FITI: FOOD INFORMATION TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVE

New opportunities in food information for the European consumers

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. Similarly, in the EU the new Regulation [(EU) 1169/2011] adopted in October 2011 by the EU Council and Parliament the agreed food labelling requirements are 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 product label. This seemingly impossible aim could be reached 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 and faster and will identify key information items instantaneously. In addition, it will allow the producer and retailer to explain in more detail distinguishing specifics of their products. Even more importantly IT options will allow linking information about food with human health in general and with healthy ageing, food intolerances, food allergies, and nutrient deficiencies in particular. It seems obvious that cooperation of stakeholders in this development is highly preferable to ensure its successful implementation and achieve broad consumer support.

OBJECTIVE OF THE PROJECT:

Providing all consumers in all EU Member States with ample, relevant, factual, honest, unbiased and non-misleading information about the food they consider buying

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INTRODUCTION

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 in food producing bovine animals and dioxin contamination of dairy products. More recently, the food market was plagued by frauds such as horse meat sold as beef and eggs of battery-caged chicken sold as free range eggs. Meanwhile, animal health and welfare concerns in food production has become almost a global issue with an increasing demand for "animal friendly" produced food. 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. Added to all this is the worldwide increase in obesity and heart diseases, concerns about malnutrition and early onset of frailty during ageing. All these factors have led the consumer to request as much relevant information as possible about the food he purchases. Nevertheless, around the world consumers are faced with food labels which are often hard to decipher or unreadable if not misleading. Today, consumers wish the information to be easy to understand, tailored to their needs and easy to find.

In the EU, the European Commission was aware of these issues when it proposed new legislation on food information. This legislation, trimmed down to a small set of 13 required pieces of information, was adopted by the EU Council and EU Parliament in October 2011 as Regulation (EU) 1169/2011 and will come into force in December 2014. The regulatory demand for mandatory information on food labels makes it more and more difficult to be concise and readable while containing as much relevant information as possible, leaving room for advertisement and assisting consumers to make responsible choices all at the same time. On the other hand online information tools and gadgets are mushrooming and can provide internet users and consumers with new options and possibilities to be informed about food products in addition to, or as an extension of, label information. These developments together create a unique opportunity to rethink the way consumers can be provided with adequate food information in a way that is welcomed not only by them but also by the government, food industry and retail.

It seems that the time has come to rethink the way consumers can be provided with relevant information about the food they eat and how food choices based on proper and tailored information can contribute in many ways to improve the quality of life, prevent food-related diseases and offer pleasure. The point of departure of this project is that today"s and tomorrow"s consumers, living in an information society, demand easy and fast access to all relevant up-to-date background information they wish to see when making choices.

Therefore, this project looks into communication options available and aims at addressing how and when such options can be harmonised and made accessible to all European consumers without costs, irrespective of age and financial situation.

SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

The EU Regulation includes a list of 13 mandatory particulars (Article 9), together with certain details on how these particulars should be presented on the food label. It only lays down general rules for displaying nutritional information. The Regulation leaves room for Member States to determine how this information is presented and whether or not additional information should be preferable. Moreover, apart from the requirement to substantiate health claims on food (which is addressed in a separate EU Regulation), any other often used „claims" on quality, social, ethical or environmental aspects remain unregulated, thus allowing countries to define and apply national labelling rules or approaches or leave this to the private sector.

The aim of the FITI project is to develop a multi-facet consumer information approach for food and food-related information. 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 are being developed allowing tailor-made

information to individual consumers. Such an information approach allows consumers to choose health propagating products in line with the WHO slogan: to make the healthy choice the easy choice. In addition to the mandatory information which should be included in the label, the smart phone application will provide relevant background information about the mandatory data and provide tailored links to specific groups of consumers thus facilitating their preferred (healthy) choices: e.g. for infants, toddlers, pregnant women, and senior citizens The application will also provide information for other groups in society (vegetarians, diabetics) including alerts linked to the presence of ingredients known for causing allergies (e.g., strawberries) and intolerances (e.g., lactose, gluten). Information may also be related to social or environmental aspect of the product such as animal welfare considerations or carbon reduction activities.

PROJECT OUTLINE

The project brings together knowledge, expertise and experience in the areas of food safety, nutrition, food fortification, food/human health relationships on the one hand and information communication and technology on the other, involving international experts and stakeholders. It connects and partners with already existing initiatives that show similarities or are considered complementary (in particular in the health and healthy ageing). The project is managed by Orange House Partnership OHP (www.orangeOhouse.eu) with strong support from Bureau Brussels (www.bureaubrussels.eu). OHP is an independent non-profit partnership of senior experts with high level (largely public sector) backgrounds. It has access to the academic community in the EU and beyond and, specifically, it has expertise in food safety, nutrition and food management. This is complemented by the knowledge and expertise of Bureau Brussels in networking, communication and administrative and practical support. The small management team also includes a few advisory members with a background in European (food) affairs, but who are not stakeholders. The management team is in charge of the project coordination and ensures that the project stays focussed and meets its objectives. The management team consults with external experts as appropriate.

DATA COLLECTION AND DATA MANAGEMENT

Food related data is being collected, collated, reviewed and evaluated by OHP experts from a variety of reliable sources including (but not limited to):

- **PRODUCT SPECIFIC INFORMATION**: o the food label of the product;
    - o the website of the food producer;
    - o from direct communication with the food producer;
    - o from data collections made by similar initiatives in EU Member States;
    - o from consumer NGO"s in the EU.

- **GENERIC INFORMAITON**:
    - o from scientific and food technology professional journals;
    - o from WHO, FAO, OIE documents and reports;
    - o from EU and national guidance documents;
    - o from national food composition data banks;
    - o from dedicated web searches and surveys;
    - o from textbooks and manuals;
    - o from personal knowledge of OHP experts and consultants
    - o from food producers.

> ### SCOPE OF THE FITI PROJECT:
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> - *Collect and organise relevant background information about the food consumers may wish to buy*
> - *Link the collected information to specific elements of interest (e.g., health, disease prevention, sports*
> - *Make all collected information available in an accessible manner to the European consumer.*

Data related to the link between food and health (in particular healthy ageing and food borne diseases) will be collected by public health institutions and academia willing to partner with FITI.

Data related to subjects not covered in the first phase of the project, such as animal welfare and human and environmental sustainability (e.g., ethical considerations, carbon footprints) may be addressed in a follow up of the project, depending on the public interest in such issues and available resources.

All **evaluated data added to the project"s data bank and subsequently used as information for** consumers are peer reviewed and documented with detailed and specific references to all sources used.

THE ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION HIGWAY

The information to be communicated to the consumer will be stored in defined templates in the OHP databank which is as such accessible via the smart phone application (see Figure 1). The data will be searchable, providing for each item in a stepwise approach increasingly more detailed information. In Figure 2 below this stepwise approach to obtain increasingly more information is illustrated for „nutrients": after selecting „vitamins" from a series of options, additional information of choice can be obtained by making the preferred selections.

The prototype of the FITI smart phone/tablet and in-store monitor application was developed by Caesar Experts (www.caesar.nl). Unfortunately, resulting from an internal reconsideration of priorities, its smart phone application department was closed down recently. Source codes and other details of the prototype smart phone application will be transferred from Caesar Experts to the management team shortly and exploratory discussions are taking place with potential IT firms eager to take over the further development of the application.

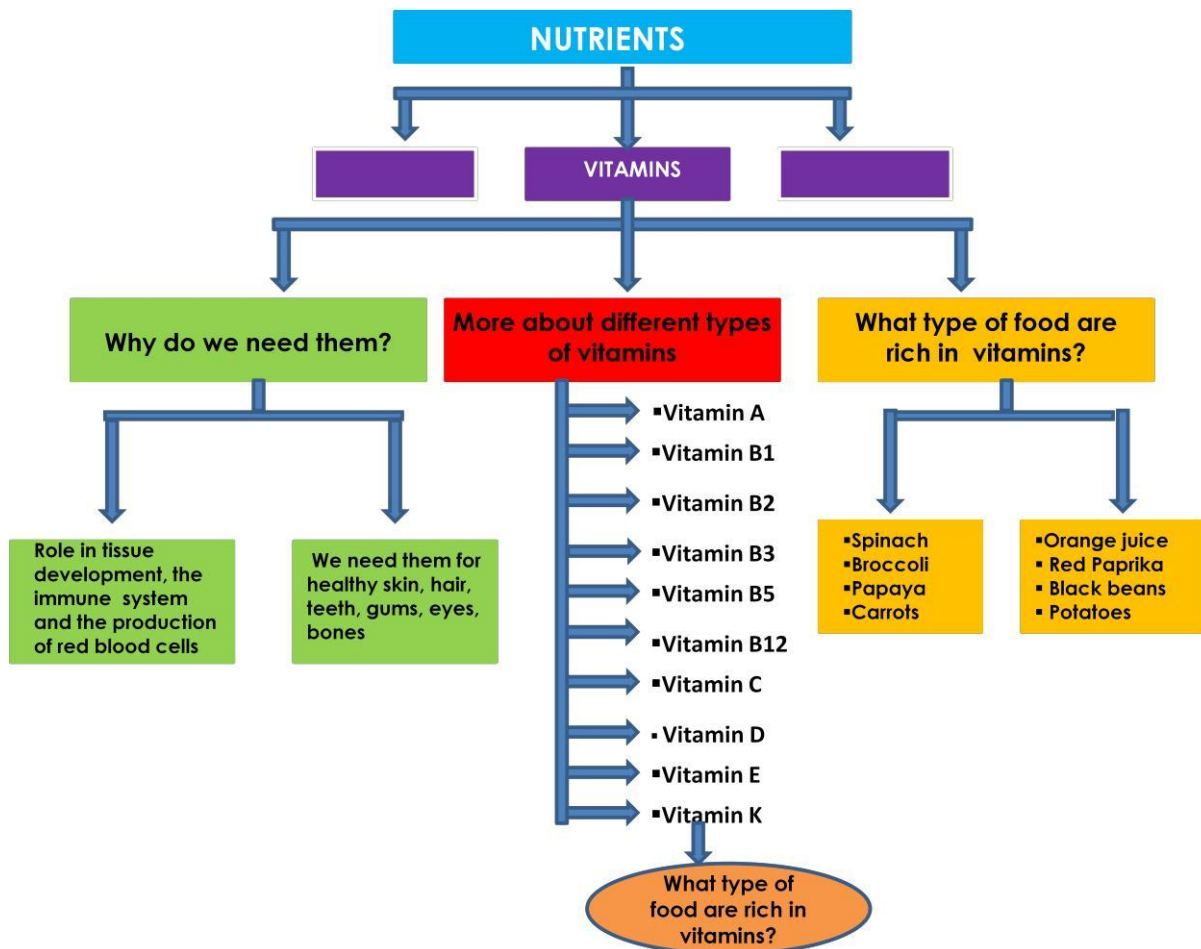*Figure 1: A template for smart phone application*

Figure 2: Flow chart showing the stepwise approach for one particular item (vitamins)

Project Deliverables and Budget

The project management team is 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 2-2.5 years with the demonstration of the application and presentation of the full report on data collection and data sources to the public sector (EU Commission, EU Parliament, national food authorities), independent NGOs and private sector (producers, retailers). The project may be expanded to cover additional areas of interest not yet covered in the two+ years running time of the current project scope.

The project costs are estimated to be in the range of €125,000-€160,,000 for the first year and cover: (i) development and maintenance of a dedicated web-site and structured web-discussions, (ii) research and data collection of 5000 food products, (iii) further software development (from prototype to a ready-to-market smart phone application) (iv) reporting activities, and (v) project coordination and secretariat.

Project Support

In order for the project to be successful, it needs up-front the support and involvement of major stakeholders in the public sector. Support for the project has already been expressed by the European Commission, several national authorities with food management responsibilities, consumer organisations and animal welfare group.