
Module IV—Ensuring Safe and Health Food

Introductory Remarks

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This session is titled *Ensuring Safe and Healthy Food* and we have already touched upon issues of safety and the healthfulness of food and of diets. Presumably healthy diets and safe food are common goals that everyone would agree upon. There are clearly differences in terms of priorities across the world although some would argue that those priorities are becoming more common. For example, obesity rates—notoriously high in Canada, the United States and in the United Kingdom—are also increasing very dramatically in many lower-middle-income countries. So, for example, the estimate that I saw from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) was that the rates of clinical obesity, even in Latin American and Caribbean countries are now at 10% and increasing. Even in some countries of sub-Saharan Africa they are at 5%. So, we are seeing movement towards even more common priorities.

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social constructs.*

We have talked a lot about causes of food insecurity. The FAO estimates there are 842 million under-nourished people in the world and the number of food-insecure is clearly a lot bigger than that. And we have discussed the reasons, demand-side and supply-side factors—I have to get those words in, being an economist—and where we position biotechnology within that framework; I think that's a very important issue. And another issue that we have hinted upon, which for

me at least is an interesting thing and a good thing, is that health and safety are, as well as scientific constructs, also social constructs. So, what represents healthfulness and safety is not only defined in terms of rates of obesity and in terms of gastrointestinal infections for example, but about how people feel in terms of what is healthy and what is safe. That creates many challenges in terms of dialogue and in terms of communication, but also in terms of setting priorities. What may be regarded as safe and healthy to an Indian consumer may be different from the opinions of a Canadian consumer to some extent.

A few days ago, when thinking about this conference I came across an interview with Hugh Grant, CEO of Monsanto, in the *Financial Times*: “We’ve Bet the Farm On This.” Grant is from a Scottish farming family and in the article the challenge of heading Monsanto, particularly given its history, comes across. It contextualizes some of the discussions we’ve been having here. He asks: “Is a skeptical and frequently cynical audience prepared to listen? The mistake that companies like mine have made, but we’re not exclusive in the mistakes category, is the belief that good science will prevail.” Grant says that much of society doesn’t speak “science.” The debate has to move on and take account of the fact that we are shifting from what Grant calls a “trust-me” to a “show-me” society. A “trust-me” society is a paternalistic society that says, “Don’t worry about it, it’ll be fine, I know best. We have your interests at heart, this will work.” According to Grant, the “show me” society says, “I might not understand the data and that’s okay if I don’t. But I want to know that I can access it at any time and I want to know that my views are relevant to this debate.”

I don’t necessarily agree with everything he says. I’m not sure what the term “good science” means, for example. But, his context and the challenges he articulated are interesting.

Ensuring Safe and Healthy Food has three eminent speakers: Edilberto Redoña, Florence Wambugu, and Suzanne Harris.