

Mansholt lecture Food policy & research:

## Food deserves coherent policies from cities to Brussels

**The annual Mansholt lecture is named after the Dutch politician Sicco Mansholt one of the EU politicians of agriculture. Someone with a great heart for development and also for food. Food is the nucleus of change and key of the Mansholt lecture 2017. There is demand for food every day from all of us.**

### **Food is the nucleus of change**

The 2016 Mansholt lecture was about rethinking the common agricultural policy. Basically it said that it is not enough to have an agricultural policy, but it should also be based and focused on the entire food chain, agriculture as well as food. There should be a structure in which we have the instruments not just to provide support for production but also for a safe and healthy food chain. The debate this year is dedicated to the latter, a safe and healthy food chain. There is probably no issue which the citizens of the European union feel more strongly about than food. Everybody, all 500 million, have an opinion about food. Food is highly thought about with views, personal opinions, food taboos, etc. It is something that unites us and divides us. If there is one thing the citizens of Europe demand of the government, of the private sector, of academy, but, above all, of Europe, it is that they are provided with safe, sustainable, healthy and affordable food. This should also preferably be produced in such a way that animals are treated well and climate conditions are met.

Consumers make a couple of hundred decisions about food each day: how much they eat, what they eat, with who, where they buy it, how they prepare it, etc. Food is continuously there in the way they think, in the way they work and in the way they live. The concern about food really unites EU citizens. In a world where even European alliances, let alone transatlantic alliances or other alliances, are actually under stress. A world indeed with Brexit. A world where all the obvious things of the last couple of decades are not obvious anymore. There is one thing that stands out and that is the growing concern about food.

### **Food dilemmas**

There are a number of complicated dilemmas and issues. One is to look at who is at risk in terms of unhealthy eating or not having access to food. The European Union has done well, there are no regions with food deficiencies in Europe. This is still an issue in other parts of the world. However, there are a lot of people who are not well fed; people that are overweight or suffer from non-communicable diseases, related to food and the diet. The majority of the non-communicable diseases, like cancer, diabetes and cardio-vascular diseases, are directly related to food. This is very much an issue of income, education and access to the right type of food. There is a socio-economic disparity both within countries, but also between the different member states.

Ironically, those who are most concerned about their nutrition, are those who benefited the most from advantages in nutrition and the advantages in the private

sector. The upper middle class are the ones who are concerned about our food being toxic, unsafe and dangerous. They are concerned about new ways of eating, whether it is a quinoa-based diet or a bread avoiding diet. There are a lot of food fashions that are serious in the mind of the people who are most concerned by it. Those are the people who are least at risk, they can afford to worry about food and go and buy expensive food.

So there are a number of dilemmas here which need to be solved.

### **Food policy**

There is no easy policy. The issue of food policy is not only seen as a national issue, also cities, mayors, are concerned about making the right choices. Are there enough healthy food outlets? Shouldn't the rooftops of new parts of the city be used for food production? And, of course, Europe is also part of the international market, so decisions and policy issues that are made in Europe do not only affect its own citizens, they affect the whole world.

The policies currently in place are fragmented. Food cannot be regulated by ministries of health or agriculture. It touches environment, but it also touches issues that have directly to do with the advantages in science. Think of the big steps forward that will be taken in the next few years in the area of digitalization. They will affect the way people eat, the way health is monitored, the way people are informed about their health and the way the government is informed about citizens' health. This is what could be called the dilemma of the know-all fridge. As Louise Fresco pointed out 'I am not sure whether I want my fridge to be connected to my insurance company. But that possibility is not far off. I am also not sure whether I want to wake up in the morning with a chip in my arm which says if my sugar level is up or down. Yet this too is a possibility for the future'.

The huge advantages which are going to be made in digitalization are going to affect people's lives directly - through the issues of food. Therefore, not just policies in terms of regulation will be needed but there will also be a need to discuss the assets of how far the government or the private sector wants to go in terms of citizens' behaviour and regulating that behaviour.

Given the societal challenges concerning dietary quality, public health, sustainability and social inclusiveness, it is necessary to transform the food system. Starting from the Food2030 agenda, EU policy goals for food, nutrition and health should include balanced and sufficient diets for all citizens, reduced environmental impact (both in and outside the EU), viable and socially balanced agri-food business (in and outside the EU), and contributions to global food security through socio-economic connectivity.

### **Food research**

It is important to find the best way to produce safe food. Not just for safe food but for a sustainable, healthy and responsible way of producing food and providing it to citizens. Fraud, like the horse meat case, has not helped to win the trust of the citizens. Trust is the key issue which needs to be built around food, and can only be achieved by involving the public. That is not going to be easy. A hugely complex transition, since the multiple aspects of food production and consumption are closely interconnected and changing one aspect can easily have major unintended consequences. Yet the transitions are urgent and must be driven by science as well as values and economics. Therefore an integrated vision is proposed characterized by four objectives (Nutrition for sustainable and healthy diets, Climate smart and environmentally sustainable food systems, Circularity and resource efficiency of food systems, Innovation and empowerment of communities) which are to be pursued

through eight scientific approaches combined within a matrix, always aiming for societal acceptance and citizen appreciation. It is strongly believed that a joint effort by all stakeholders in a Joint Undertaking (public private partnership) is the best way to pursue the strategy.

The key is that people feel very strongly about choice, individual choice. Not regulating consumer behavior but nudging consumers towards the freedom of choice for a healthy and responsible behavior. Also towards others and towards the environment, indeed the next generations which will inherit the earth. That does not come about by just letting things happen. There is concern about disruptions that are taking place, disruptions in business models, and disruptions also when looking at political level. Powerful disruption, like in Silicon Valley, which is taking over our food industry. There is a need to be alert. The importance of food sustainability, health and farming and the association between research and policy in an integrate and coherent fashion - it is not easy. It is going to be a different set of choices and different set of food which we have on our plate and we will need to act on all of them. Keeping in mind the fundamental right of people to choose, helping people to choose well and to choose with integrity and in an integrated way, is the ultimate objective of a coherent food policy.

This article is based upon the Mansholt lecture on food policy and research, organized at Radisson Blu Royal Hotel, Brussels, on September 20, 2017. Louise O. Fresco provided a key note speech after which Pieter van 't Veer presented the policy document '[Towards a European Food and Nutrition policy](#)', and Frans Kampers the policy document '[Food transition 2030](#)'. A forum consisting of John Bell (European Commission), Monique Axelos (INRA), Jan Huitema (European Parliament) and Dirk Jacobs (Food & Drink Europe) discussed the presentations with the audience, consisting of 150 people from government, science, industry and civil society.

In 2018 the annual Mansholt lecture is scheduled for **September 19, 2018**, in Brussels