Encouraging a structured dialogue between Consumers and Farmers

On 16 May 2011, the “Farmers” and “Consumers and the Environment” Categories held a joint meeting to discuss issues related to the theme “The future of the CAP: the benefit of consumers and producers.” Europe II asked both spokespersons for their views and reflections on the relationship between consumers and farmers.

EUROPE III just a decade ago, it would have been unthinkable that consumers and farmers could express common concerns on certain aspects of the CAP. What contributed to this change in attitude and meeting of minds?

YS: In my view there are three reasons for this: a) the development of agriculture, b) globalization, and c) the strengthening civil society. Farmers are becoming fewer and fewer, while continuing to occupy a major part of the territory, they need to adapt and engage with the world around them. Faced with an irreversible globalization, we must explain our preoccupations concerning imports from third countries, whose standards are different from ours, and this must be acknowledged. Finally, Citizens are demanding more and more involvement in everything related to the environment and food quality in general.

RCM: In recent years, agricultural issues have assumed a global dimension and agriculture has become a social issue in itself. Thus, the impact of agriculture on our environment (water, biodiversity, climate) is an issue that concerns the citizens and society as a whole and no longer limited solely to agriculture. Similarly, food security and the ability of agriculture to feed the world once again has become a crucial issue. In 2008, tensions between supply and demand led to a surge in agricultural prices and price increases which have directly affected households in their daily lives.

EUROPE III: What are the main points of agreement and disagreement between the two parties?

YS: I think we should speak rather of misunderstandings and this especially seeing as the number of farmers has declined sharply over the past thirty years. In a number of European regions, villages have become “commuter dormitories” and subsequently contact between villagers and farmers have progressively weakened.

RCM: Agriculture responds to needs that everyone agrees to be essential. The most obvious is of course the provision of nourishment: to produce quality food at affordable prices. Agriculture also contributes to the life of rural areas and diversity of our food models. So there is an unquestionable consensus on the strategic role of agriculture and the need for a strong policy in this area. However, on the other hand, the priorities and the means of this policy area are subject to much disagreement. Citizens no longer understand the logic of a CAP that mainly benefits large farms, but does not give enough support to smaller crop farmers and establishes rent situations that are unfavourable to new member states. Giving legitimacy to the CAP presupposes reintroducing fairness in the management of aid.

EUROPE II: The question of the impact of costs related to the food chain on the end price of products is often referred to by both farmers and consumers. Do you foresee a scenario that could satisfy everyone involved?

YS: Since the milk crisis in 2008, all those involved agree that there is a real problem of distribution of added value, and a weakening of the bargaining power of the producers within the chain of the agricultural sector. The way out is to balance these deficiencies. According to DG AGRI itself the fact that since 2006, increasing productivity has no longer been able to offset the growing gap between the prices paid and prices received by leading farmers, emphasizes this reality.

RCM: Consumers find that reduced prices at the stage of agricultural production are rarely reflected in the prices on the supermarket shelves. Today, intermediaries such as industry and the distribution sector monopolize the added value and squeeze for themselves the maximum share of the profits destined for the producer. This imbalance reflects the power struggles between producers, processors and distributors. Greater competition...
among actors associated with better organisation of producers might rebalance this situation. Why don’t producers organise themselves into cooperatives to get their brands to better compete with the supermarkets and beat them at their own game?

EUROPE II: The high quality of products on the EU market is a top priority for European farmers and is vital for the protection of consumers. In the marketing of products from third countries guaranteeing such quality can be difficult. Do you think that EU legislation is fit to meet this challenge?

YS: International trade is of course necessary. However, consistency is essential. Products from third countries should not be allowed to be in competition with ours, if they do not comply with exactly the same norms and quality standards in social, economic or environmental terms. In my opinion, it would be a huge mistake, if we were to add to our current energy dependence from abroad, food dependence, in the future. RCM: When foodstuffs are imported from third countries, there is no guarantee that the conditions of production meet the environmental standards set by the CAP, or the regulations on animal welfare. Some pesticides banned from use in Europe are being used by countries exporting to the EU. From the perspective of consumers, such distortions of competition, of which they are not informed when they choose products, are shocking.

EUROPE II: What is the impact of the actions of organisations representing the interests of farmers and consumers in the context of defining the future of the CAP? Do you think there might be a common purpose of work?

YS: Everyone occupied their home turf in the various consultations that both the Commission and policy makers held before and after the publication of the Communication in November 2010. As a good example of a common approach, I would cite the latest opinion of the EESC on “The Future of the CAP”, which was the result of a consensus between the representatives of European Civil Society from this point of view, this opinion is, frankly, a very good document.

RCM: Today, the voice of consumers is not sufficiently taken into account in the debate on the CAP and the consumer organisations are seen rather as adversaries by the farming sector. But remember that the point of view of consumers on the CAP is important for several reasons: consumers buy food from the agri-food sector and, as taxpayers, they fund the CAP.

Group III members in the spotlight playing a key role

Congratulations Senator Jillian

We were delighted to hear the exciting news that our member for the past twelve years, Jillian van TURNHOUT, has been appointed to the Irish Upper House, Seanad Éireann as a Senator, by the Irish Government: a well-deserved honour and accolade. Jillian was elected and served as Vice-President of Group III, on two occasions. She was also Vice-President of the Committee, with responsibility for Communications, from 2006-2008. An extremely active, enthusiastic and popular member, she sat in the SOC and REX sections and was the rapporteur for some fairly tricky and controversial opinions such as “Alcohol related Harm” (EESC opinion 1473/2009 – SOC/340), where her negotiating skills and ability to broker a workable compromise, were the hallmarks of her character and work attitude. Her warm personality and friendliness was missed in the corridors and meeting rooms of the Committee. We wish her every success in her new career in Irish politics, where we are sure that she will use all her personal and professional expertise to the benefit of her compatriots on many issues concerning children’s rights, youth and family policy, to name but a few of her areas of competence and passionate interest.

Onwards and upwards Jillian.

A tribute to János TÓTH (HU): “Gone too soon”

Both the current and the former Hungarian members of the European Economic and Social Committee are filled with deep sorrow having heard that Dr. János Tóth, former member of EESC and president of the TEN section, co-chair of the Hungarian Economic and Social Council, had passed away so suddenly, at such a painfully young age. At the time of his death, when the colours of hope and feelings of solidarity were evident in our minds, as we were celebrating Easter, we, in Hungary are profoundly grateful for the compassion expressed by the Presidency and different bodies and personalities of the Committee, on this very sad occasion. In his home of Budapest, we all have wonderful and very pleasant recollections of János and we also know that the EESC has too a wealth of fond memories of him. He was a very active, committed, highly responsible and devoted member of the Committee. His entire professional life was dedicated to the representation of civil advocacy. He always believed in the strengths of participatory democracy and represented those values which are, among others, the most important founding principles of the EESC and of the EU itself. Our dear friend was a master of formulating balanced and well-grounded views and compromises, always, in a respectful and elegant manner. Even though we all represent different interest groups, however, we are unified in the belief that his passing has left a painful void and that his personal commitments and values should somehow be followed-up and mirrored in some special way.

Current and former Hungarian members of the EESC

The President of Group III, Luca Zahir, and the staff of the Group III secretariat join all members and colleagues in sending their sincere condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of János, who, like us all are trying to come to terms with his tragic and unexpected loss.

News from Group III

BUILDING A STRONGER EUROPE FOR ITS CITIZENS

On Friday 13 May 2011, the Bureau of Group III met in Budapest, Hungary, to consult and listen to the views and opinions of local Hungarian civil society organisations on a series of issues, under the above global theme. The keynote speaker was Dr Tamás Ivan Kovács, State Secretary and Ministry for Development, who set out the various priorities for the Hungarian Presidency. There then followed three thematic workshops involving debates between the Group III members and the assembly of almost sixty local organisations representing a wide-range of Hungarian civil society, who were in attendance. In particular, the third workshop on the “Integration of Roma and other vulnerable minorities” provoked some very lively discussions and exchanges, during which issues raised touched on the questions of respect for Roma as citizens and heritage-bearers, their integration at European level and the entrepreneurial aspect of that integration, their different situations across Europe and the pros and cons of the current European Union’s initiatives in this area.

A more detailed report of the meeting and the full programme may be consulted here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-building-stronger-europe

THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS’ INITIATIVE: “EMPOWERING THE CITIZENS’ RIGHTS”

Group III is organising an Orientation Seminar on Monday, 27 June 2011 at the EESC headquarters in Brussels. The President of Group III, Luca Zahir (IT), launched and promoted the idea to debate on the stakes of the biggest democratic innovation of the Lisbon Treaty: the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI). This Orientation Seminar aims to highlight the historical, procedural and institutional aspects of the European Citizens’Initiative and to tackle the future challenges which lie ahead by involving a wide range of representatives of the EU Institutions and of national civil society organisations from the Member States. More precisely, it intends to brief and instruct these representatives of the national civil society organisations about the ECI, in order to give them all the necessary information with the aims of firstly, bringing about an efficient European Citizens Initiative and, secondly to open the communication channels with other organisations on a national level.

A full report of the proceeding and conclusions of this important and ground-breaking event will be published in our next edition in July.
BUILDING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH COOPERATIVES

On 27 May 2011, CECOP published an article, penned by Lere Luengo for Work Together, under the above title on its website.

To read the full text of the article click here: http://www.cecop.coop/building-gender-equality-through

THE ROLE OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES FOR THE PREVENTION OF CHILD POVERTY AND THE REALISATION OF CHILD WELLBEING


You can read the full text of the paper here: http://www.eurocoop.coop/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=404&catid=44&Itemid=191&lang=en

COPA-COGECA WELCOMES MEPS CALL FOR STRONG CAP AND A STRONG EU BUDGET IN FUTURE

In a press release issued on 25 May 2011, Copa-Cogeca welcomed MEPS demands for the continuation of a strong sustainable Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and the maintenance of its budget in the EU Commission plans for the future of the CAP.

To read the relevant press release, please go to: http://www.copa-cogeca.eu/Main.aspx?page=HomePage

OECD GREEN GROWTH STRATEGY TURNS BLIND EYE TO ENVIRONMENTAL THREATS

In a press release issued on 25 May 2011, the EEB highlighted a joint statement it and Greenpeace International sent to EU Economic Ministers, in which they call on the OECD to take braver steps and heed the calls for changes to the existing economic growth model.


EURO COOP’S COMMENTS ON THE CONSUMER POLICY POST-2013

In a statement published on their website on 29 April, Euro Coop welcomed the priorities set out by the European Commission in the consultation document for the preparation of the next (post-2013) Consumer Policy Strategy. Euro Coop indeed believes that, in spite of financial constraints, European Consumer Policy should remain a key priority for the EU.

To read the full text of the article, please go to: http://www.eurocoop.coop/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=404&catid=44&Itemid=191&lang=en

GENERAL ASSEMBLY SAYS “WE WANT FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT”

On 29 May 2011, the 15th Annual General Assembly of the European Disability Forum gathered the whole disability movement in Budapest. Among all the important topics on the table for discussion, the 200 participants focused on how to make sure that the European Union will guarantee freedom of movement for all persons with disabilities.

To read more about the discussion that took place at the event, please go to: http://www.eeb.org/Page_Generale.asp?DocID=13855&thebloc=27454

SECTORAL SOCIAL DIALOGUE COMMITTEE ON SEA FISHERIES

In a press release issued on 10 May 2011, EUROPÊCHE stated that the social partners from the fisheries sector should demand immediate consultation on the socio-economic consequences of the future CFP.


INTERNET GOVERNANCE: THE WEB OF TOMORROW IS YOURS!

EYF has published on its website details about the fourth European Dialogue on Internet Governance, EuroDIG 2011, which took place on 10 and 31 May in Belgrade.

To read more about the meeting and consult the programme, please go to: http://www.eurodig.org/
At its plenary session on 4-5 May 2011 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs:

Cristian PÎRVULESCU (RO) - SOC/348 “The EU Counter-Terrorism Policy: main achievements and future challenges” (EESC 800/2011)

Richard Adams (UK) - NAT/506 “Organic products labelling and organic products” (EESC 813/2011)

Richard Adams (UK) - TEN/444 “Management of spent fuel and radioactive waste” (EESC 817/2011)

This Directive is welcomed by the Committee as a clear step forward in requiring the planning management of the existing local, national, international and global partnership. The Committee would like to see a more effective, strategic defence of the EU’s interests in the area of access to markets. The EESC believes that the developing powers held by authorities, may lead to discrimination and stigmatisation of specific persons and/or groups of people.

Corrado ROSITTO (IT) - CCM/082 “Third country-owned enterprises in EU public procurement markets” (EESC 807/2011)

In this own-initiative opinion, the EESC states that opening-up of the public procurement systems of all countries to international trade under the Agreement on Government Procurement (WTU GPA) is beneficial. It strongly urges the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission to ensure more effective, strategic defence of the EU’s interests in the area of access to markets both internally and internationally. Moreover, the Committee believes that there should be a level playing field for all parties, based on reciprocity with third country enterprises that respect the key principles of international public procurement. In conclusion, the EESC calls for the approach based on prevention and an “early warning” system for projects and for new third country regulations which are restrictive in the area of procurement to be beefed up, with a view to identifying potential barriers and condemning them internationally right from the start.

Dilyana SLAVOVA (BG) - NAT/503 “Contractual relations in the milk sector” (EESC 819/2011)

The EESC welcomes the work of the Committee, whilst also highlighting the fact that the proposal will not solve all the problems in the dairy sector. The EESC considers that all four elements (contractual relation, protective measures, the impact of the growth of inter-professional/inter-branch organisations and transparency) are closely linked and interdependent. Thus these elements should be tackled jointly and simultaneously, the balances along the supply chain, especially the disequilibrium between retailers on the one hand and farmers and processors on the other, which stands in the way of a fairer distribution of the added value of products to milk producers. Therefore, the Committee recommends to the Commission that measures be taken to ensure that transparency is applied equally throughout the dairy chain (producers – processors – distributors – retailers). In conclusion, the EESC stresses that increased transparency can help the dairy chain function more smoothly, to the benefit of all actors, and in this context welcomes the recommendations of the HLG to the Commission ensuring that transparency does not distort competition in the internal market.

Richard Adams (UK) - NAT/506 “Organic products labelling and organic products” (EESC 813/2011)

The EESC welcomes the fact that the Commission is taking advantage of the revision of those regulations, guidelines and measures in order to adopt measures and implement and implementing counter-terrorism policy. The EESC believes that the prevention aspect should be reviewed, and a new dimension added further upstream, involving the development of cooperation and the timely resolution of tensions. Amongst its five key recommendations the EESC requests that: the term “religiously motivated terrorism” is used in official documents instead of “Islamist terrorism”. “Religiously motivated terrorism” is used in official documents.

The Committee welcomes the report of the Group and fully supports its recommendations; it also supports the Commission’s response to the report. With reference to the report of the Group in this, the Committee recommends, amongst others of the report, to the European Parliament, to the Committee to the Commission to efficiently set aside the EU’s budget for supporting research and innovation be increased. To a proportion of the overall budget which definitely reflects the shared importance and weight of this area in the 2020 strategy and feels that greater emphasis be given to “key enabling technologies”, without which we can neither meet the challenge of global competition nor address societal challenges. The Committee appeals to the Member States to definitely fulfil their “1% obligation” and to clearly exceed this goal if economically possible. With regard to the terminology used for the three research categories in the report of the Expert Group, the Committee has reservations about the concept “science for science”. Instead it suggests using the concept “science for knowledge”.

Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATTALLER (ES) INT/561 “Cooperation between national authorities responsible for the enforcement of consumer protection laws” (EESC 793/2011)

The EESC supports the Commission’s proposal and welcomes its intention to introduce greater legal certainty, clarity and elasticity into EU legislation. However, the EESC regrets that the proposed revision is so short on content and does not deal with all of the aspects of the regulation that need to be amended in light of experience since the entry into force of Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004. The EESC calls upon the Commission, in its revision of Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004, to take account of the recommendations contained in the present aims at to enhance the current cooperation between authorities responsible for consumer affairs.

Hernández Battaller Bernardo (ES) INT/566 “Jurisdiction and the recognition and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters” (EESC 795/2011)

The Committee supports the Commission’s proposal, considering that it would enable the gradual removal of legal barriers that need to be achieved; this will make life easier for people and businesses, improving effective remedies. Moreover, it urges the Commission to pursue its initiative to remove legal barriers to cooperation between authorities responsible for consumer affairs.

Evelyne PICHENOT (FR) - REX/313 “Sustainability Impact Assessment (SIA) and EU Trade Policy” (EESC 818/2011)

The EESC believes that it is crucial that all trade agreements henceforth include a monitoring mechanism which involves civil society, as the only way to guarantee that honouring of commitments and the risks and opportunities presented by the opening-up of trade in terms of sustainable development are monitored. In order to organise a renewed participatory process, the EESC recommends, in particular that the EESC be able to participate upstream by means of a prior opinion on the choice of indicators, the identification of consultation and the monitoring, in the future an EESC opinion be sought on the “analysis of consequences” submitted to the European Parliament and the Council and that the EESC be recognised as an important partner for organisations consultations and follow up with the civil societies of the partner countries, in cooperation with the EU delegations. In conclusion the EESC should act as a facilitator to ensure that the consultation with civil society regarding the impact assessment is coordinated with the future implementation of the follow-up mechanisms laid down in agreements.

Mr Jong PÉGADO LIZ (PT) is the Rapporteur for the opinion on: “The open internet and net neutrality in Europe” – TEN/457.

The full listing of membership of the study groups for the new work may be consulted here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.opinions-search.

Overview of Our Members’ Work in the EESC

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NOTE: The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee’s website: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.opinions-search.