

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Uniting against hunger

One in nine human beings regularly go hungry. At a recent Wageningen conference about the UN's sustainable development goals, international leading lights pondered how to tackle the problem. 'We must keep on raising this issue.'

TEXT MARION DE BOO/ALBERT SIKKEMA

In 2015, the United Nations launched 17 sustainable development goals. One of the most important goals is that in 2030 no one will go hungry anymore. In reality, the number of hungry people in the world has been increasing in recent years. The reasons, according to the UN, are the economic crisis, failed harvests due to drought and flooding caused by climate change, armed conflicts and the refugee migrations that result from them.

DIFFERENT CHOICES

How can we turn the tide? 'We must keep the issue on the political agenda and confront governments that see hunger as something normal,' said Lawrence Haddad, director of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), at the Wageningen conference at the end of August. 'If there is widespread hunger and undernutrition in a country, people start thinking that's normal, or a "curse". But it is neither. Hunger and undernutrition result from decisions and choices about the use of scarce resources. But you can make other choices too.' Haddad, winner of the prestigious American World Food Prize in 2018, was one of the keynote speakers at the international

conference *Towards Zero Hunger: Partnerships for Impact*, where 600 policymakers, entrepreneurs and NGOs gathered in Wageningen at the initiative of the centenarian university. They agreed on new collaborative efforts to banish hunger and promote food security and sustainable agriculture. 'The media, civil society organizations, you and I, we must all keep on raising this issue,' argued Haddad. 'We must provide the facts about the scale and the consequences of hunger and undernutrition. And we must help governments and business to combat hunger effectively.'

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Haddad's organization GAIN is already working on this. GAIN brings governments, businesses and civil society organizations together in alliances against undernutrition. The organization is running 10 programmes in Asia and Africa that aim to get more healthy food to the most vulnerable groups, and it does research on which approach works best.

821 MILLION PEOPLE

The problem is massive. One in nine humans (821 million) were suffering from hunger in 2017, chronically consuming too few calories to lead active, healthy lives. South of the Sahara, one in four people are undernourished. In Pakistan, only four per cent of all children get enough to eat. Worldwide, 151 million children are too small for their age on their fifth birthdays, and undernutrition is the cause of 45 per cent of all child deaths under the age of five. Collaboration with the business world is crucial to banishing hunger and undernutrition, said Ertharin Cousin, former director of the United Nations World Food Programme, at the Wageningen conference. Cousin: 'During my time at the UN, I helped people get access to food. Now I teach, at



PHOTO ALAMY

A small-scale farmer in Madagascar ploughs his land so he can plant a new rice crop to sell.

Stanford University among other places. I work on political issues and the intervention options for creating sustainable development and sustainable food systems.’ According to Cousin, only joint action has any chance of success. ‘You need all parties in sustainable development: the local community, local and national government bodies, international organizations, companies, scientists and the development NGOs.’ She sees a nice example in Rwanda. ‘DSM started a factory there producing highly nutritious food for children based

on maize, and working with the government, donors – the Netherlands among them – and an association of 10,000 small farmers who grow maize. With that kind of concerted action you can achieve a win-win situation. DSM is getting a bigger turnover, the farmers are assured of a market, and the children get healthy food.’

Several big companies were represented at the Wageningen conference, including dairy company FrieslandCampina and beer producer Heineken. They seek more and more collaboration with knowledge insti-

tutes and universities. In his keynote speech, Unilever CEO Paul Polman explained that companies will have to look differently at profitability and collaborative relationships with government and NGOs. ‘Nowadays, waste and pollution are often more costly than sustainable development. Deforestation and climate change are more expensive than the sustainable alternatives for food production. This creates a market for sustainable development. It is already the case that sustainable food production is Unilever’s main source of income. We buy more and more products from small farmers for a fair price, and we work with local partners,’ says Polman. ‘But Unilever can’t make palm oil production sustainable on its own; you need international coalitions to do that. The decisive factor is whether the financial sector wants to invest in this. Investors should put their money into companies that use natural resources sustainably. And regional development banks should concentrate on covering the backs of companies that invest in sustainable development, instead of financing development projects themselves.’ ■

www.wur.eu/zerohunger

WAGENINGEN MERCY CORPS

One of the new collaborations that took shape at the SGD Conference was between Wageningen and Mercy Corps. This humanitarian organization, set up in the US, has 5000 staff working in 40 developing countries, most of which are affected by conflicts and disasters. WUR and Mercy Corps are now writing a proposal for the Swiss government for a project targeting agricultural logistics and post-harvest processing in Myanmar. A sizable project is also due to start on big data and access to agricultural credit for African farmers. And there are plans for a joint proposal on sustainable agriculture in Niger. ‘Evidence-based’ is Mercy Corps’ motto, and with Wageningen on board the organization hopes to bring in the latest know-how, as well as to research the best approach to innovative projects.