

Eating ... safely

Ralph Cassar

With food production becoming industrialized and mass-produced the issue of food safety has come to the forefront of concerns for consumers. Events such as the outbreak of the mad cow disease have also highlighted that most of the times effects of certain practices, such as feeding meat-products to herbivores, in this case the remains of sheep to cows, are unknown and unpredictable. Certainty is never on our side. A fact that strengthens our, the greens, belief in the precautionary principle.

I will not dwell on the effects of environmental pollution, heavy metals contamination, the effects of industrial farming, pesticides, contaminated or artificial animal feeds and the unknown consequences of a dangerous dependence on GMOs on the quality of food. Facts, uncertainties and unknowns are well documented. Instead I will make some suggestions about how we believe we can better guarantee safe, good, nutritious food for all.

First of all it is of paramount importance that food safety is tackled on a European level especially for small countries like Malta. Small countries such as ours will never have all the capacity be it from a human resources point of view and even from the financial investment needed to maintain a fully-fledged food safety agency. A European wide effort will prevent the need to re-invent the wheel in each and every country individually and will, or rather should be conducive to information sharing and a rapid reaction in the case of problems with certain products.

Science is part of the equation in policy-making on food. Scientists have increasingly been used by politicians to justify their political action. We must move from a monolithic corporate science, which preaches 100% certainty towards public interest science. Scientific methods and models have their limits. They are based on subjective assumptions. This is not to say that science is useless, on the contrary it informs our decisions. I'm just saying that we must always proceed with caution, taking into account the limits of science and keeping in mind the unpredictability of things. Pluralism is another value which must be promoted, even in this field. Different interest groups in society must be engaged in the policy-making process to ensure that the right questions are asked of the science and that the interpretations are socially robust. Scientific advice should avoid just being a set of definitive prescriptions

but should convey a range of different recommendations, including those from dissenting voices, so that the final political decisions are made more transparent and accountable. Knowledge creation not wealth creation should be the primary goal of science and scientific and technical commissions and agencies.

Food production and food policy is one area where the precautionary principle should be the corner stone of any policy decisions. If policy-makers have learnt anything from BSE, the foot and mouth disease, dioxin contamination in animal feed and other crises, it is that the precautionary principle needs to be the overriding factor that guides science. Action should be taken before there is strong evidence of harm, particularly if there is a possibility that the harm will be irreversible. The precautionary principle has nothing to do, as some suggest, with “anti-science”; it is the rejection of reductionist, closed and arbitrarily narrow science and policy-making in favour of a sounder, more rigorous and more robust science. It is a rejection of the mantra of rushing to get new products, processes and technologies to market without considering all possible effects on society. Basically, it is an act of faith in the principle “people before profits”. Taking GM foods as an example, the one and only reason of rushing GM foods on to the market is the commercial one; all other fantastic claims are gimmicks. The public has been betrayed over BSE, foot and mouth, dioxins, the list is endless; they cannot be betrayed over GM too.

European food policy should encourage the production and consumption of locally grown organic produce and farming practices that sustain environmental improvement. It should encourage variety and diversity. Consumer choice has to be guaranteed. It is not acceptable to force people to eat GM food. The right of the consumer to choose has to be paramount. If GM commercialization goes ahead choice must be legally binding and guaranteed at no extra cost to the consumer. All GM products, ingredients and derivatives have to be labeled. Additionally the biotech industry must carry responsibility for the technology. Like in everything else in life it is unacceptable for someone to transfer responsibility for his actions to third parties. The industry has to be legally liable for economic, environmental and health implications of their products. There cannot be commercialization without this legal pan-European framework. If commercialization goes ahead systems must be put in place to prevent genetic pollution. Systems must be put in place to protect non-GM and organic farmers. Society must also be protected. It is unacceptable to us that patents are granted on

genes. Life is being privatized. Genetic resources should be declared the common heritage of mankind; they should never become the private property of some private corporation.

The subject of food safety is vast. There are various other issues which must be looked into. The important thing is that we tackle the subject holistically and avoid simplistic assumptions and jumping to conclusions without considering the whole picture. Learning from past mistakes, negligence and the “rushing to market” mentality is a must if we want to set the consumer’s mind at rest that the food he is eating is safe to eat.

Food safety is an important issue for the Greens. I invite you to visit the *Green Group in the European Parliament’s* food safety campaign website www.eat-better.org, where you can find a wealth of information about the subject. Food is one of the pleasures of life, let’s make sure that it remains so...

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