

Summary

“I go home with more food for thought than I had before the seminar”, one of the participants said, but it was not a complaint. That was exactly the intention of the seminar. Not to generate answers, but to open up the future and raise questions. Not to forecast or to create scenarios, but to explore time horizons of the global food system in all its broadness and complexity. And to do that in dialogue between experts from business, government, civil society and science.

The background of the speakers reflected this broad approach. An expert in development cooperation, bringing Africa into the discussion; an economist telling about Asia; a rainforest campaigner from Latin America; a nanotechnologist who recently returned from the USA and a European telecom innovation specialist.

Increasing demands and insecurity

Consumer demands for food and agricultural products will increase sharply in the coming years. Not so much because of an increase in world population, but primarily because of the rise in per capita income, especially in Asia. This means a rise in the demand for animal products, and consequently in animal feed. Within ten years China will account for half of the world's pork consumption and absorb half of the world's oil seed exports to use as feed.

The food processing industry and retail shift to the centre of the global food system. More and more people live in megacities all over the world and have full time jobs. This makes them increasingly dependent of processed food bought in supermarkets. The food situation has to do with different crises. Underneath the surface of the headline issues, a complex dynamic of chronic problems exist, keeping high levels of volatility and uncertainty in store for the foreseeable future. Not only the food crisis and the financial crisis, but also global issues like energy supply, health equity, terrorism and environmental degradation play a role. Overweight is surfacing as a growing problem in an increasing number of countries. Amongst the poor in Brazil for example overweight is a bigger problem than malnutrition.

These crises are closely connected and can no longer be tackled one by one, but have to be addressed simultaneously.

The seminar's dialogues brought up the growing level of uncertainty as a new element in the analysis. Climate change causes global perspectives to become increasingly uncertain. Food price fluctuations are greater than ever. Government policy is able to decrease, but also to increase these uncertainties by their food and price policies.

Technology part of the solution

Because of the tremendous increase in food demands and food production, we will soon arrive at the limits of what the earth can provide. There is no expansion free of charge, no escape in new 'wastelands' to be cultivated. To realise a food supply that is healthy and sufficient for everybody, investments are needed in science and technology. This area has been neglected for more than twenty years. A new Green Revolution in agriculture, this time with a strong focus on equitability and sustainability, is called upon. But technology alone is not enough. Externalities for food production have to be made visible, in order to show their real costs. Only then they can be part of a sustainable strategy.

Technology has to be brought in synergy with government policy. Or to put it more fundamentally: technology should not be the dominant driver, but should always serve a human centred approach. Translated to food, the leading question is no longer "how to feed the world?", but "what do you want to eat?" This is a real challenge for governments, because these are more production oriented than consumer driven. The products of government policy, such as regulations and financial stimuli, should be more consumer oriented.

We have to realise we are making the shift from a large scale industrial-technological paradigm to a more creative network way of thinking, that is both more adaptive to local demands as more global in its organisation. To prepare for its future, the food sector should therefore learn from other areas and open itself for dialogue with stakeholders, in particular the stakeholders on the consumer side of the food chain. Much can be learned from the network approach of innovation by the telecom sector. And from the successful way in which the climate sector has put global warming on the world agenda, by means of the Nobel Prize winning IPCC network.

To live with this huge complexity of interconnected world food issues is an art. To deal with it is an even greater challenge. Our challenge.

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