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Avoiding ecosystem collapse will require a different Common Agricultural Policy

Report on biodiversity sheds a light on where the future negotiation should go

In Paris a few weeks ago, at the height of the EU election campaign, a report on biodiversity and aimed at global decision makers was released, and made quite a commotion. What grasped the public attention was a frightening figure stated in the report: 1 million species will become extinct in the coming years - meaning a collapse of our ecosystems and dire consequences for human beings throughout in the world, particularly impacting their capacity to produce food.

However, the report, produced by the intergovernmental platform IPBES, also talks at length about the possible solutions, in particular for our farming and food system. As the discussion on the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) are set to start again in the coming weeks, it is high time that EU decision-makers actually follow the advice of the leading scientists on the issue and start supporting only food and farming system which are preserving the ecosystems.

IPBES, leading scientific body on biodiversity

Since the release of its report, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has been the target of vicious attacks, the likes of which are quite usual for any scientists whose reports sound the alarm and call for deep changes in our behaviours. But this time, it has proven difficult for the naysayers to cast doubt on the competence and agenda of the authors (not that it stopped them from trying).

IPBES is not just another band of dirty green activist hippies. On the contrary, it is an intergovernmental platform linked to the UN, with currently 100 member countries. Their goal is to assess the state of biodiversity and of the ecosystem services it provides to society, in response to requests from decision makers.

In short, their job is to scientifically assess how the ecosystems are functioning in relation to their utility to HUMAN BEINGS (and not just for the inherent value of biodiversity, for example) in order to help governments making the right decisions.

Hundreds of leading scientists from the fields of ecology and biodiversity were involved in the process and it was thoroughly peer-reviewed.



We must fundamentally reform our food and farming system

The situation described in the report is extremely concerning. Ecosystems are collapsing, which means human beings will not be able to survive, or at least will suffer heavily from the consequences. But, as per its aim, the IPBES does not stop at describing the situation - it also gives advice to decision makers on what can be done to avoid this mass extinction. A significant number of these recommendations are focused on our food and farming system.

First, they place the responsibility with affluent countries: they (we) should change their consumption habits and agri-food model, and stop wasting food. According to the IPBES, rich countries have been protecting their own environment, at the expense of other countries' environments. For example, our overblown production and consumption of animal products is only possible because much of the necessary feed - mostly GM and highly chemically treated - is produced in South America or Asia, destroying the local ecosystems (see this report from Mighty Earth). The report also underlines the importance of involving communities in the decisions about the land they use and inhabit. Large-scale, top-down projects are often destructive. Two direct blows to the neo-colonialist vision of "development," still very present in the EU.

The report gives a long list of production methods to support: pest and nutrient management techniques, organic agriculture, agroecological practices, soil and water conservation practices, conservation agriculture, agroforestry, silvopastoral systems, irrigation management, small or patch systems... but all of

these should be achieved alongside a significant reduction in the use of herbicides and pesticides, whose devastating impact is clearly highlighted in the report. This is an important detail, as many of these techniques, especially conservation agriculture (agriculture without tilling) are still practised with heavy use of herbicides.

The report gives even more advice, such as putting in place technical assistance for farmers to make the transition to better production methods, and also makes a strong call for on-farm participatory research, because that's what gives the best results!

Give clear support for beneficial production methods... and stop subsidising the others

What does it mean for a government, practically? According to IPBES, they should have clear, well structured regulations, to frame production methods which are good for biodiversity. Governments should put in place incentives and subsidies for these methods - and put an end to subsidies for production methods which have a negative impact.

This last point is a major one - the CAP today is mainly subsidizing the industrial farming system which is one of the main sources of biodiversity loss according to the report. Of course, the CAP also provides support for organic farming and environmental measures, but IPBES argues that this is not efficient if the whole subsidy framework is not coherent. Policy makers have to make a choice.

But to be able to adopt laws which are favourable to biodiversity, decision makers should first regulate lobbying. The report strongly underlines the negative role of industry lobbying on any regulation going in the right direction, as soon as it runs contrary to their economic interests. The report advocates regulatory mechanisms to address the risks of co-option and lobbying, given that "commercial interests may work to maintain high levels of demand, monopolies and continued use of pesticides and chemical inputs". This is central: we cannot continue making laws and regulation as if lobbying did not exist and had no influence.

As the negotiations on the CAP reform start again, lawmakers have to consider biodiversity

Many of the criticisms made by IPBES concerning food production systems and practices, as well as the allocation of subsidies, were also made by MEPs from the Greens/EFA group (and others) during the negotiations on the new CAP. They were mostly ignored or shrugged off by the majority in the EP (see our press release on the regressive text voted in the European Parliament's Agriculture Committee a few weeks before the elections).

How can politicians of the major parties in the EU stand so far from the opinion of the leading governmental scientists of the world (including their own)? Perhaps the answers are partly to be found in the influence of the lobbies mentioned above, but also in a complete lack of awareness of the severity of the situation.

As the European Parliamentary elections have made clear, EU citizens are greatly concerned by the rapid degradation of their environment, and so we hope that the new negotiations on the CAP will finally consider these issues. We will, now even stronger than before, fight for a better CAP, good for our ecosystems, good for human beings.

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