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Sustainable systems the solution

Covid-19 is a wake-up call to the planet, according to Volkert Engelsman, CEO of Dutch organic specialist Eosta, with sustainable initiatives the only viable response



Volkert Engelsman

The increase in demand for fruit and vegetables since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic has been one of the few positives to emerge from the current crisis, as multiple European countries enter second lockdowns to combat new waves of infections.

Demand for organic fruit and vegetables has risen even faster than conventional, according to Volkert Engelsman, CEO of Dutch organic specialist Eosta.

"Overall demand for organic has been going through the roof," he says. "At the moment, people seem to be more aware of their immune systems and the importance of healthy foods. So we are seeing strong growth."

Eosta has long highlighted fruit and vegetable consumption as a form of proactive healthcare, including through its Dr Goodfood campaign at organic retailer Ekoplaza's stores in the Netherlands.

"We had shopping baskets with little mirrors so people would be more self-reflective," he says "We had vitality plates explaining to people how they can improve their diet, recipes on our YouTube channel, posters, shelf-stoppers, floor stickers. The campaign has generated a lot of enthusiasm and spirit."

With sales of fresh fruit and vegetables rising sharply since the pandemic, it appears the health message is being heard loud and clear by the public. A stiffer challenge could be in forcing through the changes required for farming systems to properly protect biodiversity and the soil while providing good incomes for those working in the sector.

"We need to ask how we got here in the first place," says Engelsman. "When we attack biodiversity, we are attacking our own ecosystem. We have attacked the ability of the planet to breathe, not only with climate change, but also with

intensive animal husbandry and intensive farming principles. We have embarked on such dangerous monoculture paths that we are jeopardising the ability of nature to keep such pandemics in check."

What Engelsman sees is a highly interconnected world. Just as the deforestation of rainforests is connected to the release of undiscovered viruses, so our social divides could be at the heart of our failing institutions and systems.

"We have separated ourselves too much from nature and from each other," he says. "Embracing diversity - biodiversity, gender diversity, racial diversity - is something we seem to be struggling with. This leads to a spiritual divide, which separates us from ourselves. We need to revisit this idea of who we are, who we want to be and what sort of economy we want. Can we still keep saying 'people, planet, profit' when in the end 'profit' always wins? If we are to go

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back to business as usual after corona, we need to address these issues."

With second waves of infection a painful reality, the virus appears to be here to stay, at least for now. "Further outbreaks are likely," concedes Engelsman. "The upside of that is it will push us to be even more self-reflective and give us more time to explore what sort of society we want, what our relationship with nature, with one another and with ourselves should look like, and what consequences that has for our profit definitions, for our economies, for our food systems – for everything."

For Engelsman, proper living wages for workers marks a key element of any sustainable food system. "That's why we embarked on our Living Wage campaign," he says, "whereby we ask our customers to pay 10 cents extra for a kilo of mangoes and they can ensure the farmworkers are able to send their kids to school and have health insurance or life insurance."

But he believes stronger action is required to address worsening levels of inequality across the world, a situation only exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. "If we want to feed the world, we need to address the wealth gap," says Engelsman. "And if we want to address climate change, or biodiversity, or clean water, or health, then we have to do it in such a way that we don't export the burden to the poor. That is one

of the main issues with genetic engineering: all you do is risk widening the wealth gap."

In spite of the multitude of challenges, Engelsman is positive about the current direction of travel, including political discussions on water, soils and nitrogen. "The Netherlands is the second largest exporter of fruit and vegetables and a big animal husbandry player," he says, "which is completely ridiculous in such a small country. And now it's showing. We have 37 water wells in Holland, of which I believe 32 are polluted as a result of agrochemical and mineral fertiliser use. We also need to cut back 50 per cent of our animal husbandry family, which is quite substantial, otherwise we won't meet the European nitrogen deposition requirements."

Organics remains the most sustainable solution, according to Engelsman. "We've always said organic farming is a laboratory of change, and a sort of best practice for the agriculture of the future because it is inclusive of nature," he says. "It is climate-resilient. It is soil-inclusive. It doesn't pollute the groundwater. And yes, yields may be a little less per hectare, but you can keep going much longer than with intensive farming."

Driving Engelsman's continued optimism are the evolving attitudes in the financial sector. "Even the financial sector now says to farmers

that it's not about yield per hectare only, it's also about addressing soil fertility, living wages and biodiversity," he says. "They now have climate and biodiversity stress tests built into their RAROCs [risk adjusted return on capital]. So we see momentum coming from the financial sector and also from Brussels in the Green New Deal and Farm to Fork strategy, which says that about 25 per cent of all farming should be organic and the rest should be sustainable, and that mineral fertiliser should be taxed, so we need to reduce agrochemicals. It's pretty straightforward language."

For Engelsman, the current moment calls for a bolder, more holistic vision of farming. "We need a food system that doesn't just look at solving the post-WWII principles of 'Let's feed the world'," he says. "We need to make sure we also feed the soil and biodiversity, address climate change, nitrogen and health, fair wages, and all that, in order to sustain our ability to produce in the future. So yes, whereas in the past organic was locked up in a green bubble, it now seems to be breaking out and trickling down into the DNA of the mainstream policymakers, as well as the financial institutions, institutional investors and health insurance companies."