

## **For sustainable agriculture**

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### **Introductory Speech**

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Technological advance has had an impact on all productive activities, and agriculture is no exception.

Just to mention two examples in an industrial context, dairy cows can now produce more calves and milk than was the case centuries ago. Crop yields have increased beyond anything that could have been achieved ‘naturally’ in earlier times.

Yet are we creating a Frankenstein? Or as sociologist Ulrich Beck puts it, a ‘risk society’, of man-made risks? Nature surely has its limits, yet can we draw a line?

At a global level, one cannot discuss agricultural sustainability whilst ignoring the political economy of this sector.

In the global context, one finds an aggressive business process resulting in large scale concentration of power of agricultural interests. Such interests have extensive economic power and political leverage in areas such as food standards, production methods and use of pesticides and fertilizers.

Farmers are often compelled to meet standards such as those imposed by the EU, as otherwise they would be driven out of the market. Of course, as Greens we support upgrading towards sustainable methods. But one should be wary of agricultural policies which result in having farmers being dependent on big business interests – as is the case with GMOs and with pesticides.

In this regard, the first decision of Malta’s European Commissioner John Dalli – namely the allowing of a particular type GM potato – was surely not a step in the right direction.

More pressure is being exerted by big-agricultural businesses to over exploit agricultural land and animals. Ecological systems are being destabilised, animals are being treated as machines and small farmers are often passive spectators in all this. In short, people, animals, land and the ecology are being sacrificed for the profits a large corporations.

On a separate note, globally agriculture is effected by climate change. This is of concern to small islands.

According to the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), it is very likely that subsistence and commercial agriculture on small islands will be adversely affected by climate change. In the IPCC’s words, ‘sea-level rise, inundation, seawater intrusion into freshwater lenses, soil salinisation, and decline in water supply are very likely to

adversely impact coastal agriculture. In some high-latitude islands, new opportunities may arise for increased agricultural production’.

Looking now at the domestic scene, water usage is one of the most pressing issues. In a water-thirsty country like Malta, proper water management has become urgent. Judging by current trends of water usage, agriculture will lose out in the coming years unless the extraction of ground-water is controlled, and policies such as recycling of sewage waste water is introduced for agricultural purposes.

Various measures can be introduced to safeguard the interests of Malta’s farming communities and at the same time promote sustainable agriculture. For example, Malta can be declared a GMO-free zone. Priority can be given to organic agriculture. Farmers’ markets can be created, where farmers directly sell their produce to customers. This would result in fresher and cheaper products, and possibly, higher returns for farmers.

This is not argument that we should go back to low productivity and poor hygiene farming, but a plea for rendering agricultural production more sustainable while at the same time safeguarding the interests of farmers and the consumers of agricultural products.

One should also keep in mind that rural development is often associated with a triple role for farmers, first as producers of food, second as wardens of the environment because rural areas sustain considerable biodiversity and third as embellishing the countryside and therefore attracting visitors including tourists.

I am sure that in today’s seminar we shall be sharing an abundance of information and knowledge on sustainable agriculture. I thank all of you for being here and look forward to learn more about this important topic.