



# Irrigated Agriculture facing the Green New Deal post COVID-19

## Open Statement

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***Irrigants d'Europe*** expresses concern to the fact that the emergency for the containment of the pandemic COVID-19 would engage and affect the contents of the European Green New Deal (GNDE) and its transitional phase management.

The economic impact of the pandemic COVID19 is worrying. Allegedly, at the end of the emergency phase, all the Community budget will be affected. As for the previous economic crisis, part of the industry & services labour will be re-engaging in farming, that proved to be a back-up economic activity crucial to provide essential services while minimising the risks in case of any future stranglehold on food and raw bio-materials supply. For the recovery, we will have to move to “Glocal”, or even bring back our systems of food production and consumption along with the other agricultural products.

With the entire food supply chain classified as "essential" during the lockdown of COVID-19 agricultural activities continued uninterrupted with increasing fears over the shortage of agricultural workers and interest towards automation and robotics. Therefore, after the pandemic, Digital Agriculture 4.0 is likely to accelerate, because of the need to compete in global markets with producers from countries that are already on the way to embrace extreme automation in their cropping systems. Technologies such as drones, actuating robots and robotic monitors, besides a drastic reduction in farmers' dependence on the work of migrants, imply as well as the possibility to a widespread uptake of the advanced knowledge research in irrigated agriculture had produced in the last years.

In many EU areas, not limited to southern member states, a non-negligible part of agricultural production relies on irrigation water. In this transformation of food and biomasses production irrigation and drainage can play a critically important role for the EU agriculture.

From previous global crises, like the great depression of 1929, we learnt that the way out is to invest in vital sectors where the funds employed can generate lasting results. Therefore, we should continue investing in the modernisation of the irrigation infrastructures and its processes, like more efficient on-farm water management systems. This will not only generate jobs at the local level but also provide long lasting facilities which had already proved to be a strategic permanent input for the entire economy and not only for the agricultural sector. We may remember that the most effective response to crises is building major infrastructures supporting a sustainable and resilient economic growth for the next decades. Currently, there are plenty of such initiatives awaiting progress.

It is quite possible that the recovery will have to be based on the internal resources, which its current direction is to increase the debt of the affected member countries. Therefore, the forthcoming financial and economic crisis could lead to justify financing schemas aimed primarily at the top issues already indicated by the GNDE.

The new political line, the change in the paradigm underlying the new economic cycle, will need stronger support amid of an epochal crisis.

***Irrigants d'Europe*** call for the necessary attention to be paid in the post-emergency phase to the water/agriculture nexus in the frame of the GNDE, in which unfortunately agricultural water management and irrigation today seems to be playing an ancillary role.

GNDE indicates general sustainability objectives which if declined only through a more stringent interpretation of the Water Framework Directive rules and CAP greening process, will have serious impacts on the criteria of access to water resources for agricultural production. The only openly agricultural component of GNDE, the Farm to Fork, is likely to shift the weight towards the aspects of reduction of diffuse pollution through agriculture. The issues related to food production and socio-

economic long-term sustainability of irrigated agriculture appears as secondary to actions promoting a significant reduction in the release of macronutrients and agrochemicals to the environment.

***Irrigants d'Europe*** finds the apparently indissoluble axiom between contamination of water bodies by fertilizers and pesticides and irrigation unacceptable. The intensive livestock sector assimilation with irrigated agriculture, under the overall Agriculture umbrella, is also worrying. These common mistakes create a direct and unconditional relationship between irrigation practice and an increase in pollution in the political discourses.

The overall DGs direction towards actions that reduce the quantitative pressure on the water resource is evident. To achieve this target the current financial instruments and endowments seem insufficient and penalizing for the irrigation sector and of the governance of water in agriculture, with possible negative impacts on the modernisation in progress for years and on investments previously made.

***Irrigants d'Europe*** underline that everything that revolves around the revision of the WFD and related directives, clearly pushes towards a more stringent application of the water pricing criteria. A strategy that leads to reduced access to water as a driver for agricultural reconversion, which behind a necessary and indisputable request for greater sustainability hides a weakening of the agriculture's priority with respect to, for example, tourism in the competition for use of the resource. Besides, in the most irrigated areas of Europe, farmers are paying for the exploitation, conservation and amortization of the infrastructures that allow not only to irrigate their fields, but also to regulate flood and remove drainage and wastewater from neighbouring urban areas. Any increase in the cost of water resources will directly impact on production costs, reducing an already rather skimpy profit margins in the middle of a world crisis.

The utmost necessary water storage and harvesting policies in the face of climate change is not explicitly mentioned in any document, according to our best knowledge. A sustainable expansion of irrigation, even when done using part of the savings made applying innovative technologies and water management, should not be seen as an unacceptable trade-off for future food security and self-sufficiency.

***Irrigants d'Europe*** points out that the link between water and agriculture is sliding behind the scenes of GNDE, being considered as transversal to the circular economy, but only in its industrial sense forgetting the circular bioeconomy based on the production of biomass. Actions in favour of the water/agriculture nexus appear limited to encouraging water reuse and increasing the cost of water for farmers as a key for reducing the quantities used (with a parallel reduction of costs for other sectors) whilst guaranteeing a rapid qualitative improvement of the water bodies. There is a high risk that in the distribution of resources mobilised by GNDE, the irrigation sector and the management of water in agriculture will remain limited to a "southern-EU agriculture issue", already addressed by the CAP.

***Irrigants d'Europe***, today more than ever, is calling for actions that will trace a path of sustainability for the whole ecosystem, taking due account of the interlinked agro-ecosystem as well. These actions shall respond, as far as possible and justified, to GNDE's requirements and to the pressures of the society as a whole, but not only to part of it with serious detriment of rural society.