

Opinion n° 2001-06 (November 2001)

ON PRECISION or “RATIONALE” AGRICULTURE

Guy PAILLOTIN's report, which was submitted to the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries in February 2000, defined the concept of rationale agriculture and looked at the measures that could be taken to promote this idea he believes to be a promising one, both for agriculture and for the environment. Indeed, one of the concerns of rationale agriculture is reconciling profitability and the protection of nature. A summary of the main points of this report is annexed to this opinion.

Debatable fundamental postulates

The report attaches a great deal of importance to the consumer's willingness to pay: judging by its usual behaviour, the food sector would not be able to accommodate concerns for the environment in consumer products prices. In actual fact, agricultural production costs are for the most part marginal in the price structure of what is paid in the shops. This should change the way question is formulated: "In the agro-food sector, what are the real mechanisms which convert production costs into shop prices, and what can be done to re-establish a certain level of citizens' control over consumer prices?"

It is also worth noting that the calculation of agricultural production costs and prices charged to the consumer does not take into account the cost of "environmental externalities", which would certainly render products made in an environmentally-friendly more attractive to the market.

In more general terms, the reference to economic performance and the optimisation of production costs, which are fundamental to the rationale agriculture approach, do not make any sense in a sector which depends so heavily on subsidy. European aid in the production of corn silage, for example, has resulted in thousands of hectares of natural meadowland being turned over; compensation is topped up if the land is irrigated, which has led to a massive increase in irrigation activities.

On the basis of this, the switch to agricultural practices which respect the environment requires a complete overhaul of the economic precepts which govern agriculture and farming (in particular in this area of subsidies). One of the shortcomings of the report is that it fails to propose a subsidy system which really targets sustainable development in agriculture.

It is important to bear in mind that the objectives of competitiveness, growth and exports are often incompatible with those of sustainable development: domestically, firstly, their impact on environmental, health and social aspects; secondly, their impact on farming practices and the sovereignty of the countries of the South in terms of food; and thirdly, the ecological consequences of the correlative increase in transport and physical goods. The issue of controls over production and its distribution between the regions and farmers is one that should be dealt with here.

Laudable intentions in the area of the environment

The idea of taking the impact of farming practices on the environment into account is clearly an element of progress in respect of the productivity-oriented methods of intensive farming of the 1950s to the 1980s; the environmental damage done by this period are underlined by the author: soil erosion, water table salinisation, reduction in biodiversity and animal welfare... The economic cost of this damage in the medium and long term certainly has a lot to do with the desire to change the way we go about it.

The approach based on securing a responsible commitment from those working in this area rather than depending on purely authoritative or economic measures and the importance attached to information and training all seem to make sense, even though we should bear in mind the fact that purely incentive-based measures inevitably present opportunities for subsidy abuse or fraud.

The need for a broader dialogue

The report makes a clear distinction between the areas of health and the environment, and only considers the latter, apart from a brief mention of "proven" health risks. With this reasoning, animal meal was introduced a few years ago as a part of what was called "rationale" agriculture.

In general terms, the author refers to the need to rely on technical and scientific knowledge (including that of the farmers themselves) and lays some store by progress in these areas to improve performance (as long as a new technique presents no proven risk and offers advantages, it should not be prohibited. The example of GMOs is discussed in these terms). Rationale agriculture is based on recommendations for practices resulting from the present state of knowledge: whilst these recommendations are more refined than they were in the past, they are still limited and uncertain in terms of the impact they are likely to have.

This science-based attitude has proved limited in numerous areas. On the one hand, giving greater credence to other types of knowledge, such as "novice's intuition" (leading to Swedish breeders refusing animal meal, the commercial success of biological farming and the population's scepticism with regard to GMOs) may well prove useful and even salutary in many instances.

On the other hand, before addressing the question of farmers' approval of technical and scientific progress, it has become clear that wide-ranging and systematic dialogue is needed between farmers, scientists and consumers: it is all about developing practices of participative democracy to decide on the direction that research and technology should take.

The need for a global approach

Whilst the report recommends the mobilisation of farmers and the creation of local information and training networks, the thoughts outlined take no account whatever of the issue of employment in the farming sector, in spite of the explicit reference to sustainable development. The fact remains that there is a close link between the number of people involved in agriculture, farming structures and production methods. In more general terms,

the author fails to take the social cost of intensive farming (desertion of rural areas, cultural decline) into consideration. The approach espoused does not take sufficient account of the part that farmers' initiative, solidarity and independence have to play, beyond the purely technical aspects of the debate.

The report does not explain in any clear terms who will be responsible for transferring the ISO 14001 norms into the agricultural domain, for controlling conformity with qualification criteria or indeed the role that is to be played by consumers and environmentalists. Furthermore, it is not really proven that the normalisation approach such as that introduced with ISO 14001 is the best solution in the case of agriculture.

Furthermore, it is not clear that the choice of working on means rather than on results, as is suggested in the report (the level of pollution in a water table, the degree of soil degradation, etc...), is the most effective. Indeed, if we were to base choices on precise indicators of environmental degradation, we would be able to adapt objectives and means to the different regions, which undisputedly, do not face the same environmental pressures.

These aspects are nevertheless crucial and will determine the potential of the development of agriculture in France and in Europe, and will serve as an example of an approach to sustainable development globally.

Contrary to the intentions outlined in the report, there is no truly global approach: the social and territorial aspects of farming are omitted, and economic considerations are limited to the profitability of farming operations; this is why it would be better to talk about "rationale practices" (fertilisation, crop protection, etc...) than rationale agriculture. These rationale practices are just a code of good practice, which fail to secure the commitment of farmers in their role as citizens.

The FCSD considers that the debate on French farming has to be continued and considered in greater depth. The debate has to be situated in a more general context, not only that of Europe, but of the planet as a whole, and must include all the requirements of sustainable development.

Appendix: the main points contained within the report

The report defines the concept of rationale agriculture, itself directly linked to concerns for environmental protection and whose declared precepts are:

- ? *reconciling profitability and the protection of nature;*
- ? *applying the approach to all farming activities;*
- ? *improving performance by integrating innovations spawned by technical and scientific advancement.*

The author believes that the objectives can only be achieved through "the forward-looking and responsible mobilisation of farmers", and not through mechanisms such price increases on products used in farming or regulatory measures and / or taxes, for which implementation would be far too complex to be really effective.

The means implemented will involve the research, training and innovation communities, requiring input from all those supplying the farming business. Upstream production activities must contribute to the process by preventing commercial profiteering from exploiting the environmental benefits of products. The consumer must be implicated in the citizenship-oriented approach of rationale agriculture, and in this area, the retailers have a major role to play.

The author recommends a sufficiently flexible approach which would include a "contract of trust" in the form of a norm based on the ISO 14001 concept. This approach to environmental management would be more to do with means, and not with results, which are considered to be too difficult to assess in an objective way. He imagines identifying two levels of requirement from an environmental point of view: a minimum level (below which subsidies could be withdrawn) and a maximum level (beyond which specific and transitory additional aid could be injected).

The government actions proposed are as follows:

- ? creating a regulatory framework establishing the major principles of rationale agriculture, without imposing too many limitations to initiative for those involved in this sector;*
- ? backing a contract-based approach which results in a national referencing system for rationale agriculture, in the form of a norm, and setting up management bodies to run this quality assurance norm;*
- ? promoting the principles and methodology of rationale agriculture at the European level.*