

European Commission Conference on Local Agriculture and Short Food Supply Chains, Brussels, 20 April 2012

Text of the video message by HRH The Prince of Wales

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am so pleased to be able to offer some brief introductory remarks to what, I am sure, will be a fascinating and important contribution to the on-going debate about the future of food and farming in Europe.

By all accounts, you will be addressing subjects that have been at the heart of my interests for more than four decades and my only regret is that I cannot be with you in person to hear your deliberations at first hand.

However, it goes without saying that farming and food production are vital to the health and wellbeing of people in every society; but what isn't so well known is that they are increasingly under pressure from a whole series of ecological challenges. Soils are being degraded, water is becoming scarce; the way we farm has an impact on wildlife, on the conservation of natural resources and how we minimize both the causes of climate change and our vulnerability to what increasingly seem to be the inevitable consequences of our changing climate.

On top of these environmental pressures, there is a wide range of economic pressures - the affordability and viability of rural communities, largely driven by a burgeoning world population, and the way diets are changing in both Europe and the developing world.

It is clear that food production is a truly complex and multi-layered subject!

There is, from time to time, though, a thread of wisdom which emerges to help us understand this complex subject; to arouse our common sense and help us present a solution to the multifaceted challenges we face. I hope you will all agree with me that local food is one such topic.

Certainly, the growing interest in it and the increases in demand for it, seem to point to the fact that more and more people appreciate the benefits.

When you think about it, the advantages are pretty amazing.

For one thing, if we produced food more locally we would reduce the resources we expend in moving it over long distances.

I am sure I don't have to remind you that the price of oil has been rising and will no doubt continue to do so, which will inevitably push up the cost of transportation and therefore the price of food too.

If we moved food over shorter distances then we would reduce our collective vulnerability to the impact of very high energy costs.

But there are other benefits too.

Sourcing food more locally helps protect some of Europe's historic and distinctive landscapes.

When food is grown for distant markets it tends to be produced on a large scale as a commodity, which generally means a monoculture that favours the sort of uniform conditions which obliterate all else.

Over the past fifteen years I have been fortunate to spend some time in parts of rural Romania, one of the more recent members of the European Union and its Common Agricultural Policy, and I have been struck by the way the landscape across much of that country still looks as if it belongs there. Farming and the local environment have grown together.

As a result, it is a partnership, developed over centuries between farmers and Nature, creating what is, to many eyes, a stunningly beautiful landscape with a degree of biodiversity that is unparalleled in the rest of Europe.

It is no accident that these conditions coincide with a farming economy that still supplies mainly local markets. And with that landscape comes not only beauty, but also a sense of identity for the people who live there.

And let's not forget what that food tends to taste like!

There is great value in producing food with the distinctive taste of local varieties and products.

Not only does the taste matter, it is also the basis of a strong relationship between the producer and the consumer.

These are the reasons why more and more shoppers are discovering the joy of buying from local suppliers - people they can actually meet and talk to - rather than buying the anonymous and mass-produced food that makes up so much of what most Europeans now consume.

In this way, not only does local food help to cut pollution, save resources and nurture landscapes,

it also fortifies what I can only describe as "social capital", while at the same time boosting rural economies.

This is not to say that we should only aim for a system of local food production, but these factors surely suggest that it should be one approach that we should favour more. It certainly seems to me that for a long time the incentives and support given to industrial farming techniques have been insufficiently balanced with those that help smaller-scale producers who supply local markets. But fortunately there is a great deal that can be done.

Policy of course has a role.

Just imagine the impact it would have if we were to set targets for the amount of locally produced food bought by public institutions like hospitals and schools.

And I am sure there are steps that can be taken to help prevent smaller producers being disadvantaged by those health and safety regulations which tend to be more efficiently navigated by those who enjoy the benefits of sometimes vast economies of scale.

There is also a vital role for the private sector.

A few years ago, I established my International Sustainability Unit (I.S.U.) with the aim of facilitating a consensus between the public, private and N.G.O. sectors on a range of environmental issues. One of them is the issue of food security.

Firstly, my I.S.U. has been developing agreement on how countries might each undertake an economic analysis of food security.

And it has also been working to unite farmers, agribusiness and the retail sector so that they might make the most of the economic, environmental and social benefits of taking an intelligent view of integrated resource management at a local scale - and maybe even boost those benefits.

While I am sure there are plenty of people who would say I have got all this wrong, I must say I have long been puzzled by the fact that so many advocates of industrial farming, who pour such scorn on smaller scale and more local operations, tend to travel to traditional landscapes when they go on holiday!

They talk with great relish about the local food they enjoyed, the distinctive wines, the villages and the magical atmosphere of places that can only be found in ancient, sustainable landscapes.

This suggests to me that we really do need to stop seeing locally produced food as some sort of niche market and, instead, see it as an increasingly important part of the mainstream process of planning the future of European agriculture.

After all, local food was at the heart of what was once considered to be "conventional" farming for thousands of years. It is only recently, in just a few decades, that industrial monocultures have come to be regarded as the norm.

As we grapple with the many economic, social and ecological challenges that face us, it seems to me that local food could have a very important role to play, and is actually a key part of the solution to the multi-layered dilemmas we have to address.

I send with this message my very best wishes for what I am sure will be a successful meeting and I much look forward to hearing of the progress you make.