December 11, 2024

Dear Commissioner Hansen, Várhelyi, Roswall, Hoekstra and Kadis,

As health associations, patients and medical professionals, we would like to bring to your attention our sincere concern about the **lack of health representation** in recent European policy discussions on the future of food and agriculture, in particular the **Strategic Dialogue on the Future of Agriculture in the EU**. Since we, despite our requests, did not have the chance to contribute to this Dialogue, we are taking the initiative to write to you to underline the urgency of centering health considerations in discussions about the future of food and agriculture. **We call on you to plan for and implement the policies and measures below**, all of which are recommended by the Strategic Dialogue:

- Mandatory food reformulation policies improving health and nutritional profile of processed food, including an explicit call to the Commission to as soon as possible present a policy proposal on ready-made meals. This policy would establish mandatory food composition targets for added sugars, salt, saturated fat and calories, as well as ingredients such as meat, dairy, vegetables, legumes and wholegrains;
- An established European Board on Agri-Food (EBAF), including health representation;
- Updated EU rules on public procurement in favour of healthy and sustainable foods, complemented with an update of the EU school scheme;
- A recommended framework for National Food-Based Dietary Guidelines in member states, taking into account latest scientific literature on healthy and sustainable diets;
- An EU Action Plan on Plant-based Foods (incl. production and consumption) by 2026;
- Fiscal incentives (e.g. VAT reductions on healthier and more sustainable products);
- A mandatory policy to restrict or ban the marketing of foods high in saturated fats, sugars and salt to which children and adolescents are exposed to;
- Updated European legislation on reliable, comprehensive, EU wide, comparable and transparent nutritional food labelling, e.g. by making the nutri-score mandatory;

Our food system, along with the unhealthy European diets resulting from it, are **major contributors to the disease burden in the EU.** Nowadays, the vast majority of people in the EU die from cancer or cardiovascular diseases. Both types of disease, as well as other disorders such as obesity and diabetes are heavily influenced by unhealthy diets.

This is a public health emergency that costs society billions each year in healthcare costs and lost productivity.

Most dietary disease drivers are linked to **overconsumption, particularly of salt, sugar, saturated fats** (found mainly in animal products, but also in palm and coconut oil), and **of calories** in general. Alongside this, people are **under-consuming other types of food**, like **wholegrains, fruits, legumes and vegetables,** which is further exacerbating health risks.

Next to the direct effect on the health of Europeans, our food system and diets also pose significant long-term risks to public health and our society. First of all, the major global health threat posed by **antimicrobial resistance (AMR)** requires immediate attention, with more than 60% of antibiotics being used for livestock. Equally important, there are **enormous health risks associated with climate change and environmental degradation**, not least due to the significant contribution of agriculture and EU food supply chains. The Commission has recommended that these issues should be addressed via an integrated One Health approach, which aims to sustainably balance and optimise the health of people, animals, and ecosystems.

In short, **a shift in diets - and the food system - is urgent and needed to ensure the health of Europeans**. This would put the emphasis on disease prevention over treatment measures, a favourable, cost-effective and structural approach to improve European health.

Previous food-related policy efforts have often focused on the consumer. However, approaches that place the responsibility on the consumer to choose healthier food have proven both unfair and ineffective. **Consumers have limited power to change consumption patterns in their individual capacity, unlike very large corporations in the middle of the value chain**, which have the power to shape food environments that influence consumers' food choices, but are insufficiently regulated.

One concrete and impactful untapped opportunity to promote healthier diets is to influence the nutritional profiles of **ready-made meals**. This is a sector in which large companies have the most direct influence over what people eat, as retailers, fast food chains and food service companies (serving both the private and public sector) have full discretion over the ingredients and composition of the dishes they offer. A recent study[1] showed that ready meals are **particularly unhealthy and unsustainable** (e.g. ready meals sold in retail contain three times as much salt as the average EU diet, and more than twice as much meat). This is alarming, especially given the fact that the **share of ready-made meals has increased** (now about 17% of calories consumed in the EU)**, is still increasing significantly** and given the **exemplary (educational) role of ready meals** towards consumers. Regulating ready meals could set a powerful example and is at the intersection of the Strategic Dialogue's recommendations on the upgrade of the public procurement framework, food reformulation policies and food-based dietary guideline updates. It could save billions of Euros in public healthcare costs, save EU consumers €2.8 billion every year, and reduce the EU's carbon footprint significantly.

EU policy makers have already started recognizing the need for policy to tackle noncommunicable diseases, as demonstrated by e.g. the calls for an EU Action Plan for Better Cardiovascular Health by MEPs and the European Council. We are also pleased to see that the Strategic Dialogue is recognizing the "status quo" is not an option and is clearly calling for policies that give consumers access to healthier and more sustainable food.

We call on you to include the policies above in the Vision and roadmap for agriculture and food, and secure implementation within this mandate by collaborating across different policy areas. Despite the urgency, we still see little progress so far.

[1] Systemiq. (2024). *Making prepared foods healthier and more sustainable: The case for regulating ready-made meals in the EU* https://epha.org/making-prepared-foods-healthier-and-more-sustainable/

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We would gladly send a delegation to participate in a constructive conversation with you.

Sincerely,









Läkare för framtiden



























