

SERVING THE CONSUMER WITH MODERN COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY TO BE BETTER AND MORE ETHICALLY INFORMED ABOUT THE FOOD OFFERED FOR SALE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

“The new US Food Safety Modernisation Act, which came into effect on 2 February 2011, does not include any new or more stringent food information requirements. Moreover, from current positions of the EU Council and Parliament it seems likely that the food labelling requirements in the EU will be substantially less descriptive than initially proposed. This creates a unique opportunity to rethink the way consumers can be provided with food information. New approaches should accommodate the increasing consumer demand to have more and better information while avoiding a food information overload on the label. These seemingly unfeasibilities could be solved by innovative ways of information exchange. Indeed, novel, electronic communication approaches and IT applications supplementing label information would allow consumers to access food information much easier, faster and identify key information instantaneously. In addition, it would allow the producer and retailer to explain in more detail distinguishing specifics of their products. It seems obvious that cooperation of all stakeholders in such development would be essential to its successful implementation as only a common approach would achieve broad consumer support.”

(paragraph 10 of the project description)

SERVING THE CONSUMER WITH MODERN COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY TO BE BETTER AND MORE ETHICALLY INFORMED ABOUT THE FOOD OFFERED FOR SALE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Situation and context

In the last 2 decades consumers in developed societies call out for more information about the food they wish to purchase. This increased level of interest was triggered by major food crises such as BSE and dioxin contamination of dairy products. In addition, animal health and welfare concerns in food production has become almost a global issue with an increasing demand for "animal friendly" produced food. Future food security and the introduction of GMO's (genetically modified organisms) in various foods, a development that is perceived by many consumers as unsafe for humans and a threat to the environment, have become significant societal issues. In addition, consumers around the world are faced with food labels which are often hard to decipher or unreadable if not misleading. They request for as much relevant information as possible and wish this information to be easy to understand and easy to find.

Project scope and objectives

The scope of the project is defined by a framework for the provision of a multiplicity of food information in a harmonised way. Key elements of the framework will be: transparency, consensus amongst stakeholders on areas to be covered, on codes of conduct, compatibility, common principles and criteria, and modern communication practices. In other words: harmonized approaches rather than rigid standardization and communication approaches that are not limited to the label on the product but involve a variety of electronic applications.

The main idea behind this project is that today's and tomorrow's consumers, living in an information society, should have easy access to all relevant background information about the food they buy and eat. The aim is to develop a multi-facet consumer information approach for all food information (legally and voluntary) for all consumers that is generally applicable and probably many others and is endorsed by the key players in the field: national food safety agencies, brand manufacturers, retailers, consumer groups and other NGO's, and the public sector (both national and regional). Such an information approach would also allow producers to emphasize food quality aspects and consumers to choose health propagating products in line with the WHO slogan: to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

The project looks at how innovative ways of access to information could be developed, not what information should be provided. Consequently it does not address food information requirements as these are dealt with by legislations on food information. The project looks into communication options available and aims at addressing how and when such options could be harmonised and introduced to satisfy the needs of the producer, the retailer and the consumer.

How to reach these objectives / methodology

The project will bring together knowledge, expertise and experience in the areas of food safety, nutrition and information communication in a multifaceted approach and involve

international experts and stakeholders. It will connect with already existing initiatives which show similarities or potential overlap. The aim is to reach consensus among stakeholders and create a harmonized approach on how food information can be provided to consumers. Several modern communication tools, such as product scanning devices, will be considered to increase consumer access to food information that is not limited to the packaging.

The project will collect the views of experts and stakeholders and trigger debates. It aims to develop a consensus on how food information is provided to the consumer and how criteria can be developed for the presentation of this food information among all stakeholders. Ample use will be made of on-line tools for stakeholder consultation, such as the use of social media, consumer surveys, implementation options, info sharing and on and offline debate as tools for consensus building. The project management will focus on moderating the process, on- and offline, organising events and drafting reports.

SERVING THE CONSUMER WITH MODERN COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY TO BE BETTER AND MORE ETHICALLY INFORMED ABOUT THE FOOD OFFERED FOR SALE

Introduction

1. In the last 2 decades consumers in developed societies call out for more information about the food they wish to purchase. This increased level of interest was triggered by major food problems such as BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) in food producing bovine animals, dioxin contamination of dairy products via environmental contamination, food adulteration by the addition of unauthorized chemicals but also by an increasing general interest in the way the food is produced, processed and distributed. In addition, animal health and welfare concerns in food production has become almost a global issue with an increasing demand for "animal friendly" produced food. Future food security and the introduction of GMO's (genetically modified organisms) in various foods, a development that is perceived by many consumers as unsafe for humans and a threat to the environment, have become significant societal issues. In addition, consumers around the world are increasingly concerned about food labels which are often hard to decipher or unreadable if not misleading. They request more relevant information on the product, its ingredients and its origin, information that is easy to find and to understand.

2. In the EU, the European Commission is aware of these issues and has proposed legislation on food information. This provides the perfect momentum to rethink the way consumers can be provided with relevant information about the food they eat. In addition to the legally required food information, currently under discussion in the EU, it seems appropriate to make provisions for additional factual food information which is nowadays considered important to consumers. For instance information about food quality aspects, environmental aspects (carbon footprint?), child labour and other social aspects, animal breeding, health and welfare aspects and probably others. The point of departure of this project is that today's and tomorrow's consumers, living in an information society, should have easy access to all relevant background information about the food they buy and eat.

3. This document outlines a project that looks at how innovative ways of access to information could be developed not what information should be provided. Consequently it does not address food information requirements as these are dealt with by legislations on food information. This project looks into communication options available and aims at addressing how and when such options could be harmonised and introduced to satisfy the needs of the producer, the retailer and the consumer.

Background

4. In February 2008, the European Commission proposed [new legislation](#) on the provision of food information to consumers¹. The proposal combines existing rules on food labelling, presentation and advertising with nutrition labelling of food stuffs in one single regulation. The aim of the proposed legislation is to make food information clearer and more relevant to consumers and to include specific requirements for displaying information on the food packaging. The proposal further includes a series of mandatory particulars (Article 9), together with certain details on how these particulars should be presented on the food.

¹ Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Provision of food information to consumers. COM(2008)40 Final, 2008/0028(COD), Brussels 30.1.2008

5. From recent discussions of the EU Parliament and the Council it appeared that parties are still divided on how the mandatory detailed nutrition declaration be best expressed. The proposed new Regulation includes a list of mandatory particulars and only lays down general rules on displaying nutritional information. It may or may not require precisely how such information should be presented on the food². Moreover, apart from the requirement to substantiate health claims on food³, any other often used 'claims' on quality, social, ethical or environmental aspects will remain unregulated, thus allowing countries to define and apply national labelling rules or approaches or leave this to the private sector.

6. Today, the consumer is faced with food labels which are often illegible and/or hard to decipher if not misleading. Consumers prefer as much relevant information as possible and wish this information to be easy to understand and easy to find. Taking this into account and the fact that with the introduction of a new generation of relevant information, such as health-related information and information related to environmental and other ethical aspects, it seems inevitable to consider novel (digital) approaches to information presentation. The project looks into communication options and formats available today, in the near future as well as in the more distant future and aims at addressing how and when such options could be introduced to satisfy the needs of both the consumer, the producer and the retailer. Innovative early work has been done on these aspects notably in the 'Consumer2020' study commissioned by DG INFSO⁴.

Expected Developments

7. Taking into account the diversity of opinions among stakeholders already on the amount of compulsory information, it is very likely that in individual countries, when the private sector will be allowed to adopt their own preferred approaches for presentation of compulsory and voluntary information, this will end up with a wide variety of approaches, including visuals and symbols. This can only further confuse the consumers who, today, already face substantial differences in food information approaches, formats and level of detail between countries. Furthermore, costs for the food industry and food retailers who operate cross-borders and wish to comply with possible additional national food information measures⁵ for particular countries in which they wish to market their products, will be many-fold that of the cost of a labelling approach which is harmonized across countries, in particular in the EU (apart from the language).

8. Currently there are two mainstream approaches for the provision of food and nutrition information to consumers:

- a) Information-driven approach: this concept is based on providing as much factual and relevant information about the food as possible, thus allowing the consumer-buyer to make an informed decision about the food product by:
 - a. checking for the presence of specific ingredients, relevant for the health of the consumer (e.g., allergens);
 - b. checking for ethical considerations during the food production (e.g., absence of child labour, animal health and welfare, environmental care and protection, food quality, food security);

² Position of the Council at first reading, Interinstitutional file 2008/0028(COD) ,11 February 2011, Article 13.4 and Article 37

³ Regulation (EC) 1924/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council on Nutrition and Health Claims made on Foods of 20 December 2006..

⁴ <http://www.imrworld.org/product.php?id=179>

⁵ Position of the Council at first reading, Interinstitutional file 2008/0028(COD) ,11 February 2011, Article 37.2

- c. comparison of the product with similar products from the same as well as from competing food provider(s) (price/quality aspect);
 - d. making choices with a view to contributing to a balanced and/or healthy diet.
- In particular with respect to the latter this concept requires some basic knowledge about nutrients and daily nutritional recommendations.

- b) Guidance-driven approach: This is either provider-driven with the aim to attract the consumer to the specific product (e.g., quality or ethical indicators) or based on providing simple guidance on healthy choices which, as such, are comprehensible for all consumers. Often simple statements, symbols, pictograms or colours or a combination of these are used as indicators allowing the consumer-buyer to be quickly informed about quality and/or healthy choices. Although this approach generally does not allow price/quality comparisons, it facilitates the selection of healthy products. The most well-known examples of guidance-driven approaches are the use of “traffic lights” and “keyhole” symbols, the former distinguishing three levels of healthiness for 4 nutrition items, the latter only indicating whether the food product is above a certain level of healthiness.

9. It is expected that the currently existing variety of different approaches, priorities and interests soon will result in an EU Regulation that reflects a compromise at the political level, which may be a limited set of requirements. Once an agreement is reached about mandatory information, it may be left to individual countries to determine how they prefer to convey the mandatory information on the respective foods and food products at national level.

10. The new US Food Safety Modernisation Act, which came into effect on 2 February 2011, does not include any new or more stringent food information requirements. Moreover, from current positions of the EU Council and Parliament it seems likely that the food labelling requirements in the EU will be substantially less descriptive than initially proposed. This creates a unique opportunity to rethink the way consumers can be provided with food information. New approaches should accommodate the increasing consumer demand to have more and better information while avoiding a food information overload on the label. These seemingly contradictions could be solved by innovative ways of information exchange. Indeed, novel, electronic communication approaches and IT applications supplementing label information would allow consumers to access food information much easier, faster and identify key information instantaneously. In addition, it would allow the producer and retailer to explain in more detail distinguishing specifics of their products. It seems obvious that cooperation of all stakeholders in such development would be essential to its successful implementation as only a common approach would achieve broad consumer support.

Scope of the Project

11. The Scope of the project is defined by a framework for the provision of a multiplicity of food information in a harmonised way. Key elements of the framework will be: transparency, consensus amongst stakeholders on areas to be covered, on codes of conduct, compatibility, common principles and criteria, and modern communication practices. In other words: harmonized approaches rather than rigid standardization and communication approaches that are not limited to the label on the product but involve a variety of electronic applications: information on demand!

12. The project comprises the following main elements:

- a. the process of (i) finding common ground among stakeholders on how food information aspects should be provided to the consumer and (ii) building consensus on criteria, good practices and codes of conduct for the presentation of such food information in a harmonized manner.
- b. the process of developing modern communication technologies, tools and approaches, allowing the provision of detailed information about the food product without being limited by the few options offered by on-the-pack communication.

13. Although the project will also address information aspects likely to be required soon in the EU by regulation, it is mainly focused on voluntary information about aspects such as: food quality (ingredients, absence of undesired substances, etc.), food production (traditional, artisanal, industrial, sustainable, etc.) and ethical aspects of food (animal-friendliness, social and environmental considerations, etc.).

14. The project will collect the views of experts and stakeholders and trigger debates. It aims to develop a consensus on pertinent issues among all stakeholders. The project management will focus on moderating the process, organising events and drafting reports.

15. The project will consider several modern communication tools such as the use of product scanning devices (intelligent mobile phones, scanners in shops, supermarkets, at home). For these tools, templates will be developed allowing tailor-made information to individual consumers. The project anticipates that completing the templates with up-to-date information will be the responsibility of the producer.

16. The project itself will make ample use of on-line tools for stakeholder consultation, such as the use of social media, consumer surveys, implementation options, info sharing and on and offline debate as tools for consensus building.

Project Outline

17. The project will bring together knowledge, expertise and experience in the areas of food safety, nutrition and information communication in a multifaceted approach and involve international experts and stakeholders. It will connect with already existing initiatives which show similarities or potential overlap. These initiatives include (but are not limited to): the DG Enterprise/CIAA project "Competitiveness of the EU Food Industry", the "Health and Wellness" pillar of the Consumer Goods Forum, the AIM/BEUC cooperation on the information hierarchy of fast moving consumer goods and initiatives of ILSI and EUFIC.

18. The project will offer a variety of options for information provision and, in the spirit of harmonization, will help to find creative solutions for what now may be considered as contradicting interests. The project's intention is to accelerate the process of reaching agreement on how to provide food information by offering ways to realize innovative means of implementation of the future food information demands in all Member States; the goal of the project is not to redo the current discussion on the food information regulation in EU. Instead, the objective is:

...to develop a multi-facet consumer information approach for all food information for all consumers that is applicable to all EU member countries and probably many others and is endorsed by the key players in the field: national food safety agencies, brand manufacturers, retailers, consumer groups and other NGO's, and the public sector (both national and regional). Such information approach would also allow producers to emphasize food quality aspects and consumers to choose health propagating products in line with the WHO slogan: to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

19. The project should start as soon as possible in order to be able to already anticipate on possible outcomes of the political discussion of required information and help with bringing up different ways of implementation. The preferable outcome of this project would be a consensus endorsed by the public and private sector on a series of different ways of providing both mandatory and voluntary food information to consumers which is easily to understand and easy accessible. A facilitated multi-stakeholder dialogue seems the only way to get there. Modern communication techniques will be used to reach as many experts and other interested parties as possible.

20. The project aims to offer a way out of the current segmented situation which is not serving consumers. Both operators and (non) governmental bodies have invented and invested in different food information systems, ranging from traffic light to positive logo's. It is a real challenge to come to consensus knowing that these different schemes exist based upon different interests. The project would use the knowledge and expertise of many and above all apply a variety of discussion and debate approaches to bridge these differences aiming at feasible food information options for consumers.

21. Being well aware of the food industry's need for adequate competition space, the project does not aim at rigid requirements and standardization, thus straitjacketing the industry; instead it aims at providing a level playing field and reaching agreements on codes of conduct, common criteria and optional approaches.

Project Justification and Management

22. In order to successfully develop a harmonized system for the presentation of mandatory food information to all consumers the proposal should appeal to governmental authorities, the food industry including retailers, consumer groups and other NGO's. Therefore, it must be practical, easy to understand, based on reliable information, cost-effective, and allowing for healthy choices while not being perceived as patronizing.

23. The project will be managed by Orange House Partnership⁶ (OHP) with strong support from Schuttelaar & Partners⁷. OHP can be considered as a strong, independent and reliable partner as it brings to the project its many senior and independent experts (with predominantly high level public sector backgrounds), its access to the academic community in the EU and, specifically, its expertise in food safety, nutrition and food management. This is complemented by the extensive knowledge, expertise and experiences of Schuttelaar & Partners in communication, debate and dialogue approaches, including on line communications.

24. A small Management Team, including external members with a background in (food) affairs⁸, who are not stakeholders, will ensure that the project would stay focussed and meets its milestones as scheduled. A more extensive Advisory Board, comprising representatives of all stakeholders, will act as a sounding board, ensuring that all are heard.

Methodology in Summary

25. One of the unique features of how this project will be carried out is the combination between offline and online communication (see figure attached to this document). Face-to-face meetings, debates and all sorts of internet communication will be used to build a high-

⁶ For details see: www.orangeOhouse.eu

⁷ For details see: www.schuttelaar.nl

⁸ For details see: www.icoda.eu and www.bureaubrussels.eu

level expert community. The combination of off-line and on-line communication will be such that synergy will be created. An Advisory Board will guide the level of discussion and deliver content and summaries of the discussion rounds. Each discussion round will start with a kick-off by a highly renowned food professional and the input of a few selected experts on a certain subject. Report writers will deliver real-time input and will visualize the proposed solutions. When needed, consumer research will take place to check the likeability and comprehensibility of the different proposals. To generate traffic to the website a LinkedIn group is created as well as an address book-import invitation tool. Also bannering and different offline communication tools such as articles and free publicity will be used to attract international experts to deliver their input. Aim is to reach all relevant interest groups and above all to facilitate a high level internet based dialogue on how to better inform consumers about the products they consume. In this way we would like to support the implementation of the upcoming EU food information regulation and deliver input for discussions on other relevant food information topics.

26. Currently, 4 phases of activities are identified:

- Determine and prioritize the issues to be considered. The various information items mentioned in this proposal are only a first listing of identified issues. This aspect is seen as a discussion among the participating stakeholders that will fully define the scope of the initiative.
- Thorough review of the currently used 'claims' and 'certificates' both with and without guidelines and protocols for those 'claims' given the highest priority. This is an extensive task as many claims, certificates and related slogans exist suggesting an ethical consideration or a particular feature of food, which is often based on sincere objectives. Government organizations, NGO's and private parties, both at national and international level may be owner of such 'labels'. National authorities, the European Commission, FAO, WHO, WFP, ILO, OIE, OECD and other organizations will be very useful resources for identifying these 'claims' and 'certificates'
- Incorporate and develop guidelines describing criteria, codes of practice/conduct, and operating procedures, required to support a particular 'claim'. There may be a need for several such guidelines as all aspects of the food production chain will be considered.
- Develop consumer information approaches that are well beyond the paper label on the product. Information approaches shall be transparent, without charges to the consumer and available to all consumers. It will be designed in a way to allow the consumer to make informed decisions about the food he/she intends to buy and without being in any way patronizing.

Project Deliverables and Budget

27. The initiators of the project are seeking the support, assistance and contributions of all stakeholders. Financial contributions are sought from both the public and the private sector. Progress and milestone reports are foreseen every 6 months and will be made publicly available. The project is expected to be finished within 2-3 years with the presentation of the final report to the public (EU Commission, Parliament, national authorities) and private sector (producers, retailers). The project may be expanded to cover areas of voluntary information not yet covered in the two-years running time of the current project.

28. Deliverables of the project include: (i) consensus proposals for the presentation of all mandatory information providing product- and/or package-depending options, (ii) consensus proposals for the presentation of voluntary information, providing product- and package-depending options, and (iii) details of digital and other electronic information exchange approaches currently available or foreseen in the near future.

29. The direct project costs are estimated to be in the range of €350,000-€500,000 for the first year and cover: (i) face-to-face meetings and interviews, (ii) development and maintenance of a dedicated web-site and structured web-discussions, (iii) research and reporting activities, (iv) moderated project communication, (v) high-level (kick-off) meeting, and (vi) project coordination and secretariat. The cost do not include a consumer market survey, which may well be necessary.

Project Support

30. In order for the project to be successful, it needs up-front the support and involvement of major stakeholders, i.e. the public sector (the ropean Commission and national authorities with food management responsibilities), the private sector (EU's major producers and retailers) and relevant NGO's (mainly consumer and environmental groups). This support is currently been sought: early responses from all major parties are very positive and encouraging.

Figure Methodology in summary

