



Gerda Verburg: “New European food system”

By outlining her vision on a more sustainable food system Gerda Verburg, the Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, set the scene for a day of speeches and debate. In the Netherlands, she has set up a dedicated programme for sustainable food which is the basis for the Ministry’s participation in the Future of Food initiative.

Verburg identified trends to be tackled in the food system:

- Increasing world population set to reach 9.5 billion by 2050 means there are more mouths to feed.
- Growth in prosperity leads to people eating more meat and dairy products.
- Rapid urban growth, particularly in the developing countries, results in a worldwide loss of biodiversity, reduced amounts of clean water and impoverished soils.
- The cost of raw materials will rise in the next decades as they become increasingly scarce. Climate change has already affected food security in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia.
- Existing agricultural production is no longer adequate. Some regions turn into deserts while others have to deal with floods. In the same regions, three quarters of the population live from agriculture.

According to Minister Verburg, there is only one way to deal with this. She would like to see us “throw wholeheartedly into making production and consumption chains more sustainable and to invest in the process both nationally and internationally.” As we speak, one billion people in the world suffer from hunger or malnutrition, while another billion people are overweight or suffer from obesity. The amount of plant and animal species is declining rapidly. We are reaching a point where we will no longer be able to mitigate the negative effects on health and welfare of humans, plants and animals.

“There is an urgent need for investments,” says the minister. “It is my ambition to ensure that by 2025, the Netherlands is among the top ten most sustainable producers and consumers. To achieve that, I will bring stakeholders together in public private partnerships or roundtables. To get consumers to buy more sustainable products, I will promote the use of health and sustainability logos, dialogue and information sharing.”

Society's response

The Future of Food seminar in 2008 suggested that we should not focus on how to feed the world rather than ask what the world wants to eat. We learnt that technology has potential to deal with the widening gap between increasing consumer demands and limited natural resources. The next step is to examine how the retail and finance sectors can help the food system develop sustainable solutions.

“Retail and finance already show responsibility in making the food system more sustainable,” Verburg points out. Retail is increasingly working with the private sector on labelling, making its supply chains more transparent and engaging in dialogues with other stakeholders. The financial sector has also become aware of its role in promoting sustainability. It also understands sustainability as a value for its image and customers. In January 2010, the world's biggest investors appealed to all countries to speed up the process towards low-carbon economy.

According to the recent ING report on the third industrial revolution, a growing number of businesses address issues such as human rights, good governance and responsible use of raw materials. Minister Verburg is pleased to see that the Dow Jones sustainability index is becoming an important indicator for investors, encouraging these multicommitted companies, as ING calls them.

The agricultural minister would also pay attention to waste. “One in every five shopping bags of food ends up being thrown away,” she reminds. “It is not only the consumer who wastes food, it happens all through the food chain. Retail could assume an important role in dealing with this challenge,” she concludes.

The future role of retail and finance

Minister Verburg is convinced that both the retail and financial sector can, and should, play a big role in a sustainable future.

“Both the sectors are powerful. They operate worldwide and they can show direction. These challenges go beyond national borders, they affect the entire world. I hope that the financial sector will take responsibility and steer supply chain partners towards a more sustainable direction. I also hope that they refrain from investing in financial projects that are unsustainable and remind their fellow financiers, particularly those kept afloat by billions of governmental support over the last few years, of their moral duty.”

The role of governments

Apart from retail, finance and food industry, government has its responsibility as well. The minister invited a number of European countries to make a concerted effort to improve sustainability of our food system. Directors of the food ministries of Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom meet in May 2010 to lay the foundation for what will become the new European food cooperation.

