

Serving the Consumer with Modern Communication Technology to be Better and More Ethically Informed about the Food Offered for Sale

CLARIFYING NOTES

1. The proposed project assumes that new technologies will alter the way in which consumers are informed and will inform themselves about food products. New technological applications give the opportunity to the consumer to get additional information and to find out more about the product. This information could satisfy the consumers' interest in the ingredients, quality, origin, environmental aspects and other social and ethical facets of a product. Moreover recital 23 of the proposal for food information¹ indicates that provisions should be made to empower the Commission to enable certain particulars to be made available through alternative means.

2. The project brings together consumer representatives, policy makers, producers, brand developers, technology and food experts and retailers. In order to develop a network that addresses the provision of additional information to the consumer the project will develop:

- a. Consensus among the stakeholders on concepts of nutritional and non-nutritional information of food products and how this information is presented to the consumer.
- b. Tools to provide the consumer with additional information on food products.

3. The first pillar of the project is to create a platform among stakeholders to reach consensus on elements of product characteristics and how this information is presented. A group of distinguished food experts will assist in this process. The stakeholders decide on common approaches, descriptions and codes of practice that can be used to clarify additional information to the consumer. This enables consumers to make a decision that is based not only on the ingredients and nutrition facts stated on the label, but also on other aspects such as the product's carbon footprint and other indicators. The project creates a template for the exchange of information between producers and consumers. Where such initiatives already exist these will be reviewed and, when considered adequate and well documented (including compliance criteria and compliance monitoring structures), added to the information template with proper reference to the source (see also paragraph 10 below).

How the future can become reality is illustrated in the following example: John looks in the supermarket for a chocolate bar. He is concerned by the environmental impact of this product. John is concerned whether the chocolate was transported by plane or boat. His smart phone is able to scan the bar code and information appears about the ingredients and the means of transportation of the product. John takes another bar and compares the information. John can now make a genuinely informed decision. In addition to that his phone is able to link the information of the chocolate bar to the fitness programme of John. Of course John shares his findings with his Facebook group on sustainable food.

4. The second pillar of the project considers new methods to provide product information to consumers. It will consider novel technologies that will make information easier accessible. The information and the manner in which to present it, will be operationalised in the second pillar. Information technology specialists are involved from the outset. The consumer will be able to base purchasing decisions on more information that is quickly available and reliable.

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, 31.1.2008

5. The project is based on a voluntary multidisciplinary approach towards additional information accompanying food products. The outcome has therefore no implications for regulation as such. In fact the project might take away the need for further regulation on additional food labelling in the (near) future.

6. Whereas the project aims at consensus amongst all key stakeholders (producers, retailers, consumers) it is considered essential that the voice of the public sector (such as national food regulatory authorities, European Commission, European Parliament, Codex Alimentarius) is also heard. Therefore, the project requires active participation of public sector representatives. As is the case in many EU Framework Programmes projects, the involvement of the Commission as independent observer and watchdog is considered indispensable as it provides assurance that the project outcomes are not in any way in conflict with EU legislation but, instead, may well complement legislation, both at national and EU level.

7. The role of accurate information is vital for the choices that consumers make every day. The objective of the project runs parallel to the policy aims of EU policy makers. It is therefore believed to anticipate on the developments in food information that are currently taking place. It is considered in the best interest of the consumer that a uniform approach in the presentation of information is made available. The project presented here would be a logical step in this new development.

8. Although the project's initial focus was on the EU, its application and coverage are aimed at applying globally because: (i) food producers and retailers involved operate well beyond Europe, (ii) the issues covered are global issues as food travels across continents, and (iii) food ingredients are often imported from outside Europe.

9. From the onset, the project was set up as avoiding in any way to come across as patronising, i.e., the project is not aimed at making healthy choices but at providing transparency and comprehensive food information allowing the consumer to make an informed decision based on quality, composition, origin and several ethical aspects (e.g., sustainability). However, in doing so it would most certainly strongly facilitate informed and healthy choices.

10. One of the first actions of the project will be to collect, analyse and evaluate information about existing initiatives within and outside Europe aimed at such ethical food aspects as environmental sustainability, organic food approaches, eradication of child labour and animal health and welfare. Initiatives considered by all stakeholders as fair, sound, built on objective and measurable criteria and subject to compliance monitoring, will be embraced and invited to participate and become a recognised part (building block) of the project.

11. Orange House Partnership (OHP), Schuttelaar & Partners (S&P), Bureau Brussels (BB) and the Caesar IT Group (CG) are together perfectly equipped to carry out this project as they bring to it: (i) more than 100 fully independent senior food and nutrition experts, largely from the public sector and around the globe, (ii) a well experienced group of communication experts with an impressive track record and specialised in food and health issues, (iii) a team of senior EU affairs and policy experts, specialised in EU decision making and legislation in the food production and retail sectors, and (iv) a dynamic IT Group with a strong interest in bringing IT applications to the consumer.