EUROPEAN STUDIES A

Discuss the relative merits/demerits of an agricultural policy oriented to price reform rather than one based upon structural reorganisation

"The common market shall extend to agriculture and trade in agricultural products. ‘Agricultural products’ means the products of the soil, of stock-farming and of fisheries and products of first-stage processing directly related to these products....The operation and development of the common market for agricultural products must be accompanied by the establishment of a common agricultural policy among the Member States” (1)

>From the beginning of the European Union, EU policy has given emphasis to the agricultural sector. To this end, a Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was established in 1963. (2) Provisions for this policy were made in the Treaty of Rome. The aims of this policy were to increase agricultural productivity, to ensure a fair standard of living for the agricultural community, to stabilise markets and to ensure reasonable prices for the consumer. (3) This is unusual in the context of the Treaty of Rome which provided for free trade and movement of resources. Agriculture was ill-adapted for this approach. Protection was given, not only by customs duties, but also by a variety of agricultural policies. This essay will discuss the merits and demerits of a the pre-1992 CAP with its emphasis on price reform, in comparison with the post-1992 CAP which was oriented to structural reform.

It cannot be denied that there were merits of the pre-1992 price reform policy. There was a bountiful food supply with an increased variety and quantity of food. Farmer’s yields increased, particularly the large farmers. Producers were protected from the external market due to community preference and, therefore, domestic agriculture could develop. There were also spin offs in food production. Although some of the policies created good returns for farmers, the demerits of said policies far outweighed any advantages they had. The core-periphery divide was widened, quantity became more important than quality and consumers had to pay higher prices. Agricultural practices caused damage to the environment and international trading relations were strained.

Until 1993 the EU rarely supported farmers by paying them direct subsidies from the taxpayers. (4) Instead the 30 billion ECU (and often more) was spent in the buying up of surplus commodities at minimum official prices and was also used to pay subsidies to traders to sell surpluses on the lower-priced world markets. (5) During the 1960’s the price system was devised. The first problem with price policies is that of fluctuating and differing exchange rates. “Green Money” was the first solution to be developed to counter the problem of differing exchange rates. This, however, could be manipulated by politicians to achieve different price levels in the member states than those indicated by the common price level.
The lowering of the green currency towards a depreciating average rate, raised farm’s price levels in the national currency. (6) This meant that while regular citizens suffered from the devaluation of the currency, farmers were protected from this trend. Also although the higher prices were an advantage for the farmer, they were a nuisance for consumers.

Monetary Compensatory Amounts (MCAs) were used in the 1970’s when devaluations by France and revaluations by Germany made Green Money redundant. MCAs operated as levies on the French exports and subsidies on French imports. The reverse was applied to Germany. (7) MCAs, while allowing Community trade to continue even though common pricing was never established, had more disadvantages than advantages. They allowed the real level of prices to vary from country to country. This led to the distortion of production as farmers in the countries which have strong currencies, were paid more than farmers in countries with a weak currency. MCAs are also expensive to operate. MCAs were replaced in 1979 by the European Currency Unit (ECU) as part of the European Monetary system (EMS) which had been introduced in 1978. (8) An agricultural ECU which was 14% more valuable than the ECU was introduced. Until 1993 and 1995, when adjustments were made to this, vast amounts of officials were needed every day to administer the agri-monetary system and the monetary amounts had to be changed weekly. (9)
The original agricultural price policy in CAP had three main components.
The first of these was the target price, which was the basis for establishing all other prices. It is meant to provide a satisfactory return for the farmer. Threshold prices are the minimum entry prices for imports (higher than EU prices for domestic products) and they also safeguard against the undercutting of target prices. An intervention price is used if the market prices fall. If surplus production occurs, the commodities are bought by intervention agencies. This maintains a minimum market price level. Variable import levies were used to bring imports up to the

threshold price and export refunds were used to remove the difference between the common market price and world price. (10) Variable levies are one of the most effective protective trade policies used. They protect domestic price guarantees from being defeated by trade flows. They can sometimes generate revenues and funds for the central authority controlling the levies. They also can introduce price stability for internal markets. They have a number of disadvantages, however. The levy shrinks imports and losses to the consumer and efficiency are usually caused. Producer returns can fluctuate more wildly. They can also strain international relations as the variable levy transfers domestic demand instability onto the world market. An administrative mechanism must also be implemented to bridge the gap between the higher price guarantee and the lower international price, and this can be expensive to operate as it depends on fluctuating prices, inflation and supply/demand. (11)

The first problem posed by this three-tiered agricultural policy system, is the decision as to which system of pricing should be used. A compromise must be achieved between the highest prices and the lowest prices. If the highest prices are used production would be pushed to unacceptable levels. When this policy was first introduced, it was effective in the atmosphere of the time and production levels rose. By 1968 however the first of the fundamental problems with this policy became apparent.

If product prices are prevented from falling while supplies continue to increase in a competitive market place, costs will inevitably increase to meet prices and cut off the people and capital who want to become part of the industry. Price supports, therefore, increase the costs of production. The irony of this is that in order to deal with the effects of increased production costs, price supports must increase also. Although in a competitive unsupported market this process would mean lower prices for farmers and consumers, it would also mean hardship for the marginal farmer. Attempts to stop this by implementing market support policies are bound to fail however, because the forces of competition are pushed in a different direction - they are not removed. The demand for, and the price of, land

and equipment will increase as farmers profits increase. The end result is that farm costs and output prices increase in tandem. This marginalises the small farmer even more. Another effect of this market support policy is that production increases as industry becomes more productive. This leads to large amounts of surpluses and therefore more subsidies are needed for these to be sold on the market. It also becomes more difficult to sell these products on a market flooded with already large amounts of these commodities The costs of the policy feed on themselves in order to increase. Any attempt to lower prices and cut costs, puts us back where we started. This is the fundamental fault with price policies in the CAP.

The need for continually updating machinery and equipment for increased productivity means that much of the money intended for farmers often flows into ancillary industries and into the owners of assets who are employed in agriculture. These policies also encourage increased competition between farmers, and the large farmer usually benefits at the expense of the small farmer. Therefore these policies exacerbate the inequalities in the farming sector. The rigidity of the uniform market price does not take the differences between various areas of the farming community into account. As well as this, if there was a difference in support for Less Favoured Areas (LFAs), then the question of who should pay would be an issue of some contention.

Co-responsibility levies are also an integral part of CAP’s price policies. The CAP had started its life with unlimited guarantees of support, regardless of the quantities produced. This led to a massive agricultural budget. Support price decreases were introduced and this narrowed the gap between the EC price and the world market prices. This helped to reduce the EC budget and the intervention storage costs of the agricultural budget. This route was not successful for milk, however, and co-responsibility levies were introduced in 1977. (12) These were, for the most part, a success because the smaller farmer was then protected from these the full damage created by price cuts. There were also gains to the budget. The advantageous effects of the levy were muted, however, by the tendency of the Council Of Ministers to raise support prices to offset the impact of levies.

In 1982 the budget costs of CAP had jumped by 11% and the price policy was once again in crisis. Intervention stocks began to climb. Generous price rewards in 1981 and 1982 meant that production levels were high and world markets became saturated. (13) Quotas were introduced in 1984 to try and force production more in line with demand. The super-levy was introduced alongside these quotas. Quotas and super-levies mean that at a wholesale level, responsibility for the super-levy is determined by the over-quota production at dairy level. This means generally that those farms who stayed within the quota would be subsidising those who over-produce. Quotas, in general, restrict imports in a given period below the amount which normally would occur. The disadvantages of quotas outweigh their advantages however. They stint the domestic market of supplies. Internal prices rise and buyers curtail their purchases. Domestic producers expand their output, however, and a glut occurs on world markets which have depressed prices for affected commodities. Quotas, although insulating the domestic market from world price changes, can also amplify domestic price swings. Despite quota introduction, surpluses remained high and the cost of maintaining the dairy policy actually increased. The quota levels agreed in 1984 were far too large and were set from 1983 production figures which were already 17% above domestic consumption. Also, as these quotas were only introduced for the dairy sector, production and surpluses in other areas continued to grow unchecked. Penalties for over-production were never really implemented and were easily avoided by raising prices and adjusting MCA rates. (14)

An arable Set Aside policy was introduced in 1988. Producers can receive payment per hectare on each hectare taken out of production. Every producer must make more than a minimum area reduction of 20% to qualify. (15) This was run on a voluntary basis and farmers received compensation for the land they didn’t use. Small farmers were exempted from Set Aside. The programme resulted in only a 9% reduction of EU arable area. Production also increased and intensified as farmers concentrated their resources on their remaining land. Due to the land being left fallow, the following year’s production rates were high as the land was therefore more fertile. More money than ever since the price cuts was now being spent on export subsidies.

Relations between the EU and its global neighbours were strained by CAP.
The dictates of the CAP have led to a series of trade problems. The use of border fluctuations on world markets has placed the Community in a difficult situation. The CAP protects internal producers from external competition to some extent. Also export subsidies ensure that the world market becomes flooded with cheap commodities which undermine other global commodities. Depressed world prices occur, interspersed by periods of high rises in prices. Variable levies were used to bring import prices to a level higher than that of EU products. The Uruguay Round of world General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) negotiations concluded by agreeing a 40% average reduction of tariffs. Domestic EU support must be reduced by 20% over six years based on total Aggregate Measure of Support (AMS). All import restrictions must be converted to tariffs and reduced by 36% over six years. The volume of subsidised exports must be reduced by 21% over six years. Budgetary expenditure on export subsidies must simultaneously be reduced by 36% over six years. (16)

The absolute failure of the agricultural price policy of CAP forced the EU to implement fundamental reform. CAP was producing large amounts of surpluses and was failing to support the majority of EU landholders. Support was being concentrated on 20% of the farmers who were responsible for 80% of the output. Intensive farming practices were damaging the environment. Since farmers received a subsidy per tonne produced, they intensified their farming practices to increase their output and income.
Not only was this leading to surpluses and a massive EU budget, but also to the destruction of the environment. More fertilisers and pesticides were being used. There was an increase in the density of the livestock on the land. Enlargement of farms meant that the natural habitat was being destroyed and marshlands were being drained.

Therefore in 1992 there was radical change from a price oriented policy to a structural policy. There was also a move from price support to direct income support. It was generally recognised that a number of structural changes were required. These included the diversion of land to other uses, the conservation and protection of the environment, the integration of structural change with regional economic development and the implementation of direct income aids. (17) This impetus for change began, however, in 1988 when the Council of Ministers approved a regulation 2052/88 which was to reform the operation of the Structural Funds as part of the European Agricultural Guarantee and Guidance Fund (EAGGF). (18) This regulation marked an important shift in structural policy from the individual farmer, to the region and rural community.

The regulation set out five objectives. Objective 1 status areas are those which lag seriously behind and need major development and structural adjustment. These have a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of less than 75% of the Community average. It was hoped to improve living and working conditions, to protect the environment and to improve processing and marketing of goods. (19) Objective 5b included areas that had a high share of agricultural employment and a low income level. (20) Objective 5a was a regrouping of measures which already existed in CAP i.e. funding for farm improvements, training and social assistance for farmers. (21) A number of reform and integration programmes were introduced. Partnership was seen as the way forward and evaluation of policy success became more important. The effectiveness of these schemes is questionable however.

In 1992 the MacSharry reforms were introduced. This had three main aims i.e. early retirement for farmers and farm workers, the promotion of the use of land for forestry and to promote environmentally friendly agricultural methods. Farmers are permitted to retire at 55. They must then transfer their land to another farmer and will receive a pension from the EU. 50% of the cost of the pension is paid by the EU and 50% by the national government. (Although in Objective 1 areas the EU pays 75%.) (22)

When land is not needed for agriculture or is of poor quality, an afforestation programme is implemented. Maintenance fees are paid. There is a maximum eligibility of 600 hectares and therefore the policy favours small enterprises. Again, the EU pays 50% of the cost or 75% in Objective 1 areas. (23)

The environment is now also seen as an important problem to be tackled. There have been attempts to reduce pollution e.g. the Nitrates Objective which tries to reduce the amount of nitrate pollution in EU waters.

Extensification is encouraged to avoid the damage intensification and concentration have on the land. Long-term set-aside of 20 years has been proposed. Grants for the education and training of farmers in environmentally compatible farming have been implemented e.g. the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS) in Ireland. Organic farming is being promoted and a reduction in the amount of fertilisers and pesticides used is being encouraged. There has also been a general move towards trying to ensure that small farmers are not pushed off the land by larger farmers and discriminating agricultural policies. Diversification in rural economies is being encouraged. Integrated rural development programmes have also been implemented. Rural infrastructure has been improved. Attempts were made to improve research and development at a rural level.

The EU's Structural Funds are clearly established as the key tenet of European level policy initiatives. The Fund consists of four separate funds - the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Agricultural Guarantee and Guidance Fund (EAGGF) (although only Guidance is relevant to Structural Funds) and the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG). (24) The Structural Funds are aimed at reducing regional and social disparities in the EU. Between 1989 and 194 the funds were allocated 10,000 million ECU per annum. (25)

The EAGGF supports the modernisation of holdings, the processing and marketing of products and agricultural development measures and the promotion of local produce. The FIFG is responsible for the fishing fleet, aquaculture and coastal waters, fishing port facilities and the marketing of fishery and aquaculture. The ERDF is responsible for investment in infrastructure, transport, tourism, communications, environmental improvements and productive capacity. It also promotes research and development and provides advice and assistance for Small and Medium Enterprise (SMEs). Finally the ESF is concerned with vocational training and counselling, giving aid to self-employed people to start up a business and education schemes in some priority areas. (26)

The ERDF's responsibility lies with Objective 1,2 5b and 6 areas. It promotes the development of the Objective 1 regions who are lagging behind, helps to counteract industrial decline and helps reorganise those regions which have a low population density or whose population is leaving the rural area and migrating to urban centres. It's main objectives are to foster co-operation between the local actors of different regions with a view to the exchange of experiences through transferring knowledge and expertise and by working together. It hopes also to improve the capabilities and working methods of local and regional areas in disadvantaged regions, both economically and socially, so that the regions can meet the challenges of modern society. (27)

The ESF's aim is to "raise the general standard of living by rendering the employment of workers easier and increasing their geographical and occupational mobility." (28) It targets in particular the long-term unemployed, those in danger of losing their job, young people, women, handicapped people and the socially excluded. It is governed by Objectives 3 and 4 of the Structural Funds. The ESF also supports the development of SMEs, tourism and diversification in Objective 1, 2 and 5b areas. (29) The ESF improved employment opportunities by implementing vocational guidance and vocational training courses. It also helps in job creation and wage subsidy projects. Finally, it encourages and supports technological development and research. For the period 1994-1999 the ESF will receive 33.5% of Structural funding. (30)

The Guidance section of the EAGGF is involved in all agricultural structural development in the EU. It invests in and aids the modernisation of farms. It supports extensification, set aside and environmentally friendly farming practices. It also gives aid to young farmer's and offers early retirement. Aid for mountainous regions, poor ecological areas and LFAs is given. It encourages the increased use of agricultural products and agricultural materials for industry. The Guidance section essentially covers grants, mostly contributing to the multi-annual operational programmes operating under the Structural Fund Objectives 1, 2, 5a, 5b and 6. It is responsible for the protection of environmentally sensitive areas (for example intensive valley and marsh grasslands, moorland and hill and mountain areas), encouraging the reduction or abandonment of fertilises and pesticides, and maintaining or improving the upkeep of countryside features such as hedges and walls. (31)
Like the EAGGF, the FIFG provides sectoral assistance which covers the whole of the European Union, corresponding to Objective 5a. Actions under the FIFG promote structural measures in the fisheries sector. It grants money to modernise fleets and to develop fish farming. It offers protection

to some marine areas. It gives aid to help improve facilities at fishing ports. It helps in the promotion of products and in the processing and marketing of fishery products. (32)

A number of rural initiatives have been taken to improve the structure of agriculture and therefore solve the problems which had been plaguing European agriculture for decades. A bottom-up approach has been taken i.e. local and regional initiatives are supported in preference to national initiatives. According to the Cork Declaration issued 9th November 1996:-

"a rural development policy must be multi-disciplinary in concept, and multi-sectoral in application, with a clear territorial dimension...it must be based on an integrated approach, encompassing within the same legal and policy framework : agricultural adjustment and development, economic diversification - notably small and medium scale industries and rural services - the management of natural resources, the enhancement of environmental functions, and the promotion of culture, tourism and recreation." (33)

A bottom-up approach is used with each interested party submitting a proposal to the EU concerning the improvements that they would like to make. There are Single Programming Documents (SPDs) for each eligible area. These identify certain strengths and weaknesses in an area. All proposals submitted must be based on a particular Priority and Measure. If possible it should also complement other priorities and measures contained in the SPD. (34) The EU will make its decision based on the proposal and its relation to the SPDs for the area.

An example of such a rural development initiative is the LEADER programme. This was an EU initiative which was to assist communities develop their own areas. It was a multi-sectoral and integrated project. It's aim was to find new and innovative solutions which would help the development of rural areas and increase rural integration. LEADER 1 covered 61% of EU land area and 30% of it's population. (35) These were mainly rural areas with a high dependence on agriculture or problems with a decreasing population. Tourism and SMEs were targeted. Accommodation like B&Bs and self-catering hostels were established. This brought tourism and money into the region and boosted the local economy as well as providing employment. Small enterprises, particularly those which specialised in crafts, were given aid. For example metalwork, textiles, leather, timber and furniture. Grants were given also to modernise farms and to help farmers farm more environmentally. The profile of the recipients who accepted the aid were farmers with above average farm sizes, who were young and well-educated and had access to information and capital. (36)

Almost 1,500 jobs were created. (37) Community involvement in rural areas improved immensely and a sense of local ownership was fostered. It also created an impetus towards voluntary activities and encouraged co-operation between existing statutory agencies and private agencies who had worked together under the LEADER programme.

An example of one of these LEADER programmes was the West Cork LEADER. This was established in 1991 with the objective of developing the local rural economy. (38) A plan was drawn up through initiatives in key sectors like agriculture, tourism, food, crafts and fisheries. Partnership was a key element of the programme. An integrated approach was taken. To date, there have been 125 projects in this area. For example, there has been a development in Castletownbare in co-operative fishing along with the creation and addition of jobs in the processing of fish products. Diversification was promoted by the development of a herb farm in west Cork. A new heritage centre was created in Bandon and a weir project was also begun there to help generate electricity for a local residential area. (39)

In the UK the EAGGF has given a total of around £145 million (excluding allocations in Objective 1 regions and under the Community Initiatives) under Objective 5a for the period 1994-99. (40) Most measures are aimed at improving competitiveness and employment, while there are also measures providing for environmental considerations and for balanced land use and employment in LFAs. The UK decided on using 63% of the funding to implement measures concerning processing and marketing. 32% has been dedicated to developing mountainous LFAs. 5% has been allocated to investments on holdings. 0.3% will be given as support for young farmers and producer groups will receive 0.1%. (41)

A total of around £45 million (excluding allocations in Objective 1 regions) has been allocated to the UK by the FIFG for the period 1994-99. (42) The UK's Objective 5a SPD for fisheries concentrates on adjusting fishing effort, modernising and improving the safety of vessels, adjusting the processing industry, and developing ports. A measure for taking vessels out of service is underway for 1993-98. 7% of the fleet has currently been taken out of service and it is estimated that by the end of 1998 around 12% will have been withdrawn. (43)

Can we therefore say that the post-1992 structurally oriented agricultural policy is more successful than the pre-1992 price-oriented one? There are several criticisms which can be levied against them. Objective regions came to rely heavily on the funding, and in some cases like Ireland, the increased funds represented a substantial augmentation of gross national income. Significant funding-level problems can be seen in examining the Social Fund's operation, however. While its allocation increased from 2% of 1977 expenditure, to an estimated 8% between 1994 and 1999, this is clearly insufficient to withstand the tide of unemployment in the Community. (44)
The Social Fund's allocation of resources is not high enough to allow the authorities to tackle the underlying causes of unemployment. The Social Fund has been targeted at training and education and limited job creation, but fails to address the rigidities and barriers in wage markets and labour mobility. The fund's sheer lack of financial clout has meant that it has failed to redress the fact that there are currently 20 million people unemployed in the EU, with 10 million of these classed as 'long-term unemployed'. An even more scathing criticism of the lack of funding provided is that, of the several targeted Objective 3 and 4 areas which target youth and long-term unemployment, by 1993, only two had seen employment growth substantially above the EU average. (45)

A further criticism is the fact that although ten thousand million ECU were allocated to the funds yearly from 1989 to 1993, and monitoring agencies were established to ensure the effective implementation of the Funds, reforms have been severely limited by the actual funding level. By 1992, only 3% of the EU’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was going into the Funds.
The benefits of the new funding system have, however been crucial to several regions. Increased industrial activity, improved infrastructure, better farm structures and training of unemployed labour have all boosted regional economies around Europe.

One final drawback of the Structural Funds is the notion that the Funds are "swimming against the tide" of other EU policies, and thus doomed to failure. The Guarantee section of the CAP tends to concentrate farming activity in the areas of efficient, wealthy farms, clearly against the dispersion aspiration of the Structural Funds. Given the huge commitment of funds to the Guarantee section of the CAP, the Structural Funds have clearly an uphill task to dislodge the concentration tendencies.

A cursory glance at the raw data proves that the Structural Funds have not combated the problems they were created to tackle to a significant level. Twenty million people are still unemployed in the EU, and in 1990, GDP per capita in Ireland, Greece and Portugal was still 50-60% of the EU average. (Although these figures have since risen e.g. Ireland stands at 104% of the EU average). (46) While it is true that many worthwhile and indeed vital projects have been developed by the Structural Funds, the overall impact on the EU has been mitigated by a combination of planning, implementation and lack of funding difficulties. The Structural Funds were designed to reduce the tendencies towards divergence in the EU, but these largely remain, and unless an improved financial and developmental base is established, the Structural Funds will continually fail to address their targets.

It cannot be denied, however, that they have had favourable effects. In the short period in which they have been in operation, (Structural Funds did not become important until 1989 and the subsequent MacSharry reforms), the Funds have been responsible for improving rural co-operation and development. Farmers are slowly becoming more environmentally aware and using environmentally-friendly practices. There has been a turnaround in internal migration patterns with the long-standing rural exodus being replaced by what has been referred to as an "urban exodus". There is increasing migration from urban centres to rural areas. This is partly due to improved conditions, services and infrastructure in rural areas. These developments and improvements have been facilitated by the Structural Funds.

There has been a dramatic rise in the number in the number of commuters and an enlargement of commuting catchments. (47) There has been an increase in the number of people who choose to retire in the countryside. More importantly there has been an increased flow of working-class return-migrants. (48) That the increase in urban to rural migrations was accompanied by a parallel decline in the opposite flow, was mainly due to changing demographic factors. Traditionally the rural exodus was basically fed by small farmers and their families but now, with improving rural conditions for smaller farmers, this trend is slacking off. There has also been a rise in the average rural incomes. (49)

In conclusion, this essay maintains that price policies have a wider range of destructive demerits than they have merits. It can be seen from EU agricultural policy that the way forward is seen to be through structural reorganisation. There has been a shift from a pure agricultural policy, however, to a rural policy whose two main characteristics are to help maintain a pleasant and attractive environment through adequate aids to farmers and the adoption of a bottom-up approach which will integrate rural communities. The new structurally oriented agricultural policy costs less money to operate than the former price-oriented policy and has so far been more successful. More time is required however in order to determine whether the policy is truly successful.

FOOTNOTES

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