



New paradigm: Quality

FAO's Agriculture Department begins 2006 with a new, broader mandate and a new unit, the Nutrition and Consumer Protection Division. The Department's Assistant Director-General, Louise O. Fresco, explains the changes and how they will improve FAO services to its member countries...

► *How has the Department's mandate changed?*

"Essentially, it has been extended to encompass the entire food chain - from 'farm to plate' - which covers everything from pre-production practices to the distribution of products to consumers. So, in addition to carrying out FAO's major programmes on agricultural production and support systems, the department is now responsible for its work on food quality and consumer protection, including the joint Codex Alimentarius programme with WHO. That work was formerly carried out by the FAO Economic and Social Department's Food and Nutrition Division (ESN), which has been transferred to AG as the Nutrition and Consumer Protection Division. The department's new mandate is quite innovative, because the integration of agriculture and food quality does not exist in most government institutions in FAO member countries. We may well lead the way."

► *What prompted the changes?*

"They are part of a reform process aimed at ensuring that FAO is relevant and effective in a changing global environment, and a response to the Millennium Development Goals. They also confirm and consolidate developments that have been taking shape for several years, both in the Organization's work and in the food and agriculture sector. We observe three notable trends today. First, global figures indicate that population growth is slowing down more dramatically than had been anticipated - people in developing countries are having fewer children and having them later. At the same time, the rate of economic development is increasing faster than expected, and demand for agricultural products is booming. With economic growth, we see rapidly changing food preferences and increasingly demanding standards of food quality. The third factor is the impact of agriculture on the environment, and of economic growth in general on our natural resources.



"Taken together, those trends indicate that we need to review our way of looking at the world. The challenges now are how to produce the kinds of foods and agricultural products people need (also from a health perspective), and how to achieve the best possible production systems - ones that minimize adverse impacts on the environment and ensure the highest rate of productivity. The agriculture and food sector must now look at the entire chain, from production to consumption, and including the environmental aspects. In the future, agriculture will not be governed so much by the supply side, as it has been in past decades, but very much by interactions between the demand and the supply sides, by new requirements and standards, and by new technologies.

"So we are witnessing a 'paradigm shift', if you like, away from tonnes, calories and hectares towards issues of quality - quality of life, quality of environment, and quality of nutrition. The food quality issue has undoubtedly come to the forefront in the public mind because of epizootic disease scares - the current avian influenza is symptomatic of that, and has made people acutely aware of the relationship between public

health and agriculture. Another aspect of the quality issue is the growing concern about the incidence of obesity, in developing as well as developed countries."

► *How has AG's recent work prepared for this new orientation?*

"Over the past three or four years, the FAO Committee on Agriculture [COAG] has reviewed development of the "food chain approach" for a safe and nutritious food supply, good agricultural practices, and the need for a global approach to biosecurity, which is the management of biological and environmental risks associated with food and agriculture. Food safety was also a major theme of a COAG paper on the impacts of globalization in livestock production.

"All these emerging thrusts in our work recognize that countries are linked in food chains not just at a national level but internationally. What is produced in Brazil will feed chickens in China, and parts of those chickens will be consumed locally, and parts may be shipped across the world. It's these encompassing networks that are shaping the future of agriculture and food. The food chain is not local, the Earth is really covered in food chains, to the point where every day everyone is linked to a larger complex. That also means that every citizen should be concerned about what happens in the rest of the world."

► *And what changes can countries expect in the services the department provides?*

"Our role is to assist countries in making important choices about the future of their agriculture and food sectors. Those decisions will reflect their national priorities, the consent of their citizens, and also the sense of responsibility that every country and government should have towards the longer term impact of agriculture on the environment. Politically speaking, we also recognize that the world is no longer divided into two major blocs. There is a greater sense of collaboration as well as diversity, of people wanting to preserve their identity and way of life. We cannot simply pass on blueprints or recipes - the idea of the food chain means different approaches in different countries and contexts.

"Our new mandate and our new Nutrition and Consumer Protection Division will allow us to consolidate the food chain approach and integrate issues of food quality, standard setting and nutritional information into production. I think everybody in the department is excited by this new role, and also aware of the great responsibility it carries. As time goes on, agriculture will employ an ever smaller percentage of the world's population, hence its "constituency" is shrinking. But every human on this Earth is a consumer of food so, really, the constituency of the Agriculture Department is everybody."

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