

**SPEECH by Diversity Europe Group President Séamus Boland  
Debate on 'The Long-Term Strategy for Rural Areas'  
with Mr Janusz Wojciechowski, EU Commissioner for Agriculture**

EESC plenary session, 21 October 2021

Dear Commissioner,

Thank you for being here today to discuss a topic which, as a representative of an Irish rural organisation and as a small-hold farmer myself, is very close to my heart. There is no doubt in my mind that the future of Europe will depend on how we deal with rural areas. Agriculture globally, uses half of the world's habitable land and within the EU, rural areas are home to half of Europeans.

Farmers are also custodians of the environment and they are fully aware of the dramatic impact that Climate Change is already having. According to figures that I read recently, for every degree that the global temperatures will rise, wheat yields will fall by 6%, rice will fall 3% and maize 8%. Together, these three crops account for 2/3 of all calories consumed by humans. And globally, food prices are continually rising, with increases seen over the 13 of the last 15 months...

So the question today is not whether EU rural strategies and CAP should contribute to more sustainable and greener farming. The question is how to ensure that rural communities and European farmers are able to transit towards sustainability, without leaving anyone behind. The key words are 'sustainability', 'fairness', 'community participation' and 'ownership'.

I would like to cite three specific challenges. Firstly, the necessity for complementarity and consistency. Between on the one hand, European agricultural and food policies and on the other hand, effective and well-resourced rural policies to reinvigorate local economies and provide quality transport, education, health and digital services. Reducing disparities between urban centres and rural peripheries, must go hand in hand with quality of life in rural areas. And none of this will be possible without community led local development. I remember the VP of the EC, Mr Timmermans said here at the Committee that "If we don't make the green transition, then social injustice will explode". But it is true the other way around as well. We cannot have the green transition without a fair and just transition.

Secondly, within the EU, most farmers are still small holders, unlike in the US. Clearly, it is easier for bigger farmers to recoup costs. And even though European farmers may support the objectives of the new CAP, these changes will incur costs. Unfortunately, it is still the case in Ireland and probably elsewhere, that the average wage of farmers is below the industrial average. To this, must be added the additional costs of living and working in rural areas, such as transport. So my message is very clear: yes, let us green CAP and let us invest in rural areas. But we also need fair food prices for farmers, reflecting the true cost of production for the environment and society. Unfortunately, consumer welfare is still equated with the lowest possible price. In contrast, we need prices to remain above the costs of production.

My last point relates to sustainable food chains. It may surprise some of you that within the EU there would only be 3 days of food supplies, if chains were to be disrupted. Fortunately, short supply chains offer many benefits to rural cooperatives and consumers. However, the 'Farm to Fork' strategy will only succeed if farmers are given incentives to accelerate the transition to sustainable food systems.

Dear Commissioner, I will conclude by referring to the famous book 'Sapiens: a brief history of humankind', which dedicates a whole chapter to the 'Agricultural Revolution'. And ironically, the conclusion of the author is that it is plant species such as wheat, rice and potatoes which domesticated Homo Sapiens and not the other way around! Thank you for your attention.