

**D**r Nico van Belzen was named director general in 2012 of the International Dairy Federation, the multi-national non-governmental organisation. This year, the IDF's World Dairy Summit is being held in Tel Aviv, Israel, 27-31 October. He spoke with *Dairy Industries International* about ongoing issues in the sector and what he sees as key challenges.

**Q. What do you see as the biggest issues for FIL-IDF?**

For me, the biggest issue is to help the dairy sector prepare for a future where food will be judged not only for its nutritional and sensory properties, but also for its environmental impact. As the growing human population increases the pressure on our environment, it is important to balance nutritional benefits with environmental costs. Being nutrient dense and providing key micronutrients and high quality protein well suited to our omnivore physiology, dairy has an important place in the diet both today and in a sustainable future.

The dairy sector has been at the forefront of measuring and reducing the environmental impact of livestock – for instance through the work of the IDF Standing Committee of Environment and through the Global Dairy Agenda for Action, where IDF collaborates with the Global Dairy Platform, the Sustainable Agricultural Initiative and regional dairy organisations like EDA, Esada and Fepale. Also, IDF is representing the global dairy sector in the FAO-led initiatives Global Agenda for Sustainable Livestock and Livestock Environmental Assessment and Performance (LEAP) partnership.

On the nutrition front, new data such as the different effects of saturated fats from dairy and other sources on cardiovascular disease risk have to be brought to the attention of policy makers. Leveraging the knowledge of our National Committee experts, IDF is well placed to represent the global dairy sector with FAO, Codex, OIE and other intergovernmental organisations.

**Q. How did your background prepare you for the current role?**

My training as a molecular cell biologist and biomedical researcher provides a solid basis for understanding and communicating IDF's contributions to the issues

# Sustaining the momentum



**The International Dairy Federation's director general, Dr Nico van Belzen says global dairy has to prepare for the future with sustainable methods of production**

facing the dairy sector in the areas of nutrition, food safety, food standards, animal care and environmental sustainability. I'm making up for my lack of formal training in economics, trade and farming by reading dedicated journals.

I've worked for a dairy company from 1998 to 2003 as R&D manager, mostly on bioactive ingredients from milk. My previous position as executive director of ILSI Europe provided experience in managing an organisation similar to IDF, as well as a large network with intergovernmental organisations, academia and the food industry.

*Dr Nico van Belzen*



**Q. How has the dairy market changed internationally, and how is that having an impact on multinational organisations such as IDF?**

The dairy market is changing from supply-driven to demand-driven. Instead of asking ourselves what to do with the milk produced, we are looking how to produce more in a sustainable way to meet the demands of a growing world population.

Globalisation and large-scale integration of the dairy industry have changed the dynamics of the dairy sector in many countries, influencing some of IDF's National Committees. While maintaining its country-based membership structure, IDF will adapt to these changes.

**Q. Where do you see the organisation in five years and how will it get to that point?**

IDF will have broadened and deepened its interaction with intergovernmental organisations, as well as its collaboration with other dairy organisations, to optimally represent the dairy sector with global policymakers in nutrition, food safety, food standards, animal care, environmental, economic and social sustainability, along with other technical and scientific areas relevant to dairy.

**Q. How has the issue of raising standards for dairy quality affected the IDF?**

IDF has been at the forefront of raising international standards for dairy quality since its inception; the proceedings of the first Federation meeting in 1903 have a section entitled "Hygiene of the milk and milk products". IDF has served as a model for intergovernmental organisations that raise standards for all foods such as Codex.

Codex standards are developed through an open and transparent intergovernmental process. International NGOs can also participate in this standards setting process, and IDF is the only NGO that brings the consensus view of the global dairy sector to the table. Thus, IDF is a critical cogwheel in this process through which international food standards are harmonised and dairy trade is facilitated around the world. IDF has been the sole NGO that has provided the technical leadership that led to 34 dairy commodity standards at Codex level. These standards have become the reference points for the



*Dr Nico van Belzen speaking at SDDP 2012*

manufacturing and trade of a wide range of dairy products.

Another important aspect is analytical test methods, where IDF collaborates with ISO. These help the dairy sector to manage all aspects of the supply chain, including raw milk payment to farmers, herd improvement, manufacturing process control and optimization, export and import certification, food safety and truth of labelling. The global impact of IDF/ISO analytical methods is illustrated by the fact that many of these methods are referenced in national and regional regulations, and that over 60 have been adopted by Codex. These methods have become the international references for the testing of milk and dairy products.

Whereas IDF helps all countries by seeking global consensus on standards for dairy quality, IDF's current resources do not allow for assisting countries on an individual basis. The best way for countries to benefit from IDF's work is to join the Federation and help shape the global operating environment for the dairy sector.

**Q. What do you think is your biggest achievement?**

I would like to reach a stage where all decision makers in matters related to dairy, both (inter) governmental and commercial, would consider IDF's opinion in every decision related to the Federation's areas of work. IDF's impact would be



such that Federation membership is seen as essential for all countries that produce milk and import dairy products.

**Q. What does a typical day look like for you?**

To avoid traffic jams I'm usually the first to arrive in the office, and my first hours are mostly spent on creative work, for instance on our strategy refresh. I have weekly meetings with my colleagues to help them progress IDF's scientific, technical, communication and administrative work. As IDF's Board and membership are spread over all time zones, much communication is done by email. IDF's location in Europe, close to the headquarters of FAO, OIE, WHO and ISO, allows for relatively easy phone and face-to-face contact with representatives from these organisations. **DI**