

AGRICULTURE RESEARCH BETWEEN TRADITION AND NEW CHALLENGES.

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Dear honourable guests,
Distinguished colleagues
Ladies and gentlemen

As the acting president of the umbrella association of all German scientific agricultural societies, which in total have a membership of more than 20.000 colleagues, I would like to congratulate the Academy of Agriculture of France sincerely to this outstanding anniversary.

250 years is a remarkable achievement, given the fact what has changed in France, what has changed in Europe not only science wise but also from a political and institutional point of view. Congratulating an institution, however, is somewhat odd and thus I would like to thank and congratulate the colleagues who have carried the torch of agricultural research over the years, decades and centuries.

When we look back 250 years, the main reason to institutionalise agricultural research was a very simple one: prevent hunger, enable the people to produce enough food of decent quality. This happened in the wake of the industrial revolution and some historians argue that the increase in agricultural production at that time in Europe was a foundation of the technical and industrial revolution, which followed.

The founding of research institutions totally devoted to agriculture in, what is now Germany, happened around the same time, however, the main impetus came after the widespread famines at the beginning of the 19th century following weather extremes caused by the eruption of the volcano Tambora 1815 on an Indonesian Island. Agriculture as a University discipline was only established in 1862 at the University of Halle-Wittenberg, which is by chance, the University where I come from.

But let's get back to the challenges at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. Given the fact that production was limited a major focus was on the field and maybe on the farm level. Production per hectare or per animal – be it milk or meat – was at centre.

It was important to include the rapidly emerging knowledge in the basic sciences into the new discipline of agricultural science. Agricultural science has been enormously successful. The increase in production is absolutely unprecedented in history apart from a few examples of irrigated systems.

So what has changed and what challenges do we face as agricultural scientists and agricultural institutions now and in the future? One challenge is comparable with the situation 200 to 250 years ago. Include knowledge of advances in basic science in zoology, botany, biochemistry, molecular biology but also economics in agricultural research. The research topics still focus on producing enough food with high quality, but additionally the effect on the natural environment must be as small as possible. Much more than 250 years ago, we are confronted with global developments like climate change and the demand for renewable energy. Those questions cannot be solved by agriculture research alone, but require an interdisciplinary approach and has to be addressed by very different disciplines outside the traditional agricultural sciences. Geography, resource management or applied botany are able to make important contributions. Our obligation, however, is to enhance the understanding between such different areas, to comprehend and always to ask ourselves and the various disciplines if the solutions suggested will really stand up the last and ultimate test of agricultural research. Increase production, enhance quality of products and minimize effect on the environment.

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The ultimate proof will not happen in the lab or in the field trial, the ultimate proof is not an increase in impact points, or the amount of research money collected by a person or an institution.

The ultimate proof happens on thousands of fields and in thousands of stables in different regions and environments as we speak. If it is not reaching practical farming in one-way or the other, it is useless.

When we try to imagine how life will be in the year 2260, when agricultural scientists will celebrate the 500-year anniversary of the academy of agriculture of France our imagination and fantasy is stretched to the limits.

We don't know which books they will read, if they read books at all.

We don't know what cars they will drive, if they drive cars at all.

We don't know to what music the people will listen, if they listen to music at all.

But one thing we know for sure. Even in 250 years time people will have to eat and agriculture is very likely to be as important as it is now and as it was 250 years ago.

I would like to end with a quote by the Harvard anthropologist Timothy Weiskel:

There is no such thing as a post-agricultural society”.

We should never forget that.

Again I would like to congratulate the Academy of Agriculture of France to this great anniversary, I am convinced that agricultural sciences and agricultural scientists have now and will have in the future an important role to play in the sustainable development of the world. It is our obligation to carry the torch.

Thank you very much