“Allemaal Lokaal” (*Everyone Local*) at Bio-Dynamic farm Ruimzicht in Halle

Every year, 8 million tons of soy is shipped to the Netherlands in order to feed our animals. Europe isn’t able to produce enough proteins to feed its livestock, hence we are importing soy from the other side of the world. In order to raise awareness about soy production and the possibility to change this mode of production, Milieudefensie organized the day “Allemaal Lokaal” (*Everyone Local*) together with farmers around the Netherlands. An international group of 20 students and PhDs from Wageningen University joined Boerengroep and RUW to the east of the Netherlands to see some ‘soy-free’ farming in practice. By ELSKE HAGERAATS. Wageningen, 25th June 2016

At this moment, around 20% of the Amazonian forest has been taken down and the land has been converted into agricultural land. One could argue this deforestation is needed to feed the world, but you should think again. **First**, in many cases, small family farmers and indigenous peoples were living on this land that was now taken by transnational companies and big land owners (often with the support of corrupted governments) in order to grow ‘cash crops’ like soy. The big land owners pay ‘paramilitary groups’, violently forcing the family farmers and indigenous peoples of their land.

Besides the ongoing violence and human rights violations, massive amounts of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides are sprayed over the monocultures, resulting in soil degradation and health problems of the local people. **Second**, this agricultural land is not used for ‘food crops’ (which could feed the local people), but for ‘cash crops’ like soy, meant for the export. The soy shipped to Europe, so that we can feed our animals. Besides the deforestation, violence and decline of biodiversity and risk to food sovereignty, many people are also concerned about soy, since it is genetically modified (GMO) and sprayed with synthetic chemicals like glyphosate – a highly contested chemical of which many scientists and organizations want it banned in Europe due to severe health risks.

To conclude, many people in Europe and

around the world want this to stop, but how can we change this agricultural mode of production? Farmer Gerjo koskamp from BioDynamic farm Ruimzicht in Halle (Netherlands) invited us to his farm to show us the living proof that there is a way of farming which is good for the farmers here in the Netherlands, for the farmers in Latin America, for the health of the consumer, the soil and the animals: simply feeding the cows with locally produced food. "*Everyone local!"*

The farm Ruimzicht, Halle
Gerjo decided he wanted to become farmer, just like his parents. In 1969, he took over the Ruimzicht farm in Halle (Netherlands), including 44 hectares of land. Yet he noticed the farming method "didn't feel good." Therefore, Gerjo decided to leave out the synthetic fertilizers and go organic in 1989. It was a huge step forward, but still he felt that more things could be improved. "Why not leave the horns on the cows in the natural way?" The horns of a cow contain a lot of minerals, which are extracted from it and given – via the blood – to the calf just before it gets born. But the horns also become warm when the cow is ruminating – most probably it has some function. In 2002, he decided to move on to **bio-dynamic farming**: cows keep the horns, the calfs get milk from the mother for at least 3 months (so no milk powder), the herd should always have the opportunity to go outside in the pasture, the whole year round and the farmer should work towards a **closed nutrient cycle** as much as possible. Currently he has a wonderful biodynamic farm with a herd of 50 cows of all ages: a 'family herd' with 4 generations of cows. They are a mix of MRY, Holstein Frisian and Fleckvieh – kept for milk and meat ('double purpose cow'). The milk goes to Aurora, a small factory that turns the milk into delicious cheese which is partly sold at Gerjo's farm shop.

BioDynamic farming
Bio Dynamic farming sees the farm as a living organism. Ideally it should be able to function on its own, which also means a **closed nutrient cycle**. In reality this is often very challenging, so BioDynamic farmers aim for a nutrient cycle as local as possible. Two hectares of the farm are rented by gardener Fred Bijleveld, who uses the manure from the cows on his field to produce bio dynamic vegetables. Gerjo gets the food for the cows from local farmers within 150 kilometers. They provide **clover and grains**, like barley, rye, oat, wheat and Lucerne (alfalfa). In return, he provides cow manure for the arable fields. The grains are turned into pallets, which the farmer feeds to his cows. The cows eat about 3-4 kg. of these pallets a day, and combined with the grasses and herbs from the pasture, this is enough to produce 6.000 liters of milk a year.

There is no soy used at all. Some people are warning we shouldn't feed soy to animals: it contains a very high protein concentration, which results in stress hormones that end up in the milk as well. Gerjo: "*I don't want all that transport of fodder around the world. It's inefficient and it demands the use of lots of fossil fuel. Besides the use of fossil fuels, I also want to empower the local economy and don't do business with multinationals. When I found out some years ago that there was soy from china in the food for my cows, I told the supplier that we want local food."*

The transition
In 2015, 3 bio dynamic farmers from Aurora started feeding cows with 100% local food. But they are doing much more to decrease the footprint: working on their own energy production. Gerjo: "*We started to extract oil from our own grown rapeseed, which we used as fuel for our tractor and shovel. Besides, we have solar panels so that our electricity is 100% local as well. Even the shovel has solar panels!"*

Biodiversity and the soil
Gerjo pays a lot of attention to the **biodiversity** and the health of the soil life. "*I love biodiversity, because the cows are much more healthy now. They don't need extra minerals or vitamins, because the herbs and also the trees in the pasture provide enough minerals for them, like potassium, calcium, phosphate and magnesium*." These minerals are of vital importance to the cows health.

Gerjo takes good care of the **soil**. He is one of the farmers from the movie 'BodemBoeren' (*Soil Farmers*), explaining the importance of a healthy soil. The soil life doesn't just need N, P, K (chemical fertilizer), but also a wide variety of minerals and nutrients. Gerjo proudly explains us that you can find around 100 worms per m^2 in his pasture. One of the ways how Gerjo worked towards a healthier soil is to add **effective microorganisms** in the manure which is then divided over the land. Also, he doesn't want to use antibiotics – this ends up in the soil via the manure, killing bacteria that are an important part of soil life. Therefore he prefers to use **herbs** instead. The pasture contains more than 100 species of herbs and grasses. Cows can find herbs themselves in the pasture, and in addition Gerjo also has 60-80 bottles with herb concentrates to treat the animals, partly made himself. Besides a variety of herbs and grasses, the cows can also eat willow **trees**, which are planted at the edge of the pasture. Trees can absorb minerals from the deeper layers in the soil, and bring it up to the surface.

The **pasture is managed** in a special way. When the grass is too high, Gerjo works with electric wires to have the cows graze one hectare of the pasture and then move on to the next part of pasture. In this way he makes sure that the grass is grazed very short and then has enough time to recover.

Also the **stable** for the cows is special: a 'heuvelstal', which could be freely translated to a 'hill stable'. Gerjo explains the stable is always open, so that the cows can go in and out whenever they want to. He places straw *in the middle* of the stable

only. Cows then have to walk to this part, pushing the liquid manure down and mixing it with oxygen. It is then left to decompose for ½ – ¾ year and used on the land again.

Keeping the calfs with the mother
In order to produce milk, a cow needs to give birth to a calf. Naturally, this takes place in spring. Because we also want to drink milk in winter, cows get artificially inseminated, so they can also give birth to a calf in winter (and give milk in that time of year) as well. After the calf is born, it has to be separated from the cow for two reasons: first, because it drinks the milk, that the consumer wants to drink. Second, because many people argue that leaving the calf with the cow, increases the bond between mother and child and so it is even more difficult and traumatizing for the calf and mother to separate them later on.
Gerjo discovered a wonderful method where the calf can stay with the mother: separating them *gradually.* After separation, they can still see each other, and gradually the go their own way.
One aspect that Gerjo noticed with his calfs is that they do not only eat grass, the first days out on the pasture, but they also stick their nose into the soil. "*Probably they obtain minerals and bacteria like this as well.*"

Conclusions
Soy production is related to deforestation, soil erosion, violence against local family farmers and indigenous peoples, land grabbing and the massive use of synthetic chemicals. It threatens food sovereignty by replacing food crops (beans, rice, grains, vegetables) by cash crops, like soy – heavily treated with chemicals like glyphosate from Monsanto.

Eating is an agricultural act. We cannot wait for (corrupted) governments to take action. The faith of the people and the earth lies in *our* hands. Think global, act local: support local, sustainable food production for worldwide solidarity and food sovereignty. A fair price for a healthy, locally produced product. Farmers, gardeners and consumers: join the movement allemaal lokaal!

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