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Food Policy and the Consumer

ABSTRACT. This article examines the definition and the content of a "consumer-oriented food policy." Food policy is a balanced government strategy regarding the food economy, which takes account of its interrelationships with both national and international economy. Consumers are more especially concerned with: adequate supplies; fair and stable purchase prices; safety of foodstuffs; nutritionally well-balanced diets; fitness for special requirements; well-defined and satisfying quality, including content rules; unbiased and usable information on foodstuffs and food patterns; participation of consumers in policy-making decisions. The paper focuses on the activities of public authorities, not forgetting the present trend toward deregulation. Examples are mostly taken from the French and EEC contexts.

Consumers are aware of the importance of food in their daily lives, including such matters as cultural patterns, health, budgeting, and even food policy.

In France, in a survey made by CREDOC (Haeusler, 1985) on the "way of life and devotion of Frenchmen," interest in food was quoted as "very important" by 28 per cent of the participants, "fairly important" by 48 per cent, and "absolutely unimportant" by 6 per cent. Moreover, with respect to their own food and what they ate, 24 per cent were "very satisfied," 67 per cent "fairly satisfied," 7 per cent "dissatisfied," and less than 2 per cent "absolutely dissatisfied."

The percentage of the household budget spent on food is decreasing: In France it currently represents about 20 per cent and it is thought that this figure will fall to 16 per cent within a few years (INSEE, 1987). Convenience foods are increasingly taking the place of raw materials and staple foods, but not to the same extent in every country. More money is spent on dairy products and meat in France, less in the United States or Germany. National trends may continue, either on cultural or economic grounds (Galibert, 1987).

Income may modify food consumption patterns. According to a CREDOC survey, 59 per cent of participants would not limit their total food intake if income decreased, but 51 per cent would limit specific foodstuffs. With increasing income, 18 per cent would also limit certain staple foods, such as potatoes or pasta, showing a preference for less common foodstuffs.

Concern about health is also a factor in the development of food habits. Fifty-seven per cent of people asked said they buy certain foods for health reasons: vegetables, fruit and dairy products predominate in spontaneously quoted items. In contrast, 36 per cent perceived some foods to be detrimental to health — e.g., preservatives, chemicals, and also veal which is seen to be "unnatural" (Haeusler, 1985).

Last but not least, eating is enjoyable and appetising, and attractive food will continue to be a strong motive for changing food habits.

THE CONCEPT OF FOOD POLICY

Several attempts have been made to define food policy.

In France, in 1978, the government set up an Interministerial Group for Food Policy (Groupe Interministériel de Politique Alimentaire, GIPA). An explanatory note, prepared by the French Ministry of Agriculture included the following comments of interest:

Economic and social aims directed at sectoral interests must be given priority in developing agro-food policy, but food production policy must also take account of consumers' needs.

Similarly, the risk of shortfall in world food supplies and, in particular, for the greater part of the population, malnutrition must affect decisions related to production. This implies that food economy should be orientated towards foreign markets, but must also take account of food aid to the poorest countries.

Food policy can be defined as the cross-roads of problems linked with:
— quantitative and qualitative adaptation of agricultural production and food processes to meet the needs of well-balanced diets;
— food regulations intended to provide safe foods at value for money prices;
— distribution of food supplies, at both national and international levels;
— planning of research in agriculture and food processing, as well as in nutrition and food toxicology.

The aims of such policies are by nature different, therefore harmonisation, and, where necessary, adjustment are of growing interest to both experts and citizens (Ministère de l'Agriculture, 1978).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), whose 24 members come from the most affluent countries, developed and published in 1981 a report entitled "Food Policy" which included the following statement:

The term "food policy" describes a balanced government strategy regarding the food economy, which takes account of the interrelationships within the food sector and between it and the rest of the national and international economy. In the