

Nature and agriculture in Flanders (Belgium), From conflict to dialogue

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In the last years a constructive dialogue developed between farmers and environmentalists. This situation contrasts with the situation in the Nineties, when the two sectors were fierce adversaries. How did this process develop and which factors have contributed to a growing mutual understanding ?

In the Seventies and Eighties nature organisations looked very sceptical at the upcoming industrial farming methods and the organized land consolidations to create bigger farming plots. Yet, at the same time, so in the Seventies and the Eighties, partnerships were possible on a local level, for instance farmers and environmentalists operated together against land-consuming infrastructure projects.

From 1989-2002 nature conservation took a leap in Flanders, especially in matters of regulation and government. An offensive policy wanted to catch up, focusing particularly on an ecological network of connected nature reserves (the Groene Hoofdstructuur). The farmers experienced this objective as very threatening. Other issues that caused much unrest in the Nineties were the manure decree and the manure action plans implementing the Nitrates Directive. The general dissatisfaction with the “green regulatory zeal” expanded at the beginning of the new millennium to other land users (hunters, foresters, fishermen). This led in 2002 to a large demonstration in the city of Ghent.

After 2002 there has been a gradual improvement in the relationship between nature and agriculture. Boerenbond, the largest agricultural organization in Flanders, decided in 2006 “to invest more in sector-wide and cross-border networks and coalitions concerning specific topics with new, sometimes not obvious, partners”. Natuurpunt with 85,000 members, the largest Flemish NGO working on the protection of nature, was one of the first to take the invitation. In the autumn of 2007, the minister of the environment asked both organizations to work on a common proposal for manure restrictions in nature reserves. The conversations were successful and provided a basic agreement for further consultation. The rapprochement between the nature movement and the agricultural sector also appeared to inspire other target groups. Especially the forestry sector.

Several factors have to a greater or lesser extent contributed to improving the relationship between nature and agriculture:

- The partners became more equal. The agricultural sector has generally lost importance and the nature conservation movement has become more influential. The number of farmers declines and in the same time Natuurpunt realizes an annual growth of members of almost 10% and has already twice as many members as there are farmers.
- At policy level, the impact of Europe increased significantly. In the Nineties the illusion that each region could make his own arrangements, still existed. Today it is accepted that many goals are set at the European level. This has shifted the discussions from 'goals' to 'tools and implementation', which has made it more concrete, and more manageable.
- With its growth and greater social embedding, the natural movement gain more knowledge on the importance of the socio-economic reality. And also understand that workable solutions require a broad social basis. On the other hand, many farmers as modern entrepreneurs are open to social concerns and wider objectives.

In this evolution, the strong tradition of consultation in Flanders may not be forgotten. There can be no dialogue if there is no forum where the partners can find each other. In Flanders there are a lot of 'advisory' councils. At regional level, but also at provincial and at local level. Their task is to 'advise' the politicians about new regulations and projects. At Flemish level there is the Environmental and Nature Council (Minaraad). Both Natuurpunt and other Environmental organizations and the Boerenbond are represented. This is even more true at local level where farmers and environmentalists are the main groups of the local environmental councils.

There is a process of rapprochement in progress, but the road towards a common future for nature and agriculture is still long. And the minefields from past conflicts are far from eliminated.

- On both sides not everybody is equally convinced of the good intentions of the other party. Within both the nature conservation and agricultural organizations, there are believers and non-believers.
- Although both parties focus on the management of (local) conflicts, these conflicts can quickly escalate and sour the relationship. Some conflicts have a long history or became symbolic.
- The policymakers should take public consultation serious. And mustn't be tempted to focus on conflicts and contradictions. The same applies to the media. It is striking that the rapprochement between nature and agriculture received relatively little attention in the local media.

In the last years, a lot has been invested in the process of rapprochement itself. With the goal in the first place to restore mutual confidence. But at the same time there has been a substantive debate. These conversations focussed on the notions of separation and convergence, both in the spatial as in the broader sense. Nature and agriculture are still not interwoven, but they can also no longer be separated. Environmental NGO's and (groups of) farmers can each play a unique and complementary role within nature conservation. This principle has in Flanders already ensured some rest and created opportunities for a more sustainable cooperation between nature and agriculture. In this way the two sectors are also better prepared for the major challenges and threats ("crises") of the future.