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Towards sustainable food research

RESEARCH PROGRAMMING IN FOOD AND HEALTH – INPROFOOD FINDINGS

The European Policy context

Trends in food and nutrition contribute to an increase in the prevalence of chronic conditions and impact negatively on health and quality of life. This requires pooling various types of knowledge together, and promoting dialogue and mutual learning between industry, academia and civil society already at the programming stage of research processes.

Various European and international initiatives draw the attention to the fact that research and innovation need to play an important role in addressing this challenge. In this context, the European Research Area's (ERA) has defined the need for "structured dialogue with research stakeholder organisations and relevant civil society bodies", as a means "to increase the performance, excellence and impact of Europe's Research and Development system". Also, the Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013-2020 emphasises the need to strengthen multisectoral action and partnerships.

Current processes and structures in Research Programming in Food and Health

A starting point in INPROFOOD's endeavour was to analyse (by desk research and interviews with actors) the current processes, structures and actors involved in research funding related to food and health at the country level (Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Scotland, Slovakia, Spain, UK) and at the EU level. Some project reflections include:

- In most countries examined, the national government sets thematic priorities for research.
- Dedicated strategies and programmes on food and health do not yet exist in most countries analysed. Much of the research uses the responsive (bottom-up) mode. Except for the UK, countries examined did not have an overarching strategy for food and health research, but often had broad strategies/programmes that included a significant food and health component.
- Stakeholder engagement is not required for research programming in the public sector across all countries examined. Stakeholder engagement to the extent of industry, government and research institutions is not uncommon; but the involvement of civil society actors or the public in general is a less common practice.
- Evaluation of proposals seems to be over dominated by previous experience, demonstrated through a publication record.

Design scenarios in Research Programming in Food and Health

Following the mapping of the current state of play, the project sought to investigate the desired scenarios envisaged by the stakeholders. Consequently, 35 European Awareness Scenario Workshops (EASWs) on research programming for a sustainable production of healthy food, were delivered in three series and held in 13 different countries, bringing together a broad range of stakeholders to develop shared visions of socially acceptable, trustworthy, and transparent conditions for developing health-related innovations in the food area. Some project reflections include:

- Decisions on topics to be funded in food and health should derive from societal demand and should involve stakeholders in a bottom-up process; representatives of all stakeholder categories, but mostly of the public and private sector should be included.
- Decision making on project funding should involve stakeholders other than researchers, scientists and funders (e.g. CSO), and should not be influenced by a dominating stakeholder and be independent and impartial, without conflicts of interest
- Stakeholders believe that projects funded should ensure the applicability of research results and that funding criteria should be clear and credible (and should include e.g. an ethically responsible attitude towards research, an orientation towards public interest, among others)
- Research results should be accessible to all stakeholders (preferably by open access); Public interest and social benefit should be more important than economic interests.
- Evaluations should be conducted objectively, impartially, without conflicts of interest and by independent, competent evaluators.

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www.inprofood.eu | info@inprofood.eu | klaus.hadwiger@uni-hohenheim.de | wilawien@wilawien.ac.at

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