

Summary: sustainability will become pre-competitive in the global food system

In the Future of Food seminar fifty senior experts from the global food system, from business, government, civil society and science, took part in an exciting dialogue on the role and responsibilities of retail and finance when it comes to creating a sustainable global food system.

Many international companies active in the global food system have grown from multinationals to global players. Acting in a global playing field that is developing in a tremendous pace and where international regulation is almost completely non-existent, the companies have to operate with a much more complex set of responsibilities. They have to respect diversity, and have to interact according to local surroundings.

In this fast changing context, sustainability in the food system has entered a completely new phase. Sustainability is no longer related to specific steps in the food chain, but regards the food chain in total. Sustainability is developing from a product or producer related issue or 'product plus' to a *conditio sine qua non*, a demand that is indispensable for production in the long run. Also, it is developing from a supplier or producer issue to an overarching quality.

The most important implication of this shift is that players, that have the best overview and strongest influence in the whole food chain, are the ones to take the lead in sustainability actions. Retail and finance have this position. Speakers at the seminar illustrated this. Indian retail CEO Sanjeev Asthana showed how his company took responsibility for complete supply chains gaining in both cost reduction, better rewards and sustainability. Rabobank Brazil's sustainability manager Daniela Mariuzzo described how intimately sustainability and financing are interrelated. Sustainability of a bank is directly related to sustainability behaviour of its clients: depletion of resources due to unsustainable behavior could make it impossible for companies to pay back their loans. A bank also runs the risk of reputation damage for financing unsustainable activities.

The changing role of sustainability in the food system has important consequences. Not only NGO and government participants, but also business people like UK retail speaker Paul Kelly (ASDA), stressed that, in the case of sustainability, we have to move away from competition. It has to be a pre-competitive element for which cooperation is the key. This cooperation (already taking place in frontrunner initiatives such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil RSPO) is not only about carbon and water reduction or including small scale farmers. WWF vice-president Jason Clay stressed that ultimately sustainability has to do with availability, with protecting one's raw material supply in the long run.

Buying certified products is booming. More and more global players in the food system commit themselves to sustainable sourcing and to high percentages of certified raw materials such as coffee, tea, cocoa, palm oil and fish. Expecting a huge increase in demand for food products and 'biomass', sustainable sourcing can be seen as a useful instrument to establish long-term supplier relationships. These can help continue the food supply in the long run and apply to the quality aspects that are needed.

During the seminar, it became clear that the business sector must take the lead in sustainability actions. If they do that well, consumers and government will follow.

