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Response to GREEN PAPER promoting healthy diets and physical activity

1. Rural Women's Advisory Organisation

Rural Women's Advisory Organisation is a nationwide organisation for advice directed at households and customers, promotion of landscape management and small enterprises in rural areas.

With a membership of 65 000 it is one of the largest women's organisation in Finland, employing more than 70 professionals in various fields of expertise. This makes the organisation a powerful development agent as well as women's network in the rural areas.

At the municipal and village level the members establish their own associations. The number of these associations is over 2000. The wide range of activities at the local level, including training courses, field trips and club meetings, invite the women to get together for learning and recreation. The activity is open to everybody. The advisory work occurs at the 16 national Regional Centres, which operate in connection with the Rural Advisory Centres.

2. Response to Green Paper

Rural Women's Advisory Organisation's response is focused on consumer's interests and consumer information. It is crucial to emphasize the importance of taking socioeconomic and demographic differences into account when planning and carrying out activities in health promotion. As the culture, lifestyles, possibilities and traditions affecting food selection or physical activity vary greatly, national and more often even local activities are needed. It is extremely important to keep in mind that information doesn't promote change by itself. Often strategies to introduce the new ways into everyday life are necessary. Non-governmental organisations including professional advising and voluntary activities are an effective way to reach people in their own environment.

Green paper

IV.4. The Public Health Action Programme

Projects focusing on dissemination of the health information need to be close to people. Pan-European projects have to be adjusted to the local conditions even if the data is collected and analyzed on a pan-European level. It also needs to be considered that the Internet is not available for all socioeconomic groups or throughout Europe. Other channels should also be widely used and especially focus on reaching the people in their everyday life. When giving out information it needs to be noted, that not all people are “health literate” – it is demanding to interpret the information and to consider the impacts on one’s own environment and lifestyle.

As the Rural Women's Advisory Organisation has carried out several projects concerning rural women’s health promotion, it has been clear that even if the information is available, it often needs to be “interpreted” by an advisor or somebody close to the people. Advisory and voluntary citizen organisations, especially when they have activities both nationally and locally, have an expertise on how the local people live and have good measures to reach the people on an everyday level. This is why training, advising and people-to-people contacts can not be underestimated when planning the dissemination of information.

For example the Rural Women's Advisory Organisation carries out courses on how to eat healthier – even though there is plenty of information, the women often need to cook the lighter meal in practice to be sure that the food is tasty and will be accepted by their husbands and children also. The information it being healthier is not enough. The courses have been funded by the Ministry of Social affairs and Health.

V.1. Consumer information, advertising and marketing

The Commission’s actions on food labelling are welcome. Setting nutrient profiles can be difficult but is also a good way to point out healthier products. Non-processed agricultural products as vegetables also need to have a sign for a healthy product. There should also be a way to ensure that the information is written in such a size and style that it can be read.

Even if there will be nutrient profiles and/or industry self-regulation in advertising, consumers still need to be educated on understanding the package information. The education needs to be started in early age, preferably in schools.

Rural Women's Advisory Organisation has organised educational events in college-level schools concerning the issue. Students are close to the age when they are about to move in to their own household and are already making a large part of the decisions how they eat and which food they buy. Reading the package labels does not interest young people in general but when they are surprised by the information on the packages they also grow an interest on reading the labels. They do not actively search the information but the interest has to be raised by someone or something.

The events have been funded by the national Quality chain -project, which focuses on producing quality food and informing consumers how to select and maintain high quality food.

V.2. Consumer education

To enable consumers to make informed choices the wide selection of groceries has to be guaranteed. Globalisation can be a threat as it might limit choices as the selection grows to be more similar throughout the world. Unhealthy products are widely and profitably sold, they also have a great part of the selection in restaurants and stores selling groceries. This is a big problem especially on the countryside, where the stores are few and the selection limited. The food label and media literacy are also important in this matter.

Public-private partnerships can contribute to consumer education in many ways. For example the Rural Women's Advisory Organisation's health campaign has combined public and private funding. The partnership can include for example producing materials for education. Certain, appropriate products can also be used as rewards or their utilisation can be introduced. If this is taken into consideration it has to be noted that the project has to co-operate with several companies and introduce a wide selection of healthy products.

When choosing the messages, communicating guilt and blame have to be avoided. Instead the messages are to focus on positive and wholesome aspects of life. Healthy lifestyle and, for example, health promoting diet are just a part of life and not the only goal to achieve.

V.3. Focus on children and young people

Health education in schools can be supported by advisory organisations. Advisory organisations have the contacts to different sectors, local people and that is how they can provide new ways of education.

For example the Rural Women's Advisory Organisation has participated in a school-oriented project by some of the health-promoting organisations (Finnish Heart Association, Finnish Cancer Organisations, Finnish Horticultural Products Society). The aim of the project has been to improve the children's diet by promoting vegetable, fruit and berries consumption. The Rural Women's Advisory Organisation has organised events in schools where the pupils have had the chance to get to know different vegetables, fruit and berries. Also information on the health effects of the products have been discussed. The events have been very popular and the effects have been noted, as for example the consumption of vegetables during school meals has increased.

V.9. Recommendations for nutrient intakes and for the development of food-based dietary guidelines

In Finland nutrition recommendations and guidelines are given by the National Nutrition Council. The guidelines are the basis of all nutrition education and advising given by the Rural Women's Advisory Organisation.

As the traditions, culture, agriculture, food selection, food chain and various other aspects vary greatly in different member states, we do not support food-based guidelines at a European level. Instead there should be a common agreement on setting up a national council or board in every country to observe and improve the nutritional situation, give action programmes, promote monitoring, submit proposals, reports and statements concerning the nutritional and health situation. The advisory organisations should be a part of the council/board.

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