



## Langenburg Forum 2013

Towards sustainable regional food systems

### **SPEECH**

**Remarks by The Prince of Wales at the Langenburg Forum on Regional Food Security,  
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"Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren, zuerst möchte ich mich gerne sehr herzlich Fürst Philipp, Prinzessin Xenia und Joschka Fischer für ihre enormen Anstrengungen bei der Organisation dieses Forums danken. Ich sage nur sehr ungern, dass es über 50 Jahre her ist, dass ich das letzte Mal hier war und fast 50 Jahre, dass meine Eltern dieses wunderschöne Schloss 1965 besuchten. Das war zwei Jahre nach einem verheerenden Brand, der das Haus fast vollständig entkernte. Es ist daher eine besondere Freude zu sehen, wie prachtvoll mein verstorbener Vetter Kraft es wieder aufgebaut hat.


Ladies and Gentlemen, if I may say so, this is a very important conference. I am sure what you have heard so far about the problems we face and the obstacles to tackling them has given you a clear context in which to be able to consider what comes next this afternoon.

The aim here is to think through how we might create a much more local model of food production and distribution. But also, how that might fit with producing healthy food using far more sustainable methods and how we might do all of this without damaging business. Indeed, how this could improve business.

As you have heard, the urgency for this comes from the fact that there is not sufficient resilience in the system as it currently stands. It may appear that things are well. Big global corporations may appear to be prospering out of operating on a global monocultural scale but, as I hope you have seen, if you drill down into what is actually happening, things are not so healthy. Our present approach is rapidly mining resilience out of our food system and threatening to leave it ever more vulnerable to the various external shocks that are becoming more varied, extreme and frequent.

The drive to make food cheaper for consumers and to earn companies bigger profits is sucking real value out of the food production system - value that is critical to its sustainability. I am talking here about obvious things like the vitality of the soil and local eco-systems, the quality and availability of fresh water and so on, but also about less obvious things, like local employment and people's health. It is, as I fear you know only too well, a complex business.

The aggressive search for cheaper food has been described as a "drive to the bottom", which I am afraid is taking the farmers with it. They are being driven into the ground by the prices they are forced to expect for their produce and this has led to some very worrying short cuts. The recent horsemeat scandals are surely just one example, revealing a disturbing situation where even the biggest retailers seem not to know where their supplies are coming from. And it has also led to a very destructive effect on farming. We are losing farmers fast. Young people do not want to go into such



an unrewarding profession. In the U.K., I have been warning of this for some time and recently set up apprenticeship schemes to try to alleviate the problem; but the fact remains that at the moment the average age of British farmers is fifty-eight, and rising.


We also have to consider the problems we expose ourselves to when we ship vast quantities of commodities half way round the world. These long distance supply chains are apt to snap when they are subjected to sudden shocks. Unexpected weather events, hikes in fuel prices, trade disputes and disease; all sorts of unpredictable events threaten to interrupt supplies. And such is the way we now arrange things that most of us, even if we do not realize it, have an umbilical dependency upon this globalized system which is surely a dangerously vulnerable position to be in.

And finally there are the social and economic problems that derive from this pressure to produce cheap food. It is heartening, I must say, to be in this part of Germany where there is the highest density of organic farms in Europe. I've just visited a marvellous example with Herr Buhler but throughout the continent the way we produce most of our food seems dependent more on chemicals and industrial processing than it does on farmers - and, for that matter, on our ability to cook!

In the U.K., as elsewhere - but particularly I think in the U.S. - the consequences of this are ever more apparent in the deteriorating state of our public health. We all know that Type 2 Diabetes and other obesity-related conditions are rapidly on the increase. The public bill for dealing with these is already massive and I am told it could become completely unaffordable if we do not see a shift in emphasis. And, of course, it will be cities that carry the heaviest part of that burden. It is a peculiar trend...

Am I alone, ladies and gentlemen, in wondering how it is that those who are farming according to organic, or agro-ecological principles - in other words, sustainably, for the long-term, by operating in a way that reduces pollution and contamination of the natural environment to a minimum and maximizes the health of soil, biodiverse ecosystems and humanity - are then penalized? They find that their produce is considered too expensive and too "niche market" to be available to everyone. How is it, then, that systems of farming which do precisely the opposite - with increasingly dire and damaging effects on both the terrestrial and marine environments, not to mention long-term human health - are able to sell their products in mass markets at prices that in no way reflect the immense and damaging cost to the environment and human health? A cost that then has to be paid for over and over again elsewhere - chiefly, in all probability, by our unfortunate children and grandchildren, whose welfare I happen to care about. Surely this is a truly perverse situation which, you would have thought, could be turned on its head to make genuinely sustainably-produced food accessible to everyone, and the polluter to pay the real costs for the side effects of industrialized food? It is to be wondered at how this state of affairs persists - and yet to suggest standing it on its head and transforming the situation is to invite the predictable chorus of vitriolic accusations that you are anti-science, anti-progress, out of touch with commercial pressures and not living in the "real world."

So, as I hope you can see, the success of a globalized system is being subsidized by many complex, long-term problems that contribute to a potentially toxic mix, making the food it produces not cheap at all. In fact, it is very expensive. The only reason it appears cheap in the shops is because the costs either fall somewhere else, or they are being stored up for the future when, as I have said, they will be met by our children and grandchildren. You only have to look at what is happening to the Baltic Sea to see the sort of legacy I am talking about. And as I heard from many people in Sweden last year, a delicate ecosystem is being suffocated by what is called "eutrophication" - an entirely Man-made problem, caused by excessive amounts of nutrients leeching into the water from farming and other industrial processes. The price of apparently cheap food is costing nothing less than the Earth!



This is why we have to recalibrate and re-gear the system. Food needs to be produced in a more sustainable and eco-friendly manner and how it is then processed and distributed needs to happen at a much more appropriate level. In short, our food systems need to have better networks which are less globally dependent and more locally inter-connected. Moving in that direction could solve lots of problems. Many of the arguments about "feeding the world" conveniently ignore the fact that in both the developed and developing worlds 40% of all food produced is then wasted. It is either thrown away or it ends up rotting through lack of storage or well-managed local distribution.

There are plenty of very sophisticated means of enabling city regions to become the engines of significant change. I have seen many inspiring examples here in Germany which, if I may say so, is leading the debate on many of these issues. As you will discover in the next session, there are also some very interesting new ways of thinking and operating - seeds of change that could put resilience back into the system. They could also bring farming back from the brink of a worrying collapse and offer the retail sector a profitable future.

Some of these approaches follow the idea that came from Toronto and Copenhagen - of prioritizing procurement in the immediate hinterland of a town or city. This is already delivering benefits for farmers, consumers and for public organizations such as hospitals and schools. And in that vein, I understand this meeting today might lead to the consideration of a regional food initiative, here in Baden Wurttemberg, that would, if I may say so, be wonderful as these sorts of examples are invaluable. They demonstrate that stakeholders are not powerless; they do have the ability to support more resilient and integrated food systems if they are prepared to act with a common purpose.

One of the presentations in a moment explores how we might capitalize on the sort of information technology that underpins social media websites these days. From what I understand and I am certainly not an expert, there is every chance this technology could transform the way food networks operate, so it would, perhaps, be wise to take such ideas seriously.

I realize only too clearly that there is no one "magic bullet" solution to establishing a resilient and sustainable food system. Local food production is not the panacea. But we do need to redress the balance perhaps through carefully structured incentives and disincentives if we are to evolve food systems and food businesses so that people have what they most want, and Nature's systems have what they most need to keep us all going, now and in the future.

In this regard we should perhaps pay particular attention to a recent agreement between the United Nations food and agriculture organisation and the international Slow Food movement. It is hugely encouraging, I think, and I would have thought also provides a most useful model to build on.

So Ladies and Gentleman I can only wish you well in your deliberations for the rest of the afternoon. Having joined you here today I will allow myself the hope that the ideas you are discussing at this forum will become the much needed practical behaviour of tomorrow. "

~ ENDS ~

Miss Eva Omaghomi, Assistant Press Secretary to Their Royal Highnesses The Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall

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