

European Commission
Directorate-General Health and Consumer Protection
Unit C4 – Health Determinants

COMMENTS GIVEN BY THE NATIONAL NUTRITION COUNCIL IN FINLAND TO THE GREEN PAPER “PROMOTING HEALTHY DIETS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: A EUROPEAN DIMENSION FOR THE PREVENTION OF OVERWEIGHT, OBESITY AND CHRONIC DISEASES”

Please find attached the comments of the Finnish National Nutrition Council on the Green Paper.

The National Nutrition Council is a national expert and coordination body set up jointly by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The members of the Council serve three-year terms. The members represent different stakeholders: authorities dealing with nutrition issues and education, consumers, health promotion, catering, food industry, trade and agricultural organisations. The Council has a long history going back to year 1954. The main aims have been to follow and improve the nutritional situation in Finland by making Nutrition Recommendations, preparing Action Programmes and assessing how Action Programmes are implemented and assessing the effects on the nutritional situation. The Council also submits proposals, reports and issue statements concerning the nutritional and health situation in Finland taking into account the food chain as a whole, from farm to fork. The national nutrition recommendations have been renewed in 2005 and they are based on the Nordic Nutrition Recommendations (2004), produced by the Nordic expert group. Both recommendations strongly emphasize the importance of both diet and physical activity on the overall health.

The Council, with its multidisciplinary and multi stakeholder representatives, reflects the Finnish tradition of aiming at collaboration and consensus on national policy issues. A good example is the good interaction between the food industry and health professionals which has resulted in a large range of healthy foods based on the nutritional goals of the National Nutrition Council. The eating habits have generally developed very well during the past decades, and this development has led to a major decline in the rates of chronic diseases.

We have delivered the Green Paper to all our members and many of them will send their own detailed comments and answers to the Commission. The National Nutrition Council wants attached to make some remarks which we consider as the most important ones in the further discussion.

Kind regards,

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COMMENTS

1. The National Nutrition Council (NNC) of Finland stresses that the topics presented in the Green Paper are in general important and should be developed further in the future work. However, some of issues raised are strongly culture-bound, e.g. the food based guidelines, and difficult to apply at the EU level.
2. The growing trend in overweight and obesity, especially among children and young people, has raised great concern all over the world, but we should keep in mind that diet and physical activity can play a major role also in prevention of other chronic non-communicable diseases, e.g. cardiovascular diseases, cancer and type 2 diabetes (even without overweight). This should be kept in mind when planning diet and physical activity strategies and programmes aimed at promotion of population health.
3. The NNC stresses that all strategies and nutrition actions planned by the private sector or authorities, should be based on official nutrition recommendations. The most essential messages should be captured from the recommendations and all stakeholders dealing with nutrition issues should have a strong commitment to them.
4. It is important to keep in mind the idea of “health in all policies”. The decisions concerning nutrition, physical activity and health are often influenced by other policies than health policy. A good example is the Common Agricultural Policy. For instance the EU school milk programme caused great concern in Finland. Several issues of agricultural subsidies have major health implications.
5. The promotion of research and development of healthy foods, including functional foods is important in tackling obesity and other nutrition problems. It is also important to further develop the information given on the packages and to promote the consumers’ skills in reading and understanding the information.
6. The rules of advertising and marketing foods directed to children should be agreed upon and harmonised. In Finland we have good examples both the side of authorities and industries: recommendations and good practices for “Marketing of Food to Children” by the National Consumer Agency, the National Public Health Institute, the National Food Agency and the Finnish National Board of Education and the guidelines for cooperation between schools and business, including marketing and sponsorship, prepared by the Finnish National Board of Education and the Consumer Ombudsman. As a self control system the Finnish Drink Industries has adopted the UNSDA guidelines on marketing of drinks.
7. Most of the consumers have the basic information about nutrition and physical activity recommendations. More research should be directed towards the area of consumer behaviour and on factors which prevent consumers to put their knowledge into practice.

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