

La Vigne des Nations 2009: UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

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Speech by

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Councillor of State, Dear Robert Cramer !

Ladies and Gentlemen !

Dear Invited Guests !

It is a great honor for me, on behalf of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), to accept the dedication of the 2008 vintage of the Vigne des Nations of the Republic and Canton of Geneva. This dedication is honoring the effort of thousands of scientists and colleagues who have, since 1988, given their time and expertise to prepare comprehensive assessments for policy makers regarding our understanding of the climate system, the knowledge on potential impacts and vulnerability on eco and human systems, and the possibilities of mitigation and adaptation to climate change.

Such knowledge is indispensable to address Article 2 of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change which requires the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. Much less well known is the closing sentence of this Article, but not of lesser importance: "*Such a level should be achieved within a time frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.*" This is a clear manifest of the insight that ecosystems and their services to all humankind is not only affected by changing climate, but also by the speed and the regional expression of this unprecedented change.

What plant could better illustrate this important goal, formulated in Article 2 of the Convention, than a vine with its grapes which is the result of an annual service which is provided by the carefully managed ecosystem of a vineyard? As all ecosystems worldwide, also vines, wine production and wine quality are under the threat of global climate change.

Since several millennia, wine growers have been monitoring very carefully the climatic conditions to which their terroir is exposed in order to estimate the quality and, therefore, the economic potential of their vintage. May the year be too cold, may there be too much precipitation in March, perhaps a disastrous hailstorm in May, or an extended drought from July to the end of August as in the unprecedented heat wave of the summer 2003, from which France and Switzerland suffered the most; events like this through the season determine success or failure of the vintner.

Ask any vine grower: They are the experts in distinguishing trend from year-to-year variations. With a delicate plant like the vine grape, which requires care and persistence for many decades, long-term perspective and foresight are indispensable for success. Our wine professionals are very aware of the fact that climate change will affect their product in many different ways which require adaptation. Warmer summers may be desired, but the associated drying of the soil is an equal consequence of the warming. It is a risk for the quality of many wines. While drying of the grape – the viticulturist calls this raisination – is the secret of a great Amarone, which I admire, I am not sure whether this is desired for locations such as our local vineyards in the Canton of Geneva or elsewhere in Switzerland where many other, equally interesting, fine and distinct wine qualities are cultivated. Wine growing areas, therefore, will be challenged by the many faces of climate change. For example, they will see a steady increase in the demand of water for irrigation in order to sustain their quality and typical balance of grape varieties.

We begin to appreciate that the complex climate pattern of temperature and rain, sunshine and soil moisture all affect ecosystems in various ways. However, we still do not understand to the full extent the sensitivity of these ecosystems to changing mean climate, to changing seasonal patterns of temperature and rainfall, and to changes in the statistics of extreme weather. Ecosystems in the ocean and on land

provide and guarantee the livelihood of all humankind, and hence they render a service to us.

"Ecosystem Service" may appear as an academic concept which is hard to comprehend. However, if I apply this concept to wine, a product for which we care, which is our companion in celebrations and festivities, and which is an essential part of our food culture, "Ecosystem Service" simply means a reliable source of wine in constant quality year after year. Everybody understands this, and nobody questions the serious problems when this service is at risk. However, in our industrialised society, we must never forget that in most parts of the world "ecosystem service" simply means basic food production and therefore survival. By changing climate, not only vineyards are affected but ecosystems around the world are under increasing stress, and their services to humankind are threatened.

The dedication of the 2008 vintage of the Vigne des Nations to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change therefore raises our awareness that climate change will affect ecosystems, from small terroirs like this beautiful vineyard here in Bernex, to continental-scale ecosystems such as the corn belts of America, the rice chambers of Asia, and the extensive but highly vulnerable rainforests in the tropics. This threatens ecosystem services, many of which we are still largely unconscious of, and yet we so much depend on.

By opening a bottle of the 2008 vintage of the Vigne des Nations, we may remember that only through the service of a unique ecosystem, and the sustainable management by its curators, the vintners, we are able to enjoy this wine from the Canton de Geneve now and for many years to come. It is easy to translate this metaphor to the global scale.

Thomas Stocker

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