How can the challenges facing global food and nutrition security be addressed? How can policy-makers in the EU and beyond ease the increasing pressure on the world’s food system?

These are the core questions that the “FOOD-SECURE” research consortium with partners from 13 countries has been tackling since it was set up in 2012.

On 12 October 2016, the researchers organized their final conference in Brussels, in close collaboration with the European Commission and in the context of the Food 2030 High Level Meeting. The FOODSECURE researchers displayed their research results to the scientific world and reflected with European policy makers how these results should affect and guide policies.

Over a hundred international guests from academia, as well as members of the European Commission, civil society organizations and the private sector participated in six thematic sessions and two panel discussions.

FOODSECURE was created to understand the global food system and to find solutions to increase its resilience. With funding of 8 million Euro, it has been the most ambitious research project on global food and nutrition security funded by the European Commission under the 7th Framework Programme.
SHIFTING POLICIES AND RESEARCH IN FOODSECURE
How the research had to change in five years

Starting in 2012, the FOODSECURE Project had one major goal: Understanding and modelling the world’s food system, and to analyze policies with impact on global food and nutrition security. “We started with a very static framework set out at the world food summit in 1996 but we needed to adjust it”, tells Hans van Meijl (FOODSECURE coordinator). “The framework did not match reality”.

“When we started the project about five years ago it was in the aftermath of the world food crisis”, remembers Joachim von Braun, scientific project coordinator. “We quite quickly understood, that food, agriculture and nutrition in Europe and worldwide had become a lot more complex than we thought. So we needed to formulate new frameworks and pool new data to respond with new models”.

Through research, modelling and case studies, food security could be defined a lot more accurately. “The four pillars of food security, namely food availability, access, utilization and stabilization, as well as the different dimensions of time and space, they are all interlinked in a dynamic way. Therefore, you need a coherent set of policies, to deal with food and nutrition security at all levels”, tells project coordinator Hans van Meijl.

This is what FOODSECURE created over the last four years and presented to policy makers at the FOODSECURE Final Conference 2016.
On the policy panel of the conference on “EU policies and global FNS”, Jo Swinnen from the Catholic University (KU) Leuven and moderator of the discussion summarizes “The key message of all the work we have been doing in the past four years is that the world’s agri-food systems have been dramatically transformed. We have had major institutional reforms, restructuring of value chains, growth of standards, with large, complex and heterogeneous implications for food and nutrition security.”

From the very start, FOODSECURE involved not only scientists from different fields but also civil society actors, stakeholders and EU policy makers to ensure that the research results can be put into concrete policy actions. Wolfgang Burtscher from European Commission’s Directorate General (DG) Research and Innovation, the direct funder and implementer of the project, concludes: “To realize the complexity and the need to interact is one of the most important recommendations. But, at the same time, as we know from our life experience, the most difficult. To make policy makers interact, researchers have to interact across different fields of their normal responsibilities.”

Another issue raised during the conference related to one core area of FOODSECURE research; the volatility of food prices and the growing uncertainty that farmers and producers are facing.

“The importance of having very good quality public information and very good quality crop forecasts, is central in order to resolve this type of problems”, explains Maximo Torero from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). But, climate change puts additional pressure on food and nutrition security and contributes to the growing uncertainty and complexity.

This point was addressed repeatedly during discussions at the conference. Tassos Haniotis from DG AGRI (Directorate General of Agriculture) stated “there is a tension between the economic and environmental priorities of agriculture worldwide. And we need to find ways where we make them work together instead of competing against each other”. The researchers equipped policy makers with tools to predict the impact of actions taken and to identify the most effective strategies. As Jean-Pierre Halkin from DG DEVCO (Directorate General Development Cooperation) highlights: “One of the greatest assets of FOODSECURE is that they are providing us with a full toolbox of modernity. This allows us to distinguish between what is a good intention versus what has a scientifically proven impact.”

Four scenarios of possible futures have been developed by researchers in the FOODSECURE project. Thus they can show the potential impact of various combinations of policy measures.
The FOODSECURE research consortium developed a framework which allows a qualified look into the future. But Hans van Meijl, project coordinator, emphasizes “the science policy dialogue has to go on. We have to think further about the new framework we developed, how we can implement it. The toolbox we have developed is the first step to get from the micro, household level to the global level. Many improvements in that area are still needed.” Joachim von Braun adds “what Europe needs is a food policy and an umbrella under which many new projects under the framework programmes can be placed. Without an umbrella like FOODSECURE has prepared, this would be going into too many different directions and would become incoherent. We need a structured framework for the dialogue between science and policy in the fields of food, nutrition and agriculture, such as an international panel on food, nutrition and agriculture, like the international panel on climate change.”

795 million people in the world still suffer from hunger. Many more still do not have enough and adequate food to lead a healthy active life. Food and nutrition security is one of the most pressing issues in the world. With the number of people on the planet growing, agriculture has to produce more food with fewer resources. Policy-makers need to take action. With FOODSECURE the first steps have been made but there are still many more to follow.