

Catering a sustainable diet: What's in the pressure cooker?

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For many Europeans, eating out of home has become a part of their lifestyle. Recent data indicate that in Belgium more than 35% of the Belgian population consumed over 25% of their energy intake when eating out (1). The catering sector is consequently well placed to be involved in strategies that aim to promote healthy diets. A large number of countries in Europe have outlined strategies for the involvement of the catering sector in their national nutrition policy (2). By and large, those strategies are geared towards labelling of foods and prepared meals, training of staff and advertising.

Providing a safe and affordable food for many has long been regarded as the driving principle for the catering sector. Currently, the sector has engaged itself in a dialogue to promote healthy eating out, in an overall efforts to reduce obesity (3). Healthy eating out, in this context is mostly considered providing food that complies with a pre-established cut-offs for a couple of nutrients or merely to add labels to food to allow better informed choices by clients.

Fighting obesity and providing healthy food are alas not the only challenges for the catering sector. A sustainable food supply needs to incorporate issues that go far beyond the nutritional profile of the food offered. The driving principles of the next generation food system will (inter alia) need to integrate climate change, water availability, biodiversity and ecosystems integrity, energy and non renewable fossil fuels, population growth, waste, land use, soil, labour, and public health issues (4). The Scandinavians, pioneers of nutrition policy development might be showing us the way forward again. Recently, Sweden proposed to the EU to put in place sustainable food based dietary guidelines for meat – beef, lamb, pork and chicken, fish and shellfish, fruits and berries, vegetables and leguminous plants, potatoes, cereals and rice, cooking fat and the use of water (5).

The repercussions to implement strategies for sustainable diets on the current food system are vast and will affect the food industry along the supply chain. Reformulation of meals and foods requires considerable technical know how and expertise. The small and medium size enterprise, who make up the lion's share of the market in Europe need specific support and have specific concerns (training of low-educated and fast changing staff, undiversified offer) in this regard (6).

From our analysis of nutrition policies and profile of the catering sector in Europe, we argue that the catering sector and in particular the small and medium size enterprise are insufficiently equipped and prepared to face the environmental challenges of tomorrow. What is needed is 1/ a scenario analysis of the imminent environmental challenges and how they are bound to affect the catering sector, 2/ the development of an action plan to allow the establishment of sustainable catering.

Reference List

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