Rachel Reckinger

Food Sovereignty and Resilience in Luxembourg

Moments of crisis like the current one sparked by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, engaging all social, economic, cultural and political institutions of a society, all of a sudden put their resourcefulness to a stress-test. This is very much the case in the imminent Covid-19 situation, but it is also the case for more general ongoing and oncoming crises like the rapid acceleration of climate change and biodiversity loss, yielding even more world hunger, violence and social unrest than is already occurring now. In such times of upheaval, people worldwide return to basics, among which the individual and collective food supply is an essential and vital cornerstone.

At the beginning of confinement in mid-March 2020, we witnessed momentary shortages on Luxembourg supermarket shelves, tensions between customers and towards overworked staff, the closure of food retail outlets for small producers, such as markets, groceries or farm shops, reduced numbers of customers allowed inside supermarkets who then panic-bought and hoarded, rather than undertaking well-planned bulk buying (to avoid renewed exposure to the melee of supermarkets, while not depleting stocks), overloading online ordering facilities and rapidly creating new ones. This suddenly goes to show the *artificiality* of the sheer abundance of foodstuffs which we are so used to in 'normality'.

Which vulnerabilities emerge, even in the wealthiest of Western European food-secure countries?

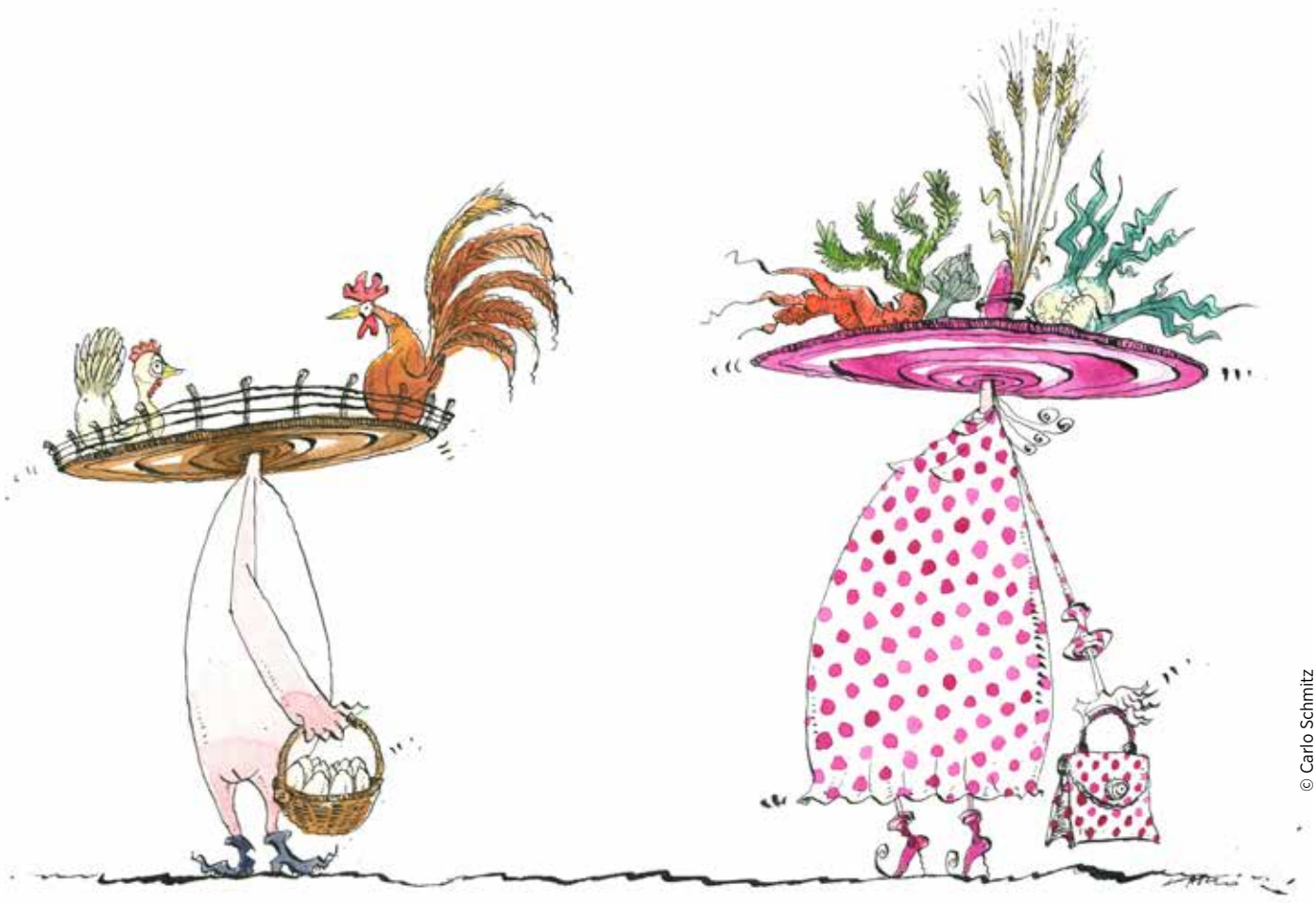
Abundance comes at the price of complex, international logistics and long food supply chains with many intermediaries. It also comes at the price of replacing seasonality with long distances, evicting indigenous crops, their genetic diversity and intercropping systems, in favour of the large, yet unvaried monocultures demanded in a globalized world market. Finally, this abundance requires a concentration of Europe's intensive horticulture in Mediterranean countries, where it contributes to impoverished soils, extensive watering and the precarity of seasonal fruit and vegetable pickers, many of whom are illegalised migrants.

So, *how resilient and even resourceful is a given food system* when internationalised (if not globalised) supply interdependencies are delayed or altogether disrupted – which may be the case in the coming months, depending on the prolongation of various shutdowns throughout the world. Which vulnerabilities emerge, even in the wealthiest of Western European food-secure countries? The rapidity with which borders even within the Schengen area closed makes the focus on national performances eerily realistic (since it happened from one week to the next), and with it the question of States' food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty and regionalisation

Food sovereignty in a given country is characterised by the largest possible *diversity* of produced foodstuffs and by the highest degree of *autonomy* possible from international imports and transportation where local possibilities exist, in a context of food democracy, assuring equity and participation[1].

Dr Rachel Reckinger is a food sociologist and anthropologist at the University of Luxembourg and head of the research project 'Sustainable Food Practices' (https://food.uni.lu). She is also a member of Luxembourg's Conseil supérieur pour un développement durable.



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When looking at Luxembourg's situation in terms of food self-sufficiency, one has to consider that Luxembourg is predominantly a grassland region, which lends itself to cattle grazing: only ruminants can make grass 'edible' for humans. Yet relatively small-scale agricultural initiatives have shown, often with agroecological methods, that a remarkable diversity and intensity of mainly vegetable production is possible in horticulture on comparably small surfaces, requiring however a high input of manpower and, often, water supply infrastructures. Notwithstanding, combined crops, trees, pasture and domesticated animals in terms of agroforestry are rare. Currently, Luxembourg has a self-supply ratio in *production* of 114.8%, respectively 116.8% of its needs in beef and dairy, but only 67% for pork, 35.5% for eggs and 29.4% for chicken, as well as 3-5% of vegetables and < 1% of fruit. In the *transformation* sector, the vast majority of goods are imported. Even though an increasing number of small food manufacturies produce a high variety of foodstuff (like cheeses, yoghurts, ice-cream, pasta products, jams, spreads, confectionary etc.) – and the country has a handful of larger companies in the transformation sector (among them a large dairy and a large grain mill active on the world market) –, the product range is insufficient to cover national demand. For example, there is not yet a 'légumerie' on Luxembourg territory which could supply customers with non-perishable vegetable and fruit products, like conserves or compotes. Similar initiatives from the Greater Region are for the moment not yet marketed very prominently.

In food sovereignty processes, social movements and civil society initiatives, but also coalitions of the willing among established, larger food actors, play a key role, yet they represent, for the moment, only a small proportion of alternative or civic food networks in Luxembourg. Participative inventories and the collective harvesting of fruit trees or wild shrubs with comestible berries, such as mundraub.org, are not yet established. Zero waste movements, the cooking-up of 'rescued food', public fridges with restaurant and canteen surplus cooked meals, discounted prices for perishable foods close to the "use by" date, partnerships of supermarkets and restaurants to cheaply sell or donate unused merchandise to charities providing food banks for the poorest, community gardens in urban settings, often managed by grassroots transition-minded citizen groups, more technological and/or larger-scale options of professional urban farming, 'do-it-yourself' and 'grow-your-own' community initiatives etc. are not yet systematic. Because field vegetables such as carrots, various salads, potatoes etc. grow

well and can be integrated without major structural shifts into machine-based farming techniques and exploitations, there are increasing partnerships with wholesalers, public out-of-home catering and commercial restaurants as well as retailers to buy such produce. Private households access such regional produce to some degree in their local supermarkets, or via a weekly subscription to box schemes or a yearly one to a community-supported agriculture group, or else on local markets or in farm outlets. There is also increasing interest in ancient seed varieties that evolve with the local peculiarities of their environment and show higher risk resistance, by contrast with genetically identical hybrids. Together, these examples of existing and emerging initiatives show that there is potential to drive Luxembourg towards more food sovereignty, while maximising its natural potential as a grassland region both for ruminant livestock systems and for scaling-up agroforestry.

As a small country, Luxembourg would lend itself to shorter supply chains and more flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances, but only if the food supply were diverse enough and also included more transformed products that were made available in a plurality of independent outlets. Quantities are a general issue. On the one hand, small producers have fluctuations and cannot easily guarantee the constant or large-scale supply of clients such as restaurants, canteens or supermarkets. Here, a cooperative-run platform (a so-called food hub) provisioned by a number of small producers but functioning as a one-stop-shop for professional buyers receiving their regional produce as composed by various producers, but via a central platform, would be influential, particularly if combined with cooperative marketing functions[2]. On the other hand, larger companies in Luxembourg do indeed offer commercial partnerships and purchase guarantees to producers who are willing to invest in specific, missing products or production lines. Yet, for those initiatives to be truly profitable, a larger market than Luxembourg's national territory would be useful. Here, transregional partnerships in the Greater Region or beyond would help realise the idea of regional food in a supranational sense, which would have to be negotiated in cross-border cooperation. For example, the Interreg project AROMA (https://www.aroma-interreg.eu) is currently setting up a Competence and Resource Centre for such cases, going beyond nationalistic and protectionist understanding of regionality. This team's research shows that apart from fish, chicken and tomatoes, all reviewed product categories are already being produced in sufficient quantity to cover the Greater Region's out-of-home catering sector's needs, resulting in self-sufficiency, and even surplus: the amount of onions produced in the Greater Region corresponds to 48 times the demand of its out-of-home catering sector; the amount of carrots produced corresponds to 11 times the demand, and for beef it is 18 times. Yet at the moment, only a minority of these foodstuffs are served in canteens of the Greater Region – which points to the fact that food sovereignty is less an issue of natural resources or production constraints than a logistical and political one of supply chain management, market orientation, price policies and various national legislative regulations.

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Knowledge transfers, market incentives and political warranties

Experts point to the necessity of a model of agriculture that is based on "diversifying farms and farming landscapes, replacing chemical inputs, optimizing biodiversity and stimulating interactions between different species, as part of holistic strategies to build long-term fertility, healthy agro-ecosystems and secure livelihoods, i.e. 'diversified Agroecological systems'"[3]. However, such a sustainable and resilient agricultural system is quite labour-intensive. Luxembourg's available manpower in the sector to date is insufficient, particularly given the fact that farmers managing main businesses work on average 60 hours per week. In a transition to more resource-friendly and more diversified production systems there is a need for a larger human work force, also in the form of neo-peasantry and lateral entrants to the farming profession. This entails a situation where knowledge diffusion and exchange are the key to success. Guidance from best practices in international peer groups suggests the promotion of "farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing", experimenting with active entrepreneurship in reducing pathway dependencies, and the assurance of political backing when displaying inventiveness in downsizing extended areas in favour of underdeveloped niche products with significant added value. Indeed, if there were more market incentives and political guarantees, such shifts would be less risky for farmers. For the moment, "the benefits diversified farming brings to society are barely rewarded by current subsidies and support measures under the CAP"[4]. Rather than focusing primarily on regulating markets and supporting farmers through standardized EU-wide policy tools, the EU must find ways to encourage local food initiatives. Complementary to bureaucratic supranational regulations, this could be achieved via trusted local institutions and funding opportunities.

Food literacy and food democracy

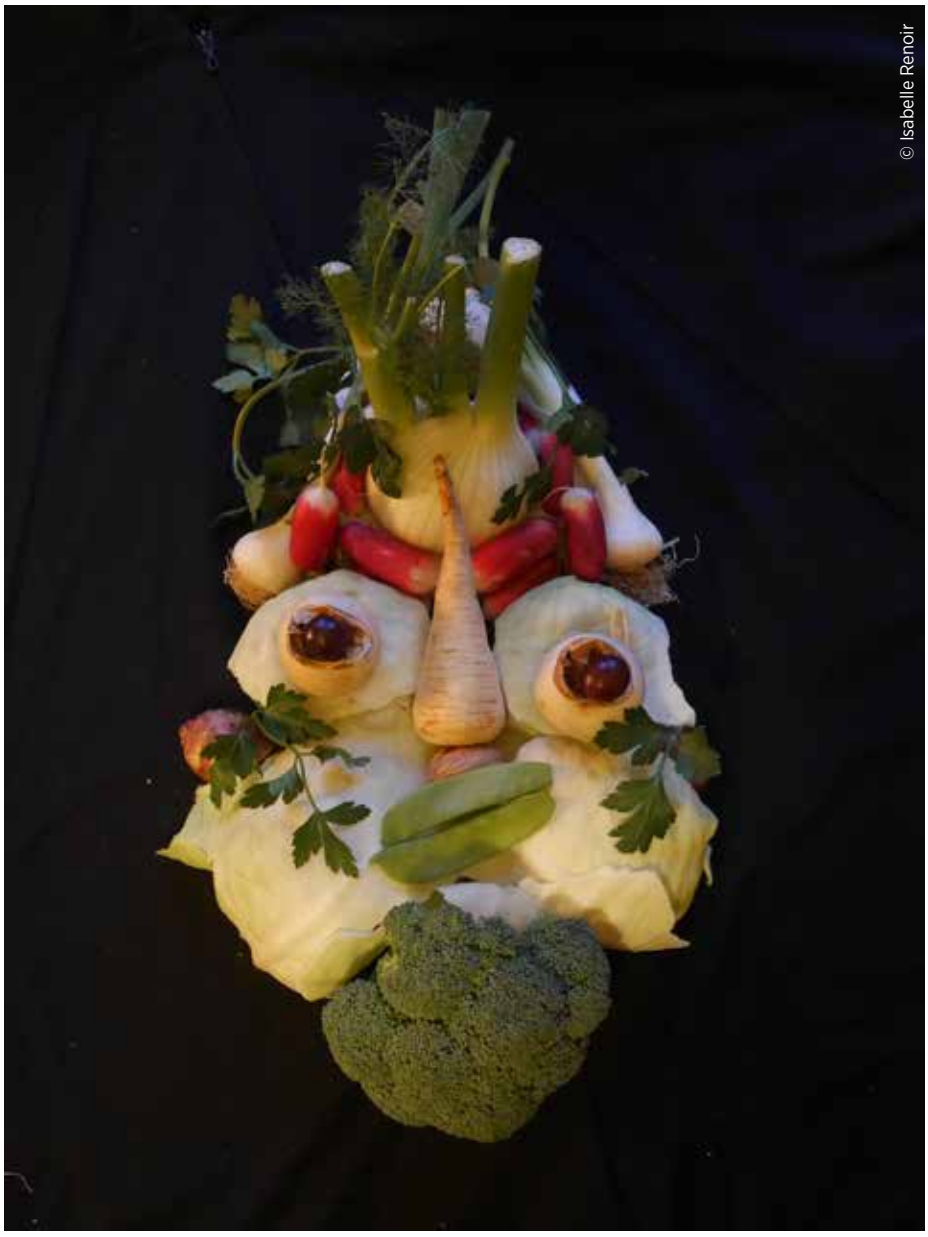
The more high-quality, ethical and sustainable local foodstuffs will be made available and become hence the 'normal', default choice (the so-called *Ökoroutine*), the more sensitivity consumers will develop for local contingencies, ethical *and* high-quality, possibly organic food, seasonality, production constraints etc. This virtuous circle would be enhanced if a responsible food literacy were embedded in mandatory Education for Sustainable Development (EDG) programs for children, pupils and students, where the conditions and intricacies of the Global North's imperialist way of living were pedagogically and experimentally addressed and learned. Daily life in capitalistic economies is largely made possible by exploiting other world regions' natural and social resources. The current western

lifestyle presupposes that not all humans draw equally from earth's resources.

A more socially and environmentally just and resilient food system would mean that consumption could be reduced, not to bare essentials but to sensible and meaningful dimensions. We must learn that ethical, sustainable, responsible, healthy food production and consumption choices are not an imposed austerity constraint but represent the affirmative and hedonistic pleasure of 'clean' *and* tasty food.

One way the State has to incentivize the production, the distribution and the consumption of such produce is via labelling schemes that certify various types of quality. Government-led quality certifications can indeed enhance food literacy and more sustainable purchases in private households or more sustainable procurement behaviour among public purchasers, but only if these labelling schemes transparently *show* their added-value instead of merely claiming it, and if they are backed by laws that make defined sustainability criteria *mandatory* instead of merely recommending them. For private households, on the one hand, labelling schemes are merely trust-building complementary information that can be used in a voluntary way (according to personal, more or less politically responsible priorities or valorisation); public procurement actors, on the other hand, are increasingly obliged (for the moment morally more than legally) to take them into account in their tenders and awards of supply bids, in a politically formalised effort to favour foodstuffs with added sustainable or ethical value. In this sense, Luxembourg's upcoming law on a national label *agrément,* comparing the guarantees and achievements of all official labels in Luxembourg and aiming at making those criteria mandatory in public tenders, is a significant step[5].

Such underlying yet efficient action can be combined with direct recommendations to public institutions and private households, providing analytical, top-down information and appealing to individual responsibility. Here, customers operate a selective internalisation of the perceived recommendations in a proactive yet pragmatic gesture of personal responsibility[6]. Which goes to show that such indirect incentives only bring about slow and partial change.



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But now, in the urgency of the corona crisis, "bids and bans have become a matter of course. When urgent action is necessary, no one leaves the solution of the problem to the 'market': the government and the public sector have to act. Admittedly, under democratic and transparent conditions"[7]. Stringent and encompassing governmental action could hence act as a lever in transitions to more resilient and sustainable food systems. Democratic and accountable governments, communicating in a factual, transparent and timely way, contribute to bring about self-motivated citizens, who interiorise these facts and thus tend to act more responsibly. Yet, to achieve such a level of compliance and cooperation, people need to trust science, trust public authorities and trust the media, who should provide well-sourced coverage, but also 'solutions journalism'.

Multi-level and multi-stakeholder shared governance at local, regional, national and EU level

In such contexts, conditions are optimal for a deliberate shift towards an effective multi-level governance of food systems. Social movements and civil society can

blossom and experiment creatively with innovations. As success gradually sets in, such emerging local food initiatives move away from the margins and they can engage with formal legislative processes at national levels and even the EU. Supporting experimentation in all of its diverse forms, through complementary actions at EU, national and local levels, would be a priority of a Common Food Policy. Such an overarching and integrated EU-wide framework for a comprehensive, ethical and sustainable food policy would be an ideal case, restoring "democracy and accountability to food systems"[8]. The setting up of food policies by EU Member States complements this approach, particularly if they support "local, multi-actor, territorial-scale innovation"[9].

Among these tools are Food Policy Councils, recognised as innovative and efficient tools for multi-scale food policy and governance. In Luxembourg, the worldwide first Food Policy Council at the *national* level is in the process of being founded (see Reckinger & Schneider in this issue). Luxembourg's multi-stakeholder platform is going to be coordinated to allow a cooperation of all types of actors forming Luxembourg's food system – from the three sectors policy and administration; research and civil society; production, transformation, gastronomy and trade. This cooperation will be an independent one among equal partners, striving to shape Luxembourg's food system in a more sustainable way, according to regional, fair and ecological criteria, in the domains of food policy, food sovereignty and food democracy.

The bottom line

An optimally sustainable and resourceful food system is socially just, ecologically regenerative, economically localised, and it engages a wide range of people across food systems. It provides food security with high-quality, ethical and sustainable foodstuffs for its entire population in a larger regional (not rigidly national) context, by shortening supply chains in a regionalised and cooperative way that is economically viable for all professionals involved, also the small ones.

Its relative food sovereignty is based increasingly on local diversification and innovations – be they in production, transformation, retail or public procurement for canteen food, but also in political governance. This involves many collective learning processes.

Practices of diversified agroecological farming are those that are best adapted to this goal of resourceful food and farming systems with low vulnerabilities, as are cooperative (even transregional) food hubs, initiatives for direct marketing among producers and individual consumers, but also political decisions to "ensure the purchasing of local agroecologically-produced/organic foods"[10]. These new

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forms of cooperation and knowledge creation explicitly aim at reducing socially and ecologically exploitative practices. National as well as EU policies should incentivise alternative and civic food networks. At various levels, Food Policy Councils can collectively initiate innovations, test them with their various partners and communicate them more widely.

Of course, Luxembourg with its small size cannot alone achieve the considerable societal challenges involved in the shifting of its food system, embedded in EU and global contingencies. But *because* of its small size and its unique multicultural population, it can provide a favourable site for experimentation with sustainable innovations at the local or transregional level. It can namely build a multi-stakeholder-led effective food policy. Luxembourg will then be equipped to use its considerable political and economic international weight to push such best practices forward. ◆

1 Michel Pimbert (ed.), *Food Sovereignty, Agroecology, and Biocultural Diversity: Constructing and Contesting Knowledge*. London and New York, Routledge, 2018.

2 http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/CS2_web.pdf (all internet pages referred to in this article were last accessed on 29 June 2020).

3 http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/UniformityToDiversity_FULL.pdf, p. 3.

4 Ibid., p. 2.

5 Rachel Reckinger/Diane Kapgen/Maria-Helena Korjonen, "Political Food Communication. Contrasting Food Governance Claims via Labelling Schemes and priorities of private and professional consumers", in: Jasmin Godeman, Tina Bartlemeß (eds), *Handbuch Ernährungskommunikation. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven im Kontext von Nachhaltigkeit,* Springer, Germany, in press.

6 Rachel Reckinger/Faustine Régnier, "Public Health Campaigns in Europe: Reception and Implementation of Nutritional Recommendations in France and Luxembourg", in: *Appetite* 2017, 112, p. 249-259; Rachel Reckinger, "Sustainable Everyday Eating Practices from the Perspective of Spatial Identifications", in: Rachel Reckinger/Christian Wille/Sonja Kmec/Markus Hesse (eds), *Spaces and Identities in Border Regions. Politics – Media – Subjects,* Bielefeld, transcript, 2016, p. 252-266.

7 https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000115991988/klimapolitik-nach-corona

8 http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/CFP_FullReport.pdf, p. 7.

9 Ibid., p. 80

10 Ibid., p. 92