The uncertain implications of the food crises for EU and US agricultural policies: evidence from the post-2013 CAP and 2012 US Farm Bill debates

Draft version

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Paper to be presented at the ECPR General Conference, Bordeaux, 4-7 September 2013.

Section: Food Governance

Panel: Value Conflicts and Diverse Claims in Food Governance across Scales.
The uncertain implications of the food crises for EU and US agricultural policies: evidence from the post-2013 CAP and 2012 US Farm Bill debates

Abstract

In the view of an increasing number of policy-makers, experts and activists around the world, how to produce enough nutritious food to feed a growing world population in the era of climate change is the main challenge for our times. Agriculture is at crossroads, and long-established food and farm policies have been put into question as result of food shortages, rising prices, and evidence on environmental consequences of agricultural intensification. The paper explores to what extent the food crisis entered the policy debate in EU and US. More specifically it compares the recent EU and US debates on agricultural policies, with a focus on the post-2013 CAP debate and the discussion on the 2012 US Farm Bill. The paper assesses the competing arguments advanced in the policy formulation stage by a wide array of stakeholders and experts to discuss the implications of the food crisis for EU and US agricultural systems and policies. The research is based on extensive content analysis of consultation processes and hearings held by the European Commission and the US Congress as well as a series of semi-structured interviews with key actors in Brussels and Washington D.C.

Introduction

The steady increase in food prices started in the early 2000s. In September 2007 the price for wheat reached 400$ a tonne, a 100% increase in six months. Similarly, prices for main staple crops like rice and corn arose to record levels. The Economist signalled that its food price index was at its highest since it was first calculated in 1845. The FAO Food Price Index was at 175, meaning that prices were up 75% compared to the period 2002-2004.

The worse however had still to come. In February 2011 the FAO Food Price Index peaked to 237. The crisis reversed a long-term trend of decreasing food prices, prompting a variety of experts to warn that ‘the era of cheap food is over’.

More broadly, the crisis brought to the fore a widespread debate on the state of world agriculture. The UN-sponsored International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science
and Technology for Development (IAASTD) reminded that ‘business as usual’ is not a viable option and listed among issue for concern the “environmental consequences of productivity increases, environmental and human health impacts of transgenic crops, the consequences of bioenergy development on the environment and on the long-term availability and price of food, and the implications of climate change on agricultural production” (IAASTD 2009: vii).

The idea that agriculture is at crossroads received unusual media attention – with regular reports on food and farming published in the Financial Times, the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Guardian and Corriere della Sera among others. The policy implications of the current state of world agriculture have also been scrutinised by all major international organisations, in primis FAO and OECD (FAO 2009; OECD 2009).

In this context, the need for domestic policy change in the European Union and the United States has been widely recognised: a wide range of institutional and social actors of different orientations affirmed that to meet the challenges of the 21st century the farm and food policy sectors must reconceptualise their priorities, as well as their practices. Trends in demography, climate change and shifting dietary patterns all represent serious issues that put into question how food is produced, processed and traded. The US Secretary for Agriculture Vilsack on occasion of the kick-off of Congressional debate on the 2012 Farm Bill 2012 argued that ‘this legislation and the bills that Congress will pass is really about keeping pace with the changing needs of agriculture and the challenges which face rural America’. The sense that agricultural policy has to be reformed because of changing conditions and public requirements has also been repeatedly expressed by the EU Commissioner to Agriculture, Dacian Ciolos. Notably, one of the main questions open to public debate in the 2010 debate on the Future of the CAP is ‘why should we reform the CAP and how can we make it meet society’s expectations?’.

Three years later these statements have been made by top-level decision-makers, the debate is far from over and proved highly controversial in both contexts, to the point that at the time of writing (July 2013) the debates on agricultural provisions are still open in both EU and US. The EU reached a political agreement on the post-2014 CAP only in late June 2013. The Irish Presidency achieved one of its most relevant results of the semester by securing a last-minute compromise between the Commission, the Parliament and the Council on the main characteristics of the policy in the next programming period. In the US, the 2012 Farm Bill is still gridlocked in Congress; so far no final decision on future agricultural policies has been finalized or is about to be delivered. Both the House and the Senate voted their own version of the bill, though the two present fundamental differences that in the view of most political commentators will be hard to reconcile. A conference to discuss compromise has been
requested by the Senate, though the House has still to appoint its delegates. With time running-out and only a few Congressional sessions in September it seems highly likely that the validity of 2008 provisions will be extended again and the new bill will be further delayed.

Despite policy outputs are still to be fully delivered and uncertainties on actual detailed provisions are high, at this stage of debate it seems safe to affirm that new agricultural policies in EU and US will be characterized by moderate change. In particular, the widespread expectation that public subsidies to farmers would be discontinued in the era of record prices and returns for the sector turned out to be misplaced. Direct payments in Europe and a publicly subsidized form of crop insurance in the US have been confirmed, attracting wide criticism.

This paper tries to address this issue – the lack of change in face of global food crisis – and offers a preliminary exploration of understandings of cause and effects of the food crisis. The paper can be placed in the theoretical framework of discursive institutionalism. In this framework, discourses are given an independent explanatory value, as it rests on ‘the basic assumption that history and humans are not so much ‘driven’ by objective interests, rational calculations, social norms or over power struggles, but by knowledge production and (collective) interpretations of the world’ (Arts and Buizer 2009: 340). Depending on policy discourses are framed and develop, policy outputs will differ. This version of the paper however does not account for the complete debates that have been carried on since 2010 in Bruxelles and Washington. Rather the focus is on the more specific theme of the global food crisis, with the aim to illustrate how the various challenges to agriculture have been understood and presented. A word of caution is thus required on the limitations of this work.

This analysis is partial and does not allow for any specific explanatory value of discourses on the food crisis on policy outputs. In this sense, the analysis is descriptive rather than explanatory and still provisional. Still, by showing the different understandings of the global food crisis, the analysis supports two important theoretical points: first policy crisis are necessary but not sufficient factors to favour policy change. Second, the direction of change favoured by policy crisis can differ, because meanings and the implications of policy crisis are open to contestation among competing coalitions of actors taking part in policy debates.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section briefly reviews the main explanations that the scholarly literature advanced to explain change in agricultural policy and proposes a discursive institutionalism as a promising approach to achieve a better understanding of policy processes.
The second section briefly highlights the characteristics of the agricultural policy cycle in EU and US and of the governance of the sector.

The third and fourth sections illustrate policy argumentations used in debates in the two contexts. The final fifth section discusses empirical findings and offers some provisional concluding remarks.

**Explanations for policy change and stability in EU and US agricultural policies**

For long the main scholarly interest about agricultural policy was the explanation of its resistance to reforms, that in the face of growing evidence of the negative environmental, economic and social consequences of existing policy provisions was particularly puzzling. Some common feature of US and EU agricultural policies have been underlined to explain such remarkable policy stability: first, in both contexts the sector has been dominated by a closed and cohesive policy community, second the general public and civil society organisations for long largely ignored agricultural issues. On the whole, stability in the field can be at least partially explained by the fact that farm policies could be developed and sustained over the years in insulation from political and public pressures.

Scholars gave plenty of evidence to support the argument that farmers organisations proved extremely efficient in assuring that agrarian interests had a quasi-monopolistic representation in Brussels and Washington DC alike. Agriculture has often been described as a perfect example of a closed policy community formed by a limited number of actors, and ‘in which the distinction between those governed and the governors is blurred and where there is cooption and consensual style’ (Smith 1992: 27). In Europe Copa-Cogeca, the most important trade union based in Brussels, built a strong relationship with the European Commission and more specifically with the Directorate General for Agriculture, to the point that observers talked of a co-gestion of the CAP between the Commission, the Council and Copa-Cogeca for the period until the late ‘80s. A ‘iron triangle’ metaphor has also been employed to describe the close connections between interest groups, bureaucrats, and legislators that effectively formed a subsystem in Capitol Hill (Browne 1995). Such closed policy networks maintained their favourable position thanks to their informational, organisational and relational resources (Marsh 1998). For instance farm organisations possessed highly valuable information on technical issues related to the working of the policy at farm level. In Europe, the need to set target, intervention and threshold prices every year required detailed estimations of levels of crop supplies, a type of information that requires dense connections with individual farmers to
be collected. The characteristic US system of subsidies - based on specific commodities - created a highly fragmented policy environment, in which representatives of farmers specialised in growing corn or wheat or cotton discussed the range of problems affecting their specific market. Further – and related - policy networks proved able to narrow policy debates to a limited set of farm-related issues. As Smith noted ‘the issue faced by those within the agricultural community was not whether prices and production should be increased, but by how much they should be increased’ (Smith 1992: 29).

The insulation of the sector was also possible because of the second concomitant factor noted above: the relative marginality of farm and food issues in the public sphere. The modernization of agriculture promoted by public policy and the consequent steady increase in production capacity made the problem of food availability less and less salient in western countries. Self-sufficiency has never been a problem in the US and in the EU it was obtained as early as 1970, effectively ruling out food availability as a daily preoccupation for all but a decreasing minority of families. Hunger, not an uncommon experience for a lot of people living in the first half of the 20th century, became almost unthinkable for younger generations who never experienced food privation. As Inglehart noted, prosperity freed people from material preoccupations and ‘has led to a gradual shift in which needs for belonging, esteem and intellectual and self-expression have become more prominent’ (Inglehart 2008: 132). In this context, and despite the persistence of poverty and undernutrition even in highly affluent countries, food shortages and famine became to be perceived as plagues affecting poor areas in Africa and Asia and as such attracted only cyclical public attention.

If it seems reasonable that the conditions of food production lost salience in well-fed western countries, it is maybe more surprising that for long the public paid scant attention to the environmental impact of agriculture. This neglect is somehow puzzling, since some of the most popular accounts of the environmental crisis pay close attention to the impact of agricultural activities on water, soil and the wildlife.¹ Still, the literature on the environmental movement shows that the political attention paid to environmental issues was at first highly selective: industrial pollution, traffic, waste disposal and later nuclear power attracted public attention and around these issues the new politics of pollution emerged as a new direction for public

¹ Notably Rachel Carson (1962), whose best-seller Silent Spring is regarded one of the most influential book that help diffuse environmentalism in the early ’60s, challenged the use of chemical pesticide in modern agriculture, a practice that was accused to kill natural life and ‘silence’ our springtime. Similarly, the highly influential ‘Limits to Growth’ report that was instrumental in the diffusion of environmental policy in both US and EU, devotes a lot of attention to agricultural production.
intervention in Western post-materialistic countries (Weale 1992). On the whole, the primary sector remained rather marginal in the public and policy debates on pollution.²

From the early ‘90s onwards however, important reforms have been introduced in both EU and US farm policies. In the EU four reforms have incrementally changed the set of original provisions, to the point that scholars observed that a new model of European agriculture has been established (Cardwell 2004; Coleman et al. 1997; Garzon 2006).³ In the US a radical reform in 1996 that abolished completely direct payments has been followed in the 2000s by the introduction of generous forms of public support, both in terms of counter-cyclical payments and subsidised insurance. Further, it must be noted that the direction of reform is meant to be clearly established: for all their differences both EU and US have progressively decreased the level of public support to the farming community and are largely expected to continue to do so (Coleman et al. 1997). The exceptionalism of agriculture – i.e. the idea that agriculture has specific characteristics that make it essentially different from other sectors of the economy – has been put into question as well as the idea that farming has to be subsidised and protected from market competition (Cunha and Swinbank 2011; Garzon 2006).

In the literature is recognised that no clear drivers for change can be identified in US and EU agricultural policy histories. Cuhna and Swinbank in their analysis of CAP reforms explicitly adopt a ‘non-formal and eclectic’ approach and note that the process of reform is discontinuous, ‘implying inter alia that if does not result from observable regularities’ (Cuhna and Swinbank 2010 : 11). Similarly Lehrer in her analysis of US reforms affirms that ‘it is the unique, ever-changing combination of interacting drivers that in the end facilitates or inhibits farm policy change at a particular moment in time’ (Lehrer 2010: Loc 922-24). Still, the role of policy crisis and exogenous shocks can be considered a leading factor in promoting change. As Mojer and Josling note in their comparison of EU and US farm policies “the policy inertia is so great, and the vested interest of the farm community in the policy status-quo usually so significant, that the impetus for reform must come from outside” (Moyer and Josling 2002: 8). Accordingly, the role of WTO negotiations, international pressures, budgetary crisis, food

² Notably soil pollution, for which agriculture is the main driver, has not been addressed since the mid ‘80s (Weale 1992: 16) and still remain a rather neglected area in both EU and US regulations.
³ It is relevant to note that scholars are divided over the evaluation of the overall effect of subsequent reforms on EU CAP. Notably Grant observes that the original policy objectives of the CAP have never been changed Wyn Grant, ‘Policy Instruments in the Common Agricultural Policy’, West European Politics, 33/1 (2010), 22-38. See also: C. Daugbjerg, ‘Reforming the Cap: Policy Networks and Broader Institutional Structure’, Journal of Common Market Studies, 37/3 (1999), 407-28.
safety failures in promoting change in the sector are much discussed in the literature on both the CAP and the US farm policy (Gardner 2003).

Crisis and shocks gave to a variety of institutions – like DG Budget DG Trade in EU, the EPA and FDA in the US - the opportunity to intervene on agricultural issues, ending the institutional insulation of the sector. Policy crises had also the effect of breaking up previous alliances, undermining the cohesion of the dominant policy communities. In the face of growing criticism and the accumulation of anomalies, divisions among small and big farmers, as well as among farmers and the food industry emerged. For instance in Europe COPA-COGECA proved less and less able to present itself as the unitary voice of European farmers, and its potential for mobilization steadily declined (Daugbjerg 1999).

Policy crisis thus have the effect to undermine the relevance of factors that made policy stability possible for decades and to provide leverage to alternative policy options (Skogstad 2009). It is important to analyse then to what extent the current global food crisis is increasing the conditions that favour policy change.

To address this question this paper proposes an analysis of policy argumentations that have been offered in debates on the future of agricultural policy in EU and US. The analysis of ‘who says what’ - i.e. the substantive dimension of policy discourses - is crucial to get insights on competing definitions of food-related problems, causal relations as well as the underlying concepts and frame of reference of discourses proposed in the US and EU policy processes. However, this paper recognises the criticism made to discourse analysis, that has often offered significant insights on the demystification of received views on social problems but has proved of limited explanatory value. As a Arts and Buizer observe, ‘too often discourse analysis sticks on the reconstruction of ‘free-floating’ ideas and meanings in texts or societies’ that are disconnected from actual policy processes. A way to address this theoretical problem is to fully account for the institutional contexts where policy argumentations take place. The approach thus follows Schmidt’s discursive institutionalism, who invites analysts to ‘take account of the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed and exchanged through discourse’ (Schmidt 2008, 2009). In short, the analysis has to focus on who say what, where, when, and why, i.e. both the substantive and the interactive dimensions of policy discourses. In the following section the latter will be described and the actors, venues, timing, of discourses will be specified.
The Interactive process in EU and US agricultural policy-making

At the European level for long the CAP has been the most prominent example of a mode of governance that is known as ‘community method’ (Wallace 2005). This mode of governance is characterised by a strong role played by the European Commission in policy formulation, the predominance of negotiations among Member States in the Council, the relative marginality of the European Parliament as well as other EU institutions, including the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of Regions and the European Court of Justice. According to Treaty provisions, the Commission has the monopoly of the legislative initiative and therefore enjoys considerable powers in setting the agenda for the Union. More specifically in the case of the CAP, the Directorate-General of Agriculture (DG Agri) is the main responsible for policy formulation. Also, the close, quasi-corporatist relationship with farmer unions mentioned above has given away to a more open and transparent process of consultations with a variety of stakeholders. Dg Agri has a list of 24 advisory groups, a total of 68 expert groups working on different issues and launched 15 processes of consultations targeting the general public in the period 2003-2012. During the 2000s CAP processes have been characterised by widespread stakeholders participation and consultations, at least in the initial stages of policy formulation. The 2010 Future of the CAP debate – in this paper one of the main focus of analysis – attracted around 5700 contributions from stakeholders, think-tanks and the general public, admittedly, mainly farmers. As the summary of responses states, ‘those with a farming interest form a significant proportion of general public respondents’ and as a result ‘agricultural interests played a major role in the debate, among the general public and think tanks, research institutes and others as well as among stakeholders’ (CEC, 2010 p. 11).

The proposal drafted by the Commission – in the current case the Commission published its proposal in October 2011 - goes to the Special Committee on Agriculture (SCA) and to the Council of Agricultural Ministers, where intensive inter-governmental negotiations take place to reconcile contrasting national interests. It is important to note that the Lisbon Treaty has included agriculture among policy to be decided according to the so-called ordinary procedure, giving a binding vote to the EP on the CAP. For the first time the EP is having a significant role.

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4 Over time however some relevant aspect of food and agricultural policy have been transferred to different DGs. Notably DG Consumer and Health is in charge with food safety; DG Trade is in charge with WTO negotiations. Further, DG Environment, DG Energy and the newly established DG Clima have a relevant role in agricultural-related issues, first of all biofuels.
in negotiations over agriculture and evidence is that MEPs and more specifically members of Comagri took the task very seriously, issuing position papers, auditing national farm ministers, conducting broad consultations. The Chairman of the EP Agricultural Committee actively participated in the Future of CAP debate, generally proposing the pro-farmers views endorsed in EP resolutions. As the Irish presidency noted, the novelty of the procedure has been challenging and overall the relationships with the EP have been ‘tense’ during negotiations.

A stylised description of US agricultural policy process focuses on the formulation and approval of the Farm Bill, every five years (Moyer and Josling 2002). The Secretary of Agriculture and USDA are in charge with the formulation of the official proposal for the bill, on the basis of their internal expertise, extensive consultations with other Departments and Agencies as well as stakeholders. USDA concentrates competences over farming, though it is of note that relevant areas of food security are under control of EPA.

Simultaneously the Agricultural Committee of the Senate and the Agricultural Committee of the House of Representative start the drafting of their own proposal by consulting experts and stakeholders. Such hearings are a very relevant part of the debate and involved around 200 witnesses. The chairpersons have a complete control over invited speakers, while very limited room is given to the general public to take part. On the whole, more than 90% of witnesses in Congressional hearings represent farmers and ranchers; academics and researchers with a background in agricultural economics are another relevant source of information for Congresspersons. The official policy discourse in Congress then is decisively focused on farm-related issues proposed by representatives of the farming sectors and overall presents a narrower set of policy argumentations compared to the EU debate.

After its formulation in the committees for agriculture the bills are taken to the floor in both Houses of the Congress for deliberation and approval. After approval of both bills, a joint conference committee works to reconcile the two. If the new version is formally voted and accepted by both Houses, it goes to the President who can decide to sign or to veto it.

The empirical analysis carried out for this paper is based on contributions to discussions officially channelled to the US decision-makers during Congressional hearings and to the EU Commission during consultation procedures by experts, stakeholders, interested parties,
activists. In both EU and US, the formal procedures for the drafting of new agricultural policy started in April 2010, when - as noted - the Commission launched the ‘Future of the CAP debate’ and the Ag Committees in the US Congress started holding hearings.

By focusing on formalised policy processes the analysis explicitly avoids to consider arguments advanced in lobbying activities, informal contacts between policy-makers and stakeholders as well as arguments advanced in the public sphere and media campaigns targeting the general public.

**European Union: the global food crisis as a threat to EU self-sufficiency**

In the debate on the post-2013 CAP the theme of the global food crisis is taken very seriously by participating institutional and social actors alike. In particular the issue gained salience since it is proposed as a concrete danger for food security in Europe. The troubles and uncertainties in agricultural markets gave to farmers organisations the opportunity to successfully advance some of their traditional core claims about the centrality of food production and productivity for EU policy in the sector. These argumentations were rather marginalised in the early 2000s, when the multifunctional role of agriculture was emphasised.

In the view of the farming community the primary contribution of agriculture to EU society consists of securing stable food supplies, a core national and EU interest. In the light of growing worldwide concerns about food security farmers can argue that it would be too risky for EU societies to give up food self-sufficiency. Notably, in their information factsheet, Copa-Cogeca forecasts constant decrease in the production of cereals in EU27, with an estimation of a further 2,3% decrease in 2010/2011 from 2009/2010. Further, data show an increase in the relevance of food imports from developing countries. A variety of ‘productivist’ actors used such data to make the argument that ‘outsourcing’ food production to poor countries that are extremely vulnerable is against EU interest to security and the welfare of EU citizens. The extreme market volatility experienced in 2008 and then again in 2011 are signals of the times to come. Accordingly, a set of ‘old style’ claims have been made. Rising prices, food shortages and the general prospect for higher food prices in the coming decade suggest to farmers’ organisations that support to EU agricultural production should be restored: ‘it is important that the CAP contributes to the maintenance of Europe’s own productive capacity’ (Copa-Cogeca, 2011 p. 3). According to this view, the multifunctional turn in EU agricultural policy has been an error, since it jeopardised the EU productive capacity. The argument is made

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5 The complete analysis will also include floor and parliamentary debates
especially clear by Copa-Cogeca, who states that ‘the overall impact [of CAP reforms] has been an undermining of the competitive position of EU farmers, increased dependence on imports of food from outside the EU and a contraction in jobs in agriculture and in related input and food sectors’ (Copa-Cogeca 2011: 3). They asked to subsidise production as well as to protect EU farmers from international competition. A similar argument to support productivity has also been made by representatives of the biotech industry. For instance, Bayer Crop Science – a leading biotech industry – notes that “without a more ambitious aim of increasing productivity again in Europe to levels above 1% per annum many of the identified issues like food security, resource efficiency in water and land use, balancing food and energy demands and also carbon footprint targets can not properly be addressed”.

This interpretation of the global food crisis, linking turmoil in the world markets with food insecurity in Europe and to with the request for incentives to agricultural productivity found some receptivity in the Commission, who wrote that ‘the first and foremost role of European agriculture is to supply food’, and identifies global food security as a main challenge for the sector. According to the Commission, ‘maintaining the agricultural production capacity throughout the EU’ should be a key objective for the CAP post-2013 (CEC 2011). Farmers are also backed by the European Parliament that in its Resolution affirms to be ‘alarmed that proposed EU legislation may have a dramatic impact by reducing the tools available to maximise yields and may, in effect, lead to a dramatic reduction in EU farm output’ and calls ‘for a stable and constant level of EU and Member States’ expenditure on the CAP guaranteeing a fair income for farmers’.

This discourse however is not the only that has been articulated during policy debates. In the view of leading environmental organisations as well as prominent research institutes, food availability is not an urgent issue in Europe. “Whilst continued European food production is critically important, to contribute to both global and EU food supplies, the Commission must remain vigilant against misleading rhetoric around food security. We are skeptical of calls for significantly increased levels of production in the EU to both tackle global hunger and to meet the demands of a growing global population” (Birdlife et al. 2009; Birdlife and European Landowners’ Association 2010). To discuss the global food crisis environmental groups, small farmers organisations as well as leading research centres highlight the unequal distribution of supplies and food waste rather than scarcity as the main causes of food insecurity. Birdlife clearly states that ‘the world is not running out of food. The average adult requires 2500 calories per day – global food availability in 2003 stood at 2800 calories per person and is projected to rise to 3050 cal by 2030. Although these figures do not take food wastage into
account ... current global food production should be sufficient to feed everyone in the world, even with increasing population and consumption levels, at least until 2030’ (Birdlife et al. 2009: 5).

In the long term, the problem of food availability is likely to increase in relevance, mainly in relation to environmental degradation, water scarcity, soil depletion. Accordingly, the conservation of biodiversity, the preservation of farmland in good environmental conditions and the adoption of sustainable agriculture are the only promising solutions to the problem of future food supplies. “There is abundant scientific evidence that crop biodiversity has an important role to play in the adaptation to our changing environment. While oversimplified farming systems, such as monocultures of genetically identical plants, would not be able to cope with a changing climate, increasing the biodiversity of an agro-ecosystem can help maintain its long-term productivity and contribute significantly to food security. Genetic diversity within a field provides a buffer against losses caused by environmental change, pests and diseases” (Greenpeace 2008).

Restoring subsidies to farmers in order to incentivise crop production is then not the answer to short and long term food security concerns. Actors reinstate the principle ‘public goods for public money’ and criticises the existing policy for lack of focus and coordination. They note that the loss of biodiversity in rural areas is continuing at unprecedented rate. More specifically environmental groups lament the lack of integration between the CAP agro-environmental schemes and the EU agenda on biodiversity, the Sustainable Development Strategy as well as the Climate Package. Birdlife for instance makes it very clear: “We assert that without a healthy and wildlife-rich natural environment, both the capacity to produce food and the ability of rural areas to prosper are critically undermined” (Birdlife and European Landowners’ Association 2010).

The global food crisis had an important part in EU debate, at least in its initial stages. It was used to effectively channel a sense of urgency and risk that strongly resonated with the original goal of the CAP, namely to achieve self-sufficiency and food security. It remain an open question to be further analysed whether this particular argumentation proved a decisive winning argument in the debate.
United States: the global food crisis as a big technological challenge and opportunity

The theme of the global food crisis features less prominently in the US debate. The very term ‘crisis’ is not used to refer to raising prices in the world market or concern over global productivity or environmental consequences of intensification. This is not to say that the problems of agriculture at both domestic and global levels are not discussed. Rather the overwhelming argumentation in Congress is around the agricultural challenge, and it is largely based on technological optimism. This idea is shared by the Federal government and a myriad of social actors,. Secretary Vilsack for instance recalls trends in population growth to stress its seriousness, as both chairpersons of the Ag committees do. No doubts however are expressed about the capacity of the agricultural sector to meet growing demand for food, feed, fibre and fuel at the global level. To feed a growing world is indeed presented as the most pressing challenge for the coming decades for the US farming system, and it is framed in terms of ‘opportunity’ by leading institutional actors, farmers representatives alike. As noted above, the over-representation of farming interests in policy debates contributes to make this beliefs overwhelming majoritarian, (to the point that it is difficult to find a counter-argumentation).6

The astonishing efficiency of American farmers, as well as the faith in cooperative efforts between science, politics and farmers are mentioned to prove the capacity of the sector to respond and to deliver effectively.

Representatives of farmers support a very optimistic view of US agriculture to further increase production and productivity. It is mainly the beliefs in technological development that represents a strong and widespread reason to support optimistic scenarios. The following is but one example of a much-repeated concept in US debate: “Since I began my career at Pioneer, we have doubled U.S. corn yields on a per acre basis. That is a very important number to think about, and we need to look at how we can do that again” (HU Senate 2; 2:47). The estimations on the future capacity vary, from 150 to an astonishing 180 bushels per acre. Monsanto – a leading seed breeder deeply involved in the development of genetically modified corn and soybean – affirms that “biotechnology will have the same impact on crop production, food production, as what we saw in the 1960’s with computers and electronics that have changed our world today. This technology promises to increase yields and productivity in very remarkable ways” and that “we see the opportunity to double corn yields in the next 20 years, going from an average today of 150 bushels per acre to as much as 300 bushels per acre by 2030” (HU Senate 3; 1:17). Accordingly, American farming has the

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6 It might be useful to remind that this analysis refers to debates in Congress. The variety of argumentation in the US public sphere is significantly higher.
potential to feed the world, exporting crops and technology to food insecure countries. To
perform this role a safety net to guarantee farmers against market volatility and natural
disasters (like the 2012 drought) is needed and strongly advocated.

In addition, any limitation to production on the ground of ecological considerations is
presented by a majority of witnesses as a threat to world food security. The trade-off between
the need to assure high agricultural productivity and growth and environmental conservation
is clearly presented. Again and again representatives – particularly in House – question the
benefits of existing conservation programs as well as a number of environmental regulation
coming from EPA. This is not unique to agriculture. As it is well known, the environmental
regulation came under specific attack on the part of the Republican party from the mid-90s
and in recent years has been even more emphasized by Tea-party members. The
Environmental Protection Agency is a target mainly on the ground that regulation is an
excessive administrative burden for the farming sector. Conservation programs are also seen
as a limit to full production capacity, to the point that the existence of a conservation title in
the Farm bill has been put into question. Advocates for sustainable farming have been ready to
intervene to make the argument in favour of existing programs, in particular the Conservation
Reserve Program (CRP). The justification here is often based on long-term considerations on
the sustainability of the American agricultural system and its capacity to guarantee food
security. For instance the American Farmland Trust uses food security to make the case for a
strong conservation title in the Farm Bill. As Jon Scholl remarked “if we are going to maintain a
thriving agricultural sector, continue to protect our natural resources, and provide the food
security that is so central to our national security, we must have a strong conservation title in
the next farm bill”. In this sense, the argument is not dissimilar from the one discussed in the
EU context. The difference lies in its acceptance, which is very limited in the US Congress.
Indeed, the belief in a positive correlation between environmental provisions and agricultural
security is proposed by a tiny minority of witnesses invited in Congress. The House and the
Senate versions alike of the 2013 farm bill halve the number of conservation programs to be
funded and order cuts in funding for $4.8 billion and $3.5 billion respectively.

When it comes to food security, it is again biotechnology that has to contribute the most.
Further, the potential of biotechnology has to be incorporated into environmental provisions.
The diffusion of insect-resistant and herbicide-tolerant varieties of seeds that has been made
possible by the development of biotechnology is praised for their beneficial effects on the
environment. Conservation provisions should be reformed in the light of changing farming
practices made possible by GM crops.
Discussion and conclusion

The preliminary analysis presented in this paper highlights that the global food crisis has been discussed, understood and framed in different ways in EU and US. To what extent this particular theme will prove influential in final policy outputs in the two contexts is an interesting question that requires further research.

Differences in discourses can depend from the specific characteristics of the interactive processes in EU and US. In the EU, agricultural policy has been decisively opened to a variety of stakeholders; environmental groups are expected to participate in Commission’s consultation and their absence would significantly undermine the legitimacy of the debate. As a result, the variety of argumentation and counter-argumentation within official debates seems high, to the point that it is possible to clearly distinguish opposing discursive coalitions in the field. On the contrary the input to US legislative process is particularly selective. Stakeholders who oppose the mainstream technological optimism – and in particular environmentalists among them - had limited access to the US official debates. This is not to say that they have no influence in policy processes, in particular through lobbying activities (Baumgartner et al. 2009). However it seems safe to affirm that the evidence to which decision-makers are exposed during official debates is unbalanced in favour of farmers’ interests and argumentations. The pluralism in argumentations comes from within the farming community. Contrary to the EU Commission, who holds all hearings in Brussels, the US Congress organises hearings all around the US, the so-called field-hearings. According to the chairman of House committee Mr Lucas “they give us a chance to see the diversity of agriculture across this great country”. As these words makes it clear, invited witnesses to these hearings are again exclusively farmers, ranchers and food processors. The variety of argumentations that can be found refers to the variety of specific conditions facing the agricultural sectors in different areas. For instance, knowledge on the specific problems of fruit growers in California or dairy producers in New York and other specialty crops have been collected in these field hearings.

The institutional characteristics of US farm governance favours the development of a well-established, self-reinforcing understanding of the agricultural challenges ahead and appropriate policy responses to it. The provision of a safety net to farmers has not been put
into question, not even by representatives belonging to Tea-party that criticised any other form of public support.\(^7\)

Despite further research is needed to trace links between the variety of themes discussed during policy processes and actual policy outcomes, the evidence presented in this paper supports two contested claims in theories of public policy regarding the role of crisis in provoking change. Theories of policy change generally expect that external shocks, systemic perturbations, big bang like disasters and economic crisis will leave policy-makers ‘in quest of a set of ideas to make sense of the novel situation and provide a diagnosis of the way forward’ (95) (Sabatier and Jenkis-Smith 1993). This analysis contributes to make the point that this is not always the case. How Majone put it “objective conditions are seldom so compelling and so unambiguous that they set the policy agenda or dictate the appropriate conceptualization” (Majone 1989:24). Accordingly, an analysis of competing understandings of policy crisis is required to evaluate their impact on policy processes. Further, as noted, the development of policy discourses and their relative influence on final outputs depends on the institutional rules governing policy deliberations.

References


\(^7\) The final version of the House Bill, inspired by Tea party representatives and controversially voted in mid-July maintain public support for a crop insurance scheme while abolish the nutrition title of the bill, that concerning food support for poor Americans (currently 47 million US citizens benefit from SNAP support).

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