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MONOLOGUE #3

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The Universal Exposition 2015 held in Milan on the topic “Feeding the planet, Energy for life” has provided a wonderful platform to highlight the essential part played by water in producing nutritious and safe food.

It has also highlighted the role of farmers as producers of crops and livestock and has provided an opportunity to showcase the crucial part farmers play in protecting and stewarding Nature’s ecosystems.

Farmers manage the water consumed to produce our food and fibre. About 92% of the water we need is embedded in our food and farmers manage most of this water. About 70% of our food is produced with green water - sometimes known as effective rainfall. 30% is produced with green water supplemented by blue water. Blue water is the water in rivers, lakes and reservoirs plus water pumped from groundwater. About 70% of the blue water we use is devoted to food and fibre production. This consumption competes with domestic and industrial water consumption.

The main message I want to have you remember is this. The way we run our economies and the way our food supply chains operate make it very difficult indeed for farmers to sustain production while protecting the water ecosystems which underpin that essential food production.

But farmers have to operate in market systems not of their own choosing. They did not make the market rules and they do not have the power to make better rules that would help them cope with volatile weather, volatile consumer demands and volatile market prices.

These markets have no reporting or accounting rules that capture the value of water - its costs, for example, as an input to crop and livestock production. Nor are the costs of mismanaging water ecosystems accounted.



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The most dangerous feature of our food supply chains is that they are driven by the understandable need to have cheap food delivered to poor people. But farmers cannot both deliver cheap under-priced food and at the same time steward water and other ecosystems.

An economy almost always runs out of water before it runs out of land suitable for food and fibre production. Most economies can afford to meet rising food demand by importing cheap food without any political consequences. These food imports have virtual or embedded water in them. 1,000 cubic metres for every tonne of wheat; 16,000 cubic metres in a tonne of beef. By importing cheap food they benefit from the willingness of other economies to 'export' their water and endure the degradation of their precious water ecosystems.

Almost all of the 28 EU economies are net food importers. Italy is one of the top net importers of food worldwide along with Germany, the UK, Spain and the Netherlands. They import at least 60% of their food. All 21 of the economies in the neighbouring Middle East and North African region are also major net importers. Some import over 80 % of their food.

Finally, to return to the important role of farmers. They will save the world. But only if they can get prices for what they produce that give them secure livelihoods. Their services to society and the food markets on which we all depend are vital. Their contributions to protecting environmental services are essential. Their role in keeping rural landscapes looking good is irreplaceable. They are our water managers.