



Policy Briefing

FOOD CHAIN, NUTRITION AND WELLBEING. A CALL FOR EU COHERENCE.

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INTRODUCTION.

The European agro food model is constantly evolving and improving, and its relationship with health issues is becoming growingly important.

Usually this relationship is perceived mostly in negative terms, or at least in a quiet unidirectional way – nutrition issues-, putting aside other elements as important as culture and traditions, sociology, employment and economics, internal market principles, environment, genetics, lifestyles... On the other hand, the contribution of food to the European socio- economic development and wellness in the last decades cannot be neglected.

Much of the discussions around the issue are quiet polarized, sterile and more based in opinions than in science, which doesn't help any progress on what can be considered the common goal: how to better integrate food and health for the benefit of consumers and society as a whole.

In the current European political agenda, two issues under discussion should be kept in mind – the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the Fitness Check of the General Food law - as long as in both 'food and health' binomial would be one way or the other present.

It is also worth noting the growing importance of International Organisations and its implications in the European internal debates on this issue.

Farm Europe wants to contribute to this topic with the following comments and open questions, in order to come up with concrete proposals and try to find the way to a more virtuous, comprehensive framework.

THE ISSUES

A . Numerous initiatives, poor results .

It is far more than evident the key role that food and drink plays in human health. It is like a two- lane highway in which one provides life; the other can have a negative impact on health. **In order to prevent this negative effects (NCD´s) public authorities try to promote different policies and actions with a dubious impact.**

If we make a short overview of measures in place, those are the most relevant:

When it comes to **public intervention**, instruments are rather restrictive, and applied in different areas:

- Commercial communication,
- Taxes,
- Advertising,
- Points of sale,
- Labelling,
- Nutrition profiles
- Nudge concept

There are also **voluntary agreements and codes of conduct**, both at European and national level, reaching issues like:

- reformulation of products (2016 Council resolution on product improvement and similar national initiatives),
- advertising (i.e. SpiritsEUROPE Guidelines for the Development of Responsible Marketing Communications),
- labelling (private schemes),

...

The point here is: to what extent this approach has been effective in practical terms?

If we put it into an European perspective, we have to realise that we participate in a sort of “collage” of measures, mixing European and national initiatives, in different areas, with different aims and ways, that need to be reconsidered - sometimes , politics is stronger than evidence.

A lot of examples can be shown in this sense:

- national taxes on different products, mainly sugar and fats , distorting trade and competition in the markets.
- Prohibition of sales in selected points (canteens, schools,..).
- Limits to advertising in tv and other media.
- UK traffic lights system as well as French Nutriscore model.
- Minimum Unit Pricing for alcoholic beverages in Scotland and Ireland,...

Internal market principles – the basis of European integration –have been sidelined with direct impact on business, free circulation, competition and consumer welfare.

It is quite clear that at European level health is a joint responsibility which ultimately rests in the hands of Member States, but there’s a need for a more coordinated, harmonised approach to get out form this messy situation.

On the other hand, the Commission and it’s Services as guardian of the Treaty should strictly monitor wether all the Member States correctly apply and implement community law , avoiding the breach of the common rules.

B. Evidence based science loosing ground with respect to opinion.

Second issue or point for discussion, **Science**. It has to be acknowledge the improvements made in terms of food safety in Europe in the last 15 years. Both EFSA and the Commission have delivered a sound set of criteria that have created a strong consensus around the best science to inform food safety – and a comprehensive system to evaluate and manage risks. But in the last years , food safety has been replaced in the debate by nutrition and in this case we have to admit that the system developed for food safety has proven not to be fit for “health issues”. On the contrary, the **general consensus has been replaced by divergence of scientific criteria, lack of trust in the institutions and the system itself, and confusion.**

Science is top priority. Science is critical not only because it leads the way for improving human wellbeing, but also because evidence based science orients political action – or at least should-.

On the other hand, science is far more than a single discipline. The present “nutrimania” simply puts aside other fields of knowledge like sociology, genetics, physical activity or environment, while multifactorial problems need multidisciplinary approaches. Even when it comes to nutrition focus is more on products (“good” or “bad”) than in diets itself. And as a matter of fact “ we eat food, not nutrients”.

Having said that, **the question would be how can Europe improve its decision making in order to take any political action on evidence based science? How can we avoid science to be substituted by opinion when informing political and legal decisions?**

Unfortunately, in recent times we have had also some examples that show how complex and confusing some issues can be:

- the case of bisphenol A ,
- Endocrine disruptors ,
- Glyphosate ...

First of all we need more confidence in our institutions. EFSA must continue to be respected as *the* reference for excellence in science and food and at the same time, it must be able to better coordinate national Agencies in his effort to align criteria and inform action.

Second and most important, how can we provide European Parliament with fundamentals to guide its legislative action? Its critical responsibilities ought to be backed with the best available science in order to help the decision making process.

An idea would be to promote the creation of an **Office for Scientific Support under the umbrella of the EP**, and the cooperation of the Commission and EFSA. This Office / Unit would have the task of helping MEP’s in taking their decisions with independent, neutral and comprehensive state-of-the art science.

The basic idea is to provide MEP’s with objective interpretative skills, a critical set of knowledge they need. The role of the Unit would not be to “make science” but to select the best available and be able to provide some objective assessment to help MEP’s to better decide. At the same time it could promote independent debates, educational activities, hearings etc. so as to cooperate with stakeholders, journalists, scientists..

So progressively, a set of principles/ consensus/ basic ideas would be shaped and what is more important, a “triage” or rating of scientific production would be created according to its evidence, origin of publication, degree of support by the scientific community, etc.

Collaboration with other initiatives already in place like STOA (Scientific & Technical Options Assessment) in the EP and the Scientific Advice Mechanism set up by the Commission should also be enhanced.

C. Public opinion misperceptions.

A third issue is **public perception**. There is a growing misperception in public opinion around food, drink and health issues. The post-truth era is emphasising almost only negative facts or promoting magic wand nutrients. Misinterpretation of complex information and a great deal of news and sources (social media) makes really difficult to avoid confusion and distress in the public opinion spreading a bad and fake image around food.

How can this public image problem be avoided?

First of all, it has to be said that this is a common responsibility. As already stated, a more powerful role and respect to EFSA as scientific reference, and more active communication on its side would be needed. On the other hand, the Office for Scientific Support in the EP would also help in making the difference between opinion and science.

Lastly, Media have also its crucial role in laying down the foundation of a better informed and educated consumer, along with scientific bodies, ngo’s, agro food and consumers organisations, whose responsibility towards a sound, fact- based communication is also important.

D. The need for a common ground.

Finally, the issue of **cooperation**. The way in which debate takes place is not the most constructive one, it seems that each stakeholder sticks to its own position being more interested in counter-arguments and defending specific interests that in finding ways to progress against NCD’s through cooperation.

Something has to be done. If we agree on the issues highlighted in this paper it can be assumed that there is a need for action.

In fact experience shows us that there is no “one-size-fits-all” effective solution, that demonising food and drink is not only counterproductive but unfair, and that something has to be done in order to overcome defensive positions.

So is there any possibility to improve cooperation and bring together all interested parties?

We think that if we give the lead to the European Parliament, there is an **opportunity to open a debate with all stakeholders and get a broad agreement on common objectives**: a better and sound healthy lifestyle in Europe, and a firm contribution from the food chain - it is crucial to understand that this is a common issue in which all the members of the chain (farmers, industry and trade) must work together and united.

This debate should lead to a set of compromises and guidelines based on science, responsible behaviour and concrete compromises for each and one of the stakeholders as a way to cooperate under clear rules, and measurable actions.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

Apart from the measures proposed, the following questions are open for debate:

- What do we expect from private stakeholders? What role could they have or shouldn't they have in a European process of thinking, concertation and decision making?
- What role can be expected from the food chain? What kind of commitments can be taken by producers, industry and retailers and consumers organisations?
- How can the EU better participate in international and global debates?
- How can you make sure that EU decisions will be based first and foremost on science whatever the inputs of national, European or international forum can be?
- How can the European institutions and notably the European Parliament (as elected representative of EU citizens) lead the way to a common action with all the stakeholders involved?

Why the sub-mentioned initiatives regarding improving health and nutrition are not either operational or on the contrary efficient ?