

Food sovereignty and sustainability in Slovenia

Agriculture is facing numerous challenges, requirements and adaptations. Out of all the sectors of economy, agriculture will be the most affected by climate change. It will have an impact on agriculture in both the narrow sense, i.e. food production, as well as from a broader perspective, including the retention of the rural population, preservation of the cultural landscape and the production potential of the very limited agricultural land in Slovenia. Contrary to the increasingly industrialised agricultural model that led to exploitation, displacement and deep inequalities in the food system, in the early 90s a new concept emerged called food sovereignty, seeking a more just, sustainable and democratic food system. During the Covid-19 crisis, to have sufficient food supply, that is to have enough to eat in times of emergency situations, also reinforced the importance of building a sustainable food system. Food sovereignty and food sustainability are inextricably linked, and the pandemic lays bare the evidence in this regard.

In the Republic of Slovenia, agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting contribute only 1.689% to its gross domestic product in 2021. Another 1.29% is added to the gross domestic product by the manufacturing of food products and beverages. Nevertheless, the significance of these sectors for Slovenia is larger than it seems on first sight due to the multipurpose roles it fulfills in the rural area.

Slovenia's position in Central Europe located between the Alps, the Adriatic Sea and the Pannonian plain is the reason for its diverse climate. As indicated, the country is mostly elevated and hilly, which also explains the Slovenia's low agricultural production. Nevertheless, around 60% is covered by forests. Not surprisingly this feature influences the possibilities and developments of agriculture. The total amount of utilised agricultural area is 488,774 ha. This is almost 25% of the total surface area of Slovenia.

Additionally, the political changes that Slovenia has gone through in the early 1990s, also lowered its agricultural productivity. The former Yugoslavia had strongly developed agricultural production and its citizens enjoyed full access to sufficient, affordable and healthy food. Yet, after 30 years of transitioning from socialism to capitalism, the people in the aforementioned former republics could face food insecurity. On 1 May 2004, Slovenia was the first of the ex-Yugoslav republics to join the EU. Privatisation, liberalisation and marketisation were the main pillars of the deep structural reforms aimed at building capitalism. The economic transition included changes in the agricultural sector, and were expected to create a favourable ambience for a market economy.

However, Slovenia's national food system's capacity to ensure sustainable food security is seriously threatened by irresponsible business activities that endanger food safety and give rise to environmental problems. To this end, the Republic of Slovenia is experiencing rapid land degradation, affecting the livelihoods of small farmers, the development of rural communities and the sustainable production of food for all. As a result of both trade liberalisation and the globalisation process, imported food have come to dominate the supermarket shelves in Slovenia. Slovenian agri-food imports are mainly made up of fruit, food preparations and bakery products. The vast majority of these imports come from the EU. At the same time, agri-food exports are increasing significantly. The destination of the vast majority of these exports is the EU.

Slovenia's agrifood sector needs fundamental support and incentives for farmers to remain in the market through restoring, preserving and enhancing eco-systems related to agriculture. Future development of the sector depends on the production of high-quality products with higher value added and subsequently the access to modern technology, land, financial assets, knowledge and innovation.

Slovenian agricultural policy promotes sustainable development, cost-effectiveness and competitiveness of agriculture in Slovenia, fostering environmentally friendly practices. The focus is on providing food security by ensuring the stable production of safe and easily accessible high-quality food, while maintaining a clean environment and fertile soil and promoting coherent development and settlement of rural areas. Additionally, in Slovenia, support is given for promoting green technological innovation and applying new insights to modernise agricultural practice.

Nowadays Slovenia is self-sufficient in cow's milk, chicken, beef and eggs. The number of organic farms has been steadily increasing over the past 10 years. The expected negative effects of climate change on Slovenian agriculture include shortened growing periods, thus greater probability of water shortage and of extreme weather events. Therefore, especially after Covid-19, Slovenia emphasises the importance of respecting the environment while ensuring food sovereignty.

A range of adaptations will be necessary in the sphere of crop production for Slovenians in order to gain agricultural productivity while preserving nature. These measures include:

- changing sowing dates and varieties used (exchanging later crops with earlier);
- more intense fertilisation to compensate for the reduced growing time and water shortage;
- changes in sowing structure, farm production policy and production technology;
- improving soil state during droughts by increasing humus/topsoil;
- construction of irrigation systems to combat negative environmental impact;
- protecting agricultural land from extreme conditions.

The EU CAP (Common agricultural Policy) financing contributes to a greater stability of farm income, provides market assistance and supports the wider rural economy by taking into account the needs of individual countries. Under the CAP for the period 2014–2020, EUR 1.7 billion has been earmarked for Slovenia, out of which EUR 814.5 million for direct payments to farmers and market support and EUR 838 million for rural development. The priority tasks are

- the promotion of environmentally friendly farming practices,
- the support for young farmers,
- the promotion of competitiveness of agriculture and
- the balanced development of rural areas.

The war in Ukraine has considerably affected Slovenia's food self-sufficiency. The war has led to a significant rise in the prices of some agricultural products, while farm-gate prices are lagging behind the rise in the prices of raw materials. The import of agricultural products from Ukraine to the European Union mainly consisted of maize, oilseed rape and sunflower seeds. Russia was an important supplier of cereals for the EU market and the biggest supplier of fuel and fertilisers. During a meeting of EU agriculture ministers, Minister Podgoršek, the Slovenian Minister, stressed that it is vital for Slovenia to constantly monitor the situation on agricultural markets with regard to price pressure, or the lack of energy products and input materials, as well as the impacts of disruptions in trade flows or production on the food security in the EU and Ukraine.

In order to find solutions for food sustainability in the EU, it is worth to mention that the European Commission has been working on a new initiative, the „Sustainable EU food system” to be adopted in 2023. It aims at achieving EU food system sustainability by integrate it into all food-related policies.

Finally, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia remains strongly committed to the protection of the environment towards building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and the country. Slovenia has the ambition to become self-sufficient in food based on the 2020 plan for agriculture "Securing Food for Tomorrow" and the 2021 plan "Our food, rural and natural resources after 2021" which both aim at increasing the competitiveness of agriculture and the agricultural processing industry, all within a sustainable framework.

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