

Farmer's cleverness

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Over the past few years, the livestock sector has been in the news with some regularity, the sector has been facing economic difficulties. For example, the chicken sector in our country suffers from the fipronil affair and there are dairy farmers who have tampered with the numbers of cows in their administration. Many farmers quit with their business. The causes are the regulatory pressure, high land prices and the purchasing power of supermarkets¹. Fortunately, there are also farmers who see light at the end of the tunnel. This week came the news that a large majority of traditional farmers want to switch to a more sustainable business in order to emerge from the crisis². Now that will not be that easy. Research by Wageningen University revealed last year that although there was an increase in the share of sustainably purchased food (from 8% in 2015 to 10% in 2016³), the majority (60%) are still being sold via the supermarket⁴, the parties with a large purchasing power.

In order to stand together strongly, farmers set up cooperatives more than 100 years ago and joint investments were made to make end products (with a higher margin) from the raw materials. For example, flour and milk factories were created⁵. The cooperative also gave the farmers a fair price for the raw materials and thus protected individual farmers against the market power of buyers. With the expansion of the market (Europe) this is becoming increasingly difficult, because products from cheaper countries are also available. The large supermarket chains make full use of this, under the motto that consumers do not want to pay more. Meanwhile, the poor farmer continues to suffer.

Now the farmer can plow on⁶ as if nothing is happening. However, it is more likely that the farmers are looking for cooperation, after all they have been doing so for many years. From this partnership sustainable producing farmers can lobby to ensure that harmful side effects of traditional agriculture are allocated in the price, creating a fairer playing field.

A different path can also be taken through the cooperation. In fact, several initiatives have already emerged. In the newspaper "de Volkskrant" of 7 April last year, it can be read that farmers and citizens have bought the area "Binnenveldse Hooilanden" of the Dutch province of Gelderland, and they are going to maintain it. Where citizens initially wanted to dig up the entire area, farmers wanted to cultivate it. These parties have managed to find synergy in each other's interests and have jointly decided to redesign the landscape. Funding is arranged through loans, subsidies and certificates for citizens. It is the first time that such a nature reserve is not managed by a large institution.

There are also farmers who go a step further in the cooperation. Last week we spoke to someone from Notter, an agricultural-oriented neighborhood in the triangle Rijssen - Wierden - Nijverdal (in Twente and that is in the province of Overijssel, but you know that). We heard that various themes are actual. Pig farmers, for example, have the legal duty to remove the asbestos from their buildings by 2024 at the latest, while those farmers often already have financial difficulties. In terms of biodiversity, nature has suffered a bit in the past and one wants to stimulate tourism (cyclists through Twente). They also want to contribute to a more sustainable energy supply and people in the area see opportunities for creating jobs for social work.

¹ <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/geld-en-werk/dit-boerenstel-stopt-door-machtige-supermarkt-de-koek-is-op>

² <https://www.trouw.nl/groen-boer-wil-verduurzamen-om-uit-de-crisis-te-komen~a9091ad5/>

³ <https://www.wur.nl/nl/nieuws/Consument-besteedt-kwart-meer-aan-duurzaam-voedsel.htm>

⁴ <https://nos.nl/artikel/2236234-supermarkten-verkopen-meer-vlees-en-vis-die-duurzaam-zijn.html>

⁵ <https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Co%C3%B6peratie>. Our Rabobank and insurance company Univé are cooperatives for example, originated from farmers' initiative

⁶ <https://www.gedichten.nl/nedermap/poezie/poezie/31914.html> and see also <http://cultuurgeschiedenis.be/en-de-boer-hij-ploegde-voort/>

Here a win-win seems to arise. A fund is set up in which the residents can invest and the municipality will provide subsidies. From the fund, the asbestos roofs will be removed and solar panels will be installed (a kind of energy cooperative 2.0). Pig farmers receive compensation for the use of their roofs. Farmers and citizens want to improve the biodiversity in the area, the starting point being that the farmer must be able to continue to do business. The plan is to have the "first line" green maintenance carried out by employees from the social service. This maintenance can be done in gardens of residents (who pay a fee for this), but also around the cycle paths to be realized. Eventually, people want to expand to a care concept for aging residents.

We can appreciate this kind of farmer's cleverness: optimization in the execution in optima forma. The farmer has always been involved with land and will continue to do so, but in the Twente example with an extra product: a "Tourist Ecological Main Structure". If you are going to do this as a farmer alone, this will never work. In a sense, this is somewhat like the Swiss model. The population wants to pay a lot of money for maintaining the traditional farm landscape⁷.



This shows that by looking more broadly than only your own terrain, sometimes surprising solutions can arise and in the meantime "the throttle can be pushed" to further increase the sustainability of the sector. We however could help the farmers by paying a little more for their sustainable products with high quality and helping to lobby for pricing the harmful effects of traditional agriculture. We then buy the less special products at the supermarket.

Maybe we will see the "Super farmers"⁸ again with a sports car bringing the milk to the milk factory as was often seen on TV in the 90s⁹. In the context of sustainability, we recommend that this will only now be done with an electric variant.

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⁷ <https://www.nieuweoogst.nu/nieuws/2017/10/02/zwitserland-houdt-van-eigen-boeren>

⁸ A term from another area in the east of the Netherlands, it has something to do with football

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWWkysK7FG0>