

Agricultural policies Brunch

Preserving farms and food security is a task for society as a whole

by Marita Brune

For a short time, the discussion of agricultural policy issues was alive in Germany in the general public. The lockdown and political calculations almost put an end to it. A new approach was sought with an "agricultural policies brunch" in the region of lake Constance in Baden-Württemberg. It is one of several new paths how farmers are trying to attract public attention for issues that are imminent for society as a whole.

In November last year, Germany experienced the largest protests by farmers in a long time: in many places such as Thuringia, Bonn, Hannover and Berlin, thousands of farmers demonstrated against the agricultural policy of the Federal Republic. In Berlin more than 8600 tractors arrived instead of the expected 5000. A great awakening was noticeable; farmers were joining in new communities to explain their concerns to the public. Their objective arguments were increasingly heard and even echoed in the media.

Farmers demanded that concerns such as nature conservation, landscape protection and animal welfare are no longer discussed in a one-sided ideological manner. Their contribution to the preservation of our food, biodiversity, nature conservation and animal welfare was discussed more broadly. With the first popular motion in the history of Baden-Württemberg (www.volksantrag-gemeinsam.de), they showed a way to deal with the above concerns in a factual way.

The farmers made it clear that they cannot be constricted endlessly with political regulations which, moreover, contradict all expert knowledge. Farms have already been dying on a large scale for years. If this continues, farmers will be unable to secure either our cultural landscape or our food supply. The protest and the public discussion were therefore justified and urgently needed.

However, deliberate attempts were made to shift the public discussion into the back rooms of political deals and to bring it to a standstill. In addition, Corona and the justified restrictions on public life resulted a tight limitation of discussions among citizens. It was no longer possible to organise events and debate with fellow citizens in the public sphere. Farmers could hardly exchange ideas among themselves.

Controversial bill is pushed through

But the politicians kept going: during the lockdown, Baden-Württemberg passed the controversial Biodiversity Enhancement Act. The farmers' organisations' demanded to suspend this highly controversial bill, but was arrogantly ignored.

Now everything was possible, there was no more „interference“ from the farming community or the public. People acted according to the motto of Wolfgang Schäuble, who described the Corona crisis as „a great opportunity“ for Europe and declared: „Resistance to change decreases in a crisis. We can bring about the economic and financial union that we failed to achieve politically.“ (Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung, 21 August 2020)

Developing direct democratic principles

Hubert Lehle, a fruit grower on Lake Constance, looks at this development with concern. And with him many colleagues from fruit and vegetable farms in Baden-Württemberg. They joined forces and actively and successfully shaped the development of direct-democratic principles in the discussion about agriculture. That was before the lockdown. Now they had to watch idly as decisions were passed through in politics without a chance to intervene. Again and again, they tried to figure out how they could revive the democratic process despite the crisis and the resulting contact restrictions.

High-profile panel

Hubert Lehle and some of his colleagues finally had an idea: on 16 August 2020, he invited the public to an „agricultural policies brunch“ on his farm. The podium was exceptional and had a high-profile line-up: Farmer Willi, a well-known, politically active, independent farmer from the Rhineland (www.bauerwilli.com). Critically minded he presented the agricultural policy plans of the EU entitled “farm to fork”. He would not be Farmer Willi if he did not immediately take action against these plans by proposing the „coloured forks“ campaign: farmers all over Germany should draw attention to this policy with large coloured forks in the countryside to encourage discussions among people.

The Swiss economist, Professor Mathias Binswanger, spoke about the question why agricultural free trade does not lead to a better world and why agriculture is a special case. See also interview with Bauer Willi.

Dr. Matthias Burchardt, philosopher from Cologne, addressed the question: „What are the costs of agriculture and what is agriculture worth to us?“ Hubert Lehle hosted the agricultural policy brunch. It took place on his farm, outdoors, with plenty of fresh air to keep the necessary social distance. Many of his colleagues and interested citizens from Germany, Austria and Switzerland took part and joined in the lively discussion.

Successful event

This event not only succeeded in bringing the discussion back to public attention. The high-profile and interdisciplinary panel also made apparent how important it is to take the topic beyond the narrow confines of specialist agricultural circles and to approach it together with scientists from other fields. The preservation of farms and thus the food security of our countries must once again come to the fore and become a task for society as a whole.



Hubert Lehle (3rd from left) with speakers (from the left) Bauer Willi, Mathias Binswanger and Matthias Burchardt (picture mt)

Security of supply precedes landscape conservation

Video interview by Bauer Willi (farmer Willi) (D) with Prof. Mathias Binswanger (CH)

Edit. On 16 August 2020, „Bauer Willi“ conducted an impressive interview with Professor Mathias Binswanger as part of the „Agricultural policies brunch“. Below we publish a slightly edited transcript of the interview. The video recording of the interview can be found under the following link [Interview].

Farmer Willi: Hello everyone. Once more we are here on holiday at Lake Constance on Hubert's farm. We had a very interesting day today, where my neighbour to the left, Professor Binswanger from Switzerland, also took part as a speaker. Matthias, please introduce yourself to our audience.

Prof. Mathias Binswanger: Ok, I am a professor of economics at the University of Applied Sciences of Northwestern Switzerland, which is located in Olten, halfway between Basel, Zurich and Bern. And there I am an ordinary professor of economics, but I am also involved in agriculture, among other things.

Agriculture is a special case

You have also written a book, a little book about agricultural trade, global agricultural trade.

Yes, the book is called „More Prosperity through Less Agricultural Free Trade“. Today it's a common notion that more free trade leads to an increasingly better world. In the book I show that this is not the case in agriculture, that agriculture is actually a special case, that sustainable food supply is actually always a local food supply. And if we want to maintain this, then we cannot achieve it if we also allow free trade in agricultural products. That's why we have to say that agriculture is a special case where the assumption that more and more free trade leads to a better world does not apply.

So this message will probably have met with great sympathy from the big retailers Migros and Coop, Edeka and Rewe ...

There it will not meet with any sympathy at all, because of course it is in the interest of the grocers' or the food industries to buy raw materials as cheap as possible and then produce goods they can sell as expensive as possible.

If, on the other hand, the farmers also get reasonably paid for their products, this reduces the profit margin for Migros, Coop or, in Germany, Aldi, Lidl and other suppliers. Thus of course, it is in their interest to pay the farmers the lowest possible price. That is legitimate, that is their market position. But we have to identify this first of all. We have to make sure that this does not have the effect it has today, that the farmers always end up at a disadvantage, because the market power is on the side of these food retailers and not on the side of the farmers.

Security of supply precedes landscape conservation

Now there are also voices, and you can hear this occasionally in Switzerland too, that people think farmers should preferably no longer produce anything at all and instead take care of the landscape. You are pretty far advanced in terms of subsidies.

Yes, in Switzerland there are various payments from the state for so-called landscape conservation activities, i.e. for the preservation of high-stemmed fruit trees, or for the conservation of rough pastures and so on. And this leads to a tendency for the farmer to become more and more of a landscape gardener – because he gets money from the state for this – and thus actually produces less and less. Of course that conflicts with the actual task of agriculture: to guarantee security of supply in Switzerland.

Before the First World War, it was already the case in our country that we had almost given up on food supply, especially for grains. And then the grain supply collapsed during the First World War, and that's when we realised: it's not good to be completely dependent on foreign countries. That's why security of supply was declared an essential goal of agricultural policy in the Federal Constitution. We started subsidising farmers and building up border protection so that Switzerland would be self-sufficient in an emergency.

This is in contradiction to the idea that farmers should only be landscape gardeners. Se-

curity of supply is then no longer guaranteed, and this is clearly contradicting the Swiss Federal Constitution. That is why it is not acceptable for us to turn farmers into mere landscape gardeners.

Cultivated landscape is beautiful landscape

Realistically, which way do you think the scales will tip? Will they tip more towards security of supply? You have the opportunity to submit petitions for a referendum, where citizens can have their say directly. Or will the trend continue in the direction of nature conservation, landscape conservation and species protection?

Basically, we are moving away from a producing agriculture. But on the other hand, the Corona crisis has led to a certain rethinking. It made us realise that when you are dependent on foreign countries and food supplies become really short, countries always think of themselves first and say: we have to feed our own people first. We have experienced that supplies can then become short. I believe that security of supply has now regained greater importance and that people are somewhat sceptical about this development towards pure landscape gardening. Because it has other implications too: if we really move away from a producing agriculture, then in the end there will be some

landscapers paid by the state to do the landscape conservation, who will then have to be paid quite expensively.

As it is at the moment, however, the landscape conservation is actually a by-product. The farmer does not primarily want to conserve the landscape, he wants to produce something. And the by-product of this activity is the landscape that we create as a cultural landscape, and that is also a beautiful landscape, the way we want it. We don't want an overgrown landscape.

Now the Swiss are talking about the beautiful landscape in Switzerland ...

Exactly, and it didn't come about by chance, it is related to agriculture. The way it is maintained at the moment, is relatively cheap because the farmers produce food and maintain the landscape for free as a by-product, so to speak. But if food is no longer produced, then the state has to pay dearly. And if we consider an overall calculation, then the conservation of the landscape becomes very expensive.

Thank you very much. I think and hope that this idea will also find expression here in Germany. In any case, it would be good for the general discussion to look at things in the same manner here in Germany too. Thank you and see you again soon. Bye.