

Open Letter following the publication of the [Corporate Europe Observatory report](#)

Truths are fragile, clichés are persistent

On 12th October, Corporate Observatory Europe published a report questioning Copa-Cogeca's representativeness of farmers, our work around the CAP and our interactions with public decision-makers.

This report came out by happy coincidence, one week before an essential vote, in the European Parliament, for the whole agricultural world on the future CAP. The arguments used in this report, its dogmatic approach, its sense of marketing, makes it a symbol for the misinformation circulating in Brussels about agriculture. It deserved a response. A constructed response that does not play the game of the media agenda, and that takes the time to develop an answer rather than the immediate release of a quote that would simply fuel the polemic. Indeed, this report alone validates an obvious issue of our time: truths are fragile and nuanced where clichés are so easy to propagate.

1st cliché: Copa-Cogeca is said to be representative of "factory farms", a monolithic and hegemonic agricultural model in Europe.

Long-standing observers know that since its creation, Copa and Cogeca have always had a cardinal value, a "compass", the defence of family farming. Family farming is and will remain for us the best way to ensure a diversified European agricultural model that is stable and capable when facing a crisis and shocks. The richness of our agriculture is its diversity. We are undoubtedly the main continent in the world where this diversity is the richest. Copa-Cogeca represents this diversity. If this were not the case, we would not be one of the most established representations in Brussels for more than 60 years and our membership would be fragmented.

In Copa-Cogeca this diversity is expressed through an active participation from our members in more than 50 working parties. Why doesn't the CEO report mention the fact that Copa-Cogeca has a working group on organic farming for 30 years for instance? Why not mention that we work on a daily basis on beekeeping, precision agriculture, women's agriculture, rural development, biodiversity, and the search for solutions to phytosanitary issues? It would have been hard to fit with the narrative, right?

Copa-Cogeca supports the entrepreneurial spirit of those who, as a family, decide to take over a farm, make an agro-environmental transition, install biogas units or solar panels on top of their barns, establish an agricultural drive-in, invest in precision farming tools, work on a quality upgrade of their production, join a local cooperative. Saying that Copa-Cogeca represents a single agricultural model, a single vision of agriculture is simply false and this argument of exclusion, the "factory farming" one, is a convenient bias to create easy opposition and free division.

The CEO report questions our "representativeness" by asking comments from "experts". The same experts who never participated in the democratic life of our organisation and do not know how decisions on our positions are taken... If they had taken the time to contact us, if they had wanted to exchange, we could have shown them the daily work that is carried out within our walls where, before the Covid crisis, at least two working party meetings were organised every day. Those working party meetings are where our positions are established in a continuous spirit

of searching for compromise and unanimity between our members. A democratic process that is often lengthy and complex precisely because of the great diversity of our agriculture in the EU!

Why not also mention that Copa-Cogeca remains one of the few professional organisations in Brussels that has maintained a linguistic regime of its meetings in 7 languages? We do so to avoid the language barrier that would prevent certain farmers and national experts from correctly expressing their positions.

Copa-Cogeca also organises regular elections, for both all governance bodies and working party chairmanships to ensure a democratic, rotating and dynamic representation of the different trends in the farming community. Should we turn the question around, and ask what is the “representativeness” of those who accuse us of being the "factory farm lobby" and who it is that funds them?

2nd Cliché: Copa-Cogeca is working in the shadows to oppose the principles and objectives of the Green Deal

The problem with this argument based on a letter is that we can present various statements, including letters to Executive Vice-President Timmermans (and several of his colleagues) stating our real policy line, *“We fully support a transition to more sustainable production and consumption. In this context, we welcome the publication of the Farm to Fork and the Biodiversity Strategies and we support the overall ambition of the European Green Deal and Paris climate agreement.”*. Why not also refer to our CAP position paper from 2017 where our second most important priority was sustainability (in a balanced approach between its three pillars – economic, environment and social). The key priority was, and still is, simplification, since the current policy has become far too complex for farmers and Member States administrations.

The European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork are broad policies that impact the agricultural sector in multiple ways. We think that this is fair at least for farmers and cooperatives to question the concrete impact behind the announced targets, what would this mean for them, at least to swallow what is possible in technical terms. Denying this right, the democratic process and this time of reflection cannot lead to anything good. Agriculture does not work in permanent revolution; it is a sector that adapts through incremental changes. In line with the European Commission’s own better legislation principles, we expect a comprehensive ex-ante impact assessment of the cumulative impacts of the various targets for EU agriculture. This in no hidden agenda, or dubious lobbying strategies, this is a simple call to follow the legislative process, a fact that Vice-President Timmermans approved and confirmed on different occasions.

The best proof of this transparency in our positioning is present in CEO’s report itself. By quoting our tweets, CEO report is showing that we communicate often on social media regarding those meetings and our position and we will continue to do so.

3rd Cliché: The future CAP does not represent any progress on climate issues, on biodiversity and for farmers as it will be a "business as usual" scenario.

This argument in the CEO's report has been used in communication campaigns that have flourished around the vote in the European Parliament on the future CAP. This argument is used to call for the full rejection of the proposed text. A text that has been prepared and discussed about for more than two years in Brussels on which everyone had a say.

As a result, the new CAP is a complex subject that covers many aspects of farming production, distribution, rural development and market management. Saying in two words that this CAP is a simple 'greenwashing' exercise that will only benefit the 'happy few' and/or some 'oligarchs' is an aberration that makes a mockery of the reality experienced in the field. Out of the European bubble, this is a way of communicating that exacerbates the urban-rural divide and feeds certain forms of populism. How can anyone claim that the CAP, as voted by the European Parliament a couple of weeks ago, represents 'greenwashing', when it means that European farmers and agri-cooperatives will have to rise to the following challenges:

- Allocating 30% of their support to eco-schemes, dedicated not only to the environment and climate but also including further improvements to animal welfare - which go beyond the original proposal made by the European Commission.
- Making viable progress through eco-schemes regarding actions concerning the climate, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, enhancing carbon sequestration, improving water quality, reducing soil erosion, reducing emissions, improving and protecting biodiversity, reducing the use of plant protection products, improving animal welfare, the nutrient management plan, improving animal and plant diversity and maintenance of wetlands and peatlands amongst others.
- Dedicating 10% of arable land to non-productive landscape elements that are beneficial to biodiversity. Only half of this target will receive support through eco-schemes and agri-environmental climate measures, the other half will be mandatory for all farmers, without further support.
- Receiving less support for areas with natural constraints – a vital part of rural areas – which only remain viable, socially vibrant and preserved through CAP funding.
- Maintaining permanent grassland on national, regional, sub-regional and holding levels with a maximum variation of 5% (without further support).
- Effectively protecting wetlands and peatlands (without further support).
- Implementing crop rotation without consideration of farm size, permanent crops and crops grown underwater (without further support).
- Implementing new statutory management requirements for water policy, for animal diseases and for sustainable use of pesticides (without further support). How can anyone who has real in-the-field experience say that this is nothing, that this is upholding the status quo?

If this CAP had not been supported by the European Parliament, no progress would have been made in the years to come! Worse yet, as the CAP represents a vital source of income for most farmers, such an approach would certainly push farmers and cooperatives to wait for clarifications prior to investing in sustainable measures. How come such a basic fact is absent from most statements these days?

It is not only the environmental sustainability that is relevant. The economic and social sustainability of the farming sector and its farmers is also quite relevant. Farmers and agri-cooperatives are required to transition and do more for the environment and the climate with a 9.4% reduction in their CAP support for the next 7 years.

In spite of all the criticism, in spite of the complexity brought about by climate change, in spite of the low incomes, in spite of the severe impacts of Covid-19 and the Brexit process – at the end

of the day the reality is that farmers are constantly making efforts to become more sustainable. With all due respect to certain activists, most of whom have never experienced the reality of farming on the ground, we will continue to defend, with determination, a transition that reconciles agricultural production and environmental conservation for millions of EU farmers.

4th Cliché: Copa-Cogeca's presence within the Agricultural civil dialogue groups and its presence before the opening of the Agri-fish Council is "a matter of tradition".

A last argument developed by CEO in its article questions the participation of Copa-Cogeca in what we could refer to as the hearings of the Commission DG AGRI and the Agri-fish Council, stating that Copa-Cogeca's presence is the result of "a tradition" or of a privilege.

This is a convenient way of getting around the purpose of these hearings, which is to provide an update on the evolution of agricultural markets and the technical difficulties that farmers and their cooperatives are facing. Agriculture is subject to strong pressures; climate, market prices, international events and public decisions. In agriculture, every year, every season is different. These difficulties, the perception of farmers on the ground must be explained and debated with European public decision-makers. Who else but the agricultural organisations can seriously do this work today in Brussels? Are environmental NGOs suddenly going to become experts on agriculture markets and follow the development of their trends daily?

The CEO report does not mention that Civil Dialogue Groups welcome a variety of stakeholders. Indeed, organisations that have campaigned with Corporate Europe for the rejection of the CAP are also present and participate in those meetings and are invited to take part in the chairmanship of these groups, yet often decline, arguing a lack of resources and or staff.

The option for travel reimbursement is open to all participants and Copa-Cogeca does indeed use it to make sure that there is a good representation from different Member States, thus bringing different perspectives and realities to such meetings.

Those hearings are essential in a representative democracy. Policy makers should have an organised space for dialogue, to collect the feedback from those that are affected by their policies first. As clichés around agriculture are spreading so easily, as our businesses are becoming increasingly complex, those hearings are more essential than ever before. In this regard, we will continue to support the efforts put in place by the Commission and the Council.

What this controversy won't tell (sadly) is that farmers are also open to dialogue with constructive NGOs that are not afraid to come up with solutions instead of systematic opposition. A reality that exists more at the national level than in Brussels, a fact that we regret. We refuse the divide that has been framed for us opposing agriculture and environment. We are the first to be impacted by those changes and we are also those that are trying to find solutions on a daily basis in our farms, and in our cooperatives.

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