

HARMONIZATION OF THE WAY FOOD INFORMATION, TO BE REQUIRED SOON BY LEGISLATION, WILL BE PROVIDED TO CONSUMERS ACROSS THE EU

SERVING THE CONSUMER WITH TECHNOLOGY TO BE BETTER INFORMED ABOUT FOOD AND NUTRITION

Introduction

1. Consumers around the world are faced with food labels which are often hard to decipher or unreadable if not misleading. They prefer as much relevant information as possible and wish this information to be easy to understand and easy to find. The European Commission is aware of this problem and has proposed legislation. This creates a momentum to rethink the way consumers can be provided with relevant information about the food they eat. It may be appropriate to include additional factual food information which is nowadays considered important to consumers. For instance food quality aspects, environmental aspects (carbon footprint?), animal welfare/social aspects and others. The point of departure of Orange House Partnership and this project is that today's and tomorrow's consumers, living in an information society, should have easy access to as much background information about the food they buy and eat.

2. This document outlines a project that looks at how innovative ways of information exchange could be developed not what information should be provided. Consequently it does not address possible labelling requirements as these are dealt with by the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council. This project looks into communication options available and aims at addressing how and when such options could be introduced to satisfy the needs of both the producer and the consumer.

Background

3. 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 and nutritional information in one single regulation. The aim of the proposed legislation is to make food labels clearer and more relevant to consumers and to include specific requirements for displaying information on the front of 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.

4. From recent discussions of the EU Parliament it appeared that MEPs were more or less split 50/50, both within and across parties, on the mandatory need for detailed information vis-à-vis simplified information such as the "traffic lights". The preliminary discussions of the MEPs also revealed that the new Regulation should only lay down general rules on displaying nutritional and other relevant consumer information and not prescribe any specific system, thus allowing Member States to use or adopt their preferred labelling rules.

5. Currently the EU consumer is faced with food labels which are often illegible and/or unreadable if not misleading. Consumers prefer as much relevant information as possible and wish this information to be easy to understand and easy to find on the food label. Taking this into account and the fact that with the introduction of a new generation of relevant

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

information, such as health-related information and information related to environmental and animal care, it seems inevitable to consider novel (digital) approaches to information exchange. 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 (to be adequately informed) and the producer (to have ample opportunities to convey quality information).

Expected Developments

6. The new Regulation is not expected to be adopted before the end of 2010 and, consequently, the specifics of food information and level of detail that will become mandatory are not yet clear today. However, it is very unlikely that the Regulation will be prescriptive with respect to how mandatory information should be presented in addition to what food information should be included on the food label, except for letter size, contrast and position of the information on the food (package).

7. Taking into account the diversity of opinions of MEPs already on the amount of compulsory information, it is very likely that in Member States, when the private sector will be allowed to adopt their own preferred approach for presentation of compulsory and voluntary information on the label, this will end up with a wide variety of approaches, including visuals and symbols. This can only further confuse the EU consumers who, today, already face substantial differences in labelling approaches, formats and level of detail between north-west and eastern European countries. Furthermore, costs for the food industry and food retailers who operate cross-borders and, consequently, must comply with possibly additional national labelling requirements for each country in which they wish to market their products, will be many-fold that of the cost of a labelling approach which is harmonized across 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 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. comparison of the product with similar products from competing food providers (price/quality aspect);
 - c. 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 requirements, limits and recommendations.

- b) Guidance-driven approach: This is either provider-driven with the aim to attract the consumer to the specific product (e.g., quality indicators) or based on providing simple guidance on healthy choices which, as such, are understandable to all consumers. Often simple statements, symbols or colours or a combination of these are used as indicators allowing the consumer-buyer to be quickly informed about quality 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, the latter only indicating whether the food product is above or below a certain level of healthiness.

9. It is not expected that the currently existing variety of different approaches, priorities and interests soon will lead to a compromise at the political level. Once an agreement is

reached at EU level about mandatory information, it may be left largely to the EU Member States to determine how they prefer to convey the mandatory information on the respective foods and food products at national level.

10 The new food labeling regulation creates a unique opportunity to rethink the way consumers can be provided with food information. New approaches have to solve the problem of a food information overload on the one hand and the consumer demand to have all information available on the other. Consumers have to be able to read food labels much easier, and have to be given the opportunity to identify key information instantaneously. To bridge these apparent contradictions, innovative ways of information exchange, labeling and IT applications could be developed.

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.

12. The project comprises two main elements:

- a. the process of (i) finding common ground among stakeholders on food information aspects to 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, lack of certain substances, etc.), food production (traditional, artisanal, industrial, etc.) and ethical aspects of food (sustainability, animal-friendliness, social considerations, etc.). A background paper addressing a number of ethical aspects of food as possible elements of consumer information is attached in Annex 1 to this document.

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 including: the Internet (dedicated web-sites), professional (LinkedIn) and social (Face-book) networks as well as the use of product scanning devices (intelligent mobile phones, scanners in shops, supermarkets, at home). For these tools, electronic applications will be developed allowing tailor-made information to individual consumers. Templates will be developed for the respective food information data sets necessary for each food product to 'feed' the electronic applications. 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, consumer surveys, implementation options, info sharing and 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 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 labeling demands in all Member States; the goal of the project is not to redo the current discussion on food labeling regulation in EU. Instead, the objective is:

...to develop a multi-facet consumer information approach for all food information for all EU consumers that is applicable to all EU Member States (and probably beyond) and is endorsed by the key players in the field: national food safety agencies, brand manufacturers, retailers, consumer groups, and the Commission. 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 on a series of different ways to translate the new EU rules for food labeling on and off pack endorsed by governments and industry and understood by consumers. A facilitated multi-stakeholder dialogue seems the only way to get there. Modern communication techniques will be used to reach as much experts and other interested parties as possible.

20. The project aims to offer a way out of the current impasse. Both industry and (non) governmental bodies have invented and invested in different labeling 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, applicable throughout Europe.

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 EU consumers the proposal should appeal to governmental authorities, the food industry including retailers, and the European consumer. 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 Partnership² (OHP) with strong support from Schuttelaar & Partners³. 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 European (food) affairs⁴, 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 next page). Face-to-face meetings, debates and all sorts of internet communication will be used to build a high-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 renown 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 experts all over Europe 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 labeling regulation.

Project Deliverables and Budget

26. 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 years with the presentation of the final report to the European Commission for EU implementation. The project may be expanded to cover areas of voluntary information not yet covered in the two-years running time of the current project.

27. 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.

² For details see: www.orangeOhouse.eu

³ For details see: www.schuttelaar.nl

⁴ For details see: www.icoda.eu and www.bureaubrussels.eu

28. 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 European-wide consumer market survey, which may well be necessary.

Project Support

29. 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 European 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.

ANNEX 1

FAIR FOOD ≈ ETHICAL FOOD

DEVELOPMENT OF A GLOBAL CONCEPT DEFINING ETHICALLY PRODUCED FOOD

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In the last 2 decades societies in developed countries, call out for more information about the food they wish to purchase. This increased level of interest is triggered, at least in part, by major food problems such as BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) in food producing bovine animals, dioxin contamination of dairy products via environmental contamination and food adulteration by the addition of unauthorized chemicals. 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 response to these developments and concerns a number of initiatives have resulted in national and international actions. Some of these have improved approaches of food production and subsequent labelling while others have not been addressed. These include:

- **Animal health and welfare:** mostly the health and welfare of food producing animals have been addressed resulting in, often, rather vague and multi-interpretable concepts (free-range, open air, pastured, biological, organic, GMO-free, etc.). Criteria to define objectively and scientifically what constitutes welfare, suffering and 'healthy' animals are still largely lacking. Furthermore, while currently regulations are in place that define which sources of animal protein are prohibited for certain animal species, animal feeding practices are still largely obscure. Many ill-defined labels suggesting animal-friendly food production are currently used. Animal welfare of experimental animals also becomes an increasingly important issue now that many consumers understand that food additives, flavours, preservatives and all other additions to food are extensively tested in laboratory tests.
- **Worker health and welfare:** the most well-known and recognizable initiative (and label) is that of "Fair Trade", the successor of the Dutch "Max Havelaar" label largely for coffee produced with a proper income and work conditions of the farmers and workers involved. Although workers' health and welfare is also considered by many other food businesses, this is generally not well defined by verifiable criteria, let alone being explained to the retailers and consumers.
- **Environmental care and protection:** many environmental NGOs have developed strategies to protect the environment. Buzz words used in advertisements include: 'green', 'sustainable', 'environment-friendly' and many more, none of them well-defined and without publicly available compliance criteria. An international concept of environmentally friendly food production (both with respect to crops and animals) has not yet been defined.
- **High quality food production:** although many regulations in developed countries with respect to maximum levels of nutrients, vitamins, minerals, food additives and food supplements ensure the safety of food, this is not the case for food quality. Examples of poor food quality are high water content of meat, addition of animal proteins from undefined sources, olive oil diluted with a lower quality vegetable oil, etc.

- **Food security:** producing food in a sustainable manner and with a view to food security for the world population for the decades to come is a concept which has not yet been addressed at a global level.

THE INITIATIVE

The Fair Food approach is an initiative of Orange House Partnership (OHP) being a non-profit global organization of independent volunteer experts in the area of chemical and food and feed safety issues (see www.orangeOhouse.eu) for further information about OHP). The initiative's objective is to build a global concept of food production, from start to end (farm to table) that will be considered highly ethical as it addresses all aspects mentioned above while, at the same time, takes into account that the concept should be economically profitable. It will allow for compliance monitoring and will be adequately informative thus allowing consumers to make informed choices. In summary, the concept of "Ethical Food" or "Fair Food" aims at the development of future foods that are not only economically profitable but also ethically produced, safe, environmentally sustainable and of high quality.

THE SCOPE

Currently, 4 phases of activities are identified:

- Determine and prioritize the issues to be considered. The items mentioned above 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. However, as the initiative develops these may expand or contract.
- Thorough review of the currently used 'claims' and 'certifications' both with and without guidelines and protocols describing such claims. This is an extensive task as many claims, certificates and related slogans exist suggesting an ethical consideration of food, which is often based on sincere objectives. Owners of such 'labels' are government organizations, NGO's and private parties, both at national and international level. National authorities, the European Commission, FAO, WHO, WFP, ILO, OIE, OECD and other organizations will be very useful resources.
- Incorporate and develop guidelines describing such details as criteria, standard operating procedures and standards, into a "codex" that incorporates all aspects of ethical, or fair, food. There may be a need for many such guidelines as all aspects of food production 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.

Figure Methodology in summary

