



The Consumer Voice in Europe

Council Conclusions on nutrition and physical activity

Letter sent to Permanent Representatives on March 27th, 2014

Contact: **Ilaria Passarani – food@beuc.eu**

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Re: Council Conclusions on nutrition and physical activity

Dear Attaché,

In view of the forthcoming adoption of the Council Conclusions on nutrition and physical activity, BEUC, the European Consumer Organization, wishes to raise its key demands in the area of food and nutrition. With rates of obesity and diet-related diseases rising in many Member States, we call on governments to take bold actions to address the problem by:

- ***Promoting healthy and informed choices for all***

With a significant proportion of the EU population overweight or obese actions need to be focused on enabling healthier choices for all. It is important to promote healthy dietary practices - including traditional diets based on the consumption of fruit and vegetables and limited amount of fat sugar and salt - but it is also necessary to allow consumers to make informed choices about individual products in order to balance their diets.

Consumers need to have clear, 'at-a-glance' and accurate information about the nutritional quality of foods. Front-of-pack color coding of nutrient levels can greatly improve consumers' awareness and help them identify healthier options. Healthy choices should be the easiest choices and they should be affordable.

- ***Setting clear targets for reductions in fat, sugar and salt levels across foods categories***

At present, voluntary deals on reformulation have not led to a significant reduction of fat, sugar and salt levels in food. On the contrary BEUC members' tests revealed that levels have even risen in some products. Several national authorities have come to the same conclusion and called on the industry to make further efforts. However we firmly believe that only clear targets can lead to a reduction of salt, sugar and fat levels and improve the nutritional composition of foodstuff. We expect public authorities to provide strong leadership and continue to work with all stakeholders in order to make concrete and effective steps forwards on reformulation.

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- ***Implementing tighter rules and controls over food marketing***

It is necessary to ensure responsible marketing and promotion of food products that are in line with dietary recommendations. This is particularly important with regard to children. Until now the food industry has generally committed to restrict advertising and marketing to kids via voluntary pledges. Member States should take the lead and implement rules that set harmonized nutrition criteria to determine whether products can be categorized as healthy or unhealthy and therefore submitted to marketing restrictions as set out in the EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity. They should also provide a relevant definition of children - i.e. up to the age of 16 and not 12 as currently favoured by the industry - and cover all traditional - eg. including packaging promotions and sponsorship - as well as non-traditional media such as social media and mobile apps which are currently not addressed by the pledges.

- ***Requiring chain restaurants to display calorie counts on menu boards***

European consumers are increasingly eating outside the home. Yet limited nutrition information is available at the point of sale while research showed consumers have difficulties assessing the energy content of these foods and often underestimate the amount of calories. To help them make informed choices and shift towards healthier diets it is necessary to get food chain restaurants to add the energy content on menu boards.

- ***Developing standards for food in public institutions (e.g. school canteens, hospitals)***

Food available in public institutions such as hospitals and canteens should meet minimum nutrition standards. Indeed it is important that these institutions, which host sick people and growing children, offer nutritious food. Yet nutrition standards are often missing and unhealthy products still lurk in school canteens and hospital cafeterias meals.

- ***Engaging discussions with the European Commission to agree on the setting of nutrient profiles***

The EU Regulation on Nutrition and Health Claims require the setting of nutrient profiles to ensure unhealthy products loaded with sugar, salt and salt are not allowed to bear any type of claims. Nevertheless until now any attempt to reach an agreement on common criteria has failed. Yet unhealthy products should not be allowed to bear health and nutrition claims simply because some vitamins or minerals have been added. This confuses consumers about the true nature of the product.

- ***Monitoring the use of health and nutrition claims and sanction businesses who continue to use non-authorized claims***

As mentioned above consumers should not be misled about the true nature of a product. The EU Regulation on Health and Nutrition claims aims to provide consumers with scientific-based information about the benefits of eating certain substances. As the list of authorized and non-authorized nutrition and health claims has been published companies are well aware if they can still make the claims. Yet many unauthorized claims remain on the market and consumers continue to be misled about the benefits of the food they buy. Member States' commitment to monitor the enforcement of the list and ban the use of unauthorized claims is critical as it ensures health messages are not available on products which are not allowed to refer to health and nutrition benefits.

- ***Addressing nutrition policy within wider EU policies, including agriculture and trade policies***

Distribution and availability of food depends on several policies, including agriculture and trade. As such nutrition issues should be included under all policies dealing with food to ensure an integrated approach is in place.

We would be delighted to have the opportunity to further discuss this with you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Ilaria Passarani
Head of the Health and Food Department