation but LVC to do this job on a global level.

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