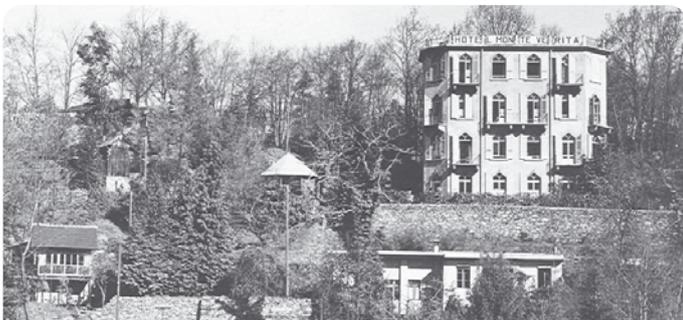


Tackling Food System Challenges

Thought leaders explore the role of interdisciplinary research and cross-sector collaboration in addressing food system challenges

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Monte Verità in former times

Tackling the challenge of providing a safe, sufficient, and healthy diet to everyone on the planet in a way that is socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable requires collaboration across disciplines, sectors and scales – an approach that is not easy either in theory or in practice.

Last year, an international group of thought leaders came together to share their experiences and exchange ideas on this topic with a diverse community; they discussed their methods, presented the food system topics emerging as most critical in their fields of study or practice, and discussed possible solutions. The group of 100 participants from 25 countries and 57 different organizations was convened in late June 2015 at Monte Verità by the World Food System Center at ETH Zurich (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology).

Monte Verità, the “mountain of truth,” is a special venue in southern Switzerland that has inspired new ways of thinking since the 1900s. The hilltop was first settled by a group of idealists from northern Europe who wanted to explore new ways of

living based on the principles of freedom, simplicity, cooperation and a respect for the natural environment. Though much has changed since then, the location and its unique atmosphere still provide the ideal backdrop for inspiring and creative discussions about ways of shaping a sustainable future.

“Monte Verità provides the ideal backdrop for inspiring and creative discussions about ways of shaping a sustainable future”

This gathering aimed to be a little different than an ordinary academic conference. Firstly, the participants came not only from academia but from a mixture of other sectors too. Representatives from nearly 35 universities and research institutions worked together with colleagues from international organizations such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Bioversity, *Sight and Life*, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, the International Food Policy Research Institute, government entities such as the Swiss Federal Office for Agriculture, and transnational companies including Nestlé, Bühler, and Syngenta. Secondly, the emphasis was intentionally on cross-disciplinary collaboration in order to learn from one another about viable solutions and identify emerging topics that need increased attention from partnerships that bridge traditional boundaries. The event was kept deliberately small in order to encourage participants to get to know one another and exchange ideas meaningfully in a relaxed and open setting.

Food for thought

We structured the conference in a way we hoped would highlight a broad range of emerging topics, where interdisciplinary col-

laboration and new cross-sector solutions are urgently needed. Sessions balanced succinct presentations with significant time for discussion among panelist and audience participants. The dialogue often reflected the diversity of the group, and offered valuable contributions that also illuminated an underlying challenge of working across “disciplines, sectors, and scales” – namely, that communicating in this varied terrain can be tricky! We learned, for instance that while many are working in the area of “resilience,” this term can connote different things if you come from an agricultural or from a nutrition perspective. Or that the significance of the term “wicked” in the context of food system problems was not immediately clear to everyone in the room. Herein lie some of the ways this work itself is challenging, but herein also lies the value of gathering and finding a space to have these discussions.

Embracing this challenge, a number of topics that will benefit from more robust collaboration did emerge, including:

- > Embedding “resilience thinking” into our ways of working and designing interventions. A new buzzword, “resilience,” has great potential for designing and building food systems that deliver food and nutrition security in the face of increasing environmental, social, economic and political shocks.
- > Addressing the “triple burden” of malnutrition, which refers to the increasing concomitant occurrence of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight and obesity within the same population. We can no longer consider these as separate issues of North versus South,



Conceptualizing, assessing and building resilience in food systems

Conference participant

“By attending this conference, I was able to briefly take a step back from my detailed work, take a deep breath, and remind myself of the bigger picture as well as where I fit in now and how I can help in the future. On a professional level, it was helpful to hear new perspectives on issues which I don't often discuss at work, and to see how relatively unrelated topics are in fact extremely inter-related ... These concepts and themes have already given me a lifetime of ideas ... It also helped that the energy of the conference was electric. You could feel the passion emanating from the speakers and audience members.”

or of rural versus urban areas. We are now seeing all these challenges playing out within the same countries, communities and even households. Indeed, much evidence now points to the fact that those who are born undernourished tend to have a higher risk of being overweight or obese as adults and of dying of non-communicable diseases.

- > Reframing the challenges of food systems as “wicked problems” – meaning that these are not only complex problems but ones for which there are no simple solutions, as each solution will in fact lead to new problems. Tackling wicked problems requires an understanding of causal factors and the engagement of stakeholders to understand their differing interests, needs and relationships. Power over decision-making becomes an important factor, thus developing interventions in food systems requires managing tradeoffs and negotiations.
- > Making “the invisible” faces behind food systems visible – namely, people involved in agricultural labor, food processing, transportation, retailing and food service. Our current system does not offer sustainable livelihoods to many of these actors, and they are often the same people at risk of food or nutrition insecurity.
- > Giving more attention to the potential of diversity (biodiversity, genetic diversity, dietary diversity) to support human nutrition, environmental health and resilience by building nutrition-sensitive agriculture, landscapes, value chains and markets.
- > The need to widen the availability of affordable, nutritious foods for the poor, particularly women and children. Opportunities exist to develop new and innovative food products that can be produced and distributed locally, to support value chains based on their nutritional contribution, and to look at the potential of traditional food products, crops and preparation methods that may have been lost over time.
- > Value chain analysis that focuses on identifying opportuni-



Negotiating how to manage trade offs when dealing with wicked problems

ties that create value for all actors, including measures to add value to products closer to the farm gate. This can help to create sustainable livelihoods but can also help reduce losses and spoilage.

The way forward

Undaunted by these challenges, conference participants were overwhelmingly enthusiastic for more. Feedback emphasized that the conference was exceptional in its diversity: in terms of topics discussed, disciplines represented, approaches to problem-solving, and experiences shared. The broad range of themes in plenary sessions encouraged everyone to move out of their comfort zones and make connections to bigger issues. The attendees appreciated the chance to actively participate in a multi-day workshop on assessing and building resilience in food systems, a cutting edge concept in food systems analysis, which provided people with new tools and methods to integrate into their work.

In general, the conference echoed the need for further collaboration across disciplines, sectors and scales and better integration of participatory approaches to engage stakeholders. The conference was a first step in what is envisaged as an international forum to build and expand a food systems community, create new and uncommon collaborations and drive innovation to build sustainable and resilient food systems for all.

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Further information

More about the conference and presentations is available at www.worldfoodsystem.ethz.ch.

The World Food System Center will continue this initiative under the banner of the “World Food System Forum.” Every two years an international event will take place at a different location around the world together with key partners. The next event is slated for mid-2017. Further information will be available at www.worldfoodsystem.ethz.ch.

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