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16 November 2007 Watching what we eat: food systems in Europe

Food has never been more of a global commodity than it is today. But there is an urgent need to understand the problems that face future European food supplies within this global market. And so scientists and policy makers gathered in Budapest last week to push for a more holistic approach to the study of what Europeans eat.

The conference, supported by the European Science Foundation (ESF) and the European Cooperation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research (COST), looked at where food comes from, the ways in which it is processed, packaged and distributed, and how it is sold and eventually eaten.

Scientists at the conference showed that Europeans sitting down at their dinner tables are eating a broader range of meats and vegetables than ten years ago. Europeans demand that their food tastes better, makes them healthier and can be prepared in less time, and yet they want this food available year round at a low price. To meet these needs, food travels many more miles; along much more complicated distribution routes than ever before on its journey from the farm to our forks.

"This requires a new approach to describing food supply. We're advocating a food systems approach", says Thomas Henrichs, a senior advisor for the National Environment Research Institute in Denmark. "The food systems approach includes not only the activities involved in food supply, such as growing and processing a green bean and packing it for distribution, and shipping it, but also the outcomes of eating the green bean on the environment, on the economy and on the health and welfare of the person eating it", explains Henrichs.

One reason to better understand the European food system is the growth in global markets-the Chinese are eating more meat, and a large market for dairy products is opening up on the Indian subcontinent. "Until recently, Europe has invested intensively in its food system in relative isolation", explains Rudy Rabbinge, professor in sustainable development and food systems at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. "But Europe must change its food system to take advantage of these new markets", he says.

And with Europe's share of global exports predicted to drop from 24 percent to 20 percent over the next 10 years, Europe needs to become more efficient to compete in a global market. Scientists hope that by encouraging different industries within the food chain to think about the food system as a whole, they can increase overall efficiency.

Changes to Europe's own food market is another reason to better understand the European food system. An aging European population brings different health demands that could be met-in part-by altering the food they eat. Migration of people into the EU has changed European food tastes, customs and traditions, and increased wealth gives Europeans the means to buy more meat. Furthermore, longer workdays and the entry of women into the workplace has left many Europeans with little time to prepare food, resulting in a reliance on 'ready-meals'. One consequence of this is an average meal contains more ingredients that have travelled further and require more packaging.

Finally, changing energy consumption and the threat of climate change will force Europeans to think about how efficiently they produce and consume food. By studying food systems, scientists hope to understand the socioeconomic, political, and cultural influences on what Europeans eat. And policy makers can use this knowledge to steer how Europe manages the food chain-starting in the field and ending in the stomach-to ensure that all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs.

Notes for editor

The conference, on November 5-6, was attended by 75 scientists and policy makers from 22 countries and was one of the series of research conferences organised by the ESF-COST Forward Look initiative. Forward Look, a flagship instrument of the ESF, allows scientists to meet people from the world of policy and help set priorities for future research.

This Forward Look is a multidisciplinary joint ESF/COST initiative, which involves the ESF Standing Committee for Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences (LESC), the ESF European Medical Research Councils (EMRC), the ESF Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH), the ESF Standing Committee for the Social Sciences (SCSS) and the COST Domain Committee for Food and Agriculture (FA).

For more information about the Forward Look please go to http://www.esf.org/activities/forward-looks/life-earth-and-environmental-sciences-lesc/current-forward-looks-in-life-earth-and-environmental-sciences/european-food-systems-in-a-changing-world.html

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