

European Soya Initiatives Workshop, 20 November 2018

MODERATOR'S SUMMARY - Duncan Brack

The meeting saw a difference of opinion, and a certain amount of tension, about what the supply chain should be aiming for: legally produced soya only, or for a more ambitious aim: sustainable soya or deforestation-free soya. There seems to be a difference in understanding and appreciation, perhaps, of one another's positions. We are near the beginning of this kind of discussion, and there is clearly scope for further dialogue about the perceptions of the situation and the challenges faced on both the supply side and the demand side face. It is the reality, though, that European consumers – final consumers, businesses and governments – are aiming to achieve more than just legally produced soya.

There is a discussion to be had about the definitions of sustainable soya and deforestation-free soya, though legality is part of those terms – an essential first step to achieving sustainability or deforestation-free soya. So the concepts are not completely different from each other. There was a general feeling that deforestation-free soya is a more pressing priority than sustainable soya, for two reasons. One is the urgency of the climate challenge and the problems of greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation. The second is because deforestation cannot be reversed; once primary forest is gone, it cannot be recreated; it can only be replaced with plantations, or some sort of secondary forest. This is a contrast with other aspects of sustainability, like labour standards, for example, which it is possible to provide for later on if they are not addressed properly in the first place.

It is also the case that different initiatives within Europe, whether national or company initiatives or certification schemes, all have different targets and different requirements, though they are heading generally in the same direction. It would therefore be very helpful for both the demand side and the supply side if there was some process to bring these discussions into greater alignment, with the aim of developing more common requirements in the supply chain, which are easier for suppliers to meet.

There was a strong feeling that on the European side there should be a role for the EU, representing all 28 member states – not just to bring them into alignment, but to increase the levels of ambition over time. There might be scope for a formal process, and perhaps a central point of expertise to gather data and share information. Perhaps at this stage it is not necessary to be precise about the exact definition of what is aimed for. Experience from some national discussions show that it can be quite difficult to agree on everything, such as a comprehensive definition of sustainability, but there probably are individual steps that could be taken that everyone could agree on – such as avoiding conversion from primary forest. These kind of discussions are essential, not just at the EU end but among stakeholders on the ground – the people who are involved in producing the soya; for example, the stakeholders involved in the Cerrado Working Group, including farmers, processors, civil society and others. There is also room, perhaps, for a more formal dialogue between the EU, and member-state governments, and producer-country governments, perhaps even in the long-term aiming at perhaps some kind of formal agreement.

There is also clearly a need to deliver support to soya producers, for example paying farmers for going beyond legality to supply what we mean by sustainable or deforestation-free soya. In general most people

in the meeting thought it right for consumers in the supply chain to meet these extra costs, but we did not succeed in identifying exactly how this could be done, what mechanism would be involved. Here again there is a clear role for discussion amongst all the stakeholders.

We also need to remember that the EU is only part of the world demand for soya; other major consuming countries, particularly China, need to be engaged in these discussions as well. There was extensive agreement on the need for more collaboration and dialogue, more cooperation between national initiatives at the European end, between EU member states and EU-based companies and traders and producer countries. There was a broad consensus in favour of sharing data and developing better data collection systems and sharing information, for example about common barriers needing to be overcome. There is a role for these kind of meetings, and perhaps larger meetings, aiming not just to give stakeholders a chance of tell each other what they're doing, but building a community of interest – people working towards the same aim, both at the EU level and at the producer level. Getting to know each other, and understanding each other's perspectives and commitments, is the best way to make progress.