



European Trade Union  
Technical Bureau  
for Health and Safety



**The European trade union movement and sustainable  
development ahead of the Earth Summit –  
a European strategy for quality employment and  
the protection of the environment**

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## Preamble

Meeting people's food needs has been a central feature of the history of all civilizations. For a long time feeding themselves was the main concern of our ancestors. For half the human race it remains so today: 800 million of the planet's inhabitants suffer from chronic undernourishment (34 million of them are from industrialised and transition countries) and 2 billion from deficiencies related to an inadequate diet.<sup>1</sup>

Even though most of the inhabitants of the developed countries have plenty to eat, for many of them food remains a matter of concern. Recent crises casting doubt on the health safety of food products have gravely undermined consumer confidence. The methods used in agricultural production and food processing are being critically examined in terms of both the safety of food and its impact on habitats, natural resources and spatial planning. The international community is alarmed by the destruction of natural ecosystems, the increase in deforestation (nearly 140 million hectares lost between 1990 and 2000) and desertification, all of which are caused by human activities. The rules governing international trade in foodstuffs are also the subject of worldwide debates.

These contrasting situations - famine, food shortage and suffering on the one hand and abundance and concern on the other - are fraught with future tensions and call for renewed thinking about how we produce these so distinctive food products. They also require an international political willingness to provide food, implement production models, adopt measures, practices and standards, and engage in forms of cooperation that are aimed squarely at promoting sustainable development, the priorities being to eliminate poverty and hunger. To achieve this, there is a fundamental need for the countries in the North to provide the countries in the South with public development aid.

These questions concern all citizens, politicians and leaders in the business world and society. Organized labour, for its part, must provide its own specific answers to these questions and work with employees to build alternative, supportive and lasting answers.

### **Workers: essential participants in the issue of world food security**

Food security, i.e. meeting the dietary needs of the entire population, is still a pressing issue in large areas of the world. **Some 15% of the planet's inhabitants suffer from food shortages.** Paradoxically, the very people whose job is to produce food are also the main victims of malnutrition and sometimes famine: poor peasants, and wage-earners in agriculture and the processing industry who are often equally destitute, make up a large share of those suffering from hunger.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: FAO 2000.

**In the developing countries** these social groups are marginalized, dominated, voiceless and socially unimportant. How can food security conceivably be achieved without the active participation of the main actors in the food production and processing chain, without the recognition of their social role by the authorities of their countries?

**In the developed countries** the recognition of basic rights and the social victories won do not prevent workers in farming and food industries from being among those who have the lowest pay, the harshest working conditions and weak or nonexistent trade union rights.

**In these circumstances, the reassertion and winning of the right of small-scale producers, farm workers and workers in agri-food industries to unionise and to express themselves through unions is vital to enabling greater mobilisation of the European trade union movement and its allies in the following areas:**

## **1. Health and safety on the job: a fundamental requirement for those who work the land**

**Agriculture is one of the sectors with the highest risk of accidents**, in both the developing and industrialised countries. It is one of the three most dangerous sectors, the other two being mining and construction. ILO estimates for 1997 indicate that worldwide, of 330,000 fatal accidents at the workplace 170,000 involved farm workers. The growing use of machinery and of pesticides and other agrochemical products has increased the hazards. In several countries the rate of fatal accidents in agriculture is double the average rate of all other sectors combined. Exposure to pesticides and other agrochemical products is a major occupational hazard that can lead to serious pulmonary illnesses, job-related types of cancer, impairments of the reproductive system, poisoning and death. These hazards are multiplied in the developing countries by the use of highly toxic active ingredients (often banned in the developed countries but still marketed in the Third World) and the absence of protective equipment, as well as unfamiliarity with the recommended conditions of use.

More recently, the appearance of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) has meant a new risk for workers who come into contact with the potentially infectious materials. The work stations of slaughterhouses, cutting plants and rendering plants must be examined to ensure the safety of these workers.

**Health and safety on the job must be one of the priorities of policies advocating sustainable development.** The Convention and the Recommendation on Safety and Health in Agriculture adopted by the ILO in June 2001 must be ratified immediately by all countries.

## **2. The fight against child labour and other forms of inhuman exploitation**

**According to the International Labour Office, in 1997 there were 250 million children aged 5 to 14 working in agriculture in the developing countries. Half of them were working there full-time.** Some 80 million are in dangerous jobs. The International Labour

Office's IPEC<sup>2</sup> programme similarly estimates that some 70% of children who work are employed on farms.

Banning child labour is a contentious issue: if the working conditions are commensurate with the age and there is concomitant access to schooling, child labour sometimes represents an opportunity to acquire job skills and escape a marginal existence. But most often this practice amounts to shameless exploitation of defenceless beings who are left to their own devices and subject to squalid and inhuman working conditions.

The agri-food sectors most likely to receive raw materials whose production involved child exploitation are those dominated *by* the major international groups that use tropical products as raw materials in their specialities: sugar, coffee, cocoa<sup>3</sup>, tea and tobacco, or in sectors like fruit (citrus, bananas, other tropical fruits) and cotton.

**Forced labour and coercive recruitment practices**, which are modern forms of slavery, are the fate of many workers 'employed' in agriculture and forestry. Far from being marginal, these practices are widespread (in Brazil and other Latin American countries, the Caribbean and Africa).

**Sustainable development is incompatible with these inhuman practices of exploitation. The trade union movement of the agri-food sector bears a special responsibility in the fight against these extreme and unacceptable forms of exploitation.**

### **3. Relocations and social dumping**

Given that Europe is faced with the widespread relocation of agricultural production to developing or emerging countries, particular attention must be paid to formulating guarantees to ensure that food production is not called into question, and to the quality of the jobs created in these countries in terms of wages, social security coverage, working conditions and trade union rights. Although these redeployments create jobs, they are used strategically by the multinationals that engage in social dumping - which we firmly oppose - to pit workers of the sectors involved against each other across continents. **This issue is a challenge to be met together, at international level. International trade union cooperation and the development of responsible consumption and fair trade are valuable allies in this fight.**

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<sup>2</sup> International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour.

<sup>3</sup> A recent agreement between the IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations), three NGOs and most of the representatives of the world cocoa industry acknowledged the need to eliminate child labour.

The requirement of decent conditions of production for the workers of agriculture and agro-industry and the fight against social dumping at international level are key prerequisites for the sustainable development of the planet.

## **4. What sorts of agriculture are needed to feed the world?**

The situation of workers in our field of activity depends largely on how models of development of agriculture and food industries evolve. Therefore, we must participate on an equal footing in any debates and establish a sufficient standing to enable us to influence choices and changes in policies, both those involving agriculture and agro-industry and those that are national and international in scope, and pave the way to achieving sustainable development at all levels.

### **4.1. The WTO and the CAP: for what purpose?**

The key idea driving the worldwide reorganisation of trade that since 1994 has been led by the World Trade Organization (WTO) is that the establishment of a world market in food products will increase trading, which itself is a factor of economic development and hence of wealth. This sequence, sometimes oversimplified, is today questioned and disputed. Consequently, deeper analyses are required because a one-dimensional model entails the risk of world biodiversity gradually disappearing.

The reform of the CAP must go further still. This is a strong social requirement based on both the recognition of the positive progress made in the quantitative performance of European agriculture and the need for its qualitative transformation to provide more food security, higher product quality, improved land management, greater protection of habitats, and preservation and renewal of natural resources. Without this essential reform, the CAP budget will become far too low to continue subsidising certain forms of productions and at the same time cope with the enlargement of the Union to include CEECs. This would give European agriculture more credibility and strengthen its position in international trade. Subsidies for European agriculture are often viewed as obstacles to developing other forms of agriculture around the world. In this respect the USA, despite professing to advocate free trade and implementing a policy on subsidies that is comparable to that of the EU, has just reinforced the protectionist nature of that policy. The decision to do so will have numerous consequences for world trade in agricultural produce and for the poorest countries. Moreover it clashes with the principle of sustainable development.

Alternative positions are being advanced in Europe. Without questioning the necessity of worldwide regulation they combine the necessary control over production volumes to avoid the surpluses that drive down prices, the setting of profit-generating prices defined by large zones of comparable levels of productivity, and suitable protection at borders. These arrangements would make it possible to acknowledge and enforce a new right: the right of peoples to ensure their own food security.

### **4.2 People must have the right to feed themselves**

We reaffirm the reasons that compel us to demand **this right of populations to produce locally the foodstuffs that correspond to their needs** and to security of their supplies.

This forms the basis of any possibility of evolving towards economic and political stability, towards democracy. From this perspective the developing countries have the right to defend their agriculture, a vital sector, through protective measures at their borders. The agricultural sectors of the developed countries are structured no differently.

Food aid must not thwart efforts to develop food crops, nor those to achieve self-sufficiency in food. Protective measures at the borders can therefore be justifiable, and states or large permanent exporting groups (Europe, the Cairns Group, the United States) must refrain from destabilising the fragile rural economies of these countries by exporting their surpluses.

Without calling into question countries' right to use up their timber resources<sup>4</sup>, a number of systematic deforestation policies do indeed seem to pose serious threats to ecosystems and impoverish natural heritage without providing sufficient revenue to the people harvesting the trees or to those who subsequently work on the land that has been cleared. The use in the home of wood as a source of energy is still essential for large numbers of people around the world. Demographic growth is stepping up the pressure on this resource which could be renewable, but which, because of the poverty caused by predatory political systems and inadequate technical resources, often leads to desertification and misery. Today what we need more than ever before are ambitious aid policies focussing on the management and replanting of forests.

A fundamental element of sustainable development entails protecting the marine environment against the exploitation of all its resources by industrial fishing methods and against pollution, both of terrestrial origin and caused by shipping. In this context and as a basis for food safety for coastal countries and islands, demands for reforms to leading fisheries and sustainable ecosystems have been made in a number of international agreements concluded under the aegis of the United Nations. These reforms still need to be applied expressly.

Above all, assistance to the countries of the Southern Hemisphere must be designed as supportive and balanced cooperation and allocated to programmes supporting infrastructure, training and economic and social development that directly benefit the rural populations that comprise the great majority of these countries' populations. It is therefore vital that the amount of public development aid defined by the United Nations, which is in keeping with these perspectives, must quickly reach the goal of 0.7% of GNP. This is one of the EU's commitments at the Gothenburg summit.

### **4.3. Regaining a quality environment**

#### 4.3.1: The grey areas

Agriculture must furnish a guarantee that our landscapes and the rural environment are maintained. It must provide for a diversified food supply. Nothing would be more unfair than to overburden systematically those who are part of it. Nonetheless, this must not prevent us from identifying the items adrift, the grey areas:

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<sup>4</sup> Deforestation on a massive scale has been a feature of the history of most industrialised countries and has even been a precondition for their economic development.

- The development of the use of man-made fertilisers and processing products has resulted in an appreciable rise in their concentration in habitats and the occasionally excessive presence of residues in agricultural products. Quantities of pesticides past their sell-by date and toxic waste recorded in LDCs, and the use of some of these, present enormous risks and may even prove catastrophic for public health and natural resources.
- In fact, the industrialised countries which have exported these products bear a heavy responsibility and must accept the consequences by helping to eliminate these products and waste, reduce pollution and renovate the sites and soil in question.
- Access to clean water is tending to become an inaccessible luxury for most human beings. The consequences of pollution of groundwater and aquifers, of the drying up of resources, and of difficulties of access and transport characterise the lives of billions of the planet's inhabitants. The struggle to provide potable water for everyone is one of the major battles of the new century. The availability of water for irrigation also affects the production of food goods and thus remains one of the top priorities in the field of farming.
- More generally, the stakes involved in terms of the world's water, the preservation of this resource, its fair and rational utilisation and the infrastructure required for its various uses (food consumption, economic activities, agriculture, fishing, forests and so forth) are the challenges of the new century.
- The concentration of off-land livestock farms is a source of odour pollution, water contamination and eutrophication (the development of green algae along lake or sea shores).
- Although habitats are better protected these days, some have been profoundly altered. For example, wetlands that are home to remarkable flora and fauna have been extensively drained. These changes have contributed to a rise in both the frequency and magnitude of floods.
- Lastly, the evolution of livestock feeding techniques is behind the most serious food crisis of the 20th century in terms of impact on people's awareness.

The siting of agricultural production in the most favourable areas, the sharp drop in the number of farms due to the enlargement of farm holdings, and the pressure on prices as a result of increasingly concentrated volume retailing are causing negative trends in land-use planning. Furthermore, these policies are leading to an increase in transport flows which are incompatible with the potential self-sufficiency offered by certain methods of agricultural production and with the objectives of the Kyoto Protocol. Entire regions of Europe are becoming depopulated, their social fabric is disintegrating, public utilities are disappearing, land is being left fallow once more and so forth.

#### 4.3.2. How to put things back on an even keel

This listing of items of concern must not result in a one-sided view of the situation, especially since new approaches are taking shape in Europe under the pressure of both current events and of the authorities, farmers and workers uniting to address the issue:

- **Sensible, integrated, territorialized and sustainable agriculture** in accordance with given countries or schools of thought constitutes the crucible of experiences capable of renewing production methods and pointing the way towards other agricultural models. Although organic farming is still very marginal (1% of the European UAA<sup>5</sup>) is it nevertheless an effective answer to preserving the environmental quality of agricultural and rural areas?
- Europe's willingness, still quite hesitant, to **adjust direct aids, agro-environmental measures and measures of eco-conditionality** herald a reversal in the productivity-biased trend that has characterised previous decades. Upkeep of landscapes, protection of habitats, maintenance of a harmonious fabric of rural society, direct marketing and farm tourism, which comprise the multifunctional nature of agriculture, must be encouraged. They provide the guarantee of a form of agriculture in harmony with the public.

### 5. Ensuring the health safety of food products

Even though our European countries have always prided themselves on the quality of their products and of their cuisine, in the last decade they have been struck by a disturbing series of food crises: mad cow, dioxin, listeria infections, and so forth.

Yet paradoxically, the frequency of impairments to the health of consumers attributable to food is steadily falling. Nonetheless, the majority of them remain very concerned and mistrustful. Although there is no such thing as zero risk, everything possible should be done (for example through rules, standards, monitoring and sanctions) to avoid accidents.

To ensure the health safety of food products, two rules of action must be put into practice:

- **Prevention**: a set of rules aimed at sheltering consumers from **known and recognised** health hazards and monitoring compliance with these rules.
- **Precaution**: warning the consumer/citizen of a risk that is possible but has not yet been scientifically recognized, whilst measuring the costs and benefits of steps taken. The precautionary principle, often confused with prevention, is a principle of action that can also result in total bans. This is why **risks must be assessed**. The recent creation of the **European Food Authority**, charged with both assessment and formulation of food safety standards in conjunction with other countries' agencies and authorities, should improve the guarantees provided to consumers.

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<sup>5</sup> Usable Agricultural Area.

The concept of **traceability** must be added to the precautionary principle and prevention. It makes it possible to identify the origin and production conditions of a given agricultural product.

With regard to these three basic principles of food safety, organised labour can be a relevant and major element in formulating standards and monitoring their enforcement.

The appearance of **genetically modified plants** in the USA and in Europe has generated intense debates. What emerges from them is that even if most scientists consider the health risks to be minuscule, the application of the precautionary principle and the fears expressed by consumers call for new guarantees to potentially accept their development. On the other hand, it is essential that the research into these techniques be continued to prevent Europe from being excluded in future from a new opportunity for technical progress.

But beyond the regulatory measures applied, particular emphasis must be placed on the need to strengthen the role of certain social actors in the food distribution channel: the role of consumers, whose representation remains weak at European level and inadequate<sup>6</sup>, in order to influence those at whom the food sector is aimed; and the role of agro-industry workers, who also occupy a strategic position in the food production and processing chain since they are the last ones to come into contact with food before it leaves for the store shelves. Organised labour must arrange meetings and debates between researchers, scientists, workers, farmers and consumers to guarantee increasingly safe conditions of agricultural production.

## 6. New social advances are necessary

The important position they occupy in the production process makes the workers of agriculture and agro-industry fully-fledged participants in the food sector. Consequently, their concerns centre on other issues:

- High-quality **professional qualification** of the workers in food sector. The evolution of techniques on the farm and in the processing industry plus past experience with accidents involving food and dispersed pollution of habitats necessitate much more effective systems of basic and continuing vocational training than those currently in existence, and recognition of this training when it comes to jobs and wages.

- A specific **right to notify** in agri-food companies. Workers are the last ones to handle the products. They can thus prevent incidents, and perhaps accidents. What they also require is a genuine right to notify in this regard. How should it be defined and instituted? What guarantees of protection should be demanded for the workers who report these defects?

- **Consequences of globalisation:** One of the typical features of globalisation is the development, on a worldwide scale, of a process of extreme concentration in certain sectors of food processing and in volume retailing. We have to understand these phenomena better to both act at local level and formulate international responses. It is an

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<sup>6</sup> This need is made all the more pressing by the fact that consumer information and education constitute a strong element in enhanced food safety.

industrial action requirement that committees of European and worldwide groups be created with rights and prerogatives for elected staff representatives that make it possible to monitor, submit suggestions and take action, and this requirement must be expressed firmly.

- **Employee savings:** Can the organisation of an employee savings scheme, with equal access for all workers of groups regardless of their country of origin, based on ethical, social and environmental criteria, contribute to better governance in the agro-industrial companies? On what conditions?

- **Safety at work:** In all countries professions in agriculture and agro-industry are among the hardest, most dangerous, and most disabling. How can the central theme of health and safety at work be strengthened by prevention of on-the-job accidents and occupational illnesses?

- **Necessary action:**

1- The challenges of sustainable development in all the constituent areas of food safety are creating a need for renewed forms of cooperation between trade unions throughout the world. This will come about most of all via exchanges of analyses and experience gathered on all the relevant issues.

This also entails tighter relations between trade unions within the committees of European or global groups to come up with concrete initiatives on sustainable development, involving companies and workers. Our trade unions must get involved with their counterparts in developing countries, to implement training activities aimed at representatives in charge of working conditions, hygiene, and health and safety.

2- **International solidarity** and trade union cooperation are achieved in particular through campaigns of support for trade unionists facing **anti-union repression**, firm trade union action on behalf of **observance of ILO conventions** and the basic rights of workers, and promotion of **fair trade** networks. How can this type of solidarity and cooperation be organized concretely at the level of the food industries?

## Conclusion

Nowadays society has a different view of agricultural production. Now more than ever, farming is expected to play its part in ridding the world of famine, the hope being that world poverty will finally subside. But society also expect the principle of biodiversity to be respected and rejects the one-dimensional model of food production. Many of us are concerned about the longer-term future of the planet. Forests and water are common goods that need protecting, and agriculture and the production of foodstuffs are the fundamental elements of sustainable development. If sustainable development is to become a reality, realise its full potential and meet the planet's needs in any real terms, we must allow the men and women who generate wealth to play their part in such a transformation, and the trade unions have a key role to play in helping them rise to these challenges.