

OPINION ON THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES CAP HEALTH CHECK

The 'Health Check' of the CAP, building on the approach which began with the 2003 reforms and on the experience gathered since then, aims at improving the way the policy operates and making it fit for the new challenges and opportunities in an EU of 27 Member States.

It seeks in particular an answer to three main questions:

1. how to make the direct aid system more effective and simpler;
2. how to make market support instruments relevant in the world we live in now; and
3. how to confront new challenges, from climate change, to biofuels, water management and the protection of biodiversity.

In coping specifically with the new challenges mentioned at (3) in regard to the protection of biodiversity, the more than 3 million families of allotment holders in Europe who are organised in the Office International du Coin de Terre et des Jardins Familiaux directly and indirectly make a decisive contribution to the implementation of a new European agricultural policy.

More than 12 million persons run allotments in Europe. The area amounts to ± 1400 km² (140.000 ha). The allotment holders are organised in 15 national associations in Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Finland, France Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and Slovakia.

Training

The stock of experience and knowledge possessed by allotment holders affords great potential for the protection of the environment and the cultivated countryside.

Professionally conducted training sessions and consultations in federations and associations ensure the transmission of expert knowledge concerning the cultivation of a large number of plant varieties for many different uses.

The "*Bundesverband Deutscher Gartenfreunde e.V.*" (*German Federation of allotment holders*) has edited a guide under the title "*Naturgemäßes Gärtnern*" (Natural Gardening) with practical recommendations for expert gardening in allotments.

The Austrian federation of the allotment gardeners (*Zentralverband der Kleingärtner und Siedler Österreichs*) organizes seminars at the end of which the allotment gardeners get a certificate proofing their knowledge on plant protection (*Sachkundennachweis*)

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The French allotment garden federation (*Fédération Nationale des Jardins Familiaux et Collectifs*) has elaborated a « Charter on Gardening and Environment ». Its members commit themselves to follow it. The Charter

advocates among others banning the use of weed killers, reducing the use of chemical fertilizers and insecticides, composting the waste, collecting the rainwater and reducing the use of water.

In order to stimulate further work to protect the environment in the allotment garden areas, the Swedish federation of Allotment and Leisure Gardens (*Svenska Förbundet för Koloniträdgårdar och Fritidsbyar*) has set up criteria for this work and developed an environment diploma. This diploma can be given to all the member societies which decide to adopt these pedagogic guide-lines for their work. The criteria include for example common rules for ecological gardening, composting, biological diversity, water waste, energy, materials, transports, machinery...

Other federations as for example the Dutch federation and the Office itself grant diplomas for an ecological gardening.

Quality of life

The allotment ensures fresh air. Allotments improve the living environment, in particular, in built-up areas. People find a rational and healthy free-time activity in the vicinity of their place of residence. It enables nature to be experienced: As publicly accessible green spaces allotments provide an insight into ecological processes. It shows the visitors examples of good environment practices. An understanding of natural conditions is passed on to subsequent generations.

Environmental protection and biodiversity

The allotment holder actively contributes to environmental protection: Allotment gardens promote biodiversity and are a factor in offsetting the increasing sealing-off of our countryside. In addition they improve the climate in urban areas.

Production-enhancing measures, which have led to a decline in many plants and animals in our agricultural landscape, do not need to be adopted in allotments; accordingly, the opportunities for promoting biodiversity in allotments are more favourable than ever before. Allotments afford living space and provide food for many species.

In England, in the Netherlands and in the Federal Republic of Germany investigations have been conducted in allotments in order to ascertain the diversity of plant varieties in allotments. In 2004 and 2005 in Sachsen-Anhalt, Middle Germany, for example, nearly 300 different plant varieties were found over an allotment area of 1000 m². That result exceeds all expectations and warrants the conclusion that no City park can even approximately show as many plant varieties.

A recent scientific report "Managing the Urban Greens" by E. ANDERSSON et al from the University of Stockholm and the Swedish University of Agriculture (2007) shows that the informal management in allotments is important for ecosystem services in urban landscapes. In their investigation they found both higher amount and other species of bumble bees in allotment gardens than in parks and cemeteries.

In the Netherlands a butterfly entered on the red list reappeared in the allotment garden site "Briljant" in Utrecht, member of the Dutch allotment garden federation (*Algemeen Verbond van Volkstuinders Verenigingen in Nederland*)

Urban agriculture

Allotments produce valuable fruit and vegetables with an incomparable taste for the allotment holder and his family.

In Sweden for example one has estimated that on an allotment of 200-300 m² 100-200 kg of potatoes, roots and onions, 50-100 kg of other vegetables and 50-150 kg fruit and berries could be harvested.

Through the use of environmentally friendly methods of cultivation and as a result of biodiversity the allotment holder produces many edible species having a high health-giving value, which are of inestimable value, free of pesticides, can be harvested when optimally ripe and then reach the table fresh direct from the garden without great costs and without having to travel long distances. The principles of a sustainable development are so strictly respected.

Conclusion and demand

A major objective of the Office International du Coin de Terre et des Jardins Familiaux is therefore to integrate allotment holdings within the urban and rural area, to maintain allotment gardens in big cities and to create allotment parks.

European agricultural policy should pay proper heed not only to the interests of commercial agriculture but also to the concerns of allotment holders under the heading 'measures for rural development'. There should be inducements for improved measures to arrest climate change and to maintain biodiversity. In that connection the financial resources of the so called 'modulation' could be increased and transferred into the Rural Development budget. In that way allotment holders may successfully participate in the solution of problems affecting society as a whole, which cannot be achieved simply by investment inducements and structural measures in European agriculture.

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