Opening Symposium of the Amsterdam Centre for World Food Studies

Key lessons and messages from the Opening Symposium for the Amsterdam Centre for World Food Studies:

- The ACWFS continues a long tradition of food and nutrition security research at VU with a strong interdisciplinary perspective
- Food and nutrition security is not limited to the developing world - the ACWFS should have a global focus
- There is no single actor who can address all the underlying causes of malnutrition - the ACWFS should foster partnerships
- Academic research is critical to evaluate policy options to improve food security - ACWFS researchers should engage policy makers with recommendations

The official opening symposium of the Amsterdam Centre for World Food Studies (ACWFS) took place at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam on October 12, 2017 and brought together a broad audience from academics, policy making, civil society, ACWFS partner organizations, and others. The symposium was an opportunity to mark the official opening of the new Centre and introduce its mission, strategy and main activities to a broad audience.

“what kind of policy of food and nutrition security is needed for the 21st century”

The director of the ACWFS Prof. dr. Remco Oostendorp, opened the event (click here for the program). He noted that there is a long tradition of food and nutrition security research at the
VU, originating with the former World Food Centre (SOW-VU) in 1977 as the institutionalization of a world food study started in 1972 for the Club of Rome. He explained how ACWFS sets itself apart from SOW-VU by not only preserving the valuable knowledge and main assets of SOW-VU, but further reinforcing interdisciplinary approaches including transdisciplinarity in research projects, bringing together more researchers working on food and nutrition security, and also being actively engaged in the educational activities of the university within this field.

The opening remarks were followed by two keynote speeches related to the topic of policy and research for food and nutrition security in the 21st century. Each speech closed with an interactive Q&A session.

“The big challenge of food and nutrition security is to have clear definitions and clear objectives”

The first keynote speaker of the symposium was Gerda Verburg, coordinator of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement and assistant secretary-general of the United Nations. She addressed the issue of the double burden of malnutrition that is a rising issue globally. She mentioned how malnutrition is caused by various underlying factors such as civil wars, natural disasters, disease outbreaks, inappropriate social policies and environmental problems. Due to the variety of factors involved no single actor can address all these underlying causes at once. She therefore emphasised the importance of ownership, inclusive approaches and collaboration.
between sectors, disciplines and across borders as a requirement to handle the rising challenges of malnutrition globally. Click here for the keynote address of Gerda Verburg

The second keynote speaker of the day was Professor Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy, Centre for Food Policy, City University of London and the first ‘Food Policy Professor’ of the UK. He addressed the importance of the distribution of power when focussing on food and malnutrition in the world. He argued that international food corporations have gained immense power in recent years becoming powerful actors, which cannot be ignored when discussing global food systems. Click here for the keynote address of Prof. Tim Lang

“Food companies are more powerful in framing the terms and conditions of the food sector than our governments”

Next the centre was officially opened with a speech by the Dean of the School of Business and Economics, Prof. dr. Willem Verschoor, who addressed the relevancy of the research performed at ACWFS in a global context where food and nutrition security is a rising concern. The opening speech was followed up by an opening remark by Dr. Melle Leenstra from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasising the importance of collaborations across sectors to ensure innovation and progress in the field of food and nutrition security. He also remarked that the interdisciplinary approach in both research as well as in its educational activities attribute to the key strengths of the ACWFS.
After a coffee break the keynote speech about the food security challenges in China followed delivered by Prof. dr. Huanguang Qiu of Renmin University, Beijing. He argued that China must make some important decisions balancing food security and ecosystem sustainability as well as ensuring that farm incomes in rural areas can keep up with the rapidly increasing incomes in other sectors. Click here for the keynote address of Prof. dr. Huanguang Qiu.

“The natural resources in China are limited and the policy makers must find a good balance in how these resources are allocated”

After the conclusion of the keynote addresses and Q&As, the director of the ACWFS presented the ambitions of the centre to foster interdisciplinary cooperation in research, education and outreach. He discussed the acquisition of externally funded research projects, development of interdisciplinary education, promotion of communication between researchers at the VU and representation of the VU in national and international food and nutrition security events as key activities for achieving the Centre’s ambitions.
The symposium concluded with a panel discussion with panel members Gerda Verburg, Tim Lang, Huanguang Qiu, Melle Leenstra, Joske Bunders (Athena Institute, VU) and Lia Van Wesenbeeck (ACWFS, VU). The panel members were also asked about their stance on a variety of statements such as research and agenda setting are too supply driven and transdisciplinary collaboration does not solve the conflicts of interest.

Is research and agenda setting too supply driven?

The audience was also invited to give their reactions to the various statements and panel members’ responses. The panel debate sparked various discussions which were continued over drinks in an informal setting in the foyer after the symposium ended.