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Healthy and Safe Food for the Future – A Technology Foresight Project in Central and Eastern Europe (Futurefood6)

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Purpose

Futurefood6 is a project developed to assist Central and Eastern European countries in reaching international standards throughout the whole food chain and, in turn, to enhance overall European competitiveness by developing an industry that stands for safety, diversity, sophistication and products of a high quality. It mobilises stakeholders from the food industry, research, academia, the state and public sector, decision-making bodies and the public to create a desirable set of future visions for the food industry in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) for 2020.

Securing Food Quality in Processes of Transition

The process of integrating the food industry of Central and Eastern European countries into the single European market presents significant economic and political opportunities and challenges. Food quality and safety are crucial aspects of human life and are, therefore, prime policy objectives of the European Union. Food quality and safety have to be secured through regulations for inputs, production processes, outputs, transportation, storage, packaging, labelling, documentation of origin and the like, for creating an adequate infrastructure for food markets and their smooth development. The food industries in CEE are undergoing sweeping ownership, technological, organizational and financial changes. The new decision-making processes should put a strong emphasis on safety and quality standards. Substantial changes in financial services, wholesale markets, commodities exchange, price information, transportation facilities and infrastructure are also needed. A foresight process is highly instrumental in tackling these complex issues. By bringing together the relevant stakeholders – business, researchers, policy-makers, consumers, NGOs – with their wide range of expertise and accumulated skills, it is possible to identify emerging technological and market opportunities and threats, consider science, technology and socio-economic factors in their entirety, and thus devise appropriate policies and strategies, based on consensus among these stakeholders.

The EC, within the Sixth Framework Programme, decided to support Futurefood6 as a foresight exercise dedicated to the definition of policies and strategies to promote and guarantee healthy and safe food for the future. Six countries in the CEE region were selected as the focus of the exercise. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) is the coordinator of the project.

Methodology

The project applies the UNIDO methodology for multi-country foresight, which inter alia involves the participation of high-level decision makers from governments, enterprises and the innovation sector during the whole exercise. Their involvement enables integrating the findings and recommendations into the policy guidelines for the targeted food industry. These are the key axes of the project's methodology:

1. Mobilization of a variety of actors from different stakeholder groups with experience in relevant economic, science and technology fields, business and societal issues as well as policy-makers from Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia to share their assessment and expectations for the future of the total food chain in these countries.

2. A socio-economic scenario building exercise to collect the views of business, consumers and other societal groups concerned with the food industry and the impact of different technologies. This exercise is designed to also identify the major drivers for the food chain.

3. Interviews with specialists from different disciplines and affiliations (industry, academic institutions, public authorities etc.) to gather information about the current situation of the sector, the industry's needs, problems and future prospects.

4. A survey on key technologies to address challenges associated with the innovation needs of the industry. Special attention is devoted to identifying and analysing all aspects relevant to food quality and safety. Traceability and sustainability issues are a specific concern throughout the project.

5. A vision building exercise to depict multiple possible future states, based on the views, experience and aspirations of stakeholders, consumers and other societal groups, business people, researchers and policy-makers.

6. Roadmapping to consider in detail implications for innovation for achieving possible future states and to identify appropriate actions for exploiting opportunities and alleviating threats.

Promoting a New Decision-making Culture for Food Quality

The project is expected to influence and shape the national policy of the countries involved, as well as the CEE region as a whole. The policy-oriented goals of the project are the adoption of new concepts along the whole food chain geared toward producing healthy and safe food and identification of areas with competitive advantages, strengthening long-term thinking on strategic issues, improved exploitation of science, technology and innovation (STI) results by policy-makers and businesses, establishment of a food quality and safety platform as a new way of networking and cooperation between the six CEE countries.

The main results of the project will be compiled in a final report with policy recommendations and a manual for assisting small and medium enterprises in implementing those recommendations. The project website presents the full range of the results and offers an opportunity for public online debate and collecting expert views and feedback. The exercise is expected to consolidate a knowledge community on future trends and visions for enhancing food quality and safety in the region.

The ultimate objective of the project is to promote a new decision-making culture among managers and policy-makers in order to place quality and safety issues at the centre of food chain management and to identify future key technologies and new business models for promoting the quality and safety requirements in food production in CEE countries.

The project will close with a final conference (27 January 2009, at Tech Gate Vienna, Austria) to provide an opportunity to evaluate the results of the project and discuss concrete recommendations for the future development of the food industry in the participating countries.

Sources and References

For more information, please visit the website www.futurefood6.com.

Also see the websites

www.unido.org/foresight

http://etp.ciaa.be/asp/home/welcome.asp and

http://cordis.europa.eu/fp6/dc/index.cfm?fuseaction=UserSite.FP6HomePage.