

Viewpoint: ‘Arrogance of affluence and ignorance of ideologues’: EU’s failing agroecology Farm-to-Fork strategy — and what can be done to ensure sustainable farming and food

The world is teetering on the brink of multiple food security crises which will lead to famines, political and social unrest and economic collapse across a wide range of regions. A perfect storm of war in the Ukraine (leading to lost food exports and reduced planting this spring), high energy costs, export restrictions on a large number of fertilisers, food commodity price speculation, logistic bottlenecks, financial and economic vulnerabilities following two years of a global pandemic and persistent droughts in many key agricultural regions means that food stresses are baked into world markets before the first crop failure of 2022.

Against this backdrop, the European Commission produced a document last month: “[*Safeguarding food security and reinforcing the resilience of food systems*](#)“. This EU strategy on how to mitigate the coming food security crisis, famines and increased malnutrition is to promote more organic food production, agroecology, reduced fertiliser use, subsistence farming, social justice theories, Farm2Fork and increased food-related aid (to countries ready to adopt some food cult ideology shared by a minority of activists in Brussels). The EU is serving up a recipe for famine, civil strife and economic collapse across large sections of the developing world... and their Communication celebrates this.

This official EU report is written by people with full bellies, ideological dreams of food purity and no idea of how challenging it can be to secure a harvest. Painful to read but more painful to ignore, I have provided my commentary on selected passages. I keep pinching myself when I say that this is the state of thinking of our European leadership. It would be funny if so many were not at risk of dying or malnutrition, to a large part, due to their ignorant food cult ideology.

In the end, this is just one more example of the arrogance of affluence and the ignorance of ideologues.

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Support for the poor... sort of

A good part of the European Commission’s Communication looks at how to fund those who have suffered the consequences of poor food policies. It is sad to realise that so many Brussels civil servants associate CAP payments as policy and that any failed regulation can be rectified by throwing money at the hardship they have caused. A key element to the Commission’s Farm2Fork strategy is to provide funds to support farmers when their yields decline or crops fail. An agricultural policy built around “failure by design” can hardly be commended (but maybe the money will stop the farmers from protesting).

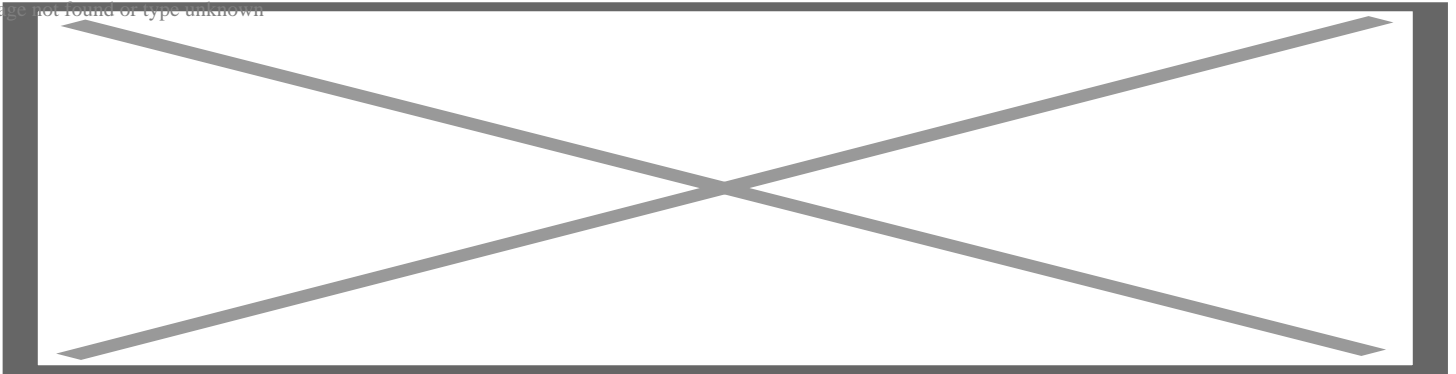
So it is no surprise that the “*Safeguarding food security and reinforcing the resilience of food systems*” Communication proudly declared how much money the European Commission will be providing to

consumers, farmers and developing countries. But if Brussels had implemented rational, science-based agricultural policies over the last three decades, would this money and suffering have been necessary?

Help for low-income consumers

Low-income Europeans will certainly suffer from food inflation and scarcity, as they are already suffering from high energy costs and post-pandemic employment challenges. The Communication did not define what was a low-income person except to say they were vulnerable. I suspect Brussels thinks this is a very small population (as they grouped them together with Ukrainian refugees or less than 1%) so I am not sure they have budgeted food relief for up to a quarter of the EU population.

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It is heartening to see that the European Commission has recognised that high food prices lead to reduced fruit and vegetable consumption and lower overall health levels (including lower immunity levels and higher risks of obesity, heart disease and cancer). So why then, with their Farm2Fork strategy, is Frans Timmermans adopting policies that will knowingly increase food prices and lower European nutrition and health levels? Worse, as a higher demand for organic food in the EU will put more stress on developing countries to produce for this growing affluent market, Brussels is exporting its malnutrition-focused food policy.

Help for farmers

Apart from the disruption to global food supplies due to the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, the EU was already facing a serious farming crisis with higher energy costs, fertiliser inflation and lost access to the best available agricultural technologies due to regulatory handcuffs. While the Communication touted several times that the EU is a net exporter of wheat, they export little else and as Brussels has been diligently applying the precautionary principle to all crop protection tools, Europeans are becoming more dependent on others to put food on their table. Following the disastrous neonicotinoid ban, many European countries now import oilseed rape (largely from the Ukraine). Decades of restrictions on GMOs and other seed breeding innovations has left EU livestock farmers dependent on (GMO) corn and maize imports.

3. FOOD SECURITY IN THE EU

3.1. Food availability and affordability

For the EU **food availability is not at stake**, though **food affordability** for low-income persons is.

The EU is largely self-sufficient for many agricultural products and a net exporter of wheat. However, the EU is a considerable net-importer for specific products which may be difficult to (swiftly) substitute, such as feed protein, sunflower oil or seafood. There is no risk of widespread shortage for consumers. While the stable food supply in the EU is not jeopardised, these vulnerabilities together with increasing input costs in the food supply chain are driving food prices further up. If the significantly higher production costs at farm level are not compensated by higher prices, this may impact supply certainties.

The European Commission talks as if there is no “widespread” food-supply risk in Europe ... unless the input costs go up. Well, the input costs have been going up for years. This document has no serious scenario-building. What would happen, in light of food shortages, if some countries ban exports of essential food commodities? Indonesia has just become the latest. How will increased food import costs affect debt levels? How will massive consumer food hoarding affect food supplies? How many farmers will just quit their profession as these conditions worsen? The European Commission simply says: Crisis? What crisis?

The Commission calls on Member States to ensure a **fairer distribution of income support** to enhance in particular the resilience of small and medium-sized farms, vulnerable to volatility of markets that may threaten continuity. The Commission also encourages Member States to make more use of the rural development fund to finance **risk management tools**, to help farmers cope with revenue and income losses, and to support the development of short supply chains and other types of diversification of farm income. Similarly, it welcomes plans to facilitate **access to credit** for farmers, to be able to invest in sustainable production methods, including for example production and use of renewable energy.

It seems that the European Commission will have some strings attached to their funding, giving priority to small farmers, local supply chains and those willing to implement sustainable production methods (I assume that means, following from the Farm2Fork ideology, organic farming methods). So farmers trying

to increase yields and help feed the world need not apply.

Help for developing countries

Perhaps the most tragic failure of EU agriculture policy is the knock-on effects in developing countries whose governments are forced to impose similar elitist food policies on their smallholders in order to ensure export markets. In 2002 Zambia and Zimbabwe rejected US food aid during a famine for fear that some GMO seed might be planted and EU export markets would be closed. In 2005 the European Commission warned Uganda to stop using DDT to protect homes from malaria as exports would be blocked if residues drifted onto local vegetable patches. Elitist EU food colonialism has had a dark past, and it is becoming darker still.

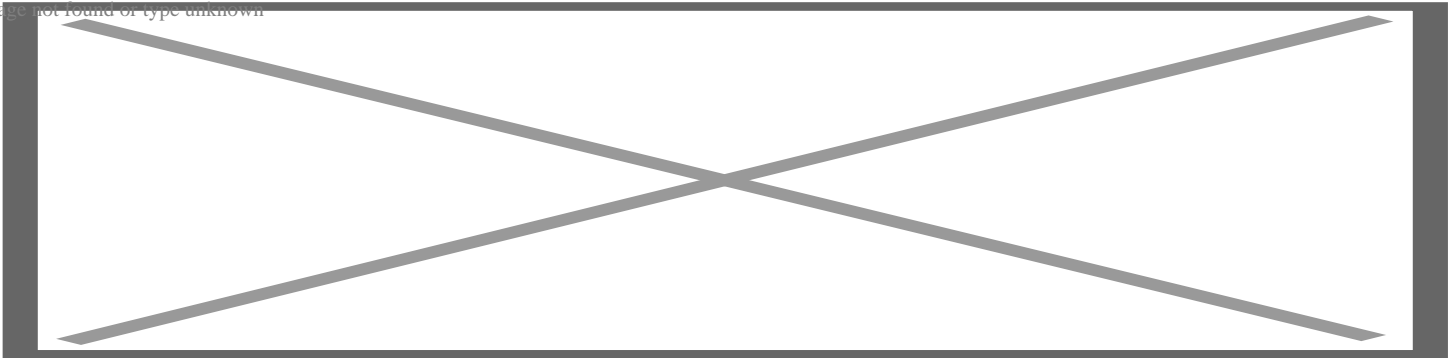


Stanford Nhira, 46, a farmer in Mashonaland, Zimbabwe, survived on the meager diet. This is a very haunting but tame image of the suffering that activists created through fearmongering. Credit: New York Times

Countries struggling to feed themselves and lift themselves out of agrarian-based, subsistence farming economies, have recently been hammered down by affluent social justice activists imposing agroecology

solutions when what they need is the best available crop technologies. If developing countries were able to feed themselves, then food price shocks would not destroy their economies and send them deeper into debt.

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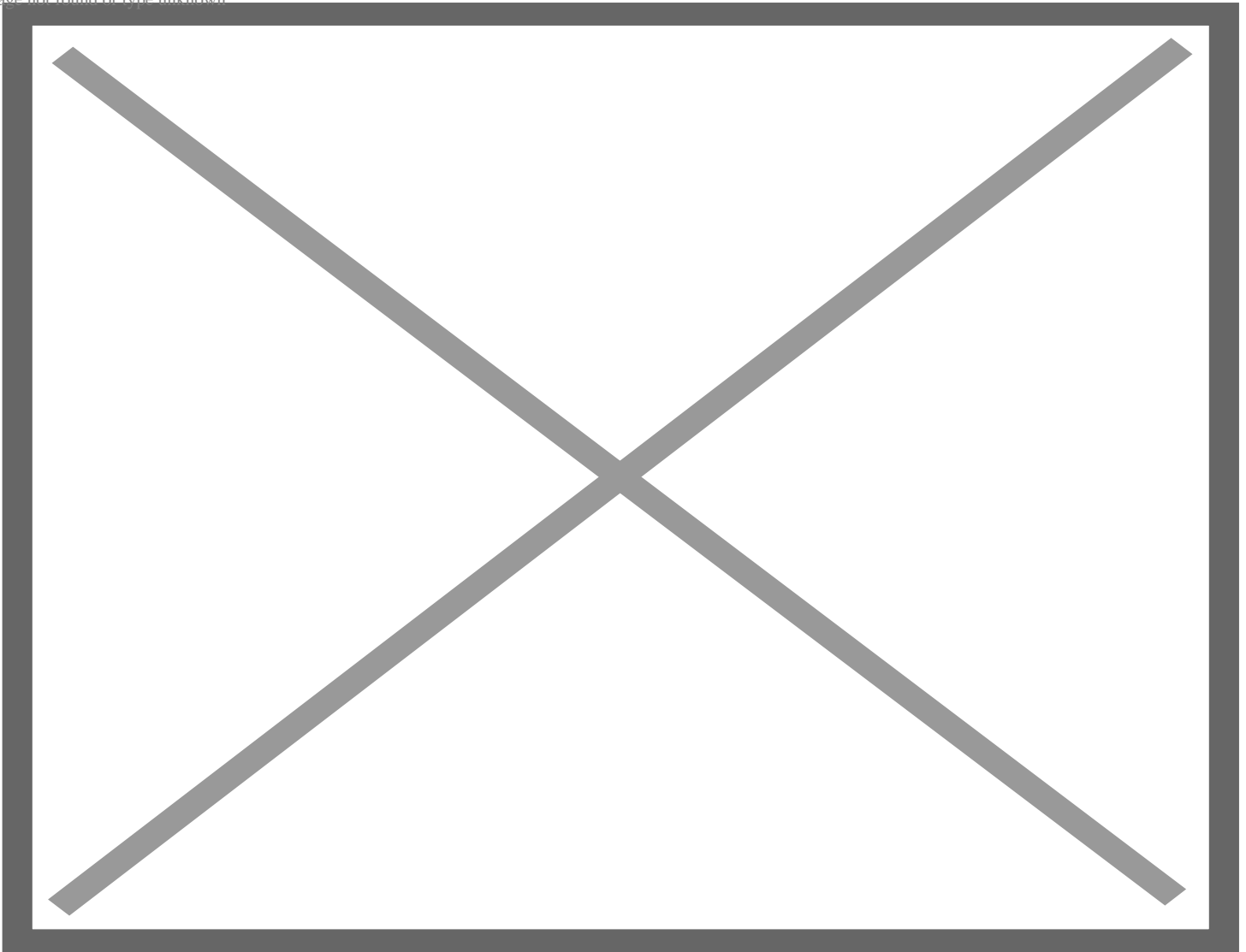


This paragraph needs to be closely examined. Is the European Commission linking food aid and debt relief to those developing countries willing to adopt green recovery measures? By “green recovery” is this document referring to the contents of the EU’s post-COVID financing plan (which is Green Deal obsessed)? So in other words, the poorest of the poor will only get funding and food aid if they adopt environmental measures based on musings by affluent environmental think-tanks (organic, with no synthetic fertilisers or innovative seeds)? Smallholders in food-stressed countries need better yields so they can keep their land and maybe get their children back in school. Earmarking any food aid to developing countries in peril to how well they can fight climate change (by adopting less-intensive, lower-yield agricultural practises) is pure, cult-driven madness.

Blame others

On the first page of the Communication, the European Commission went out of their way to make it clear that the coming food security crises that will afflict the developing world was not their fault. They blamed the Russian invasion (four times), market speculators (three times) as well as the pandemic and climate change.

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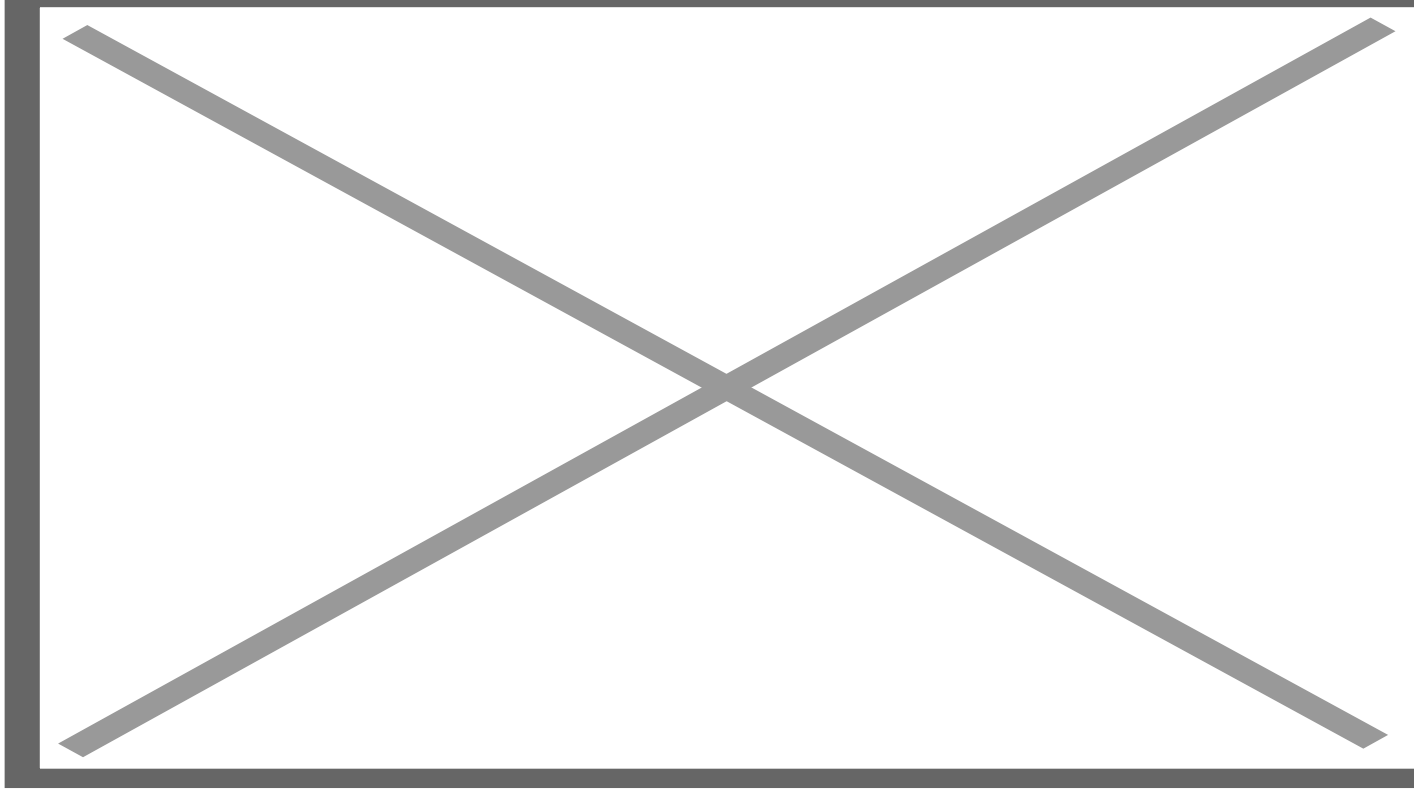


But the reality is that three decades of precautionary policies toward innovative agricultural technologies (from blocking most GMOs, rejecting gene editing, implementing a hazard-based approach that is banning most pesticides, restricting livestock tools and limiting chemical fertilisers) has made farming an unprofitable and dying profession. Europe is no longer able to feed itself and is relying on the surplus food production of others (like the Ukraine) to feed them.

How on earth can European officials, in all honesty, claim they are “largely self-sufficient for key agricultural products”? Despite past creative claims to the opposite, the annual EU food deficit (excluding drinks and fish) averaged € 8.376 bn from 2010 to 2017 ([WTO](#)). EU farmers cannot feed their livestock without massive imports of (mostly GMO) maize and soy from Argentina, the US, Australia and the Ukraine. “Largely self-sufficient” my ass.

Failed EU agricultural policies have led Europe to this point that their import reliance and demand for lower yielding luxury (organic) crops are fast becoming the reason for food scarcity and vulnerability in developing countries. And their solution to the coming food insecurity is to stubbornly continue to push their Farm2Fork pro-organic ideology that will further strangle EU farm production making poorer countries, who cannot pay, even more vulnerable to food stresses.

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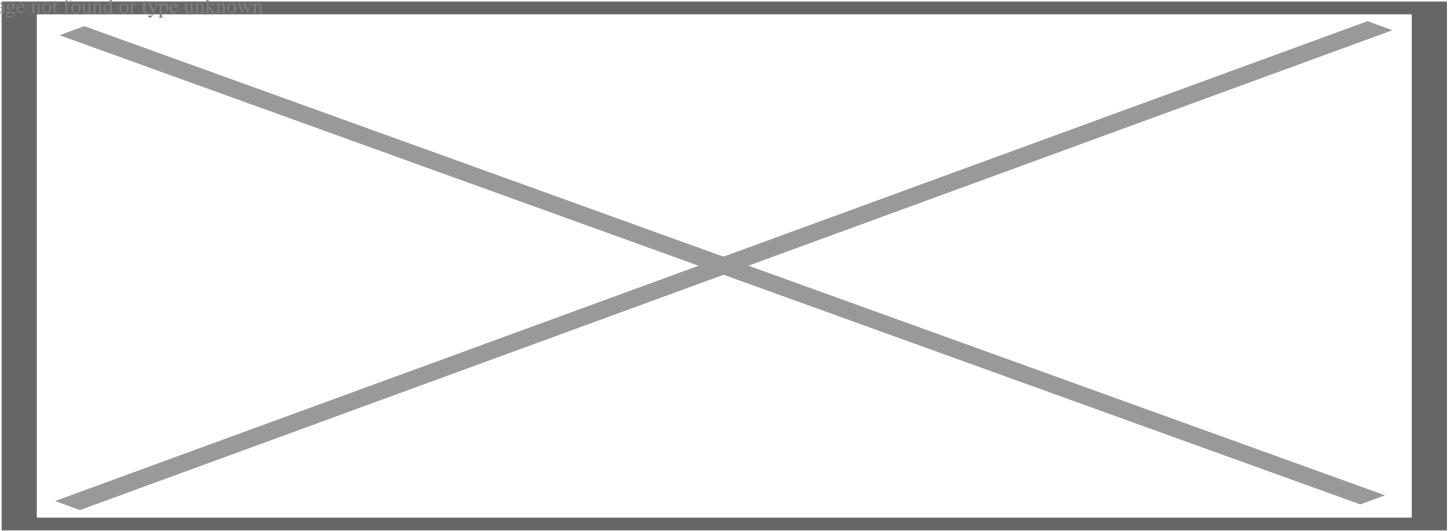
Children in Harare scavenging for fallen grains of corn. Not the scavenger hunt these children should be forced to do. Credit: Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi

The European Commission is in no position to lecture others. It is time to ditch the cult ideology and embrace realpolitik.

Ursula's Global Food Aid Kitchen

The most arrogant passage in the European Commission's "Safeguarding food security and reinforcing the resilience of food systems" Communication is how they pretend they are in a position to help feed the world. The document frequently crows how they are a net exporter of wheat and seems to imply they could fill the gap in the global wheat shortage.

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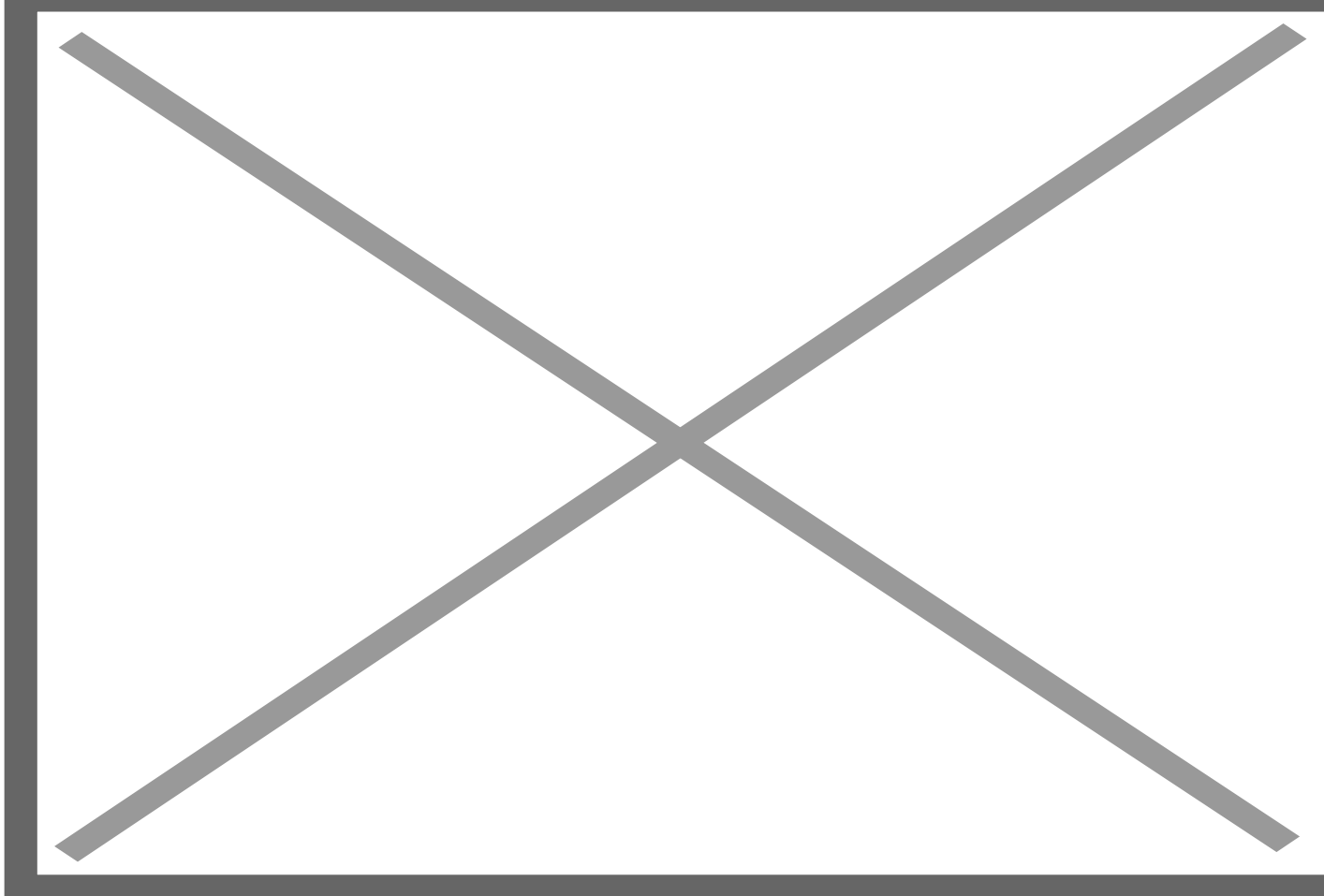
These numbers though are not telling an honest story. Of the 19 million tonnes exported in 2021 H2, [10.5 million tonnes](#) was exported by France with [2 million](#) tonnes going to China. Outside of France, Germany and Poland, most other EU countries are not significant wheat exporters. In 2021, Ukraine and Russia combined exported twice as much wheat as the EU.

The type of export market matters as well. The Ukraine exported wheat to countries like Yemen, Egypt and the World Food Programme. This differs from EU wheat exports to wealthy countries like the UK. That this Commission Communication expects exports to increase because of “*high prices encouraging export sales*” indicates Brussels is hoping to play the speculative game and capitalise off of other countries’ misfortunes – but only those able to pay. Whatever happened to “solidarity”?

And what will happen to supplies of other food commodities if so many farmers rotate into wheat in the next year?

But wheat is not the only food shortage to have significant impact on developing countries. The Ukraine and Russia are significant [exporters](#) of maize, sunflower, barley and oilseed rape (and the European Union is the main importer). So rich European countries will be competing with import-dependent developing countries for scarce commodities. The European Commission would like to pretend they can help feed the world, but its cupboard is essentially bare with yields pilfered away after decades of irresponsible, anti-science agriculture regulations and now they are adding to the problem.

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The arrogance of affluence. Madagascar children eating meager meals. Credit: Rijasolo

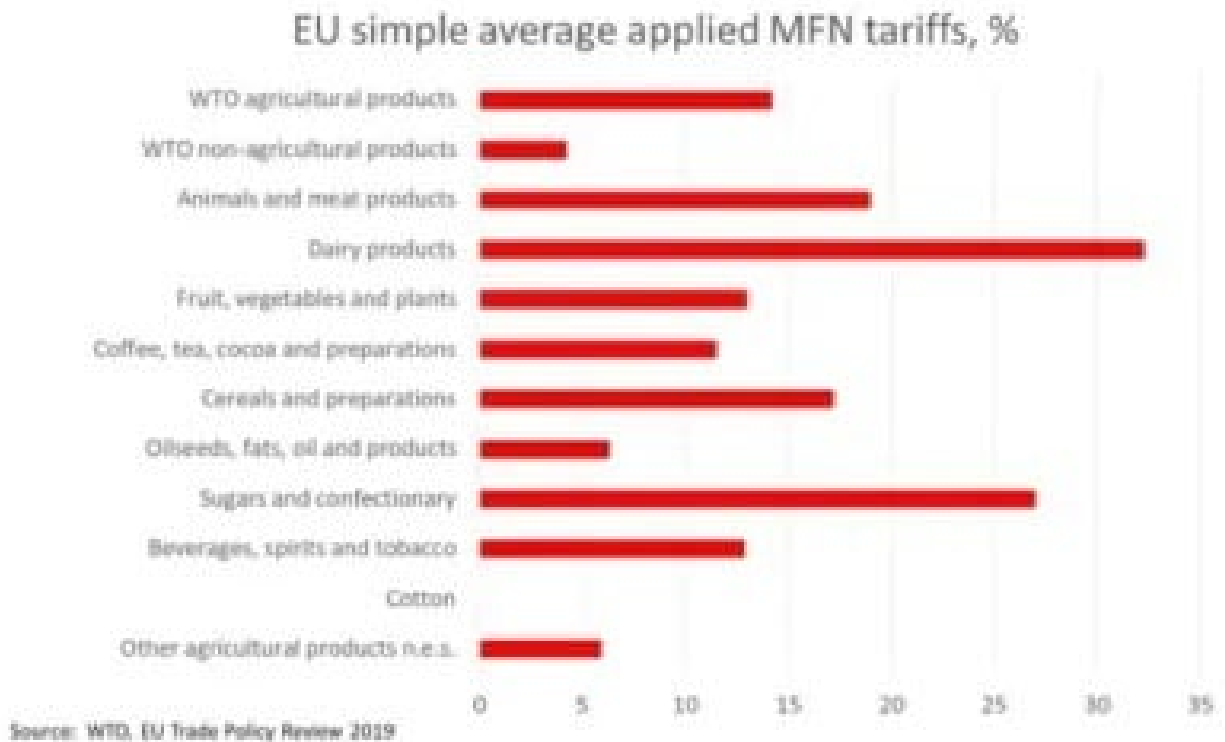
Talking tough on trade restrictions

It is comforting to see that the European Commission, though, does understand that export restrictions, tariffs and bans on foodstuffs are in no one's interest and exacerbate the global food system challenges.

Moreover, the EU will continue to strongly advocate, including in international fora, to **avoid export restrictions and export bans on food** as the track record of these are disastrous as the 2007-8 crisis amply demonstrated in various parts of the world. WTO coordination will be essential. To increase resilience, importing countries are encouraged to ensure better diversification of sources of food supplies. Moreover, well-functioning global supply chains and logistics are essential for global food security.

But Brussels should be aware that when it comes to trade restrictions, no region does it better than the

European Union. Europe pretends their regulatory bans on GMOs and livestock restrictions are for human health concerns. Every trace residue of a banned pesticide (which is fast becoming most active ingredients farmers rely on) results in shipments being rejected. This was the reason activists worked so hard to try to ban glyphosate (to restrict the trade of GMO maize and soy feed).



Source

On tariffs themselves, a [2019 WTO trade report](#) showed that agricultural imports into the EU are the most restricted sector. Dairy imports had a 32% tariff, animal and meat products had an added 19% tax, and sugar enjoyed a 27% tariff. So it seems rich for the EU to talk tough against export restrictions when they are the leading offender.

I can't wait to see EU officials tie food aid to the removal of any trade barriers.

Do the people who wrote this official Communication know anything about the European Union? About agriculture? About social justice? Wait, it gets even more unthinkable.

The EU's solution to fight famine: Agroecology?

What has happened in 2022 is a horrible tragedy that will likely lead to an escalation in human suffering to levels that the world has never seen. At one point the European Commission Communication inexplicably

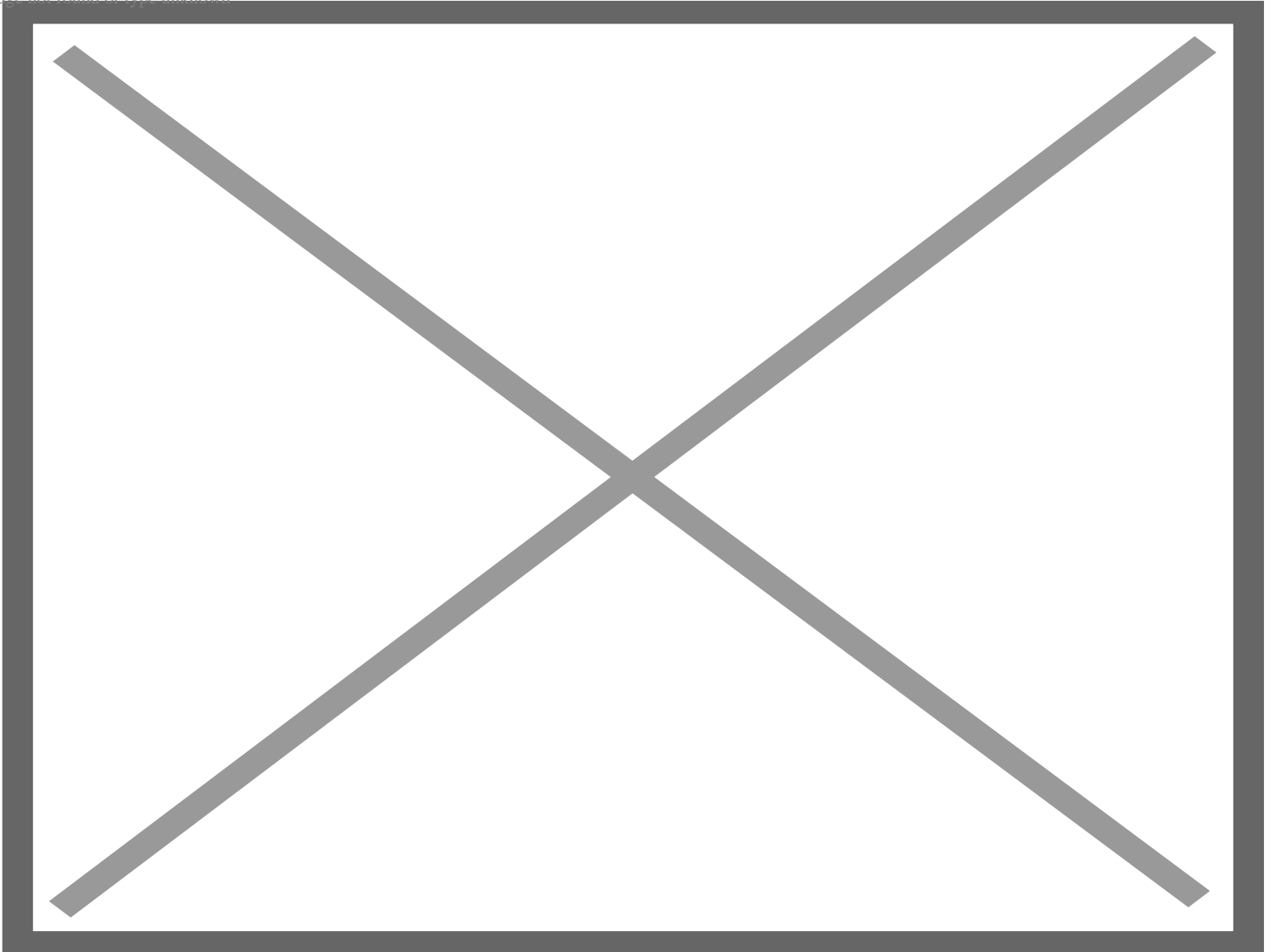
takes a wrong turn down an insensitive political alley.

In the **medium term**, the EU will continue to support countries in the transformation towards resilient and sustainable agricultural and aquatic food systems. This includes analytical and policy support, elaborated in the context of the follow-up to the 2021 Food Systems Summit and Nutrition for Growth Summit. In this context, the EU will step up its international cooperation on food research and innovation, including playing a leadership role in the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), with particular reference to climate change adaptation and mitigation and sustainable management and protection of natural resources, applying approaches such as agro-ecology, landscape management and agro-forestry, diversification of trade flows and production systems, and reduction of food loss and waste. Furthermore, the EU will strengthen its international cooperation on nutrition and healthy diets, including through humanitarian aid, as well as on resilient and inclusive value chains. For Africa, the African Union EU Rural Transformation Action Agenda agreed in 2019 offers a basis for enhanced cooperation.

We are in a period of food security threats, increased global hunger and famine risks, countries going into bankruptcy or facing civil strife, and the European Commission chose this moment to cite how they will support developing countries in their transition to agroecology and agroforestry? Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot???

Since when was agroecology even an official European Commission agriculture strategy? Did I miss that memo?

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Agroecology is a rather [slippery concept](#) with many definitions built along various political interests. It is largely led by social justice warriors, anti-industry activists and organic farming lobbyists. Obsessively naturopathic, agroecology is built on a series of rejections of modern agricultural technologies. A scientific approach to agriculture would look at each situation and each need and develop the best technologies and systems to obtain an optimal solution, constantly checking and revising where necessary. The agroecological approach would start with a series of dogmatic restrictions: farmers cannot use synthetic inputs, they cannot work with large corporations and they cannot trade on international markets. Research based on such fundamentalist dogma is not scientific.

It is a political construct. The activists pushing agroecology are battling to keep African smallholders from using better seeds, crop protection measures and synthetic fertilisers. They are pushing to keep these subsistence farmers impoverished. And now the European Commission has come (a bit late) to the party.



It takes a cold soul to force the torment of Tantalus on the world. Credit: L. Szanto

The Commission mysteriously touted the European Union's involvement in CGIAR, funded mostly by the US government and the Gates Foundation ([only 2%](#) EU-funded) who developed some blue-sky proposals on how to improve development in rural areas. CGIAR's academic research reports were not meant to address risks of famine. And what exactly did the CGIAR [recommend](#) to deal with the coming Ukraine-

based food crisis?

1. Massively ramp up grain production in the short term;
2. For oil-producing countries to increase fuel supplies as much as possible to ease shipping and fertiliser costs; and
3. Provide significant food and financial aid.

No social justice agroecology opportunism there.

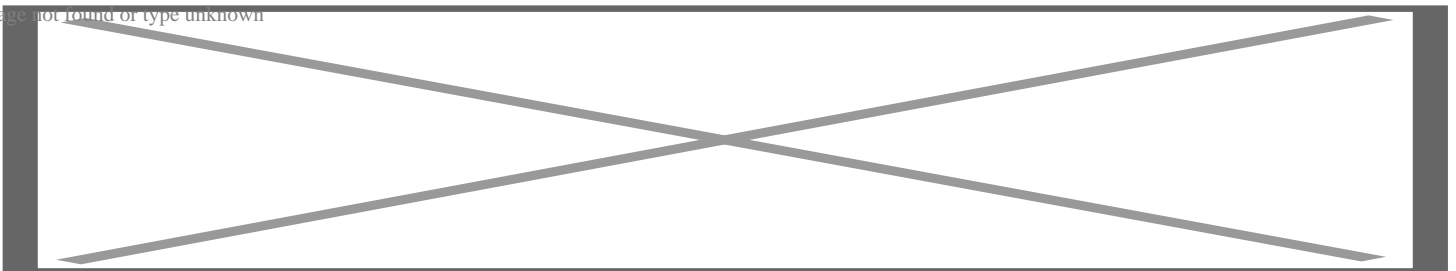
Farm2Fork: *Let them eat cake!*

Never let a good crisis go to waste. This European Commission has defined itself by its Green Deal strategy and they have tried, relentlessly, to push it through, hell, pandemic or high water. So you could expect these obsessive ideologues to push their Farm2Fork strategy as a solution for world hunger. I wish I were making this up, but...

Acutely aware of the interrelations between our health, ecosystems, supply chains, consumption patterns and planetary boundaries, the Commission set out its vision for a **fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system** in the Farm to Fork Strategy. In this strategy, the Commission underlined the importance of the resilience of the EU food system, to ensure access to a sufficient supply of affordable food for citizens under all circumstances and to undergo a transition to sustainable food systems in a fair and democratic manner, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Except that the present crisis is not about “fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food” being a social right to all Europeans. The opposite is the case. The European Commission’s own research body, the Joint Research Centre, [estimates](#) that Farm2Fork will result in an overall agricultural yield decline of 10-15%. (See my [analysis](#).) As the strategy also plans to re-wild less productive land, this deficit, assumedly, will be made up by increased imports (from countries that may be facing food shortages). Who said anything about Farm2Fork being fair or environmentally-friendly to developing countries?

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Two words: Sri Lanka.

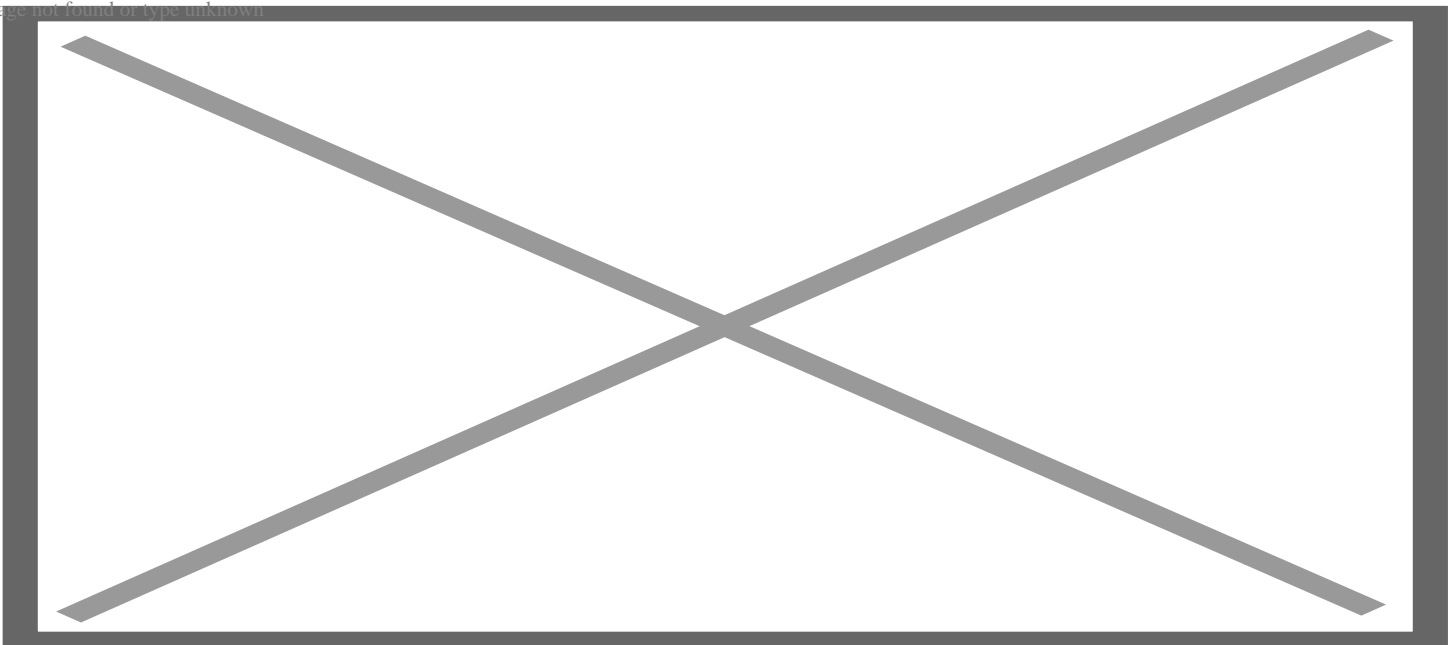
While it remains a question whether Sri Lanka banned fertiliser imports because of a forex reserve

shortfall or, as widely claimed, because Vandana Shiva told them to, it is no doubt that the best way to decimate agricultural yields and create instant poverty is to impose organic farming practices on a population that cannot afford food imports. This EU Communication seems to be sharing some sympathy for the logic of the Sri Lankan President Rajapaksa.

Is the European Commission actually suggesting that because fertiliser and other agricultural inputs are more expensive, they were right in proposing that we should stop using them? Fuel costs too high? Well tractors emit CO₂ so bring back horse-drawn ploughs (solving the fertiliser issue). I suppose the EU's long-term vision for rural areas is to stop farming – allocate some fields for tourists to visit, leave some livestock as a petting zoo...

Or maybe we can just call it agroecology.

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So one of the pillars of sustainable agriculture, according to the European Commission, is organic farming. How? Through reduced yields demanding more meadows ploughed under? By allocating more land to produce organic-approved fertilisers and pesticides? How can organic food production (with more scaring, deformities and fungi) lead to less food waste?

Who actually wrote this activist dogma? Didn't anyone in the European Parliament raise objections to this official Communication? Is Brussels braindead? These ideologues in Brussels have no understanding of agronomy, no experience in farming and no respect for reality.

We have been farming organically for millennia with frequent famines and widespread malnutrition. While some of the best research minds in the last 75 years have increased yields exponentially while reducing inputs, the European Commission seems to think they can just fund a three-year agroecology research project and return to organic practices with no loss in yield. Just like that – a true green (deal) revolution.

And these people are making the policy decisions for 450 million Europeans.

I am looking for a photo of Ursula von der Leyen as Marie Antoinette.

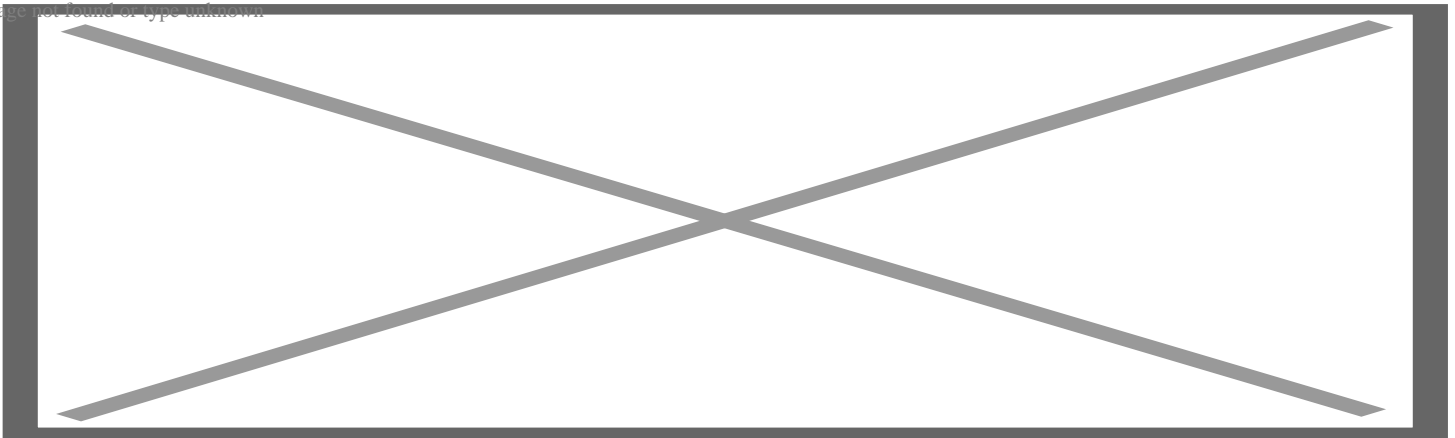


It's worth noting that Marie Antoinette likely never said the famous phrase and is portrayed as being rather conscious of her people's suffering, which is more than we can say for some leaders. Had she been so callous as the press portrayed her she likely would have fit in with today's self-obsessed grandioseness. Credit: Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun

Just when you think this horrid little EU Communication could not get any more ridiculous or offensive, the European Commission

cites their participation in an activist-driven UN Food Systems Summit as proof their ideology can work.

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People who spend too long in Brussels tend to blur the difference between aspiration and policy. The [2021 Food Systems Summit](#) was also known as the People's Summit where activists from around the world imposed a 300 commitment wish-list onto a UN declaration including the desire for zero hunger, no waste, healthy diets and school lunches. Each of the coalitions from this summit are heavily populated by activist groups who have no responsibility for feeding growing populations ... but they give emotional speeches and lobby hard to get their campaign points into the final compendium.

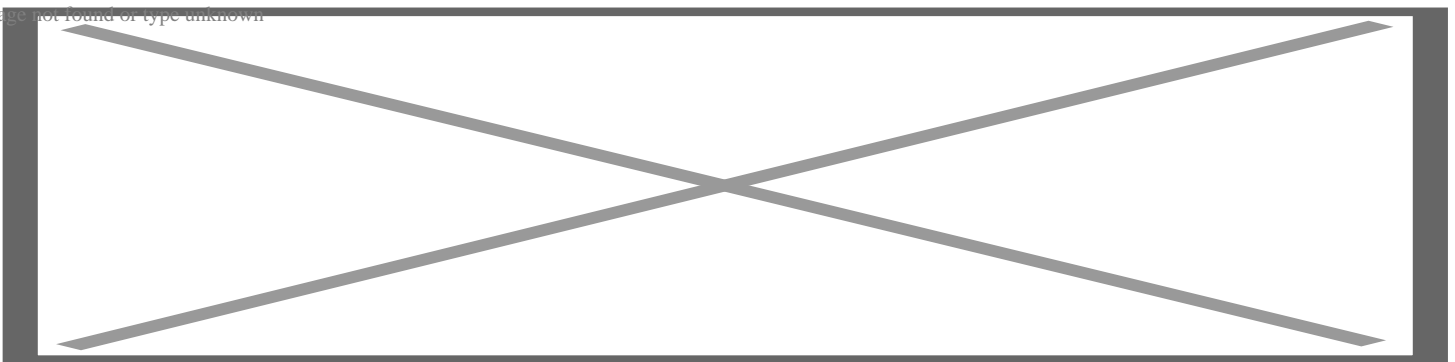
Oh yes, and more research in [agroecology](#) ... *and world peace!*

And this, according to the European Commission, is how we can accelerate the transition toward food sustainability. Absolutely ridiculous, shameful and embarrassing.

My advice to the EFSCM

This document set the scene for a new European food security crisis preparedness and response mechanism ([EFSCM](#)). It should be noted that this committee did their consultations and nominated their members in 2021, long before the thought of the possibility of an invasion of the world's breadbasket. I suppose they had originally just been anticipating the consequences from their Farm2Fork strategy.

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So as this multi-stakeholder expert group begins to map out risks and provide recommendations, I look

forward to further public consultations. These are my top ten recommendations for their food crisis risk management strategy.

- Promote the best available agricultural technologies
- Agroecology is largely based on removing technologies
- Recognise “organic” as a marketing label and political ideology, and not scientific
- Stress agricultural policies that will guarantee higher yields
- Stop designing CAP as a funding mechanism for failure – let farmers farm
- Understand that artificial distinctions like natural v synthetic are not scientific
- Accept that sustainable intensification is a gradual multi-step process
- Approve innovative seed breeding technologies according to product not process
- In times of crisis, rigid ideologies must be abandoned
- Scrap Farm2Fork and listen to your scientists

Why do I think the European Commission will not adopt any of them?

Timestamping the EU's arrogance of affluence

This Commission Communication should serve as a timestamp of the highwater mark of the arrogance of affluence, where European ideologues pursued environmental cult policies without serious dialogue or compromise. They relentlessly pushed their Green Deal through the pandemic and now through a major war, food security and refugee crisis in Europe. In over two years, the Farm2Fork strategy has been seriously criticised by most scientific bodies (including the Commission's own Joint Research Centre) and not once, not by one iota, have they compromised their unrealistic ambitions or listened to others. This puritan commitment to enforcing a failed strategy could be considered as admirable (from a Lysenkian perspective), but it belies an ideological arrogance that can only be tolerated by affluent activists who could afford the dreadful consequences of their medieval food beliefs.

World events are starting to bite Frans Timmermans and Ursula von der Leyen in the face. The European Commission cannot continue to lead by ideology and solve the consequences of their failures simply by throwing money around. The cupboard is bare – Europe is not self-sufficient in food production. Brussels is not in a position to feed the world so how much more to lecture others and demand that their impractical ideologies be followed.

It is time for Ursula and Frans to give up their rainbow and unicorn view of the world and embrace realpolitik – policies built on compromise and pragmatic solutions. I fear though that they cannot and given that an electorate cannot throw them out, I anticipate that Brussels will quickly become irrelevant as national leaders across the EU simply wait for them to complete their term of office. They will be quickly forgotten; seen as dinosaurs of a failed policy approach, representatives of lost opportunities and a lasting symbol of the waste of Europe's peace dividend.

This Commission Communication expresses the delusional thinking of a failed leadership that has no observational skills or commitment to policy process. The world has moved on, innovative talent has left and Europe has lost relevance.

David Zaruk has been an EU risk and science communications specialist since 2000, active in EU policy events from REACH and SCALE to the Pesticides Directive, from Science in Society questions to the use of the Precautionary Principle. Follow him on Twitter [@zaruk](#)

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