



PHOTO GUY ACKERMANS

Holistic food policy

‘To be properly prepared for the many challenges ahead related to sustainable food, the Netherlands needs to make a transition from agricultural policy to food policy. That requires a systems approach with attention to the entire value chain from production to the consumer, as well as to biodiversity, climate, animal welfare, food safety, health, poverty, trade, identity and participation. This holistic approach sounds appealing but it still has to be translated into a new form of governance. At the moment policy is dispersed over several different ministries. And an integral food policy is impossible without regional government bodies, civil society organizations, ordinary citizens and companies. A lot of thought is being given to innovative ways of developing food policy, both within and outside the EU. Several Dutch political parties argue for a ministry of Food. Personally, however, I don’t think a new ministry is the best approach to arriving at an integral food policy. Departmental reorganization always leads to political wrangling or a preoccupation with internal ‘nonsense’ in the civil service. Each reorganization cuts through existing linkages again. And there is a risk that in a large new ministry sustainability issues will get snowed under because of a lack of checks and balances.

So it would be sensible to explore other options too. Such as appointing a programme minister for food, without a ministry. Such a minister would approach negotiations in Brussels differently to a minister who is primarily defending the interests of the agriculture sector. Experience suggests, however, that in government circles in the Hague such ministers don’t achieve much.

So I think it’s an illusion to think you can design a simple governance model for holistic food policy. I would prefer to see a network organization – a kind of governance bypass that works around the ministries – such as the one set up to run the Delta programme. That kind of network organization has to bring together the ambitions and visions of various stakeholders working on food, make discussion of conflicts about values possible, stimulate innovative collaboration and develop long-term strategies. To do that it needs a firm political, legal and financial institutional base. Otherwise it will be all words and no action.’

Katrien Termeer, professor of Public Administration and Policy