

FFA2019 – Opening Speech

Next generation

Janez Potočnik, Chairman

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is good to see you again and welcome to the 12th Forum for the Future of Agriculture.

It is my great pleasure to chair this event for the fourth time, and I would like to thank you all for coming here today, particularly those of you who are our regular guests.

I should begin with a small apology.

You might remember that during my opening remarks last year I said that we were “sleepwalking into a catastrophe of our own making.” I actually misspoke.

We are not sleepwalking – we are wide awake, seeing rising temperatures, falling biodiversity, and vast inequality, but consciously choose to do very little. We have become very good at making gestures, giving speeches, and then walking away.

As some of you may know, after I left the European Commission, I became Co-Chair of the UN International Resource Panel. Less than a month ago, we released the Global Resources Outlook 2019 – the first of its kind.

The report looks at biomass, fossil fuels, metals, minerals, land and water and how much of it we use. The short version is that we use far too much; our global resource use has more than tripled in the last 50 years, and we have all been enthusiastic

consumers. Between 1970 and 2017, each of us took on an extra 5 tons of raw materials.

We did not have these resources to spare. Their extraction and processing have come at enormous cost, the environmental impact of our appetite has caused 90% of water stress and biodiversity loss, 50% of the impact of climate change, and 1/3rd of our polluted air. The vast majority of its consumption has been here, in the developed world.

To make it very clear; this is only the impact of getting these materials ready for our use. It does not count the impact of the products we made and consumed, or the waste we leave behind.

This is the way of life we have built in the last two centuries. It cannot continue. Not if we want to give the next generation a chance.

However, our report is not only doom and gloom. There is good news.

Our models show that if we really make an effort, if we reshape our economies and policies to protect the climate, use our resources wisely, behave as responsible consumers, and treat our land sustainably, we can all live well.

If we act - as we promised the world we would - on the Sustainable Development Goals, if we dare to be brave and bold, if our politicians have courage, we can deliver a better future for the next generation. But only if we really act, not if we just pretend to.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We tell ourselves that we will fix it 'tomorrow' or 'after the next election'. Except that we are running out of tomorrows. Last year's IPCC report has made that very clear; there are twelve years left to get to grips with climate change¹. After that, our coral reefs will fade away forever, the Arctic will change catastrophically, and our environment will never be the same again.

Twelve years is not a long time even in a life of an individual, let alone in the life of a human race. By the end of the next Commission, we will be more than halfway there. It will affect the entire lives of the next generation.

This is why today's FFA is dedicated to this next generation, to their parents and to their grandparents.

Climate change

Today, those in charge are failing the next generation.

We no longer even talk of halting and reversing climate change, instead we talk of adaptation. For millions of people, especially in the developing world, that means droughts, lost farms, disappearing biodiversity and extreme weather events. For them, adaptation means scarce resources and a desperate fight for survival. It can mean a desperate migration to places where they see abundance. 2,262 of them drowned in the

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report>

Mediterranean² last year in a search of a promised land. And Europe turns its back.

Clearly, climate change is not the only reason for scarce resources and migration, but we are fooling ourselves if we say it is not important.

We are not sleepwalking. We did that 30 years ago when the scientific community started ringing the alarm. We did it as the first glaciers disappeared and the weather started to change.

We are not sleepwalking. We are choosing to ignore the fate of tomorrow in favor of a comfortable today. That may be pleasant today – it will even get you elected. But it is not worthy of ourselves, our politics, and certainly not of the next generation of citizens, farmers, consumers around the world.

We are not sleepwalking, we are engaged in an experiment to see who can ignore reality the longest. Unfortunately, the winner of that contest will be the biggest loser of all, and they will take all of us with them.

Financing sustainability

So, it is time to really open our eyes. To see that the world spent 300 billion dollars' worth of fossil fuel subsidies in 2017³ even though we know that fossil fuels must stay in the ground. In Euros, dollars or renminbi, pollution and financial engineering still pays better than sustainability.

² <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/03/681956995/number-of-migrant-deaths-in-mediterranean-fell-in-2018>

³ <https://www.iea.org/newsroom/news/2018/october/hard-earned-reforms-to-fossil-fuel-subsidies-are-coming-under-threat.html>

We must reconsider what growth actually means in the 21st century, in a world where we are already far passed some of the sustainable planetary boundaries.

Providing for a growing population and meeting their needs cannot come at the expense of our planet. It is like burning your house to keep yourself warm in the bedroom.

We cannot continue to live in a world where quarterly growth, stock markets and GDP are seen as the markers of success of our society instead of water quality, species richness, or human happiness. However, reconfiguring these systems can only be possible if it will be just, fair and inclusive. Most people, especially the billions who are still poor, cannot be asked to accept much-needed changes if it means they will be poorer still.

Further, we must – urgently - find the financial resources necessary to pay for the transition. Even if all of us individually became responsible consumers, this would not be nearly enough. We need the vast resources of our financial markets and the state - rebuilding our energy systems, creating real value for ecosystems, shaping a circular economy in manufacturing as well as in agriculture; all these are necessary, and we know it.

For those of you who question whether or not we can seriously redirect our investment, let me remind you: the European Central Bank has spent 2.6 trillion euros over almost four years, buying up mostly government and corporate debt to

save the financial system⁴. How much is the continued existence of life on earth worth to you? What is it worth to the next generation?

Food and consumers

Fortunately, while our political and economic leadership lags behind or engages in delusion, many citizens have their eyes wide open. They are acting, even if our leaders are not.

The next generation of consumers is already so far ahead of most of us; concerned over where food comes from, demanding of ethical production, and ready to be the change they want to see. 52% of organic consumers are millennials. Furthermore, they eat 52% more vegetables than their older counterparts.⁵ A staggering 40% of millennials are reportedly taking on a plant-based diet.⁶ This is the kind of change that moves mountains, that forces our food system to deliver.

However, we must not only stare at the trends we like. Even in Europe, too many are still struggling to feed their family. Their economic stress, in absence of efficient social policies, demands low-cost food; nearly 1.4 million emergency food packages were handed out in the UK in the first three months of 2018 alone⁷. This is, still, a reality in Europe. Across the

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eurozone-ecb-qe/the-life-and-times-of-ecb-quantitative-easing-2015-18-idUSKBN1OB1SM>

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/deeppatel/2017/08/26/food-leaders-take-notice-how-millennials-are-changing-the-way-we-eat/>

⁶ <https://dairycentral.ca/?p=904>

⁷ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/food-bank-uk-benefits-trussell-trust-cost-of-living-highest-rate-a8317001.html>

developing world these problems are of course much more severe.

CAP

It would be absolutely unfair to lay all these burdens, from climate to consumer choice, at the feet of Europe's farmers or its farm policy. However, they are the ones on the front lines. Those who manage our food systems are our biggest natural resource managers. They are absolutely key to any real change.

We should all recognise them as partners for change. In the past, many have acted in good faith, and they need and deserve the public support that is necessary to make our transformation not just fair, but possible.

However, the CAP remains the most difficult nut to crack if we want to deliver systemic change. The new European Multiannual Financial Framework proposal shows, once again, that political leaders in Europe prefer defending the status quo and are not ready for radical change. It certainly does not answer the 12-year challenge laid down by the IPCC.

We should be aware that this EU budget, including its CAP component, is the last one we have to deliver on our 2030 commitments to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. In its current shape it is difficult to see the MFF or the CAP playing that role effectively.

The CAP also needs to better support the desperately needed young people who will take over our farms and rural communities. Right now, they are retirement villages without

retirement options. Less than 10% of our farmers are under 40⁸ and they struggle to earn enough money for decent living.

Much of the action our societies need right now will depend on this generation of farmers and the next. One can argue that this is unfair, and it is, but unfortunately in many cases we still prefer to pocket the profits and socialise the costs, or even worse, to transfer the costs to the next generation, who cannot vote against it.

Partners

Ladies and gentlemen,

The FFA cannot be immune to change – we too must act according to our principles. In that spirit, we have embarked on a new adventure, to move away from a focus mainly on agriculture and the environment, though they will remain at our core. From now on, we will focus on the whole food system, and how it works with other parts of our interconnected world.

We cannot do this alone. This is why, as you can see on your program and elsewhere, we have found new partners who are willing to join us on this journey. WWF, Cargill, The Nature Conservancy, Thought for Food, and Mondelez have joined the FFA as partners. They are more than welcome, and I would like to thank them for their trust shown by coming on board as the FFA itself is transformed.

⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20180719-1?inheritRedirect=true>

We are also proud to have the support of the Romanian Presidency, showing that the agenda of sustainability and the food system is being taken serious at the highest level.

Closing

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no more time to waste. It is often said that tomorrow belongs to the next generation. Unfortunately, we have made the world in which the tomorrow is already predetermined by us – for all of them, around the world.

Make no mistake, the next generation is already out there. There are hundreds of millions of them, and the vast majority lives in the developing world. They have as much right as anyone in this room to a sustainable, just, and happy life.

It is therefore my great pleasure to invite Ertharin Cousin, twelfth Executive Director of the UN World Food Program, to the stage to share her thoughts on the next generation.