

ID - Now the Cow. Debating knowledge for dairy-farming

Theme: Agroecology
Moderator: Suzanna van der Meer (OtherWise)
Speakers: Katrien van 't Hooft (Dutch Farm Experience), Kees van Veluw (Wageningen UR, Louis Bolk Institute), Irene van de Sar (Dutch Dairymen Board), Frens Schuring (Warmonderhof), Clemens Driessen (Wageningen UR)

Report

What kind of knowledge and innovations should be shared and developed for sustainable dairy farming? most of all be practical and tailor made. Also a lot of opportunities where seen in sharing and shaping hybrid innovations by combining ideas from different practices, different knowledge traditions and even different parts of the world. Even in striving for naturalness, high-tech innovations might find a place. Like the mobile milking robot that Clemens Driessen helped to developed with a group of farmers, which could milk cows in a nature reserve in the future. Moreover, scientists should visit farms and locally see specific problems, to set up a useful research agenda: “You just need to be humble, go there, see what is happening and gather people who have specific knowledge and who can support somehow that. Because we do not know more than the farmers, we know less than them (Brazilian PhD candidate)” Frens Schuring thinks: “Research questions should be future-oriented initiatives which start from an impulse that comes to a person if he opens his mind, heart and will for what the future is calling him to do. Our rationality is always influenced by the past and is therefore not the right starting point.”

Initiatives of farmers and their practical problems and home-made solutions should lead researchers to the right research questions. Several people mentioned not to expect the government supporting or enabling transition to sustainable approaches for dairy-farming. Especially not the current government. The influence of the primary sector should be more evenly spread, because now mainly the large-scale producers and industry influence the agenda setting and policy-making. Next to farmers, the consumers and civil society organizations should be in the circle of power around the dairy sector. Another bottleneck are banks that only invest if a farm increases production quantities, they do not understand or support quality improvement. Possibilities are seen in learning from/with, other farmers and veterinarians from other countries. Katrien van 't Hooft facilitates this for example by cooperatively working on the shared goal of reducing anti-biotic use.

There was a shared pessimism about the role of Wageningen UR for research. Because of the reductionist approach, reducing cows to production-units, striving for up-scaling and reducing costs. WUR is serving the few big export-oriented dairy-producers. The research that is relevant for them is really different from what the average dairy-farmers in the Netherlands now needs. Wageningen UR is incorrectly legitimizing their approach by referring to the moral “we need to feed the world”.

Kees van Veluw was also sceptical about the role of Wageningen UR in research, however he was more optimistic about education: “I can teach what I want. That is true, so in that sense, Wageningen can play a role. But completely participatory, with farmers, and forget about that reductionist approach. Because farmers, you (pointing at Irene) you don't have a reductionist approach, you are forced to have it but it's not in your heart.” Another role proposed for the university and research center is to bring farmers from different places together who have a very different approach and facilitate them to exchanging their ideas and knowledge. This could also provide input for further research.

Outcomes

1. Universities should widen their research and education and start from the field: what would farmers like? What are farmers already developing? Set research agenda which support that instead of Wageningen UR supporting mainstream, dominant discourse.

2. Connect consumers and producers who see added value in alternative aspects or manners of dairy farming.
3. Stop trying to go with or against the dominant discourse of increasing milk production in quantity. Try to be profitable by offering quality through organic milk, farm experience or connection with the consumer.