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Green Week 2019: 11th Global Forum for Food and Agriculture: Intelligent solutions for sustainable agriculture

In the last 50 years global food production has trebled. Nevertheless, 821 million people are starving and over 2.5 billion are undernourished. The world's population continues to grow and requires more and more resources, such as water, land and energy. Solutions are needed that will enable agriculture to increase yields while reducing the burden on resources and the environment. In that context the digital transformation offers great promise. But how can every farmer be given access to this technology and make use of it? And how can data security and control over one's data be guaranteed? These were two of the main topics debated at the 11th Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA). More than 2,000 participants representing politics, business, science and society attended 14 panel discussions and two high-level panels in order to exchange views. This was also the first time that emerging startups had an opportunity to present their digital products and services at the GFFA's Future Forum. Scientists from a number of research institutions also presented their work on digital solutions at a 'Science Slam'.

Speaking at a high-level panel of the European Commission, EU Agricultural Commissioner Phil Hogan lamented the gaps in broadband coverage in Europe: many rural areas were still lacking services in this respect. "This not only threatens their ability to compete but also the economy in these regions", said Hogan. Not only should EU member states include digitalisation in their policy planning, but they should also ensure that programmes and technologies come to fruition and are implemented, he added.

Federal Minister of Agriculture Julia Klöckner, who in reference to the World Economic Forum said the GFFA was the 'Davos of agriculture', offered a clear idea of the future: "I want to make my ministry the benchmark for all things digital in the federal government." The minister plans to earmark 15 million euros annually for this purpose between 2019 and 2022. The object is to set up digital test beds at farming units all over Germany to find out what digitalisation can achieve in practice – and how it can help to save resources, protect the environment, ensure livestock health, reduce workloads and further consumer protection.

Her counterpart, the Australian minister of agriculture David Littleproud, offered some examples. Four states in Australia, which has suffered extreme drought, are using satellite technology to measure how grazing sheep impact on vegetation, whereby the animals are equipped with a GPS transponder. When livestock is slaughtered scanners are employed to measure meat quality. This method of independent quality assessment helps to reduce conflict between producers, the processing industry and consumers. "We are investing heavily in digitalisation and agriculture. And it is showing results: for the first time in my life farming has become sexy and rural areas have become popular with young people again", Littleproud said.

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, the EU's candidate for post of director general at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), also supported preparing young people for the digital revolution. It was important no one was left behind. "In many parts of the world we have an ageing society, so we must ensure that older farmers get access to new technology too", said the former director of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).

At a high-level panel of the FAO, José Graziano da Silva, the current director of the organisation, emphasised that digitalisation would create opportunities for smallholders. They account for around 90 per cent of farming units around the world and some 56 per cent of food production. However, it was almost impossible for many



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smallholders to sell their products because they had no access to the markets. For Graziano da Silva internet technology was key. "With access to the web, farmers can sell even small quantities on the market and get a better income", the director general of the FAO said.

China's Vice Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs Qu Dongyu was of the same opinion. China aims to eradicate starvation and total poverty by 2020. His government is promoting the use of mobile phones and high-speed internet in rural areas and in particular wants to increase online trade, which is already a booming market. Specially organised trade fairs offer apps which young farmers can use to link up with consumers in the cities. "I live in Beijing and can order my mother's homemade products", the vice minister said

Despite the opportunities digitalisation offered one should not underestimate the risks of platforms generating and exchanging data, warned State Secretary of the Berlin Senate Department for Consumer Protection and Anti-discrimination Margit Gottstein. "Whoever is in charge of data can exercise decisive influence on value chains." Social media had already shown what could happen and had already achieved full coverage. Similar things could happen in the farming sector. Gottstein cautioned against a further concentration of power, for example among seed producers or manufacturers of agricultural equipment for instance.

State Secretary of the Argentinian Agro-Industry Luis Miguel took the same cautious view. In his country, which is six times the size of Germany, 34 million hectares of arable land are devoted to crop-growing annually. "Intelligent" machines make sure that at harvest time farmers know how much they need to plant the following year. But what happens to all the data? "In March we will be introducing an online platform and asking companies about the data their machines collect and what they do with it", said Etchevehere. Companies who take part and volunteer to cooperate openly will be rewarded with a seal of approval.

"We have always said that data does not belong to the company but to farmers, and that it should only be used for the purpose for which it was requested", said Liam, Condon, a member of the board of Bayer AG. The head of the Crop Science department assured those present that the data his company collected was not used for developing algorithms and was not passed on to third parties. Andreas Dörr, a farmer, who has been using digital technology on his 1,000-hectare farm in the Rhön region since 1998, preferred to see the practical side: "Where a leasing agreement is concerned, for instance, I find data security to be very important. But if the issue is data from interconnected machines and that my app helps to improve detecting weeds or that a farming equipment manufacturer uses my data to improve his products, then I have no problem with that."

As in previous years, the 11th Berlin Agriculture Ministers' Conference represented the political high point of the three-day event. For the first time in the history of the GFFA Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel delivered a speech to the agriculture ministers of 74 nations and representatives of numerous international organisations. The chancellor emphasised the opportunities that digital transformation presented. She also highlighted the issues of combating starvation around the world and the need to ensure that sustainable agriculture helped to achieve the aims of the Paris Climate Accords. For many countries the digital transformation was a giant step forward that brought with it a huge process of cultural change, Merkel said. The chancellor called for rules and a framework to assure the rule of law. This would have to be agreed at international level

In their closing communiqué the representatives of government pledged to find solutions to reduce the existing gaps in broadband coverage and improve access to digital technologies in the farming sector. To achieve this the FAO aims to put together a concept for an independent international Digital Council for advising countries on the digital transformation and furthering the exchange of ideas and experiences. Furthermore, in cooperation with other stakeholders the UN organisation is to assess the opportunities and risks of digitalisation for agriculture and rural areas, and develop methods to determine levels of digitalisation in individual countries and regions around the world. Using this Digital Diagnostics system it will then be possible

to adapt solutions for each particular region. “The decision to establish an international Digital Council is a breakthrough”, said Federal Minister Klöckner as the conference came to a close, and promised to continue the discussion at the GFFA 2020.

The Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA) has been held at the International Green Week Berlin since 2009. Over three days high-ranking experts from around the world meet at this conference to discuss the major issues concerning the world's food and farming industries. This year the main theme of the conference was ‘Digital agriculture – Intelligent solutions for tomorrow's farming industry’.