

Preserving Ecosystem Services via Sustainable Agro-food Chains

George Baourakis¹ and Konstadinos Mattas²

¹ CIHEAM-MAICh and Nyenrode Business Universiteit, The Netherlands

² Department of Agricultural Economics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece
baouraki@maich.gr; mattas@auth.gr

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Editorial

Today, agro-food chains constitute a focal point of critique from multiple perspectives – economic, environmental and societal – for their powerful yet quiescent role in promoting a secure path towards sustainable development. Effective and sustainable food systems accompanied by responsible use of ecosystem resources/services and societal concern can successfully meet current and future challenges. The need for sustainability, from both the demand and the production point of view, is situated at the core of policy objectives for the development of agro-food chains. In this context, the 164th EAAE Seminar organized in Chania, Greece, 5-7 September 2018, covered the topic “Preserving Ecosystem Services via Sustainable Agro-food Chains”, focusing on the necessity for sustainable food chains in a viable ecosystem analyzing their wide spectrum of interlinkages.

From an agricultural policy point of view, one of the key questions that concerns policy makers, related to the long-term planning of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), is the form of agriculture that farmers intend to follow in the future and their inclination towards more sustainable types of agriculture. Conventional agriculture, which has been the predominant agricultural system in the past decades, was considered the main driver for several environmental challenges, such as surface and groundwater pollution, organic matter decline, soil erosion and exploitation of scarce water resources. In response to the aforementioned issues, alternative production systems have been proposed. Those alternatives, which constitute the main trend of modern agriculture, employ innovative cultivation techniques aiming at the sustainable management of agricultural resources. Surveying a sample of Greek producers, Papadopoulos et al. (2019) conclude that the adoption of alternative agricultural production methods will be fostered not exclusively by income support measures of the Common Agricultural Policy but by concrete actions that will focus on training and informing producers about CAP and the practice of innovative sustainable methods.

Beyond policy measures that foster the adoption of sustainable food systems, trade can foster qualitative characteristics of agro-food production, such as productivity. In Staboulis et al. (2019), it is evident that trade costs play a crucial role in determining the level of trade that occurs between countries. Trade costs are also relevant to productivity at sectoral and country levels as well. The study, utilizing panel data across the 34 OECD member countries, tries to assess and estimate the impact of trade costs on agricultural sector productivity for the 1995–2014 period. It concludes that there is strong evidence that when the agricultural sector faces lower trade costs, it tends to be more productive and there is some evidence that it experiences higher productivity growth too.

The focus on innovative methods is not limited only to the supply side but it is evident on the side of the consumers. Ventura et al. (2019) highlight that food waste can be considered an alternative resource for animal feed in specific conditions.

The study analyzes the strategy to prevent food losses by turning waste into animal feed by applying a “from food to feed” approach, building in that way a sustainable food system.

A new paradigm of production is also promoted through the work of Campos (2019) that explores the perspectives of new consumption and production paradigms of food compatible with the diversity of local ecosystems and the cultural systems that consider the economic, environmental and socio-cultural dimensions toward sustainability. The paper is focused on the concept of the Mediterranean diet as an example of a sustainable diet that promotes local production and consumption, as well as encouraging sustainable agriculture and safeguarding landscapes with lower environmental impact. In that way, a healthier diet and lifestyle is promoted through sustainable production and consumption. Moreover from the consumer point of view, Theodoridou et al.(2019) is focusing on identifying consumers’ spending habits and investigate consumers’ food purchasing behavior in adverse economic conditions. The study is focused on investigating the factors that affect consumers and their shopping attitudes in a turbulent economic period in Greece (2016) utilizing data from an intercept survey conducted in a random selected sample of 553 consumers. From the presented analysis it is evident that the level of income is affecting food consumption significantly while other important factors are the size of household. The study concludes that higher quality of food products is followed with higher prices and therefore not a favorable choice for the consumers who act within a limited available budget for food consumption.