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Recommendations on the Pitkalija Reform

by Malta Youth in Agriculture Foundation (VO/0823) and Friends of the Earth Malta (VO/0091)

Friends of the Earth Malta (FoEM) has been working since 2015 on its Food, Agriculture and Biodiversity campaign focusing on promoting local producers, raising awareness with the general public on the importance of supporting the local agriculture sector, while also advocating for more sustainable practices. In 2017 FoEM has published the AgroKatina¹ report that puts forward a number of recommendations, one of which was a reform to the Pitkali Market.

The Malta Youth in Agriculture Foundation (MaYA) has been working closely with growers to gather feedback and suggest ways forward. We are aware that such a reform is not an easy task, however fair and consistent actions need to be implemented to ensure fairer remuneration given to growers. One needs to realise that growers are the only stakeholders who take the risk of producing, while having no guarantee about the price they will get. Middlemen and vendors on the other hand have a valuable say in selling the produce however have minimal risks in their job.

FoEM & MaYA welcome the reform of the Pitkali Market since the current operation at the market has been heavily criticised due to lack of transparency in prices and a lack of traceability, as weighing and data inputting are still done manually.

The reform is long overdue and hence we look forward to seeing the imminent implementation of the Pitkalija Reform.

We would like to stress that a reform will not be possible **without ensuring that compliance checks are made and that the new protocols are enforced.**

In addition, the following comments on the Pitkalija Reform Document.

¹ <https://foemalta.org/wp-content/uploads/AgroKatina-Report.pdf>

Ensuring Transparency on the Country of Origin

One of the actions that FoEM & MaYA have been taking in recent years is promoting local products with consumers. It is already difficult for consumers to know what products on the market are local considering that there is inadequate labeling by hawkers and at shops.

Transparency is crucial throughout the whole supply chain. In the same way that it is crucial that at source, no foreign produce disguised as local products (i.e. labeled with Malta as the country of origin) is introduced to Pitkalija, no produce ends up being mislabeled once it reaches consumers. There are numerous issues occurring towards the end of the supply chain, when foreign produce is sold to consumers under the pretense of being local. With this respect we urge that Pitkalija works closely with MCCA to ensure that transparency and accurate labeling within the supply chain is maintained.

Labeling on Pre-packaged Local Produce and Loose Items

A positive initiative that can also help consumers to make informed decisions and incentives to purchase local products would be to introduce a labeling system for pre-packaged or loose local products that enter Pitkalija (eg. any produce that can accommodate a label, such as watermelons, melons, cucumbers etc.) The label can be a simple sticker that says “Prodott ta’ Malta” and can be used by farmers to increase competitiveness and market their products better. This initiative would be a step in the right direction to ensure transparency with consumers and also supporting local farmers in line with the National Agricultural Policy 2018-2028.

Grading Systems

Even though we acknowledge that due to consumer demands a grading system is beneficial, produce should not be graded based on its appearance only. Further criteria would need to be developed so that the quality and the growing methods of a product are also taken into account during the grading process. If a grading system is based solely on the appearance of a product, it could result in small-scale farmers fetching a lower price simply because of less-pleasing appearance even though their produce might be of a higher quality and grown using practices that are better for the environment. Education campaigns for consumers would also be beneficial to educate the public that an ‘ugly’ or ‘misshapen’ product does not make it less nutritious.

It is also currently unclear in the document provided who will be responsible for classifying the products. If a grading system is to be introduced it is vital that this grading checks occur prior to a product entering the Pitkalija, where the Pitkala do not have a say on the process.

More Rights to Farmers

Despite that the reform document is a step in the right direction, there is still not enough power given to farmers to partake in the processes that take place at the Pitkalija market.

FoEM & MaYA welcome the fact that various organisations have been consulted to ensure a proper representation of the farming community. We are proposing that a committee is established that takes decisions on the running of the Pitkali Market to ensure better governance. Farmers and their representatives need to have a say on the management, running and improvement of the Pitkali Market.

Fair Prices for Farmers and No Products Going to Waste

During the COVID-19 pandemic, farmers were struggling to sell their produce since restaurants and hotels were closed and there was an oversupply at the Pitkali Market. We were seeing headlines of local produce going to waste. On the other hand Food Banks and organisations providing food for people in need were struggling to keep up with the demand, since people had lost their jobs and more households depended on food provisions.

We would like to see a solution to this situation, with no local produce going to waste and local farmers getting a fair income considering not only the expenses but also the uncertainty that goes into food production.

We are hence proposing a system where the produce that is not sold at the market is bought by the government or the Pitkalija Management Company from the farmer at 75% the average price, and hence redistributed as seen fit. This will ensure that farmers have a guarantee that their produce can be sold.

The farmer would still be able to decide whether to accept this price or else take back the produce as indicated in pg. 17 of the reform document.

This measure should only be introduced in parallel with a coherent crop management plan to ensure that overproduction is always minimized.

Crop Management Plan

With the data collected at the Pitkali Market with the use of the introduced barcode and IT system, it is vital that a crop management plan is developed. The data on the amount of produce sold and not sold per month should be made available to farmers and the public. A crop management plan will reduce situations where there is an oversupply of a specific product that results in a lower price to the farmer and also more likelihood of wastage. The crop management plan should be developed within the MAFA with advice and consultancy then provided to farmers for free.

Transparency on Sales

Transparency of the pricing of sale should be made available online for the farmers using Pitkalija services.

Re-introduction of a Fair Auctioning System

The Pitkali market is meant to be a market where local produce is auctioned by the middlemen to be then sold to hawkers/vendors.

Vendors should NOT be allowed to enter the Pitkalija premises before ALL the growers deposit their produce inside Pitkalija. After various investigations were carried out, we are aware that vendors and other individuals would establish an unfair price to be awarded to farmers way before the purchasing stage would start.

Avoiding Disparity between Full-time and Part-time Farmers

Full-time and part-time farmers must be treated equally in the Pitkali Market by the middlemen and hawkers/vendors. Monitoring should be done and measures taken to ensure that there is no disparity between full-time and part-time farmers.

Hawkers/Vendors Should not be Middlemen

To have a fairer system, pitkala, or their helpers, cannot also be hawkers since this gives an unfair advantage and a conflict of interest.

Credit Systems

We support that credit systems are used for hawkers/vendors and this should be the only available option for payments.

Gender Stereotypes

Even though other sales may be referred to as “housewife” sales at the Pitkalija market (as mentioned on page 13), in this day and age there should be no reason to continue propagating gender norms in an official government document. Hence we propose that any sales to the general customers should be called “sales to the general customer” without using terms referring to any specific gender.

MaYA and FoEM look forward to the uptake of these recommendations and the implementation of the Pitkalija Reform.