



Collectively foreseeing future issues: *Prospective strategy* contributes to the Agriculture and Food Systems' 'Futures Studies' Club

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 March 2010

Received in revised form 24 June 2010

Accepted 29 June 2010

Keywords:

Prospective

Futures Studies Club

Agri-food sector

BASF Agro France

Sustainable development

ABSTRACT

The Agriculture and Food Systems' 'Futures Studies' Club, created in 1995 and spearheaded by BASF Agro France is in its 15th year. The Club has become a regular meeting place for the players of the agricultural and agri-food systems from the farmer to the consumer and a place to debate about their societal issues. It has addressed a dozen subjects of futures studies since it was created in 1995.

BASF Agro France and the Club's members, mainly the company's clients, aim to understand and anticipate the changes that might in the future affect the agricultural world and the players of the agribusiness sector: suppliers, distributors, agri-food business, and retailers.

To that end, free dialogue and debate between members in an atmosphere of mutual trust were strongly encouraged, which guaranteed the richness of the discussions and the pertinence of the wrap-ups and the conclusions drawn from them. Appropriate tools from what can be called *prospective strategy* or *strategic prospective* (coming from the French school of *stratégie prospective*) are used to reach a valid conclusion through a crystal clear group process.

Members of the Club bear witness to the input and benefits gained by participating in the Club: prioritising issues, confronting and validating ideas, possible response leads, operational added value, whether to consider strategy or management. BASF Agro France follows through on the direct and operational conclusions, feeding its strategy, projects and programs, for example by contributing to a corporate vision which fully integrates sustained development.

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1. Introduction

The dynamics and the strategic context of the agriculture and food sector, and its companies and organizations, have been constantly evolving for many years. This evolution has been punctuated by repeated reforms of the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy), lengthy negotiations within the WTO (World Trade Organization), emerging worries of the general public concerning health hazards, changes in consumer behaviour, the increasing role of nature protection non-governmental organizations (NGOs), a chaotic evolution of the prices of farm produce on certain markets, complicated interactions between agricultural production and certain markets such as the energy market, questions provoked by the uncertainties linked to climatic changes, debate on technological innovations such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs) or the future nanotechnologies...

Because of the tendencies and uncertainties related to these factors, and the increasing complexity of their interactions, a more formal study is absolutely essential to anticipate the possible futures. Of course, each company may, within its own structure, give some thought to the said possibilities. Indeed, many now do, but the complexity of the socio-economic, social and competitive factors combined with their increasing interactions encourages renewed, collective approaches that open onto society and the world in general.

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The Agriculture and Food Systems' 'Futures Studies' Club, created in 1995 and spearheaded since by BASF Agro France,¹ is in its 15th year. Originally composed mainly of BASF Agro France and its direct clients, co-ops and agribusiness companies, the Club has now become a regular meeting place for the players of the agricultural and agri-food systems, where they debate about their societal issues.

The Club has addressed a dozen subjects of futures studies since it was created in 1995, five of which in the past 10 years. The insert entitled The Futures Studies Club from 2001 to 2009 gives a synoptic view of the subjects. In fact, the Agriculture and Food Systems' 'Futures Studies' Club's work² and its processes over the first 5 years were summarized in an article published 10 years ago [1,2]. A report was later published for the following 5 years from 2000 to 2005 [3].

The 'Futures Studies' Club from 2001 to 2009 5 shared questions about their sectors' future

- What farmers for what farming in France towards 2010? (2001–2003)
- Certainties and uncertainties of the Luxembourg agreement and consequences for farmers' expectations and behaviors? (2003–2004)
- What techniques for tomorrow for farm production in France, and how will they be accepted by the French public? (2005)
- In the context of increasingly liberal agricultural exchanges what major issues for 2015 and what necessary responses from French agriculture? (2006–2007)

This period of 15 consecutive years, very long for a group like this which brings together companies and professionals of varied origins, justifies a look back, organized along the following three lines of description and evaluation:

- How does the Club work? How has it evolved over time, and why?
- What are the main benefits to the members of the Club? Which benefits are analyzed through the testimonials and assessments of the managers themselves?
- For what reasons has BASF Agro France continued to spearhead the group for 15 years; i.e., what was learned and what is the added value for the company itself?

2. How the Club works and how it has evolved since 1995

The Agriculture and Food Systems' 'Futures Studies' Club has been supported by the CEO of BASF Agro France in person since the very beginning of the program (the first two-day seminar in 1995). Even though the CEO has changed in the past 15 years, this program has continued.

The first BASF Agro France CEO,³ who launched the program in 1995, wanted not to repeat the 'blindness' of the firm and the sector which occurred a few years before, when they were unable to anticipate the big changes which took place in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in Europe in 1992. The CAP, as one of the most important European policies, organizes and orients very strictly the crop markets. It thus has very important economic consequences on the markets of both nutrients and pesticides for agriculture; in other words, the BASF Agro market.

The results and outcomes of the first years of operation of the 'Futures Studies' Club were very positive: better understandings, anticipation, collective thinking, and better linkages between BASF and its clients, as evidenced by direct testimonials from four of the members (see further).

These results and positive outcomes have been maintained throughout these 15 years, if only to face new changes and challenges (and renewed forecasting questions) which have emerged through the period. Included are, for instance, issues such as food safety, environmental protection concerns, sustainable development, and changes in international regulations.

2.1. A major shared objective, unchanged throughout the past 15 years

The aim for BASF Agro France and Club members, the company's clients for the most part, remains the same: to understand and anticipate the changes – of whatever nature – that might in the future affect the agricultural world and the players of the agri-food system: suppliers, distributors, agro-processing industry, and retailers. To that end, dialogue and debate among members in an atmosphere of mutual trust were strongly encouraged; freedom of speech, ensured. This combination guaranteed the richness of the discussions and the pertinence of the wrap-ups and the conclusions drawn from them.

¹ BASF Agro France is the agro-chemical branch (especially pesticides) of the BASF Group. The French market is currently the first among the European markets for these products.

² The Club covers mainly large-scale farming (grain and oil-protein crops), but the importance of intermediate consumption between different branches of the system, for example, the grain consumed for animal production, widens the field of analysis and of benefits to a large part of the agricultural world and to the agri-food business downstream.

³ The CEO of BASF Agro France was also well aware of new challenges for agriculture that occurred in the countries of Europe, few years before coming to France, such as for instance the importance gained by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially in the environmental field.

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