Dialogue C

Participants in Group C – from business, science and government – all had direct links to the food system through their areas of work, which included obesity, sustainability, agriculture, health, climate change, food security, fair trade, market measures, ICT, organic production, technology, risk management and development aid.

It is a known fact that the global demand for food will increase sharply as a result of demographic changes (population growth and urbanisation) and an increase in living standards and wealth of producers and consumers. In developed countries, consumers often want and buy more than they actually need – a "need" which is most often culturally driven. Furthermore, important information on healthy and sustainable choices pertaining to basic needs is often absent. As a result, consumers are often unaware of such things as the appropriate daily intake of nutrients and how and where food is produced. The food industry can be of remedy to this problem by helping consumers to make healthy and sustainable choices. As only five percent of the world food supply is produced by the top ten food companies, the presence and importance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is obvious.
The role of retail becomes more and more important as a 'director' of food chains and quality levels. Not only in the western world, but its presence and importance is growing rapidly worldwide. Also the retail sector has the possibility to empower consumers to make sustainable choices.

Land claims

How can food producers respond to rising consumer demand? While arable land is limited in quantity and not easily expandable for the sake of preserving biodiversity, pressure on it is increasing due to the growing number of competing land claims.
It is needed by agriculture for food and feed production, and more recently for crops used in energy production. Furthermore, cities, which require vast areas of land for their infrastructures, are often located on fertile soil. Expansion of arable land is limited, because the remaining nature has to be conserved for the sake of biodiversity and climate.
Therefore, land is scarce and quickly becoming a global commodity. A prime example is the recent lease agreement between South Korea and Madagascar, whereby South Korea has ensured its food security for the long term. In many cases land is used in an unsustainable way. Much effort is necessary to counter the problem and turn to sustainable harvesting. Change is urgently needed, and the issues of land scarcity, water shortages and rising CO_2 levels must be addressed.

It is obvious that technology will play a vital role in agriculture, by helping to increase yields and to improve processing and conservation techniques. However, the use of

technology is not an effective solution without the implementation of sound government policies. For instance, investment in soil enhancement – enabling an increase in yield per hectare – is dependent on suitable arrangements of land ownership. Policy decisions are the determining factor behind proper land rights and allocation of land to the variety of competing claims. Furthermore, governments need to make sure that sufficient investment - both public and private – is made toward agricultural research, as it is an area that has long been neglected, resulting in decreased yields per hectare for many crops.
Infrastructure is another field where increased government investment is needed – so as to link both farmers to regional or global markets, and remote regions to each other. A prime example of where this is not happening is China, who exports agricultural products from certain regions globally, while importing these same products in other regions.

The group concluded that generalised approaches and solutions have limited value, as most factors that increase the gap between consumer demands and natural resources are regional specific. Moreover, these factors have a different impact in each region. Various approaches therefore need to be developed to correspond to local particularities. Even more important is to invest in resilience of the food system, i.e. the level of adaptation to stress. Is the food system able to find answers for coming challenges that are yet unknown?

Uncertainty

During the debate, uncertainty was identified as one of the most important factors of food system developments, as its repercussions are manifold. Uncertainty increases with lowering world food stocks that should play a role as strategic buffers. This leads to the sharp price fluctuations that have been witnessed over past years. Uncertainty is further enhanced by very different factors as climate change, leading to increased number and power of adverse weather conditions, and by consumers' insufficient knowledge on many aspects relating to food. Knowledge dissemination could help a bit, probably.

Furthermore, the current financial crisis generates even more uncertainty at many levels, including the global food system. Special attention must be given to sovereign wealth funds, as the billions of dollars of capital that China and several oil exporting countries have amassed will flow towards new areas and are expected to play an important – yet uncertain - role in coming years. The right to food may be severely challenged in an uncertain environment, as history painfully reminds us. However, democracy can help to create stability and a more stable food supply, thereby helping to disseminate the right to good, safe and healthy food.

Climate

If we compare the global food system with our climate system, it is obvious that the general public is very much aware of the influence that society has (and will have) toward climate change, and is therefore in full acceptance of the mitigation and adaptation strategies proposed by governmental bodies. On the other hand, the food system is not particularly well understood, and it is imperative that the debate concerning its future and the development of global strategies on food change be brought closer to the public sphere. The need for such strategies is not currently felt at a general level, as food problems have yet to become a reality in the developed world. Nevertheless, it is vital to anticipate difficulties in food, and the IPCC model could be a starting point for a worldwide food strategy dialogue.