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Review on the conference “Dialogue on Food, Health and Society” from September 29-30, 2008

Promotion of dialogue on the interdependences between food, health and society

More than 100 participants from science, industry and society met 29 – 30 September 2008 at the Swiss Re Centre for Global Dialogue in Rüschlikon. The “Dialogue on Food, Health and Society” was organized as knowledge exchange platform and brought together players from these different disciplines. From the German scientist to the Abbot of Einsiedeln - speakers from different nations and background contributed to the event. The opening by Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard clearly stated that nutrition and health are high on the political agenda.

In his welcome note, Peter Forstmoser, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Swiss Re, illustrated that nutritional behaviour is also of high relevance for insurance companies. Studies clearly demonstrate the relationship between obesity and a higher susceptibility to health problems reflected in increasing health care costs. This economic relevance was emphasized by the Federal Councillor in her speech as well. She invited the audience to take an active role in the dissemination of knowledge on health and nutritional behaviour and to rise awareness of this interrelation within society. It is for the public authorities as well as industry and society to meet this challenge together.

To link topics and institutions and to build partnerships

Further key note speakers were Jan Maat, Unilever; Peter van Bladeren, Nestlé; and Erich Windhab, ETH Zürich on the topic “Food”. The area “Health” was reflected by Hannelore Daniel, Technical University Munich (D) and Thomas Mattig, Health Promotion Switzerland. “Society” was represented by Ingrid Hoffmann, Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen (D); and Abbot Martin Werlen from the Benedictine Abbey of Einsiedeln. Specific workshops were organized on different topics to enable interdisciplinary discussions and interaction between the different participants. Throughout all sessions it was concluded that there is a strong need for private public partnerships to solve present and upcoming problems.

To increase information and to disseminate knowledge

The aim of the conference was to analyse and discuss the relationships between food, health and society, the three cornerstones of the field of nutrition. The final session again made clear that communication and information on nutrition has to be increased and broadened. Literacy and education in nutrition and health as well as a better understanding of consumer behaviour are a must. The private and public discussions as well as the ideas created amongst the participants have proven that exchange between the different actors, stakeholders and experts is a must. A follow-up on this conference was highly supported by a numerous participants.

To intensify research and to improve quality of life

Lifestyle and quality of life were buzz words throughout the whole event and were often co-related with a request for increased research investments. “Research in the Life Sciences, in the areas of food and nutrition, is extremely important to guarantee food safety and quality of life” commented Urs Hilber, director of the Zürcher Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften (ZHAW) in Wädenswil. Developing science based food declarations and labels instead of marketing and PR driven statements was another demand. Food has never been as safe as today. Nevertheless, scepticism with regard to new developments and food products increases steadily among large parts of the population. “This is true not only for the food industry but also agricultural products are affected, take as example our efforts to fight fire blight. Also within agriculture we need the collaboration of science, industry and society to develop publicly accepted solutions for a continuing improvement of our quality of life.” explains Lukas Bertschinger, Deputy Director and Director of Research at the Agroscope Changing-Wädenswil Research Station (ACW).

Better quality of life goes hand in hand with the improvement of living space. For almost 20 years the economic development initiative of the region Zimmerberg-Sihltal, a key partner of this conference, has been active. In the meantime it not only created the living space “Zurich Park Side” but has positioned the region as “think tank”, being home to numerous innovative organizations besides ACW and ZHAW.

This event has been organized by five institutions (Department Life Sciences und Facility Management of the ZHAW Zürcher Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften, research station Agroscope Changins-Wädenswil ACW, economic development initiative Zurich Park Side, Swiss Re Centre for Global Dialogue and the Knowledge and Technology Transfer (KTT) Consortium Whoch6).

Further Information on the event: www.swissre.com/cgd (what we do / events / past events)

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