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## “Get out of my comfort zone”

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Martin Pidoux is a researcher and professor of agricultural policy and markets at the HAFL High School of Agricultural, Forestry and Food Sciences.

**SGA: You have worked in administration (OFAG), for professional defense (USP) and now in teaching and research (HAFL). What activities did you enjoy the most in each position? What challenges did you encounter?**

Martin Pidoux: After ETHZ, I started my career at the Federal Office of Agriculture. I enjoyed trying to build a constructive dialogue with the sector with a view to finding concrete solutions to the problems encountered. As a young agronomist, it was also very interesting to discover the organization of the federal interior administration,

know the different steps necessary for the implementation of a law or an ordinance and observe the divergences and areas of tension that exist between the different Offices and Departments. It is true that after almost two years in my role at the OFAG, I felt a form of routine settling in. I needed to take on new challenges

professionals and get out of my comfort zone. So, when an opportunity presented itself at the Swiss Farmers' Union as responsible for agricultural policy, I did not hesitate to apply.

I arrived at the Swiss Farmers' Union (USP) at a pivotal moment, marked by numerous changes at the staff level. The contact with my new boss, Francis Egger, who had also just started at USP, after leaving the management of the Grangeneuve Agricultural Institute in the canton of Fribourg, worked immediately.

After the vertical and rather rigid hierarchy of a Federal Office, I loved the work in a small, very dynamic and horizontally organized team at the USP. It was very stimulating. We were constantly in the heat of the action...the discussions around PA 14-17 were in full swing and we were at the heart of them. But be careful, professional defense is not an easy task. This involves an enormous personal commitment and the disappointments are sometimes great. Also, I remember from my time at the USP that, often, the process of consulting members and the democratic organization of decisions are more important than the final result. This is, in my opinion, too frequently disappointing and unambitious. Indeed, in a large heterogeneous organization like USP, it is difficult to find proactive solutions that suit all members. Ultimately, defending the status quo is often the smallest common denominator. This can be frustrating given the challenges facing Swiss agriculture. And then, I applied as a professor of agricultural and market policy at the HAFL High School of Agricultural, Forestry and Food Sciences. To be honest, I doubted my chances but it worked and I've been there for 5 years now.

At HAFL, I greatly appreciate the positive and motivating dynamic that

comes directly from the contact with students, the freedom of tone I have and the possibility of working with many different partners in the agri-food sector. The latter mandate us with sometimes opposing expectations, particularly on sensitive issues such as the opening of borders or the use of pesticides. It's very enriching but obviously, it doesn't make the work easier and exposes us to criticism. We must accept the conclusions and consequences of the studies.

This implies an impeccable scientific approach which guarantees the objectivity of the analyses. However, I am convinced that the scientist in applied research must also know how to take risks by addressing current social issues to fuel reflection and contribute to popularizing them. Its mission is to provide arguments against extreme and populist positions. In agronomy as in other fields, there are no simple answers to complex and multifactorial questions – popular initiatives targeting pesticides are a good example. The world is becoming ever more complex and science has an important role to play in seeking realistic solutions.

### **What research projects have you carried out in recent years that have pleased you the most?**

Projects that are directly linked to the concerns of the agricultural sector interest me a lot. As such, I appreciated the study carried out with Jacques Chavaz on the effects of a broad opening of the market on the Swiss agri-food sector. It is important to address issues that are disturbing and encourage a critical look at the situation.

### **And those with the most impact?**

It is always difficult to measure the impact of an applied research study, particularly in agricultural policy. For me, a good project should not remain in a drawer, but should have a certain media resonance. In this respect, the study on French-speaking agriculture was a success. I have also carried out more confidential projects, at the economic level

business. Here, if we manage to resolve a problem on a farm, it is satisfied and it changes its way of working, that is already a significant impact.

### **Who are your role models in research and teaching?**

Physicist Stephen Hawking for his popularization work. I find this way of making astrophysics accessible to everyone admirable, for example with his book *A Brief History of Time* and then the film that followed. We need a “Stephen Hawking” of agronomy....

Closer to my work, I had the chance to meet people who influenced and inspired me. First, I learned a lot from Jacques Chavaz, my first boss at OFAG, and with whom I continued to work afterwards. He is brilliant analytically, mastering files down to the smallest detail but without losing sight of the overall context. He always brings a critical and constructive perspective and does not fear complexity. He is wary of simplistic solutions – he is precisely the anti-populist. During my time at USP, Francis Egger also inspired me a lot. He is a hard worker who never stops. He has energy to spare, a lot of charisma and a very good ability to listen and motivate people. Francis is a born leader. For me, he will remain the “quintessential” chef. In the area of research, I would like to mention Bruno Durgiai. I really appreciate this empathetic and respectful way of working with farmers. He asks them important and sometimes disturbing questions, but is never judgmental. He does excellent work in business economics. Bar-bara Eiselen, who works in our rural economy group, has a way of getting to the bottom of questions and an ability to connect elements which are very valuable. She is always of great inspiration and contributes enormously to applied research in rural economics. I take my hat off to her, because I unfortunately see that it still remains difficult today for a woman to evolve in our overly paternalistic sector, but I predict a magnificent career for her.

Many other people have left their mark on my professional life and I cannot name them all.

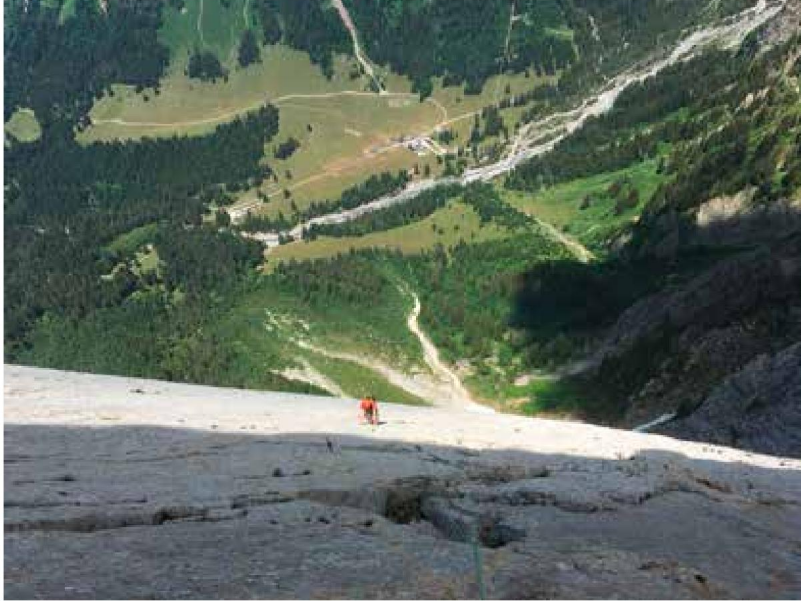
### **Where do you see the challenges in teaching?**

I have a lot of respect for the role of teacher. I have a certain influence on students, particularly in matters of agricultural policy. This involves great responsibility. Of course, my mission is not to play politics but to provide the scientific tools for a well-founded and objective analysis of agricultural policy and markets. However, students, and I understand them, often wish to address current themes that they have read in the press. In agricultural policy, models provide partial explanations and provide information on the consequences of a decision or an instrument, but, as with all human sciences, an element of subjectivity remains. This depends a lot on our individual value systems. You have to be aware of it and admit it. Also, I seek to transmit a form of critical thinking. I want to help students be able to analyze and argue correctly... regardless of their opinion... even if sometimes, I admit, it annoys me because I don't agree at all! Ultimately, students must understand problems in all their complexity and be wary of cookie-cutter solutions.

### **What are the current themes for applied research in economics and rural sociology?**

I think that in rural economics and sociology the biggest challenge is the work of popularization and communication to strengthen the bridges between the rural world and the city. A better understanding of the agricultural reality by society is essential and the agricultural world must also learn to be open to the expectations of an urbanizing society. Very concretely, there is work to be done in the following areas:

sustainable agricultural production, the efficient use of resources, notably phytosanitary products, the development of agri-food production in a context of tightening production constraints, etc. We won't be bored.



*Legend: Mirror of Argentina, Papageno*

### **Which institutions do you cooperate with?**

We work with different partners (OFAG, Agridea, Agroscope, cantonal services, professional organizations, etc.) depending on the project and the skills required. We are fortunate, in Switzerland, to have a wide range of institutions and organizations active in economics, rural sociology and agricultural policy. We work in a dynamic and competitive field, it's motivating. In this respect, the SGA day is a good opportunity to discover current themes and methods in rural economics. It also makes it possible to develop new collaborations.

**You were a member of the SGA committee. What did you like about the SGA committee activity?**

I loved being part of the committee. We had a relaxed and very respectful atmosphere. At our level, we managed to strengthen the links and mutual understanding between the institutions that we represented. The SGA day and the autumn festival, which we initiated, are important events in the panorama of rural economy and sociology in Switzerland. It was an honor to participate in their organization and I try to return regularly.

**If you are visiting friends abroad. What Swiss products do you take as gifts?**

A piece of Gruyère AOP and a bottle of Chasselas. World class!

Interview conducted by Esther Bravin

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