

Working party 4 session: people and policies

Healthy nutrition: for all people or for every person?

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Promoting healthier diets and lifestyles is a highly laudable goal. Several recommendations have been proposed by the different Working Parties. Let us emphasize in addition a few points of importance before making any policy recommendations at a European Union (EU) level.

Emphasizing cardinal principles

Four main fields have contributed over the past century to improved health: 1) dramatic changes in our cultures and lifestyle as a result of several socio-political and socio-economic components; 2) the prominent role of biological science and agriculture research which will also be able to answer finely tuned demands, provided that we can further investigate the resources of genomics; 3) the obvious importance of an open market allowing world-wide trade exchanges, but

concerning policies: An ethical consideration for human rights to self determination, either collective or individual.

concerning economy: A comprehensive appreciation of the various socio-economic realities, and particularly of the reciprocal influences of trade and employment.

concerning technology: A constructive attitude towards innovation, paying careful critical attention to the societal consequences of a growing consumer requirement for safety.

Keeping this in mind, I would like to briefly insist on the need for suitable health claims.

preserving the rights of the under-privileged ; 4) the key role of the food and drink industry to develop successful innovations that improve the convenience, safety, taste and nutritional qualities of the food products.

There are, however, strong interactions between these fields. Food-based dietary guidelines should take socio-economic and cultural factors into account, a point that has been highlighted by Working Party 2. All suggested actions look highly pertinent when they are considered from a particular point of view. But, as Working Party 3 has pointed out, to promote healthier diets and lifestyles it is necessary to adopt multidisciplinary and comprehensive approaches.

Consequently, within the main frame of the Working Party 4, I suggest that the European Union (EU) should pay a particular attention to a few principles of cardinal importance :

The need for health claims

Popular consensus establishes an implicit relationship between diet and health. But this link between human beings and their food is quite complex. Humans learned over millenaries to eat in order to obtain the best possible postprandial well-being. They tried to obtain specified advantages from their food, including religious or ritualistic benefits, and they learned how to prepare most common foods, to obtain particular benefits for themselves (health and well-being) through improved taste, convenience and safety. Thus food provides much more than a supply of nutrients or substrates.

But the ancient comfortable familiarity between humans and their food sources has disappeared, due to the distance introduced by the organization

of the agrofood industry and the processes of food construction (adding or subtracting components). In these now prevailing conditions, the relationship between food and health needs to be established through explicit statements.

For these reasons, I strongly support the related recommendations by Working Party 4, namely: 1.5 “The European Commission should not be involved in the direct delivery of dietary advice to the public”; 1.13 “The European Community should agree rules for the use of nutrition and health claims”, and also 1.10 “European Community funding of health-related research should better reflect the Community’s public health priorities”. Indeed, we clearly need more Nutrition research to base health claims on scientific evidence.

Individual characteristics: from poverty to genomics

The fact that humans are not equal in front of food commands us to pay particular attention to poverty and to genetics. There are 800 millions hungry people in the world, and 34 millions in Europe. For these people the problem is not to eat healthily, it is simply to eat. This obliges morally and politically the EU and each member state to provide them with adequate food for health by means of public support programs. But the problem is not only to supply well-balanced or supplemented rations, adapted to these peoples’ particular situations. It also points out a need for a very comprehensive approach to policies. Their impact on social organisation, lifestyles, anxiety vs. quality of life, and finally on health, should be carefully assessed. This is recommendation number 2 of Working Party 4.

Another important point is that, among those who have enough to eat, lucky are the humans

who have individual, genetic, and behavioural characteristics allowing them to spontaneously fit the socially dominating ideal phenotype and not to be concerned with diseases such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases or cancers. But most satiated people would like to escape a suspected or recognized health hazard related to their unique genetic profile. This again induces a strong demand for an explicit health assessment of foods, based on the knowledge of genome expression, and on the influence of nutrients on the expression of genes, in order to base functional and health claims. This will open the way to a genuine health market.

Conclusions

To summarize, I would like to express my firm belief on 3 points :

1. It is the role of the public offices (EU and member states) to organize Politics i.e. the management of the city (*πολις*) for all people. It means to provide adequate food for health to people in great poverty, but also to carefully revisit all policies for their social and human consequences, through comprehensive approaches.
2. It is the role of each citizen to help himself, by knowing himself. Let us recall the famous maxim "*γνωθι σεαυτον*" (Aristotle, Rhet. 2, 21) which was then used by Socrates as a motto. But to make food their first medicine, according to the Hippocrate’s statement, european consumers need both nutritional education and trustworthy claims for functional foods.
3. It is the role of the EU to establish clear rules, definitions and methods, to demonstrate and validate scientifically based health claims, suitable for every person according to his unique needs.

Putting policy into practice: a commentary on the report of Working Party 4

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Objectives: The purpose of this paper is to comment on the Draft Report of Working Party 4: Nutrition & Diet for Healthy Lifestyles in Europe

General Remarks: This report is very much to be welcomed. The EU has immense weight in world public policy, e.g. at the World Trade Organization (WTO), yet its own food and agriculture policy has not achieved a proper balance between competing demands – health, employment, trade, consumer confidence, environmental protection. This report could help redress that imbalance and deliver the promise of Maastricht and Amsterdam.¹

Specific comments: The Eurodiet project and final reports will be policy-effective if they address the following issues:

1. *Education.* Good health requires citizens to have a decent food education, but it is politically sensitive as to whether the EU's role and competence includes an educational role. This is an issue of subsidiarity. Important steps are being taken in this area by the EU both by the French Presidency Nutrition Initiative (July–December 2000) and the debate around the EC Food Safety White Paper 2000.²

2. *Consumer protection.* The EU has a tortuous experience in trying to harmonise Member States' legislation in this area. With the Single European Act 1986, the EC moved away from harmonisation of national content regulation of foodstuffs and in its place introduced a new policy of liberalisation, controls at source and point of sale, and a promise to deliver consumers better information. In practice, labelling has limited policy effectiveness. The food crises of 1996–2000 suggested that controls were less than inadequate. As a result, the EC is now under pressure to introduce new mechanisms to deliver consumer confidence. In particular, industry is turning to traceability and due diligence to meet its obligations.³ Nutrition policy must dovetail with this new thinking to be of value.

3. *Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).* The report should contain more on CAP, which is the EU's

food driving force and accounts for half EU budgets. CAP is not audited for its impact on public health. The Eurodiet process should come out with a recommendation that the EC undertake a full health analysis of CAP. CAP is constantly in a process of change, it is true, but this process is more driven by fiscal and enlargement pressures than by health concerns.⁴ This imbalance is inappropriate and needs rectifying.

4. *The food sector.* The drivers of the food economy world-wide have a problematic impact on public health. Key drivers include: intensification, concentration, market fragmentation, supply chain control, business-driven notions of quality, a search for value-adding alongside price control.⁵ The result is that health and environmental costs easily get externalised.⁶ If the EU wants a positive nutritional role, these and other trends need to be reviewed. Nutrition and health impact need to be situated within a wider policy context. There are currently no mechanisms for doing or acting on this. A nutrition strand within Health Impact Assessment would be useful.

5. *Environmental health.* Public policy in food demands that equal emphasis is given to four 'pillars': food safety, public health nutrition, environmental protection, and social justice (sometimes 'sustainable development' covers these last two). It would be helpful if the EU had a policy which was consistent with the new policy commitments made by Member States as members of the European Region of the WHO.⁷

Conclusion

1. The EU should have a comprehensive food and health policy;
2. The EC needs an advice system to anticipate rapid changes in the food economy;
3. Nutrition / dietary advice should be integrated with safety, environmental and social policy goals;

A health audit of CAP and other key EU food policies should be conducted on a regular basis and debated accordingly.

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CIAA views on the Working Party 4 report

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Working Party 4 "People and Policies" needs to be placed into the right EU policy framework. The European Commission, which recently adopted its White Paper on Food Safety (1999),¹ has clearly identified the first EU priority: "ensure a high level of food safety and restore consumer confidence in food". The White Paper defines an action (legislative) plan composed of 84 measures, including the proposal for the establishment of a European Food Authority and some other actions such as the development of dietary guidelines and a comprehensive nutrition policy. It is important to mention that the food industry is only one element of the food chain. The agriculture and supply sector, the retail sector, the catering sector need also to be involved and will have their role to play in the implementation of any future policy.

CIAA has expressed its views on the content of the White Paper and states in particular that "where nutritional requirements will be addressed at EU

level, as part of a food policy, the dietary diversity of Europe has to be taken into account. Nutritional guidelines need to promote a healthy balanced diet rather than the attainment of specific numeric nutrient goals. Food-based guidelines at national level need to be supplemented by nutrition education programmes if they are to have tangible results."²

Eating habits evolve rapidly, as society evolves, and the food and drink industry, by providing a variety of foodstuffs, responds to consumer demands by developing new processes, new technologies and new products.

The Working Party 4 "People and Policies" report contains 18 recommendations that can be subdivided in three chapters: dietary guidelines (already addressed above), education / research / monitoring and consumer protection. As far as the aspects related to agriculture policy, it is more

appropriate to leave the agricultural organisations to react.

The food and drink industry fully support the proposed recommendations aiming at more research, better education and improved monitoring in the nutrition field. Data are needed to establish the scientific basis for any future policy aiming at recommending changes to the diet. Without better education, there will be no success.

On the “consumer protection” chapter, CIAA would suggest that since many of the points are already included in the White Paper on Food Safety they could be considered redundant. Nevertheless, the food and drink industry would reinforce some points and call for urgent action on Establishment of a Single Market for fortified foods;

Permission to use claims (nutrition, functional and health claims) in the EU provided they are strongly substantiated (the CIAA code of practice on health claims aims at defining criteria for their use).

A new approach to labelling. Labelling is one element of consumer information but alternatives exist and should be exploited.

CIAA recommends that the WP4 report be revised to take account of the White Paper and so better reflect the state of play.

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