Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1389 (1998)[1]

Consumer safety and food quality

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Assembly refers :

1.1. to its previous work in the field of food quality and in particular to Recommendation 1142 (1991) on the labelling of quality food products and Recommendation 1244 (1994) on food and health. It further refers to the Seminar on the Use of Antibiotics in Food Production (London, 8 June 1998), organised by its Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development;

1.2. to the work undertaken by the Public Health Committee (Partial Agreement in the Social and Public Health Field), especially with regard to the quality control of food products. In this context, it welcomes the new Committee of Experts on Nutrition, Food Safety and Consumer Health, but regrets that only seventeen member states, none of them from central or eastern Europe, are signatories to the Partial Agreement;

1.3. to the work undertaken by other organisations, including in particular the European Union's food legislation, the Codex Alimentarius food standards developed by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the trade agreements concluded by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) within the framework of the Uruguay Round negotiations.

2. The Assembly is concerned about consumer health, which is at risk from the rapid development of agri-food technologies, the market introduction of food products before all the necessary information has been made available, deficient statutory regulations and controls, and the lack at European level of adequate legislative and technical harmonisation. It considers that scientific and administrative structures and food safety legislation and controls must be updated.

3. It notes consumers' growing alarm over their food, their increasing consciousness of the importance of a healthy, risk-free diet, and their improved organisation at national and European level. Given the possible health implications, it considers that consumers should be duly informed of all matters concerning their diet so that they can make their own dietary decisions in full possession of the facts.

4. The Assembly recognises the very important role of the different players in the agri-food production process (farmers, manufacturers and distributors) and considers that they must be correctly informed and held fully responsible for introducing healthy and risk-free food products on the consumer market.

5. It also considers that both scientists and consumers must be involved in decision making and control procedures so as to provide full guarantees of the safety and non-toxicity of food products, along with all necessary assurances to the consumer that the products being marketed are not damaging to health, even in the long term.

6. In view of the globalisation of the economy, trade deregulation and, within the European Union, the free movement of food products, international measures and agreements are necessary in order to guarantee food safety and forestall or resolve disputes, whether at international level (WTO, FAO, WHO) or in Europe (European Union, Council of Europe).

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1. See Doc. 8194, report of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development , rapporteur: Mr Woltjer. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 4 November 1998.

7. The Assembly will not compromise on the importance of food safety, the final responsibility for which lies with public authorities, which must guarantee it on the single criterion of public health without ever bowing to economic interests, however important.

8. Consequently, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers :

8.1. prepare a European framework convention on food safety which will establish general principles and a pan-European legislative framework drawing on existing international rules;

8.2. invite the European Union and the competent international organisations to take part in drawing up such an instrument;

8.3. involve the Assembly likewise and request it to give an opinion on the draft before final adoption.

9. The Assembly further recommends that the Committee of Ministers invite member states :

9.1. to accede to the Council of Europe's Partial Agreement in the Social and Public Health Field so as to participate in the activity and conclusions of the Public Health Committee, the body responsible for food safety issues, and its subsidiary bodies, especially the Committee of Experts on Nutrition, Food Safety and Consumer Health;

9.2. in the case of states which are not members of the European Union or of the Council of Europe's Partial Agreement in the Social and Public Health Field, to consider and take inspiration from the principles and food standards laid down by these two organisations to facilitate the trade in foodstuffs and guarantee their safety for health;

9.3. to adopt food safety legislation based on scientific studies and findings and, where necessary, on precautionary principles, so as to guarantee that only healthy, risk-free products are introduced on the market, especially in cases of innovative products such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs). All legislative measures should conform to the relevant standards of the competent European or international organisations;

9.4. to encourage and promote the production and consumption of quality products which conform to stricter rules on identification and traceability (markings of origin, labelling, etc.);

9.5. to set up independent scientific committees empowered to give technical opinions on the toxicity or non-toxicity and the real or potential risks of foodstuffs, whether these are due to their composition and ingredients (especially food additives) or to techniques used in their processing, packaging and preservation;

9.6. to form bodies in which the government and the sectors concerned - in particular the scientific and production sectors (producers, distributors and importers) and consumers - will confer and exchange information. These will be consulted before any decisions bearing on foodstuffs are taken;

9.7. to work for complete transparency concerning information on food safety, especially with regard to labelling, so as to ensure that consumers have access to all the facts they need to form an opinion as to the constitution of food products and as far as possible to minimise their concern as to the health risks;

9.8. to this end, to inform producer and consumer organisations and the processing industry accordingly and to involve them in an open and transparent information policy;

9.9. to improve health checks at every stage of agri-food production (including import networks) so as so ensure that existing legislation is fully complied with and to provide, if necessary, for severe sanctions in cases of breach or fraud. Such checks should be carried out in close cooperation with the competent services in other countries or the European or international organisations concerned;

9.10. to set up national food safety agencies, combining powers which are frequently widelydispersed among different ministries, as co-ordinating and advisory bodies in all areas bearing on food legislation, nutritional research, safety checks on foodstuffs and the import of food products;

9.11. to co-ordinate their action and harmonise legislation on food safety, and to comply with, and if necessary strengthen, regulations and agreements adopted under the auspices of the competent international organisations.

10. The Assembly calls on the European Union :

10.1. to strengthen its food regulations by modelling them on the European Commission Green Paper on the general principles of food law in the European Union and the relevant European Parliament proposals;

10.2. to set up, in co-operation with the Council of Europe, a European food safety agency modelled on the European Medicines Evaluation Agency, to be responsible for the scientific evaluation of the safety of food products produced or marketed in Europe, if necessary in co-operation with the corresponding national authorities. It would be compulsory to consult such a body before reaching any decisions on food safety.