

UNESCO Chair on World Food Systems – an open space without boundaries

16.02.16

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Nicolas Bricas of CIRAD (Agricultural Research of Development) is the Director of the UNESCO World Food Systems (WFS) Chair and the IPAD Masters Programme Co-Director. Damien Conaré of Montpellier SupAgro is Secretary General of the UNESCO WFS Chair. Nicolas is a co-investigator with SIID fellows [Prof. Michelle Holdsworth](#) and [Dr Rebecca Pradeilles](#) on a [research project](#) examining the relationship between food insecurity and weight status in African adult populations.

In this guest post, Nicolas and Damien discuss the role of the UNESCO Chair on World Food Systems (WFS).

The UNESCO Chair on World Food Systems (WFS) was founded in 2011 by [Prof. Jean-Louis Rastoin](#) (Montpellier SupAgro) along with a multidisciplinary group of teachers and researchers from various Montpellier-based institutions (France). The WFS Chair represents an open space without boundaries for research and exchange geared towards inventing and promoting alternative food systems.

The first precept is that, beyond being an economic sector, food is crucial in many countries worldwide (developing and formerly industrialised countries) where a range of processing, retail trade and restaurant micro and small businesses prevail. The industrialisation of agricultural and agrifood production threatens these activities, while above all jeopardizing global non-renewable resources and ecosystems. The food sector thus also represents a major environmental challenge in view of its contribution to oil and water consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss and the destruction of essential animal species, especially bees. The modern food system model is not sustainable, nor can it be applied globally, so a major overhaul is warranted.

Food is also a critical social issue from several standpoints. The primary function of food is often seen as related to ensuring health. There are still hundreds of million undernourished people in the world, mainly due to poverty, conflicts or disasters. Hunger is not simply a feeling of discomfort due to a lack of food, it also causes ill-health, which seriously handicaps people in their physical and mental capacities. The number of hungry people is actually declining—although too slowly—and over the last two decades the planet has been producing substantially more than required to fulfil global nutritional needs. Moreover, food, combined with other risk factors, is responsible for a growing number of new diseases, including diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, etc. All of these risks represent opportunities for developing a broad range of innovations:

selection of varieties for their nutritional quality, fortified foods, genetic testing for nutritional risk assessment, equipment designed for dietary management and assistance, food traceability and signalling, etc. A spectrum of products and services is opening, thus shifting the focus of food questions onto health issues, at the risk of overlooking other equally crucial concerns.

Food has always had a socialisation function. Hunting, producing, preparing and especially eating food are collective activities in all societies worldwide. A meal is a highly social activity, a time of synchronization, sharing and solidarity between community members, of building social hierarchies, controlling gluttony and learning respect for food. These many functions are currently being undermined in societies that reduce food intake to a mere individual act of consuming nutrients to fulfil the body's biological needs.

Food also has an individual and collective identity building function. The diverse range of foods consumed on Earth is associated with ecosystem diversity, while also being a question of cultural diversity, and even more so related to the diversity of cooking and eating habits. In a globalised world where certain food models prevail, there is a risk that some resources, knowledge and know-how will disappear. Cultural confrontations may not be on equal footing, but circulation and trade fosters the reconstruction and reinvention of food diversity.

Finally, food is a universe of sensuous pleasures and a fantastic field of artistic creation—gastronomy and culinary arts. This vast range of possibilities is now being addressed by consumers to cope with the threat of the industrialization of food production and promotion of functional foods. Fooding is fashionable, thus clearly highlighting a renewed enthusiasm for this everyday art.

Different food-oriented scientific disciplines correspond to each of these functions: economics are focused on food resources, use and trade; management on companies that utilise them; nutrition and dietetics on the biological functions of food; sociology on the social functions; anthropology on the collective identity functions; gastronomy on the hedonic functions, etc. Moreover, these competing disciplines often tend to be focused solely on the functions to which they correspond, with other functions considered as secondary. For instance, should one's biological needs be fulfilled before considering pleasure or cultural features? Nothing could be less certain! Disciplinary hyperspecialisation is accelerating with the proliferation of scientific journals, so it is now hard to have an overview of food issues and to consider all food functions in the diverse range of global settings. This is the first challenge for which the UNESCO Chair on World Food Systems intends to play a role—decompartmentalize approaches and offer specialists the potential to add their contribution to an entity of broader scope so that their ideas will be more widely disseminated.

This holistic view of food is now vital, as indicated by the success of training sessions organized by the WFS Chair: a seminar at the start of the university academic year offered by CIRAD and Montpellier SupAgro is open to all Master's candidates on contemporary food issues, and they also now offer an Executive Master's Degree programme 'Innovations and Policies for Sustainable Food' (IPAD). This latter programme provides an opportunity for engineers or Master's graduates to pool their often too specialized former training experience. The training sessions are deliberately multidisciplinary and designed to boost trainees' awareness on the issues and on the approaches of others. This is also the goal of the meetings organized by the WFS Chair: the annual symposium held yearly in Montpellier in late January, workshops offered in specialized symposia and conferences held abroad and co-organized with the international partners. These meetings aim to shift the focus of scientific debates towards broader contemporary issues so as to initiate dialogue between science and civil society in the general sense.

This broadening of the horizons without walls should not be limited to the scientific community. Other stakeholders have a major impact on food systems: private companies, including agricultural producers; policymakers on international, national and (to an increasing extent) local levels; NGOs, associations and unions; foundations with a growing influence in research and assessments aimed at finding innovative solutions; and finally informally organized groups of citizens taking initiatives to invent new ways of producing, trading or consuming. Initiatives to promote dialogue between scientists and these stakeholders have already resulted in collaborations in pilot projects (development of an agroecological and food policy for *Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole*, a project to create a model canteen at Montpellier SupAgro), in addition to future plans to publish specific media of each stakeholder.

The WFS Chair was granted the UNESCO label for a first 4-year term and its main financial support is currently provided by Agropolis Foundation and the Foundation Daniel et Nina Carasso. This led to the recruitment of a small permanent staff team, the launching of training and research activities and the promotion of dialogue between scientists and society in an international scientific network openly responsive to issues impacting Africa, Asia and Latin America. At the end of this first 4-year term, the WFS Chair was further endorsed by UNESCO for another 4-year term.

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The University of Sheffield
Western Bank
Sheffield S10 2TN
UK

[Contact us](#)

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