

The Soy Case

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Soy production has been booming the past 25 years. Most of this protein and oil containing bean goes as animal feed to the meat industry in Europe and China. Protein from fish meal has become scarce, other animal sources have been forbidden because of BSE, but the demand for meat is rising rapidly world-wide. Production of soy in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay is growing even faster because the IMF and World Bank are pushing these countries to export as much as possible so that they can pay back their debts.

To make this increase in production possible, millions of hectares of forests and savanna have been destroyed, small farmers have lost their land and income and people remaining in the countryside are being made ill by exposure to wide scale pesticide spraying. As a result of the focus on monoculture export crops, millions of people in one of the world's biggest food exporting regions are now suffering from malnutrition. GM-soy is contaminating the countryside and the risen use of pesticides is polluting water and soil. The transport of all this fodder is contributing to climate change and resulting in an extremely unsustainable nutrients balance. Economically this development is forcing the Latin American countries concerned in a neo-liberal free-trade system. [more arguments against the current soy production in 'The forgotten arguments'] We can make a long list of all the misery and misfortunes inflicted by this system, but what can we do about it?

The production side

It is important that small farmers and other local people in the soy producing countries are protected against the consequences of massive soy production.

- * Land rights should be respected, even when families that have lived somewhere for generations don't have the papers to prove it. Nowadays the big growers of soy (and other crops) often use violence to chase away small farmers and indigenous people. Most of the time they are backed up by local and national politicians.

- * Countries should put food production for their own population first, even if this leads to a loss of income from export crops. Nearly all of the money made by the massive exports ends up in the pockets of the landowning elite and foreign multinationals.

- * The debts of the Latin American countries (and most other developing countries) should be cancelled. The debts were created by the ruling elite, often during dictatorships. But years after the dictatorships the poor are still paying the price. There is no reason why small farmers and people in the slums should have to suffer because of deals made between banks and elites in the past. Although A SEED is in favour of cancelling the debts, we do not expect this move to solve all problems. Governments would still be able to decide to focus on export, failing to use the income so gained for the common good of the country.

- * The production of soy and other crops should be GMO-free, small scale with crop rotation and organic whenever possible. Small farmers and other peasants should get a fair income. But this brings us to the most controversial alternative: criteria for good soy. The problem is that criteria alone don't criticise the current export model. On the other hand, sufficiently strict criteria would make the continued massive export of soy impossible. It would become too expensive and impossible to produce in sufficient quantities.

The demand side

Most of the soy (80-90%) imports into Europe is used to feed animals. Meat production is a very inefficient way to produce protein and food in general [see the forgotten arguments], but European consumers like their meat. It should be made clear to people that this behaviour has consequences; "The production of this kilo of meat did costs 15m2 of rain forest and the life a farmer. Enjoy your meal" When you realise that people in countries like China and India are copying this irresponsible behaviour it is clear the European diet should change radically.

One alternative would be to produce animal feed in Europe. Peas, clover and lupine also provide the proteins needed for animal feed and there is still a grain surplus. 'Het Landbouw Economisch Instituut' (Dutch economical institute) calculated that the animals for European demand could all be fed without the import of animal feed. It would make meat a bit more expensive for consumers, but would save about the same amount in agriculture subsidies.

To realise this important point, Europe would need to stop exporting meat. This, in combination with the imports of animal feed is creating a totally unbalanced flow of nutrients. Europe doesn't know what to do with all its manure while other regions face erosion and exhausted fields. Besides this the transport consumes a lot of scarce energy and is contributing to climate change.

But still European governments continue to support industrial agriculture. Everybody knows about the pollution it creates and the cruelty involved, but the economic arguments win every time. Thousands of people are employed in this industry in Europe, but a less industrial agricultural system and the production of vegetable alternatives for meat would also create work. It is about time politicians stopped listening to the industry and started to take social and environmental problems seriously.

A SEED is mainly focussing on the demand side. First because we are based in the Netherlands, the biggest importers of soy in Europe. Let's first improve our own behaviour and take some responsibility before we tell others what to do. The second reason is that by questioning the demand side we question the fundamental problem behind increasing soy imports; over-consumption and an economic system based on never-ending growth and expanding world trade.

A SEED's Soy Campaign

In the past years more and more organisations in Europe and South America are campaigning on soy. This is necessary because it is such a big issue and there are so many things related to it. Within this whole spectrum of development organisations, environmental NGOs and progressive farmers' unions, A SEED decided to focus on the following things:

- Spreading information about soy-production, its link with meat and the role of European companies. You can find more background information and links to other useful sources on this website.
- Putting pressure on European companies involved in the import of soy, especially Dutch companies playing an important role in the process. They have nice, but so far unfamiliar names like Nidera, Cefetra, Nutreco, Cebeco, Provini, Cehave, Hendrix Meat Group and Dumeco.
- Solidarity with grass-roots groups in Latin America. It can be important for their local actions make it to the media here as well. This international attention can sometimes help to protect activists against violent, corrupt or indifferent governments and multinationals. Multinationals operating in Latin America can be sensitive for international pressure and negative publicity.

Help needed

But this is still a LOT of work. For example writing articles to magazines and newspapers, organising direct actions against involved companies, making and/or spreading material to reach the public, doing research on local alternatives for animal feed. If you want to contribute to this, please contact us!