

girls worldwide say



Europe Region  
Région Europe

**Response by the Europe Region WAGGGS to GREEN PAPER -  
« Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European  
dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic  
diseases »**

**Commission of the European Communities Brussels 8.12.05  
COM (2005) 637 final**

The Europe Region of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (Europe Region WAGGGS) would like to comment on the Green Paper « **Promoting healthy diets and physical activity : a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases** » which has been produced by the European Commission as the basis of the public consultation on this issue.

The Europe Region WAGGGS is one of five regions belonging to the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, representing 38 Member Organizations, and over 1 million girls and young women in Europe. We provide non-formal education programmes which allow girls and young women to develop life and leadership skills so that they can "*develop their fullest potential as responsible citizens of the world,*" and become active citizens in their own communities in all levels of society.

The Europe Region WAGGGS is an organization which is dedicated to equipping young people, particularly girls and young women, with the tools to deal with some of the major issues in today's society. Ensuring that young people have the information to enable them to make the right choices regarding their health, and working for better health policies for young people, is one such issue on which we are working with our Member Organizations, because of its relevance and importance to young people living in Europe today.

WAGGGS has identified seven issues in the area of adolescent health of concern to girls and young women, one of which is the promotion of healthy eating choices. Therefore, the Europe Region WAGGGS welcomes the publication of the Green Paper on the prevention of obesity and the decision of the European Council and the European Commission to establish initiatives to promote better nutrition and healthy diets as a first step on how to reduce and prevent the increasing prevalence of obesity and associated chronic diseases in the European Union. We are particularly concerned at the rise in obesity in children and adolescents which can have long-term health implications, and believe that all areas of government and organizations concerned with the well-being of young people should be concerned about this issue and actively work together to ameliorate the situation.



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The Green Paper correctly highlights the need for better consumer education as to what constitutes a healthy diet. In 2005 WAGGGS carried out a survey on adolescent health issues, including questions on nutrition and healthy eating – in the Europe Region, approximately 2000 European Girl Guides and Girl Scouts aged between 11 and 17 took part in the survey. When asked about healthy diets,

- **47% of the young people who responded said that not everyone in their country knew what a healthy diet was.**

For the Europe Region WAGGGS, this highlights the need for action in the first area identified in the Green Paper – *Section V.1. Consumer Information - advertising and marketing*<sup>1</sup>. Even though it is widely assumed that young people know about healthy diet, they themselves see that they lack suitable information. We support measures to improve people's, particularly young people's, understanding of nutrition and specific issues such as food labelling, and believe that all agencies involved: national governments, media, schools and civil society, (particularly youth and health organizations) should work together, to educate individuals to become "critical consumers." Since young people in particular spend a lot of money on fast food, there should be increased information about the nutritional values of this type of food, including particularly soft drinks, snacks etc. Information also needs to be short, and easy to understand considering the surroundings in which it is bought.

Within the Survey of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts in the Europe Region WAGGGS:

- **62% of respondents believe that people choose not to eat healthily and just eat the food they like.**

These answers are linked directly to the question in - *Section V.2. Consumer Education*<sup>2</sup> – how consumers can be enabled to make informed choices and take effective action.

To be informed is not enough to take the appropriate action. Unhealthy food is not expensive and within youth culture is often seen as trendy and cool. It is also important to remember that, for many young people, fast food restaurants are one of the few indoor places where they can meet with their peers. We believe that it is often overlooked that particular young consumers need to have positive self-esteem. But even more importantly, young people need to have positive experiences concerning physical activity and healthy food. Once it is discovered that healthy food can be tasty and there are opportunities to prepare healthy food in a fun way, young people can be motivated to take appropriate action regarding their diet. Education therefore should focus on developing positive and practical experiences with physical health and healthy food.

The marketing of unhealthy food is often specifically targeted at young people which can undermine these efforts, so any actions which are developed have to take account of the number and quality of the commercial messages they receive in their daily lives.

The Europe Region WAGGGS believes that the following key messages are the most important for consumers regarding nutrition and physical activity:

- Healthy food is tasty, offers a broad spectrum of flavours. It is easy to access and easy to prepare
- Physical activity is not only sport, but also your daily routine. Small changes in your daily routine, can have a great impact on your physical fitness
- Healthy food and physical activity does not require strict rules, but can be combined with fun activities and social events

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<sup>1</sup> Green Paper "Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases" Brussels 08.12.2005 COM (2005) 637 final p7

<sup>2</sup> Promoting healthy diets and physical activity p8

- Food and physical activity choices made every day affect an individual's health and future well-being. Eating well, being physically active and having enough rest and relaxation are important for a healthy lifestyle.

The Europe Region WAGGGS is pleased that the green paper has recognized the need for actions towards children and young people in the promotion of healthy eating and physical activity – Section V.3. - A focus on children and young people<sup>3</sup>. Children and young people should be at the centre for action to combat obesity. It is true that important life-style choices which affect an individual's health in adulthood are often made during childhood and adolescence, and our survey confirms the importance of education in promoting healthy diets. Formal education is a key opportunity to promote healthy diets; however, while it is mentioned that civil society has a role to play in supporting parents and the formal education system, the Europe Region WAGGGS believes that the contribution which youth organizations can make should be particularly highlighted and supported at national and European level, as part of proposed actions on this issue. For example, in Girl Guiding/Girl Scouting, using non-formal education methods such as working in small groups or learning by doing, particular activities are developed so that young people can learn about the different types of food (and how to prepare them) which make up a healthy and balanced diet, and then use peer education techniques to pass on what they have learnt in their local communities.

For young people, physical activity in a formal setting like school is often combined with high peer pressure and the fear of disgracing oneself. While formal education is a key environment to promote physical activity, youth organizations also contribute to the healthy development of young people through the promotion of physical activity. For example, Girl Guiding/Girl Scouting programmes have a particular focus on outdoor activities. In an environment not focusing on competition, but teamwork, young people can experience the pleasure of physical fitness in a peer group they choose for themselves. Positive practical experiences with physical activities and healthy food lays an important foundation for choices in later life. Civil society, particularly youth organizations and the formal school system should be encouraged to develop links and ways they can work together.

Physical activity is done most easily outdoors. However, over the last years we have seen an increasing number of EU and national regulations, which make outdoor activities with groups of young people more and more difficult. When the European Commission is considering Section V.6. – Addressing an obesogenic environment<sup>4</sup>, and how it could be built, it should ensure that regulations on safety, sanitary precautions, etc. are worded in such a way that they still encourage participation in outdoor activities. Young people who get the impression that the outdoor environment is potentially dangerous, will in later life not easily move around outside without their own car or spend time outdoors for pleasure.

#### Section V.7. – Socio-economic inequalities

- **23% of respondents to the WAGGGS' Adolescent Health Survey said that they believed that not everyone had access to a healthy diet.**

These answers stress the urgency to minimize the difficulties to access to a healthy diet. At home, children and young people are mostly dependent on their parents and it is difficult for them to have a direct influence on their regular food at home. At least there should be measures to ensure that a healthy diet is available at school for a reasonable price.

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<sup>3</sup> Promoting healthy diets and physical activity p8

<sup>4</sup> Promoting healthy diets and physical activity p10

## Other issues

One area we feel is missing from the Paper is the need to consider the nutritional needs of particular groups of people in society, and develop policies to ensure that their particular needs are met. For example, gender is a particular determinant of health, and young women between adolescence and their early twenties have particular nutritional concerns, at a time when they are undergoing dramatic changes in their physical, social, cognitive and emotional development. Young women are often particularly susceptible to compromised dietary intakes and poor nutritional health, and it is important that they consume foods which are rich in calcium, folates and iron, particularly during their reproductive years, and as well as focusing on issues of weight, the full spectrum of nutritional concerns should be considered. It should also be remembered that women's commitment to healthy eating can influence more than their own health.

While the Green Paper raises many questions about the issues concerning the promotion of healthy eating and physical activity, consideration should also be given to the different gender approaches to physical exercise – it has been identified that in the United Kingdom, for example, that girls and women are more likely to avoid sport or drop out of recreation and sport at key life stages than boys or men, and work done by the YWCA highlights that by the age of fifteen, only thirty-six per cent of girls engage in physical activity for at least thirty minutes on most days compared to seventy one per cent of boys.<sup>5</sup> Overall there is a severe lack of research in this area and the Europe Region WAGGGS would suggest that this is another area which should be explored at European level, given the link between physical activity and good health.

Finally, in the overall picture it should also be taken into account that focusing on dietary restraint is not the whole solution to the problem, because of the links with eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. Therefore we pledge for a comprehensive approach which ensures that a positive relationship towards the body and body image is developed, and societal pressures towards being a certain image are minimized.



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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.wsf.org.uk/docs/Obesity.doc> Womens Sports Foundation response to the United Kingdom Health Select Committee Inquiry on Obesity April 2003

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