

HCF: Safety and Sustainability

“We need a global approach when addressing the sustainability issues of the chemical sector. The chemical industry plays a key role in securing the well-being of people and the environment. Global commitment also generates results locally,” stated the moderator of the session, Mr Alain Perroy, the Executive Director of Cefic.

The panel approached the issue of safety and sustainability from various angles, and significant points were presented. It became clear that sustainability is a fundamental business driver in today’s world: companies that innovate are those that will remain most profitable. Access to finance is difficult, especially in times of recession, and sustainability is one of the key criteria when access to credit is considered.

Safety and sustainability must and can coexist. The chemical industry is expected to speak for itself – and put its words into practice. Such openness has to go beyond legislative requirements.

What applies to the European economy in general also applies to the chemical industry; the future success of European economic development needs to be based on the three pillars of the Lisbon Strategy: high environmental standards, adequate social conditions, and economic success. All three pillars are equally important – they are drivers for sustainability. It is also important to take sustainability into account throughout the entire life-cycle of products. Innovation is crucial. Another crucial element is to include the whole supply chain in the process.

We are living in an ever more demanding society with numerous targets to reach simultaneously, which requires global decision-making. Declining natural systems along with increasing population and consumption mean that sustainability needs substantial change, which, in turn, creates uncertainties. There is a need for a new business model: sustainability is not a status, but a process that needs to be improved. We must understand the concept through integrated research and by using a cross-disciplinary approach. We must improve existing products and processes by sharing best practices, for example, in dialogue with participants in the entire value chain, with authorities, and social partners. Initiatives for reaching these goals already exist, such as the Long-term Research Initiative (LRI), Responsible Care, and Global Product Safety (GPS). Governments, business, and academia must all work together to enhance innovation and sustainable chemistry.

It may not be easy to monitor this process. We should start by setting the standards within the EU, and then expand as necessary for a global approach. REACH sets the bar high within the EU, but the question remains: how can the huge amount of data generated here best be used outside EU borders? The Globally Harmonised System for classification and labelling (GHS), originally established by the UN, serves as an example of a standard which is currently being adopted in many parts of world.