

Angels of the soil

NEWSLETTER n. 61

"Infinite economic growth in a finite world is a myth"

(Felwine Sarr - Economist)

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<https://angelidelsuolo.wordpress.com/2019/07/16/newsletter-n-61>



A. EXPERIENCES: *Xylella Fastidiosa*: does it have a positive side?

Why are we talking about *Xylella Fastidiosa*? Because it seems to us to be an emblematic example of how our society develops: first we destroy the ecosystem, then we home in on a single factor as though it was the only pathological element.

Let's look at a parallel: antibiotics have become inadequate or even ineffective combating diseases that were once regarded as easily treatable. A simple cold can nowadays lead to very severe health problems. The blame is placed on the tolerance developed by the bacteria and their ability to change themselves, but in reality it is simply the result of the way we have misused them. Just think of the antibiotics that we consume daily when we eat meat from livestock raised in places where they are used indiscriminately.

Xylella has always existed, and there are dozens of different types that live on different types of plants, from peaches to cherries to plums. *Fastidiosa* was officially "discovered" in 1987 when it became a serious problem due to its ability to penetrate olive trees and cause them to scorch, wilt and eventually die. It should be stressed that XF can attack other plants including vines and citruses. It is a bacteria that compromises the pathways by which sap moves through the plant, transporting water and mineral salts throughout the plant's system. Can science find a solution to this problem?

Science is never "neutral": frequently it responds to the needs of those who hold political and/or economic power. Leonardo da Vinci moved from Florence to Milan and from there to France, where he found funding and support for his projects, especially those with military applications. In theory, scientists and researchers should be able to access funds and take into account existing social, environmental, economic and cultural conditions. Unfortunately that does not happen; instead the results of research that shows environmental degradation (air, water, soil, biodiversity, etc) are often ignored.

"Monodirectional" research on *Xylella Fastidiosa* has concentrated on the bacteria, regarding it as extremely dangerous. Furthermore, since it has proved impossible to reach a state of scientific certainty about its spread, in order to control it people have resorted to a single precautionary method, that of destroying all the trees, whether they are diseased or not.

It's as though when winter comes, bringing with it the risk of the spread of Spanish or Asian flu, we were to decide to kill all the patients and their families. This is not a joke: it has happened both in the past and more recently.

So let's try looking at the problem from a different perspective: the relationship between plants and the soil. In order to understand this relationship, we suggest watching the Plant Health Cure video "Soil is a living organism".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ugaL6wsXME> In just a few minutes we come to understand that life runs through the soil around the roots of trees and plants and that only thanks to their interaction with bacteria and fungi do they obtain the vital sap that allows them to live and flourish. But what happens if we destroy this life around the roots? The video shows this very well. Mechanical digging, and the use of pesticides, weedkillers and

chemical fertilisers alter and impede the natural biological cycle. They destroy fungi and bacteria, opening the way to diseases and pandemics.

That this applies also to Xylella and olive trees can be found in studies by a number of researchers whose work is disregarded by the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA). This point is stressed by Vandana Shiva in a video addressed to the people of Puglia where the digging up of olive trees, some of them hundreds of years old, has created an intolerable situation for farmers and locals. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHEv2NGx3GY>

The video is part of a documentary, still in production, about the Xylella Fastidiosa issue. The documentary is being produced by *Bosco di Ogigia*

<https://angelidelsuolo.wordpress.com/2018/08/16/il-bosco-di-ogigia-comunicare-partendo-dalla-terra-2/> and financed through crowdfunding. On 29 May in Rome the creators presented an evening of debate with the provocative title "*Xylella Favolosa, oltre il batterio*" (XF beyond the bacteria). <https://www.facebook.com/events/328723437801479/>

B. NEWS FROM THE SIP FORUM : The latest report from the IPBES

IPBES is an intergovernmental organization set up in 2012 in order to provide politicians all over the world with assessments of the state of biodiversity and ecosystems, based on scientific data. We wrote about the IPBES in a previous newsletter.

<https://angelidelsuolo.wordpress.com/2018/05/16/assessment-of-biodiversity-and-ecosystem-services-for-europe-and-central-asia/>

Their reports on biodiversity and ecosystems are well-known and widely read. The latest *Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services* was published on 6 May 2019 <https://www.ipbes.net/global-assessment-biodiversity-ecosystem-services>. Its contents are alarming: more than one million species of animals and plants have become extinct or are in danger of extinction thanks to human activity. No longer can we pretend we don't know. We have wasted the time we had and now we have to try to limit the damage. We can start by promoting farming techniques that respect the soil and its ecosystem.

<http://www.salviamoilpaesaggio.it/blog/2019/05/lo-stato-di-salute-degli-ecosistemi-e-la-preoccupazione-degli-europei-per-la-perdita-di-biodiversita/>

- SIP Forum: One small step ... on our journey!

In July 1969 Apollo 11 took the first men to the moon. The first words spoken on the lunar surface by Neil Armstrong were "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind". Of course we are exaggerating for effect when we compare ourselves to the Apollo 11 mission, but we can say that the SIP Forum has also taken a small "step" towards fulfilling its aims for the European dimension of the soil. Our three questions sent to Italian candidates for the European Parliament received 19 replies. We regard them as the "nucleus" of a broader action whose direction is very clear:

- a) firm up the synergy between the 19 candidates who showed openness towards the subject of the soil in Europe and ensure that communication on this matter circulates among them and among others who show a similar awareness;
- b) encourage the creation in other EU member states of similar "political" nuclei that are sensitized to the issue;

- c) enable connections between these nuclei and the development of a common plan;
- d) to push the need for an EU directive for soil protection within the EU's institutions.

If the path is clear, following it is dependent on the will of those who participate. This might seem at first sight a utopian vision. However, never before this moment have the concrete conditions for carrying it out existed: the green wave among young people, the arrival in the European Parliament of a large group of MEPs who are engaged with environmental questions; the availability of means of communication and awareness raising (including this newsletter!); reports from international organizations such as FAO, IPBES, EEA, UNEP, etc; willingness on the part of the media to pay attention (see for example the dossier of *Politico* which came out a few weeks before the elections <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-forgotten-environmental-crisis-soil/>). Let's keep in mind the Latin saying that "a single spark can start a fire" and move along our path together with those who have shown their willingness. We may fail, perhaps, but we will definitely be glad we tried!

<http://www.salviamoilpaesaggio.it/blog/2019/05/suolo-e-paesaggio-in-europa-ancora-tutto-da-costruire/>

- The European Dimension: iPES FOOD

Established in 2015, the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (iPES-Food) works to shape debates on food system reform through policy-oriented research and direct engagement with policy processes around the world. The panel brings together environmental scientists, development economists, nutritionists, agronomists, and sociologists, as well as experienced practitioners from civil society and social movements. iPES-Food bases its work on a holistic, sustainability, political economy, democratic approach. Their analyses are fully independent and without financial or organizational ties to any corporations, governments or intergovernmental agencies. iPES-Food is currently funded by the Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation, the Open Societies Foundation, and the Fondation Charles Leopold Mayer pour le Progrès de l'Homme.

"*Towards a Common Food Policy for the European Union*" is the title of the report published by iPES-Food at the end of 2018. It is a synthesis of ideas on how the CAP should operate in order to attain sustainable food systems. Originally written in English, there are reduced versions in five other languages including Italian.

Strengths

- EU food and farming systems require a fundamental change of direction in light of the severe, interconnected, and systemic challenges they face.
- The resource base for EU agriculture is being critically threatened by land degradation, soil erosion, and water contamination and over-extraction, as a result of industrial agriculture and the loss of farmland to urban/industrial development.
- Access to land for sustainable food production is therefore crucial, but is being undermined by biofuel incentives, urban sprawl, speculative land acquisitions, the failure to protect soils, and a farm subsidy model that drives up land prices.
- The EU should create an EU Land Observatory to monitor land markets, promote rights of first refusal for young agroecological farmers, allocate CAP payments based

on a range of criteria (not just farm size), and move towards comprehensive protection of natural resources under a Land and Soil Directive.

This report should be considered the fount and origin of true doctrine for European agricultural policy.

http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/CFP_FullReport.pdf

C. NEWS ON THE SOIL AND EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS: Changing the CAP

On 2 May the European Commission ended the public consultation on the proposals for the Common Agricultural Policy over the next few years. The idea of the CAP was there at the start of the European Community, in order to put into practice the aims set out in the Treaty of Rome (1957). The CAP forms part of the current EU Treaty, with article 39 setting out its aims:

- (a) *to increase agricultural productivity by promoting technical progress and by ensuring the rational development of agricultural production and the optimum utilisation of the factors of production, in particular labour;*
- (b) *thus to ensure a fair standard of living for the agricultural community, in particular by increasing the individual earnings of persons engaged in agriculture;*
- (c) *to stabilise markets;*
- (d) *to assure the availability of supplies;*
- (e) *to ensure that supplies reach consumers at reasonable prices.*

These are concrete objectives that should mean the population of Europe is safe from any food need or risk. But this is not the case. On the one hand we have over-production of some products, on the other insufficiencies that mean we have to import large quantities from Latin America and Canada. To this we must add the aggravating factor of industrial farming, which threatens the environment with pollution and the destruction of soil, water, air and ecosystems. In short we have lost the ability to feed the population of Europe. Thanks in part to the incentives provided by the CAP, we are favouring a small number of large farms that produce food which increasingly harms our health, the environment, plants and animals.

The public consultation on the new CAP, set up by the European Commission itself, is over, but many objections have been raised. There have been strong calls for a return to a kind of farming that can safeguard the environment and health. But will these words be heard? We shall continue to follow the path of this text that for the moment concentrates mainly on technology rather than on the productive capacity and cycles of Nature. In the meantime, we invite our readers to look at the *Agriculture Atlas 2019*, which was published in English last May. It provides a detailed snapshot of how the current CAP is applied in the EU. It also puts forward solutions that reconsider the role of farmers and the use of our soils.

https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/shaping-cap-reform-consultation-stakeholders-and-citizens-2019-jan-21_en

D. WE ARE NOT ALONE!

- Experiences from other European States : Food for life (UK)

At this time of Brexit, it is hard to talk about what is happening in the UK. We do not intend to get into the logic that has led to this situation. We think that maybe insufficient attention was paid to the sense of "abandonment" felt by many who live in rural areas of the UK. Yet there are organizations operating there that are in the forefront of a new model of rural society that is respectful of the environment and of healthy food production. One of these is the Soil Association which we have written about in previous Newsletters.

<https://angelidelsuolo.wordpress.com/2017/10/16/soil-association-scotland/>

The SA is perhaps the foremost non-governmental organization in the UK that is promoting healthy, humane and sustainable food, farming and soil use. In addition, through their system of Soil Association Certification, they assess and certify farms and businesses that comply with organic standards. The Soil Association also runs the Food for Life Catering mark. This is a guarantee scheme for restaurants and caterers who can use it to source healthy foodstuffs that are freshly prepared and from sustainable sources.

With the aim of guaranteeing "Good food for all", the Soil Association is working on several fascinating projects: the *Sustainable food cities* network brings together public, private and third sector organizations and local communities within cities to improve their local food systems; their network of *Hospital Leaders* brings together hospitals that work actively to improve their food; with community-supported farming they are creating partnerships between farmers and local communities, leading to mutual advantages and connecting people to the land where their food is grown. All of these have been brought together in their *Food for Life* programme which seeks to give access to healthy food for everyone.

Food for Life brings schools, nurseries, hospitals and care homes, and their surrounding communities together around the core ethos of healthy, tasty and sustainable food.

The programme aims to make good food (healthy, tasty and sustainable meals) an easy and natural choice for everyone. In this way people are reconnected with the provenance of their food, with how it is produced and eventually cooked. Schools, nurseries, hospitals and care homes are the main targets of the programme. Understanding and competence are created through a "global approach" that brings in children, parents, staff, patients and visitors, catering staff and so on. Understanding and awareness are created in order to transform the current approach to food so as to reconnect it to healthy and sustainable attitudes for people, the environment and the soil.

The network that is formed remains open and allows all those operating in the public structures named above to easily become engaged through contacts that the Soil Association can provide throughout the UK. Each of the categories (schools, nurseries, hospitals, care homes) receives complete support in carrying out the programme which respects local priorities for health and wellbeing. To this end the programme collaborates closely with those running the institutions.

We find the Soil Association's programme brilliant and appealing. Its impact is both direct (thousands of meals consumed every day in the institutions involved) and above all indirect: every child, student, patient and resident has relationships with their own families, relatives and friends. The message they carry is a simple one: "healthy food is possible for everyone".

<https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/about-us/our-partners/soil-association>

- 4 per 1000 Initiative: Why do Italian ministries not reply?

On 28 February the SIP Forum sent an official letter – via certified electronic post - to the Minister for the Environment and for the Protection of the Land and Sea, Sergio Costa, and to the Minister for Agricultural, Food, Forest and Tourism Policy, Gian Marco Centinaio, asking for Italy to formally sign up to the 4per1000 initiative.

We have not received a reply.

This is the kind of thing that leads Italian citizens to consider themselves "abandoned" by a government that ignores us and does not take account of what we think.

Our politicians often blame Brussels and its officials for almost all Italy's current problems. They give them the insulting label of "eurocrats". Few reflect on the fact that "Brussels" is not some abstract entity, but a set of institutions created to allow the 500 million citizens of its member states to live together, respecting their different cultures, languages and identities. Brussels as a single unified and centralized institution does not exist. What do exist are the community institutions whose tasks and obligations are determined by the member states. These institutions have no real autonomy, because everything is discussed, negotiated and decided by representatives of the Member States. This is true of the Parliament, the Council, the Commission, the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, to name but a few of the most representative bodies.

And yet, despite their complexity, European institutions are very "accessible". The information is set out on the websites of every single institution where, in addition to the names and surnames of those who have been elected, nominated or employed to serve there, you can find their phone numbers and email addresses. They are the link between us citizens and the institution. It is their job to keep us informed about what is being discussed and to take on board our views, suggestions and advice. We can contact them directly and it is up to us to decide who to contact.

If you don't know who to contact, it's not a problem. There are services designed to provide the information desired. For example, if you want to know what point has been reached in the approval of a law or if a particular regulation or arrangement is already in existence, you can phone a number that is free throughout Europe, 00 800 67891011, where someone will reply in your language. Or you can write, again in your own language, and get a reply within three days on the relevant website. And again: you can just send an email or a letter directly to the President of the Institution (whether this is the Commission, the Council, the Parliament or whatever). They will not reply personally, but your message will be passed on to the competent staff members. The code of conduct that applies to the institution requires them to send a reply, if possible in the language of the person who has written in, within 2 weeks.

Why then can an Italian Minister not reply to a letter sent officially by a fellow citizen, without the latter having to mobilize friends, acquaintances, parliamentarians or "friends of friends"?