MANIFEST MAY 2023

The goal of the Wheelbarrow March

Farmers, citizens and their governments face many major challenges that are related to agriculture and food like: GHG emissions, nitrogen, fresh water availability, climate change and increasing costs of the healthcare system. Topics appearing in media on a daily basis. Both, the farm operations and nature are threatened in their existence, the climate is quickly changing, the price of food is rapidly rising, while the quality of food (nutritional value) has been declining since the beginning of the green revolution. At the same time, the spendings on healthcare is skyrocketing. People tend to live longer on average, but the number of healthy years does not increase.

In this manifest we advocate (agricultural) policies that revolve around a healthy living and functional soil that both serves agriculture as well as ecosystems. This would largely contribute to a better health of citizens through wholesome nutrition and would contribute to solving many of society's problems simultaneously: nitrogen leaching and deposition, impaired water quality, poor water infiltration and holding capacity in soils, soil degradation, erosion and the poor biodiversity in agricultural areas. A focus on healthy soils will bring solutions that benefit citizens, farmers and nature.

With the wheelbarrow march we show that we want to take this road TOGETHER: farmers, agronomists, ecologists, scholars, academics, healthcare professionals, politicians, landscape managers, and citizens. The soil is the foundation of our existence and it connects all of us in a period of transition from fossil fuel-based problems to nature-based solutions.

**Good Soil, Good Food,
Better Health**

*The wheelbarrow march is an initiative of the Symphony of Soils Foundation,
a citizens' initiative of professionals in soil and nutrition.*

SYMPHONY OF SOILS

What do we ask from politicians, civil servants and industry representatives?

- ☑ Target an agricultural future based on a 'living soil', which supplies wholesome food that fosters human health and that will reintroduce vital nature in our society.

- ☑ Allow farmers more space to exhibit their craftsmanship and let them have their say in how the goals can be achieved: move from means-based regulations to target-based regulations.

- ☑ Use the knowledge and experience of the many farmers and agronomists that already work on regenerating agricultural soils. Investigate, learn, fall and get back up together.

- ☑ Make it financially possible for the farmers. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Solar radiation and fresh air are the only things farmers don't get billed for. Feasibility of nature-inclusive farming should not depend on subsidies. Pay the farmer for the services he provides, such as landscape management, water storage, carbon storage, nitrogen fixation, clean air, sharing knowledge, and providing foods of exceptional nutritional value. Also reimburse the costs that are necessary for the transition, because it is not only their transition but that of society as a whole. The revenue model requires a long-term vision.

- ☑ Make healthy and fresh food affordable and accessible to all. The resulting savings in costs for healthcare will easily pay for those measures. Take care that farmers receive proper payment for their products, that citizens receive proper educational background on the importance of healthy food and are supported to nourish themselves with such foods. Combine true pricing and market regulation mechanisms to promote wholesome foods in stores and used in the hospitality sector. Foster a socio-economic climate in which healthy food is also accessible and affordable to the least wealthy in society.

- ☑ Use local food initiatives to make citizens more aware of the importance of healthy food. Provide independent nutrition education and workshops in schools, because at early age the foundations of future consumption patterns are laid.

- ☑ Expand the amount of research and courses focusing on the relationship between soil, nutrition and health in agricultural and medical education.

- ☑ It's possible! There will be significant results within 5 to 7 years if we do it TOGETHER as a society.

Explanation

Long live the soil!

Mankind and its culture is strongly connected to the soil it lives on. Within for instance the Rhine delta different a wide variety of soils exists; each soil brings forth customs and habits fitting in the context of the regional landscape and agricultural production system. On poor sandy soils, where natural yields were relatively small and uncertainty around self-sufficiency existed, a social security culture developed around unneighborly help and farms remained of modest size. Quite a contrast with the farmers on the young and rich clay soils, yielding large harvests and supplying enough foods for sustenance and export from the region. On these soils, farmers could gather wealth and farms steadily increased in size, while a culture developed around showing riches and a social structure with an elite and working class developed. On the peatlands, unsuitable for arable production, developed a culture around dairy farming, with different habits again. Nowadays these cultural difference are no longer as explicit as they used to be, an inevitable result of a globalizing society, but in rural areas the cultural context of the soil and the natural landscape can still be experienced.

The agricultural soil is an unique world with many substances and organisms cohering in a subtle balance. However, that world is rather invisible. As humans, we tend to be completely unaware of this wondrous world underneath our feed during everyday life. Also because many of us living in urbanized areas are no longer working with the soil ourselves, but depend on others growing our food. As a result, the deterioration of soil quality often goes unnoticed by a large part of society and even for farmers that became increasingly reliant on machines and chemicals and disconnected from nature-driven farming soil degradation is scarcely recognized. However, soil life and the mineral reserves in the soil have a direct influence on the mineral composition of our diet. Many parallels and conections exist between the microbiomes in ur digestive tract and the microbiome of the soil.

The soil has no voice that can be heard in loud words. It undergoes its destruction in silence, the silence of the soil complemented by the lack of birds singing. On behalf of the soil, we therefore urgently request attention for proper care so that we and future generations can regenerate soils, sustain healthy soils and feed society on these in a healthy way. Investing in a vital soil pays back in improved public health: 'farmacy' instead of pharmacy.

Climate change is having a noticeable impact on agriculture in Mediterranean Europe. Due to the delta in which we live, North-West Europe still has beautiful and fertile agricultural soils. Despite extended periods of drought and an increase of heavy rainfalls we can keep producing here so it seems to, but not without paying attention and focusing on restoring and maintaining the condition of these soils.

Agriculture puts pressure on the soils in our region in recent decades. The soil is deteriorating due to intensification and the trend toward cultivating high-yielding but soil-taxing crops. Short-term profits are made at the expense of long-term production stability resulting in a reduced quality of the organic matter in the topsoil and decreased amount of organic matter in the subsoil. This loss of organic matter results in a loss of soil structure, diminishing yields at increased expenses and a loss of capacity to deal with weather extremes. Working on a climate-robust soil is a precondition for sustainable agriculture and the fundament of our mere existence as a society.

Another worrying trend is the declining nutritional value of our food. We get more than enough calories. However, the content of nutritive substances in our diet is decreasing, both of minerals and trace elements and of bioactive substances (secondary plant metabolites) that are shown to have many beneficial effects on human health. Not all trace elements in the agricultural soil are maintained by current fertilization. The availability in the soil of trace elements that are not deemed important for crop growth, but which are important for humans, is declining. In some cases it is not even the lack of these elements in the soil, but the excess of the commonly applied elements that cause an imbalance in our food and that diminish the role of soil micro-organisms that make those trace elements plant available. Plant breeding, in which the pursuit of quantity forced any attention to nutritional quality to the background for several decades, also contributes to this. The intensification in agriculture that was decisive for decades is now crossing the line. The many environmental problems as silent withnesses of this transgression. Just like a human being, soil can withstand a bit of mall treatment, but if it is stressed for too long, ailments will arise, natural restorative capacity decreases which will result in a complete 'burnout'. The signs of mall treatment of soils were there since the beginning of the green revolution, the ailments in soils are present for decades, when will the final degradation become evident? In many areas it already is, but as long as we have plenty of calories coming from the land we tend to neglect it.

Society and within it agriculture are in transition. Still hesitant, but it has started. The uproar caused by the transition in agriculture is palpable. This goes much further than just the recent discussion focusing on nitrogen, which unfortunately has attracted a lot of attention while it is merely one expression of the flawed system. Unrest and even anger that exists within the agricultural community concern all facets of the flawed food production system, which finds its root cause in: high demand for energy and raw materials, social and economic injustice, large workloads, trade relations, lack of appreciation, lack of means to farm in a more sustainable way and so on.

What we ask of governments

In a transition, it is very difficult for everyone, citizens and farmers alike, to determine direction and the rights steps. The number of variables is too large to oversee. However, one aspect is always worthwhile to consider: soil quality / soil health! A living, rich and vital soil is a foundation on which farmers and horticulturists can always build, whatever the developments. Healthy, productive and functional soils connect all farmers, wether they are labeled organic, conventional, or anything else. The soil is where all parties involved in the discussions around agriculture find 'common ground'. It is healthy soil on which we can all agree on.

That is why we ask the government to support measures that are necessary to regain and maintain healthy soil. In words, in laws and regulations, and in money to support action. With every decision that concerns agriculture and horticulture, the question must be asked:

> **"What is the influence of this decision on soil biology and soil fertility and the possibilities of the farmer or market gardener to take care of these permanently?"**

The answer to that must be that there is a positive effect. Then a measure will always have a positive effect on the future prospects of agriculture and horticulture. Underlying issues regarding fertilization, nitrogen, etc. are thus given a clear direction and are therefore resolved. In 5 to 7 years, the soil can already show a major improvement, which has an effect on the stability of business operations, the use of raw materials, and the vitality of the food.

In this manifest, we advocate making the soil the leading factor in agricultural policy, in order to organize agriculture and food in their cohesion. The soil is ideally suited to reconnecting farmers and citizens. Vitality of soils is of great social, economic, and ecological importance and is key to allowing a wider transition towards a bio-based and circular economy that is envisioned by many.

In this manifest, we do not mention any concrete actions or measures that are to be prescribed by the government. Generic measures do not fit into a new way of policy-making. Goals are the starting point of the future. Methods from regenerative, nature-inclusive, and organic agriculture offer perspectives for action, but companies that do not consider themselves part of a specific group are also showing good developments in the field of soil fertility. It is recognized by everyone: we have to move from means regulations to target regulations. It turns out to be difficult, but let's do it anyway!

This call is made by farmers, agronomists, ecologists, scholars, academics, healthcare professionals, politicians, landscape managers, and citizens. This collectiveness expresses the desire to establish a link between the production and consumption of food.

Agriculture can only realize a living soil if society contributes to it financially (economy) and materially (circulation). The financial aspect is essential, but we are fully aware that money is not a goal, but it is a means to shape agriculture. The pressure on the soil and therefore on farmers is unprecedentedly high due to world trade with low food prices for farmers. Lifting the pressure from the backs of farmers, requires investments, but when those investments target healthy soils and subsequently healthy foods it leads to better health and makes a positive contribution to solving the many problems we are currently experiencing as a society. Investing in long-term solutions and healthy sustainable systems always pays off in the long run.

We would like to stay in touch to make the ideas in this manifest more concrete and to discuss the measures that would allow for revitalizing our soils.

Partners and organisations

supporting the wheelbarrow march to Brussels

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