

# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

2004



2009

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*Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety*

PROVISIONAL

19.9.2006

## **DRAFT REPORT**

on the Green Paper entitled 'Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases'  
(INI)

Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety

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**CONTENTS**

MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION ..... 3

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT ..... 9

## MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

### on the Green Paper entitled 'Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases' (2006(INI))

*The European Parliament,*

- having regard to the Commission Green Paper entitled 'Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases'(COM(2005) 637),
  - having regard to the adoption (in May 2004 at the 57th World Health Assembly) of the Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health,
  - having regard to the European Economic and Social Committee's own-initiative opinion of 28 September 2005 entitled '*Obesity and Europe - Role and responsibility of civil society partners*' (SOC/201),
  - having regard to the Council resolution of 14 December 2000 on health and nutrition [2001/C 20 23.01],
  - having regard to the 3 June 2005 conclusions of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council concerning obesity, nutrition and physical activity,
  - having regard to the informal meeting of EU sports ministers on 19-20 September 2005 at which the British Presidency proposed the creation of a working party on Sport and Health,
  - having regard to the call issued by scientists at the 10th International Congress on Obesity (ICO 2006), which was held in Sydney from 3 to 8 September 2006,
  - having regard to Rule 45 of its Rules of Procedure,
  - having regard to the report of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (A6-0000/2006),
- A. whereas the number of people suffering from obesity has increased spectacularly over the last 30 years within the European Union, whereas the phenomenon's growth rate is the same as in the USA in the early 1990s, and whereas nearly 27% of men and 38% of women in Europe are these days regarded as being overweight or obese,
- B. whereas obesity also affects over three million children (i.e. one European child in four) and whereas the rate of progression is alarming, with nearly 400 000 new cases per year,
- C. whereas the energy intake amongst large groups of the population has been stable since the 1950s; changes in lifestyle, however, have led to a decrease in both physical activity and physical work and thereby reduced energy requirements, causing an imbalance between energy needs and energy supply,

- D. whereas numerous projects and studies have confirmed that the onset of obesity is characterised by early disparities linked to the socio-economic environment and that the condition is more frequent in low-income families with a low level of educational achievement,
- E. whereas according to the WHO's 2005 report on health in Europe the seven major risk factors contributing to ill health include overweight, inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption and a lack of physical activity, and whereas those three health determinants must be acted upon simultaneously,
- F. whereas although by virtue of the powers conferred upon it under the Treaties the EU has an essential role to play in the field of consumer protection by encouraging healthy eating and the consumption of fruit and vegetables, Community measures to promote sport and physical activity must of necessity complement those implemented by Europe's Member States, regions and cities,
- G. having regard to the socio-economic impact of diseases relating to the problems of overweight (which already account for between 4 and 7% of the Member States' total health expenditure), whereas the overall cost of obesity (taking in to account the increased likelihood of unemployment, work stoppages and invalidity) has not been subjected to precise scientific evaluation,
- H. whereas most of the Member States have introduced policies designed to tackle the problems of obesity and to increase their population's level of health - some governments having introduced bans and others preferring incentives,
- I. whereas certain Member States have, for example, decided to regulate - or even to ban - the presence of vending machines in schools on account of the limited range of items on offer and the negligible provision of low-sugar drinks, fruit and vegetables and 'diet' products,
- J. considers with interest the voluntary undertakings recently given on the one hand by European manufacturers of non-alcoholic beverages to restrict marketing to children under the age of 12 whilst at the same time providing access to more varied beverages in schools and, on the other, by two 'giants' of the fast-food sector to print nutrition symbols on hamburger packaging and on the paper cones in which chips are sold,
- K. whereas the Green Paper under consideration is part of a comprehensive EU initiative designed to combat the factors which are most harmful to health (including poor eating habits and a lack of physical activity) and which - along with smoking and excessive alcohol consumption - are the root cause of certain types of cancer, respiratory and cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis and type-2 diabetes,
- L. having regard to the Commission's presentation on 11 September 2006 of the outcome of a public-consultation exercise in the wake of the Green Paper - an outcome which prompts calls in particular for EU action covering various Community policies and devoting particular attention to children and young people,

M. having regard to the active role which the Community is called upon to play (in connection with joint policies or in addition to the activities engaged in by the 25 Member States) in terms of campaigns to inform consumers and make them more aware of the obesity issue, to restore fruit and vegetable consumption under the CAP, to fund research, educational and sports projects and to adopt new or revised legislation which has a genuine impact on the European people's nutritional health.

### **Obesity: a political priority?**

1. Welcomes the Commission's commitment to healthy eating and physical activity and calls for the fight against obesity to be regarded henceforth as a political priority in all European capitals;
2. Notes with bitterness that despite the action taken by a number of Member States, obesity affects a constantly growing proportion of the population and that if this trend continues, poor diet and physical inactivity will overtake smoking as the prime avoidable cause of death;
3. Advises all the Member States to recognise obesity officially as a chronic disease in order to prevent obese people from being stigmatised in any way, and to contemplate having such people covered by health-insurance schemes;
4. Expects the Health Ministers meeting in Istanbul from 15 to 17 November 2006 at a WHO European Ministerial Conference on combating obesity to issue a firm commitment accompanied by specific targets;
5. Supports unreservedly the launch in March 2005 of the EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health and welcomes the method adopted by DG SANCO: a permanent dialogue with the various sectors of industry, the Member States' authorities and NGOs;
6. Regards as a step in the right direction the trend currently prevailing in various sectors of the European food industry towards practical action designed to refocus the marketing of products to children and to introduce nutritional labelling on children's drinks and food products;

### **Informing consumers from childhood onwards**

7. Considers that any policy designed to prevent and monitor obesity should cover people's entire lives from the ante-natal period to old age; also considers that particular attention should be paid to childhood - the stage in life when many eating habits are adopted;
8. Points out that school is the place in which children spend the most time and that the school environment must therefore help young children in terms of educating their tastes and directing their efforts, encouraging regular physical activity and promoting a healthy lifestyle;

9. Calls for the EU non-alcoholic-beverage sector to implement without delay the commitments which it laid down on 20 December 2005 in its code of practice, in particular its commitment to restrict commercial activities in primary schools;
10. Considers that the presence (where authorised) of vending machines in secondary schools should in all cases be in accordance with a precise set of terms and conditions based upon a nutritional approach and a varied range of products on offer;
11. Condemns the frequency and the intensity of television campaigns designed to advertise and promote foodstuffs targeted exclusively at children, and stresses that such commercial practices do not encourage healthy eating habits and should therefore be regulated; stresses furthermore that there is strong evidence that TV advertising influences short-term consumption patterns of children aged between 2 and 11 years but considers all the same that the individual responsibility of parents comes into play, since the final decision to purchase lies with them;
12. Considers that a 'gentlemen's agreement' between the Commission and the European media industries must eventually be concluded, involving the requirement for children's products in different media formats (television, cinema, Internet and video games) to carry health and recreation information intended to make Europe's youngsters aware of the importance of practising sport and of eating fruit and vegetables in order to remain healthy;
13. Believes that the media (TV, radio and the Internet) are now more than ever before an essential teaching device for learning about nutritional health and one which should offer practical advice to consumers in order to enable them to establish the right balance between daily calorie consumption and energy expenditure and ultimately give them freedom of choice;
14. Considers that the adoption in May 2006 of the regulation on nutritional and health claims gave out a strong signal and will finally provide consumers with honest, reliable and consistent information concerning the nutritional characteristics of food products, in particular those which contain large amounts of sugar, salt and certain fats;
15. Considers that Directive 90/496/EC on the labelling of food products needs to be revised without delay, in pursuit of the objectives involving the simplification and harmonisation of European law and in line with the recommendations put forward by industry representatives and consumer associations;
16. Takes a strong interest in the food signposting systems put in place in three Member States in order to simplify nutrition messages, but points out that a consistent message to consumers demands a certain degree of harmonisation in this area;

#### **Incorporating nutrition and physical activity into other Community policies**

17. Considers that the promotion of a healthy diet and of physical activity must be a political priority not only for DG SANCO but also for the Commission directorates-general responsible for agriculture, transport, employment, research, education and sport, which implement Community policies or programmes with an impact on nutritional health;

18. Welcomes the fact that the current Community action programme on public health (2003-2008) provides funding for a number of projects concerned with obesity and considers that long-term funding must be made available and that emphasis must be placed in the second programme (2007-2013) on promoting a healthy lifestyle amongst children and young people;
19. Emphasises that information campaigns are not the best tools for reaching disadvantaged socio-economic groups; actions need to be adapted to local needs, direct contacts need to be established and there has to be close cooperation between local schools, kindergartens, paediatricians and local health services;
20. Calls for the Structural Funds to be used for investment in socio-economically disadvantaged areas in infrastructure that facilitates physical activity and safe transport (such as bicycle lanes) and encourages outdoor play in a safe environment; at the same time, encourages the Member States to invest in such objectives;
21. Calls upon the Commission (in partnership with the appropriate ministries in the Member States or the regions) to contribute to 'sport at school' programmes in 'guinea pig' establishments and at the start of the year to give the pupils at each school selected an EU-branded sports bag containing basic equipment (footwear, shorts and a tee-shirt);
22. Considers that the 'exercise and sport' dimension must be incorporated into EU regional policy, in particular through improvements to the quality and accessibility of sports facilities;
23. Welcomes the call issued by the scientific fraternity at the Tenth International Congress on Obesity for research to be stepped up with a view to achieving better insight into how genetic factors and lifestyle interact and give rise to illness;
24. Welcomes in this connection the Community funding provided for nine projects included under the 'food quality and safety' thematic priority within the Sixth Research and Development Framework Programme - projects which seek new ways of combating obesity by concentrating on (for example) a specific age range or by studying the interaction between genetic and behavioural factors and a state of satiation;
25. Calls in connection with the Seventh Research and Development Framework Programme for action against obesity to continue not only to reap the benefit of transnational cooperation between researchers in the thematic field of diet, agriculture and biotechnology but for it also to be regarded as a research topic of common interest to a number of disciplines and to be granted financial support equivalent to at least 5% of the health budget;
26. Is highly concerned at the fall in the consumption of fruit and vegetables within Europe, which mainly affects low-income European households on account of the fact that such products are expensive and too little information is made available concerning their true value in the diet;
27. Calls for greater consistency between the Common Agricultural Policy and the health policies launched by the European Union and calls upon the Commission to make quite

sure that EU subsidies awarded to certain industrial sectors are not under any circumstances used to finance advertising campaigns which present high-calorie products in a favourable light;

28. Regards as essential a reform of the common organisation of the markets in fruit and vegetables, one of the objectives of which would be to revive consumption of this type of highly nutritious foodstuff; firmly believes, furthermore, that a policy of incentives (including price reductions, lower taxation and other types of subsidy) is preferable to a system based on increased taxation of high-calorie products ('fat tax') which would ultimately penalise in particular the least affluent European households;
29. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission, to the Member States and to the WHO.

## EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

*'Good eating habits are like a savings book: you have to invest long before you earn any interest.'*

Simone Lemiux, of the Institute of Nutrition and Functional Foodstuffs at the *Université Laval-Québec*, speaking in 2005.

The obesity and excess-weight epidemic affecting the people of Europe prompts us to press the alarm button. Highly revealing figures may be quoted from the extremely useful own-initiative opinion drawn up in 2005 by the European Economic and Social Committee on the basis of reports issued by the World Health Organisation and the International Task Force on Obesity:

- within the 25-Member EU, 14 million children are overweight and 3 million are obese;
- in a number of EU countries, over half the adult population is overweight and between 20 and 30% of adults are deemed to be obese;
- the number of European children who are overweight or obese increases by over 400 000 cases per year and this problem affects almost one child in four over the 25-Member EU as a whole;
- between 10 and 20% of children in northern Europe are overweight, whereas in southern Europe, the UK and Ireland the proportion is between 20 and 35%.

Obesity is therefore a reality which leads us to observe as we turn a street corner that an increasing number of the people queuing for the cinema are manifestly overweight. This fact is all the more striking in view of the fact that it affects more and more of Europe's children and teenagers.

Of course, there will always be those who speak out against what in their eyes is only an obsession linked to new aesthetic values and not a genuine 21st-century 'disease of civilisation'. The fact of the matter is that obesity (which is not to be confused with being overweight or carrying a few extra kilos) - and anorexia (which should not be mistaken for merely being slim or slightly too thin) - are both major physical-health problems.

Nuances apart, the greater prevalence of obesity in all sections of the population implies a greater risk of death from associated conditions such as type-2 diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.

We should, therefore, welcome the debate launched by the Commission by means of the Green Paper drawn up in December 2005, the purpose of which is to make us think about the best ways of combating obesity by promoting a healthy diet and regular physical activity.

This initiative follows on from the launch in March 2005 of the EU Platform for Action on

Diet, Physical Activity and Health, which regularly brings together representatives from various industries, the Member States' authorities and NGOs under the aegis of DG SANCO.

The rapporteur welcomes this new method of open and innovative consultation which (she hopes) will enable the main framework for future joint activities at EU level to be set up.

As regards 'physical activity', which is half of the equation and hence of the solution (the famous 30 minutes of daily physical activity suggested by many medical practitioners), the rapporteur would like to point out straightaway that education and sport are matters for which the Member States or the regions have prime responsibility.

Although it is true that the educational value of sport was acknowledged at the December 2000 Nice European Council and that 2004 was designated the European Year of Education through sport, it is nonetheless true that the EU has comparatively little scope for action.

A number of avenues should of course be explored: campaigns using various media to raise public awareness of physical activity, theme-based partnerships with the 25 Ministries of Education and the EUPEA (European Physical Education Teacher Association) and in particular the incorporation of sport into regional policy.

It is just as important that we should point out that the public authorities responded only belatedly to what is a disease of the modern era. Contrary to what many people think, obesity affects not only industrialised countries but other populations too: in Asia and Oceania (with record rates amongst Melanesians and Micronesians) and in the Mediterranean countries.

The Commission financed its initial project to combat obesity in 1998 in partnership with the University of Crete. Amongst the Member States, France was the first to launch (in 2000) a national nutrition and health plan. In that same year the Council adopted its first resolution on health and nutrition.

Since then, most of the Member States have taken action designed to promote health eating and regular physical activity from childhood onwards.

As regards diet the Member States have adopted legislation, implemented an action plan or followed both courses of action. They have also acquired resources and can now wield a whole battery of incentives, regulations and prohibitions.

These apply to areas as varied as:

- nutritional labelling of certain food products (the 'food signposting' systems introduced in the UK, Finland and Sweden),
- the presence or the withdrawal of food and drink vending machines in the case of certain schools (France and the UK),
- direct advertising to children under the age of 12 (regulated in all 25 EU Member States and banned solely in Sweden),

- foodstuffs and additives used in the preparation of meals in school canteens (decision taken by the Latvian Government and applicable with effect from 1 November 2006 to ban the consumption by children of food and drink containing artificial additives, colorants or caffeine),
- products made from hydrogenated vegetable fats or margarine and containing a high concentration of trans fatty acids (in 2003, Denmark passed a law designed to reduce exposure to trans fatty acids).

The rapporteur has deliberately chosen the option of quoting examples of action taken by the Member States, much of which is based on prevention and prohibition. This deliberate choice enables the rapporteur to highlight a current trend on the part of lawmakers to 'strike hard' in the fight against obesity, either by banning certain ingredients or by warning consumers against high-calorie products.

The rapporteur thinks that it is too early to make any kind of interim or final judgment concerning the various policies pursued by the Member States, most of which have only recently been launched.

This is the first reason why the rapporteur has not proposed simply extending the five initiatives mentioned above to the EU as a whole. The other reason is her preference for open, affirmative proposals, which do not sit comfortably with a 'prohibition' approach. (Such an approach in any case has little effect amongst children, who are strongly inclined to challenge any kind of ban.)

Hence the philosophy underlying the report is one of incentives rather than the outlawing of certain food products.

The rapporteur also recognises that there is no room any more for the kind of political correctness which results in inaction: can anyone really believe these days that there are no foodstuffs which are either 'good' or 'bad' from a nutritional point of view?

At this point she would like to state clearly that as far as she is concerned there are healthy foodstuffs which are highly nutritious and 'junk foods' with a high calorie content. It is the former (in particular fruit and vegetables, the consumption of which has been in free fall for over a decade and of which the importance in health terms is well known) which should be the subject of EU incentive policies.

As regards the common agricultural policy, the rapporteur agrees with the many criticisms which have been made regarding its lack of effectiveness. In its current form the CAP has had its day; a radical reform needs to be undertaken and the concerns of producers in the various sectors and also of consumers seeking a healthy, varied diet which meets nutritional targets should be addressed.

With regard to the common organisation of the markets in fruit and vegetables, the rapporteur advocates a new EU policy, one of the main objectives of which would be to restore consumption of this category of foodstuffs, which are highly nutritious. She also believes that a policy of incentives (price reductions, lower taxation and other forms of subsidy) is

preferable to a scheme based on increased taxation levied on high-calorie products (a 'fat tax'), which ultimately penalises the poorest European households in particular.

Acting in this way on a number of Community policies by creating synergies amongst them is in the rapporteur's view the most direct way (and possibly also the most difficult, in view of the number of parties involved) for Europe to contribute its added value in the struggle to change eating habits and lifestyle in general.

This multi-sector approach is in strict accordance with the message issued by the Council in its resolution of 14 December 200, in paragraph 12 of which it emphasises 'that many Community policies, particularly in the fields of public health, agriculture, fisheries, research, transport, consumer protection and the internal market, have such an impact that those national nutritional policies can have full effect only if aspects relating to nutritional health are taken into account in the drafting and implementation of the Community policies concerned.'

It is for this reason that a number of specific proposals have been brought forward, which relate to various policies under which the EU may act. For example:

- under the 7th RDFP, funding must be made available in the traditional areas of food, agriculture and biotechnology, but research into other factors must also be encouraged and joint multidisciplinary projects (socio-economic topics, health) must therefore be financed;

- as regards audiovisual policy and consumer protection: the rapporteur proposes the conclusion of a 'gentlemen's agreement' between the Commission and the European media industries, involving the requirement for children's products in different media formats (television, cinema, Internet and video games) to carry health and recreation information intended to make Europe's youngsters aware of the importance of practising sport and of eating fruit and vegetables in order to remain healthy;

- in the field of education and sport: the Commission has the means (in partnership with the relevant ministries in the Member States or the regions) to launch 'sport at school' programmes in 'guinea pig' establishments and at the start of the year to give the pupils at each school selected an EU-branded sports bag containing basic equipment (footwear, shorts and a tee-shirt);

- in connection with the Structural Funds: social and economic cohesion within the EU is a major European-integration objective. In view of the prevalence of obesity in the most disadvantaged sections of the population, the promotion of healthy lifestyles for both the urban and the rural population must be incorporated into the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) as set for the new 2007-2013 period.

In conclusion, the fight against obesity is only just beginning and it must be made a political priority for all the Member States and also (and especially) for the EU. The EU has a key role to play in bringing Community policies into line with ordinary people's everyday concerns regarding health and the quality of life in general.

A good diet must be recognised as a habit which is as important as taking physical exercise

and refraining from smoking as a way of improving health.