UN expert says EU farm policies ‘impossible to satisfy’

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European efforts to make farming more environmentally friendly have done little to address its growing ecological footprint abroad, says a UN expert who calls for a shift to more sustainable consumption.

Background

Two decades of changes to the Common Agricultural Policy, the European Union’s signature farm support programme, have led to a reduction in oversupply and subsidies for warehousing surplus foods, experts say.

But Europe has been less successful at reducing food waste at the consumer level. The EU executive estimates that up to 140 million tonnes of food and plant rubbish are produced each year in the EU, amounting to 300 kg per person – two thirds of which is edible.

Worldwide, food waste has broad nutritional and environmental impacts. A recent McKinsey Global Institute report says that the world produces 10 million tonnes of edible waste each day, or up to 30% of all food.

World Health Organization figures show that at least 2.8 million adults die each year as a result of overweight. In addition, 44% of diabetes and 23% of heart disease cases are attributable to being overweight and obese.

Olivier De Schutter, the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, criticised European Union farming policies for driving demand that is “literally impossible to satisfy” and requiring vast amounts of “virtual land” in other countries.

“The EU today uses 640 million hectares of land, which is about 1.5 times its own surface,” De Schutter, a Belgian law professor who serves as an independent expert to the United Nations, said in a recent speech.

Demand for biofuels, livestock feed and flowers are driving plant and imports from emerging markets in Asia, Latin America and increasingly Africa.

“Globalisation places populations with very divergent purchasing power in direct competition,” De Schutter said at a 20 March event in Brussels hosted by the Compassion in World Farming charity.

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development, which takes place in Rio de Janeiro in June, offers the opportunity to move away from a “productivist paradigm” and commit to “sustainable production”, De Schutter said.
More people, more conflicts

Concerns about conflicts between food production and resource sustainability are reflected in a new UN Food and Agricultural Organisation report. It forecasts a 70% rise in global agricultural demand by 2050 – and a doubling of need in low- and middle-income countries – at a time when food production faces threats from climate change, unsustainable water use and deteriorating soil quality.

EU officials have pledged to use the Rio event to promote European policies and, as Environment Commissioner Janez Potočnik has said, to seek “targets, timeframes and political direction” to protect the ecology and create a “zero-waste economy.”

Meantime, the European Parliament and national governments are in the process of reviewing the European Commission’s plans for ‘greening the CAP’.

The proposals are aimed at improving biodiversity and reducing greenhouse gas emissions; using CAP direct payments to encourage farmers to rotate crops as a way to reduce fertiliser and pesticide use; and preserve at least 7% of land for focus areas such as buffer areas or permanent grassland to help reduce emissions.

It also seeks incentives to make livestock farming more compatible with other environmental goals, including reducing farm runoff from manure that contributes to nitrate pollutants in waterways.

Yet such policies have sparked a debate about whether Europe should be considering limits on production when it must import ever-growing amounts of commodities from around the world.

“Today we produce 35 million hectares outside of Europe for our feed and food needs,” said Friedhelm Schmider, director general of the European Crop Protection, an industry group representing the pesticides industry. “So we produce in Africa or in Asia for our food in Europe, which is called land-grabbing.”

Schmider told EurActiv in an interview that “we have to increase the land productivity but we have to do it in a sustainable way.”

Super-sized diets and waste

Western habits also have other impacts, experts say.

Rich-nation diets are spreading globally – especially to mushrooming middle classes in emerging countries like India, Brazil and China – and with them rising consumption of meat and food that are contributing to soaring levels of obesity, World Health Organisation figures show.

Food waste is a global problem – with consequences for the environment and supply chain. The European Parliament recently called for “radical measures” to slash food discards to conserve natural resources and cut landfill disposal.

“Many, many more are overeating as compared to the number of people who don’t get enough,” Jan Lundqvist, senior scientific advisor at the Stockholm International Water Institute, told EurActiv recently.
He worries that excess food consumption is destined to grow as middle classes expand in developing countries. “I think those aspects must be considered when we talk about the problems of feeding the world or to supply water.”

De Schutter told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on 6 March that the spread of Western eating habits was undermining efforts to improve nutrition globally and spurring a rise in obesity.

“Urbanisation, supermarketisation, and the global spread of Western lifestyles have shaken up traditional food habits. The result is a public health disaster,” the UN expert said in Geneva.

He called for taxing unhealthy foods products; regulating foods high in fats, sugar and salt, restrictions on food advertising and revamping “wrong-headed” farm subsidies and doing more to support local crop production.

**Positions**

In a statement released on 27 March, the CONCORD federation of European development and relief groups said: "The EU is heavily dependent on the import and use of external inputs - feedstuffs, fertilisers, pesticides, fuels, heavy machinery. Currently, 80% of protein animal feed for European livestock is imported which grabs 16 million hectares of land from local farming communities in South America, promoting GMO monoculture with devastating impacts on the environment.

"The impacts are not restricted to developing countries: This model also leads to unsustainable arable and animal production where large areas in Europe have lost their fertility and are polluted with nitrates, phosphorus and pesticides."

The European Dairy Association said in a statement on 19 March that the objective of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) should be ensuring food security for the citizens of the EU whilst making a contribution to the food security of the rest of the world.

“The European processing industry has an immediate interest in the future success and competitiveness of European dairy farmers," Joop Kleibeuker, the organisation’s secretary-general, said in a statement.

“To prosper in an increasingly globalised market environment the European processing industry needs a competitively priced supply of high quality raw milk. At the same time both European dairy farmers and processors need to take on the challenge of improving sustainability."

Philip Lymbery, chief executive of the British charity Compassion in World Farming, said at a 20 March event hosted by the organisation:

“Our society currently wastes nearly half of its food … We feed farm animals with grain which could be fed to humans and could satisfy the needs of billions of people.”

**Links**

EU official documents
• European Commission: Regulation on the financing, management and monitoring of the Common Agricultural Policy

European Union

• European Commission: Video of Commissioner Cioloş' statements on the key points [fr]

International Organisations

• UN Human Rights Council: Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food

Industry federations and trade unions

• COPA / COGECA: The Common Agricultural Policy after 2013

NGOs and Think-Tanks

• Compassion in World Farming: Beyond Factory Farming report

Press articles

• AlertNet: How America Is Making the Whole World Fat and Unhealthy