

# FOODLINKS

Knowledge brokerage to promote sustainable food consumption and production: **linking scientists, policy makers and civil society organisations**



# Link or sink: taking an integrated approach to sustainable food systems

Professor Dr Han Wiskerke and Dr Bettina Bock explain how the FOODLINKS project aims to develop a broader, shared understanding of sustainable food production and consumption by linking together the collective expertise of researchers, policy makers and practitioners



LUNCH IN THE COWSHED



### Firstly, can you detail the aims and objectives of FOODLINKS?

**BB:** The project wants to develop new ways of closing the gap between researchers, policy makers and practitioners engaged in the field of sustainable food consumption and production. The gap that currently exists prevents new knowledge and insights being used in policy making and practice; at the same time researchers are often unaware of the questions and needs for knowledge that exists with policy makers and practitioners. More communication and collaboration would make science more relevant and more accessible, and support the effectiveness of policy and practice. The project convenes at a point where scientists, policy makers and practitioners experiment with various tools that facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experience.

### In terms of sustainability, how far do you feel Europe has come over the last 20 years, and to what extent do you believe there is room for improvement?

**HW:** Europe has made some big steps in reducing the environmental impact of food production caused by fertilisers and pesticides; it has more attention for animal welfare (housing systems, transport), and has regulated the protection of traditional regional products through its food quality policy – eg. Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG). But there is still a lot of room to improve the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the food system. And there is a *need* for improvement. Much more emphasis should be placed on sustainable and healthy diets. Diet-related diseases resulting from obesity and malnutrition are causing enormous economic



problems due to rapidly increasing healthcare costs. There is also enormous potential to support local/regional food economies by re-valuing public sector food procurement, and shortening food chains will, if organised well, lead to less greenhouse gas emissions caused by food transport. We use eight calories of fossil fuel on average to produce one calorie of food energy, and this enormous dependency will have to be reduced in light of fossil fuel scarcity. This in turn gives way for a potential rapid increase in food prices.

### How is the FOODLINKS project addressing and seeking to overcome these hurdles?

**BB:** The Communities of Practice (CoP) play a crucial role as they offer a place and occasion for the three groups to meet and discuss a particular domain or dimension of sustainable food production and consumption, that they themselves are engaged in as part of their daily work. Exchanging their knowledge and experience – along with their perception and interpretation of the issue at hand – results in a deeper understanding, offers new ideas for how to address problems and in doing so supports each of the parties in their daily work. In addition we hope to develop a broader, shared understanding of sustainable food production and consumption and a long-lasting collaboration.

### The project has almost been in operation for a year, and is set to run until December 2013. What is your current focus, and how do you rate the project's performance to date?

**BB:** Our current focus is to get the CoP working within a lively and active community, exchanging knowledge and experience, posing questions and formulating responses and,

in doing so, experimenting with different knowledge brokerage tools. We installed public platforms for the CoPs, which will also continue to exist after the closure of the project. Each CoP has a main and two co-facilitators who organise the CoP communication and take the lead in opening the conversation, proposing to use certain tools and devices, and keeping everybody actively involved.

### FOODLINKS consists of 14 partners (universities, regional and local governments and civil society organisations) from nine European countries. How is collaboration and the multinational dimension integral to the project?

**HW:** Collaboration between universities, governments and civil society organisations is integral to the project as it is about translating research findings into practical information for policy makers and other stakeholders. At the same time, this collaboration also helps scientists in understanding the kinds of issues and questions that governments and CSOs would like to see addressed by researchers. The multinational dimension helps to generate ideas and solutions for sustainability problems as we learn from different experiences and contexts.

### What are Knowledge Brokering Activities (KBAs) and how are you enabling stakeholders to gain a fuller understanding of their purpose?

**BB:** Knowledge brokerage tools are instruments that can be used to foster communication and exchange of knowledge and experience. One example for such a tool is interactive mind-mapping which can, for example, help to collect ideas about the various dimensions of a problem very quickly and with little effort. It also has the advantage of immediate visualisation.

### Finally, please feel free to add any further details you wish to mention.

**BB:** We aim at building communities that really make a difference in rendering our food system more sustainable. We hope that they become communities that function well beyond the duration of the project and that really support those engaged in sustainable food production and consumption to book results – be it as researcher, policy maker or as practitioner. For this, cross-border collaboration is essential – we therefore invite all interested in sustainable food production and consumption to take a look at our website and join the CoP platform!

# FOODLINKS: linking research with policy for a sustainable food system

The **FOODLINKS** project is experimenting with new integrative modalities in a bid to link research and policy making to ensure sustainable food consumption and production for the future

**THE WAY WE** produce and consume food has an enormous impact on our already resource constrained world. Of the total fresh water consumed by humans, roughly 65 per cent is used in food production, whilst approximately one-third of all urban waste is food related. What is more, the depletion of fossil hydrocarbons and other natural resources is a direct result of producing food energy.

Food production and consumption is a process that links environmental degradation, social (in)equality, education, and is the leading cause of health problems including malnutrition and obesity. It is an issue that permeates the many facets of our lives and the legislative policies can no longer externalise the environmental, social and economic costs.

Indeed, the production and consumption of food has forced itself onto the EU's scientific and political agenda and the transition to more sustainable food patterns has been set in motion. To close the gap between researchers, policy makers and practitioners engaged in this field, the FOODLINKS project was set up in the beginning of 2011. Over the course of three years, the project aims to develop and experiment with new ways of linking research with policymaking in line with more sustainable food consumption and production patterns. It is a collaborative project coordinated by Professor Dr Han Wiskerke and Dr Bettina Bock. The project incorporates a consortium

of 14 partners from nine European countries, including research organisations, public authorities and civil society organisations. In addition, the project is supported by an expert forum of 19 members from various backgrounds (such as Peri-Urban Regions Platform Europe, Slow Food, Sustain, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the European Public Health and Agriculture Consortium and several regional and national authorities) who advise the project at crucial stages. The various consortium members are complementary in their disciplinary and thematic expertise, and together will address the multidimensional aspects of food and the sustainability of its consumption and production.

## RECOGNISING THE LINKS

Food production and consumption policies have traditionally taken a sectoral approach. This means food production is largely considered in terms of agriculture and processing for the food industry, and food distribution is thought of in terms of transport and food selling for retail purposes. However, changes in population, diets and the heavy demand now placed on the Earth's natural resources mean we need to reassess this sectoral approach. A more integrated view of food consumption and production is necessary to recognise the links between food sustainability and the social, environmental and economic impacts. To do this, stronger collaboration is needed between scientific research and policy

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DISCOVERING HOW  
CHEESE IS MADE



making: disciplinary and departmental borders must be crossed; scientists, policy makers and other stakeholders must work together; and the definition of problems, the articulation of questions, the interpretation of results and the formulation of recommendations must be a collective process of knowledge exchange and learning.

A collaborative, integrated approach lies at the heart of FOODLINKS. The project aims to develop and experiment with new integrative modalities of linking research to policy making and thereby contributes to the establishment of new policy-relevant communities of researchers, policy makers and civil society organisations. These individuals and organisations together form what the project deems 'Communities of Practice' (CoP) who meet and discuss particular domains and dimensions of food: "Exchanging their knowledge and experience, and their perception and interpretation of the issue at hand, results in a deeper understanding, offers new ideas for how to address problems and, in doing so, supports each of the parties in their daily work," explains Bock. The objective is to develop a broader, shared understanding, and enhance the use of research insights in policies about sustainable food production and consumption.

### BROKERING KNOWLEDGE

The first step the FOODLINKS project seeks to link research and policy in the field of sustainable food consumption and production is an inventory of promising Knowledge Brokerage Activities (KBAs). KBAs enhance the utilisation and 'public value' of research, as opposed to producing knowledge purely for the purpose of research. This requires giving more attention to social learning and collective knowledge production, and is therefore about bringing knowledge together – or 'brokering' knowledge. Social learning processes usually take place in participatory settings where the actors involved work together to build a learning community through different forms of interactions.

FOODLINKS experiment with social learning via their CoP. These groups are made up of researchers, policy makers, and practitioners, and split into three groups. Each group focuses on one of three different dimensions of new food systems: short supply chains, public food procurement, and urban food strategies. The

CoPs use various methods and techniques to analyse these different food systems and, in doing so, extract and analyse the issues at the heart of the theme. "The members of a CoP attempt to identify a broad range of issues at stake within their theme, prioritise these issues, find out what information is available about these issues – research reports, initiatives, policies and campaigns, for example – then examine which solutions may or may not work, why and why not, and then articulate new issues and questions," explains Wiskerke.

The performance and usefulness of the applied KBAs in the sessions are evaluated and monitored by the FOODLINKS project team. This allows for any necessary adjustments of the applied techniques to be detected and amended in light of optimising the process. There are various factors and issues that can stymie the effective transfer and interpretation of research findings in policy making exercises, including different time plans, languages, and frames of references, definitions or prioritisation of problems, aims or objectives, and resources and capacities to act. However, all CoP members are invited to reflect on the added value of their participation, and assist the FOODLINKS project team in identifying tools, techniques and modalities for enhancing interaction.

The final stage of the FOODLINKS project is to disseminate the results to a wide range of actors and organisations, and to actively involve stakeholders to give feedback on the project's activities and outcomes. However, before this happens a key objective of the team at the end of the FOODLINKS project is to also have increased the size of the CoP so they are self-sustaining European networks. According to Bock, this is already beginning to happen: "The CoPs started as closed communities involving partners of the project. The idea was to go public after six months. The first CoP on short supply chains recently did so and immediately attracted new participants. It is interesting to notice that this in turn gives an important push in activity within the community," she highlights.

If this trend continues, the small CoP can gradually expand and become open for new members, establishing a community that functions well beyond the duration of the project, and makes a difference in ensuring the delivery of a more sustainable food system.

## INTELLIGENCE

## FOODLINKS

KNOWLEDGE BROKERAGE TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE FOOD CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION: LINKING SCIENTISTS, POLICY MAKERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

### OBJECTIVES

The project aims to develop and experiment with new integrative modalities of linking research to policy making in the field of sustainable food consumption and production, thereby contributing to the establishment of new policy-relevant communities of researchers, policy makers and civil society organisations and enhancing the use of research insights in policies to promote sustainable food systems

### KEY COLLABORATORS

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