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News | 16.10.2016

World Food Day

Agriculture must move in step with the needs of our climate

“Climate is changing. Agriculture must too”. That is the theme of this year’s UN World Food Day, to be celebrated on 16th October.

The message is a promising one. And with World Food Day falling just before the next UN Climate Change Conference, linking food and climate resonates strongly. COP 22 will take place from 7-18 November 2016 in Marrakech, Morocco and the FAO has taken the opportunity to call on countries to address food and agriculture in their climate action plans, and invest more in rural development.

At first glance, it seems a promising and ambitious programme. But how will the FAO and, at EU level, the European Commission actually approach adaptation to climate change? And how does the COP22 aim to include food and agriculture in the COP discussions?

FAO bogged down in the Climate Smart Agriculture mantra

The concept of Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA), developed by the FAO and the World Bank, is potentially positive but has also proven to be quite controversial. CSA entails three objectives, all of which aim to preserve soil health in a changing climate: adaptation, mitigation, and increasing yields.

However, as stated at the recent hearing held in the European Parliament on the occasion of World Food Day, CSA is merely an ‘approach’: there is no clear definition, criteria or distinctions on what is and what is not CSA, and how it can benefit food systems facing climate change.

This gap in the definition creates opportunities for supporters of the current intensive agriculture model. In fact, the Global Alliance on Climate Smart Agriculture (GACSA) includes 20 member countries, some NGOs and farmers’ organisations, but also agribusiness corporations, which defend sustainable intensification. 60% of corporations in the alliance are fertiliser companies such as Syngenta and Monsanto. These supporters of the CSA claim that carbon capture and storage techniques could finance climate resilience, food security and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. However, they do not question the specificities of industrial agriculture such as the use of synthetic fertilisers, GMOs or high-yielding seed varieties, which cause soil erosion and put biodiversity and farmers' rights at risk.

It is not easy to reject CSA altogether, as there are also many good initiatives coming from it. Some organic organisations are calling themselves climate smart; the French government has joined the GACSA,

stating that it will try to push the CSA debate towards agroecology. Some organisations have also joined the Alliance to promote the true uses of this term. But FAO is burying its head in the sand when it comes to the ambitions of the industry to overtake the CSA approach in order to implement the rules of the current productivist and non-ecological agricultural model. As the process began with the involvement of agro-industry, it will be difficult to redefine the term CSA now. It will continue to be used by industry as it sees fit.

European Commission between weak ambitions and contradictions

Similarly, the European Commission gives limited attention to the contribution of more sustainable food production in responding to climate challenges. In the European Parliament hearing on World Food Day this week, the Commission blindly supported the overall CSA approach as being the solution to climate change. On the other hand, recently Agriculture Commissioner Hogan pledged €15 million to promote EU meat consumption, despite a recent study showing that by cutting our meat consumption to within accepted health guidelines could reduce food-related greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 29% by 2050.

Quite a confused stance for an institution that claims to have put the EU on the way to achieving the transformation towards a low-carbon economy.

COP22's aspirations to make a difference on agriculture: a last hope?

On 30th September, Morocco's ministry of Agriculture organised a high-level conference to launch the 'Triple A' initiative, which aims to Adapt African Agriculture to the challenges of climate change.

Together with 20 other African ministries of Agriculture, Morocco, which is heading next the COP22 climate talks, wants to have the 'Triple A' initiative considered by all participants at the next COP and to agree on financial commitments. So it is the time for developed countries to contribute as they committed last year in Paris to a fund of $100bn per year by 2020, which will be key for developing countries to be able to plan to invest in early action. Particularly in adaptation and particularly in agriculture.

Africa employs 60% of its population in the agricultural sector and Morocco has decided not to ignore the potential of this sector for its country and the whole continent.

The 'Triple A initiative has two components: Negotiations and Solutions. Two technical terms, two pragmatic responses. Negotiations for a fair distribution of funds between climate adaptation and mitigation by placing the 'Triple A' at the heart of the climate talks. Solutions to promote and foster the implementation of concrete and innovative projects. Examples include soil management, control of agricultural water, climate risk management and capacity building and financing solutions.

One may raise the progressive aspect of this initiative, as for the first time it will allow to push agriculture high on the agenda of the climate negotiations and hopefully remind people of the potential of Africa to develop sustainable solutions for the sector. For instance, the 'Triple A' includes better use of agroecological practices in soil management, to improve carbon storage.

However, one must be careful not to again let this initiative be taken over by the agro-industry. The 'Triple A' also claims for 'larger-scale, and more sensible, use of fertilisers' on the ground that Africa is one of the world's lowest consumers of fertilisers. Again, as for CSA, the fertiliser industry will not miss this train. But accepting the so-called solution it offers could increase the market access of fertiliser industries in Africa, which would be completely perverse from a climate and agriculture point of view.

So, when celebrating the World Food Day this Sunday, let's keep in mind that the link we wish to make between agriculture and climate must not echo the demands of the agro-industry, which has for years

promoted the benefit of the very model of industrial agricultural which is at the heart of so many environmental concerns.

As Greens in the European Parliament, we call for a real paradigm change at EU policy level, thanks to a more coherent EU Food policy, away from the productivist and ‘all-for-export’ logic, and caring for healthy food and for all actors of the food chain working to put it on our plates.

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