

DUAL-QUALITY FOOD. THE NEED FOR A SOLID HEALTH EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT. In the last two decades, both politicians and health officials have drawn attention to foods with a double standard of quality that are marketed in various European countries. Identifying the same brand that sells a product with the same packaging but with a different composition has provoked various disputes, including in the European Parliament. Imposing quality standards has proven to be one of the solutions. But, until their implementation, a good education of the young generation in terms of food quality, reading labels and promoting healthy products remain some of the effective solutions.

Keywords: *health, food industry, education, nutrition, ethics, double standard.*

REZUMAT. Calitatea duală a alimentației. Necesitatea unei educații serioase cu privire la sănătate în școli. În ultimele două decade, atât politicienii cât și responsabilii din domeniul sănătății au atras atenția asupra produselor alimentare cu dublu standard al calității care sunt comercializate în diferite țări europene. Identificarea aceluiași brand care vinde un produs cu același ambalaj dar având compoziție diferită a provocat dispute diverse, inclusiv la nivelul Parlamentului European. Impunerea unor standarde de calitate s-a dovedit a fi una dintre soluții. Însă, până la implementarea și respectarea lor, o bună educație a tinerei generații în ceea ce privește calitatea alimentelor, citirea etichetelor și promovarea produselor sănătoase rămân unele dintre soluțiile eficiente.

Cuvinte cheie: *sănătate, industria alimentară, educație, nutriție, etică, dublu-standard.*

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Introduction

Food safety and security as well as nutritional quality vary widely around the world. Achieving these three goals is one of the major challenges for the near future (Lairon, 2011). Due to technical and demographic changes, in recent times, food chains for human consumption have undergone considerable changes. Consumers and public authorities place more value on quality attributes, such as nutritional content, safety, functionality, social and environmental impact. The increase in the number of quality assurance schemes has been the result of the efforts to ensure food safety and quality both in the EU and internationally.

Following the model of society described by George Orwell in his famous novel “Animal Farm”, BREXIT introduced the idea of a two-speed Europe and the idea that all European countries are equal, but some countries are more equal than others. In most cases, the equality of countries is measured based on GDP per capita. Since the 1990s, multinational companies have “adapted” their product offerings based on the financial potential of the target market but keeping the same name and visual identity of the product. In a single European market, where products and citizens move freely, differences in standard have been observed by the authorities in countries whose markets have delivered products of different qualities than the original ones, asking for explanations from the transnational producers. To describe the phenomenon, newspapers introduced the term double standard or double quality. This neologism comes from English and describes an unequal treatment, preferably applied to a standard, which should obviously be unique. Can we talk about a deception of the consumer or a lack of morality of the producer towards the consumer? EU rules only cover those aspects of food safety, so far not involved in the quality policy of producers. Thus, Member States have the possibility to regulate these issues with strict reference to their own markets (Pădure et al., 2019).

Dual quality of foods in Europe

The problem of the dual quality of goods in Europe has existed for almost 30 years. As early as 1989, after the transformation of the economies of Central and Eastern Europe, people in the former countries of the Soviet Union noticed a strange phenomenon. Although brands of international products that were not on the shelves of local stores until then were traded, their quality was poorer compared to the same products purchased from abroad. This phenomenon was first observed in cosmetics: it seems that cosmetic products bought abroad had a more pleasant smell, which lasted longer, had a different consistency and color,

and in terms of detergents, it seems that they had other washing effects on laundry. Later, people in the former countries of the Soviet Union began to notice that some characteristics of particular products (e.g. soft drinks, coffee or fish croquettes) are different in their country compared to products sold under the same brand and with identical or very similar packaging in other European countries (Bartková, 2019). In this way, there are companies that sell the same brand of coffee, in identical packaging, but with different content in different countries- e.g. in Eastern European countries, coffee has less caffeine and more sugar. Moreover, children's food not only has a different content, but can be up to 35% more expensive in countries such as Bulgaria (Pavlova, 2018).

In fact, after the Eastern enlargement in 2004, eight Central and Eastern European countries became fully legitimate members of the European Union. Along with many different privileges of the new statute, these countries have become part of the European single market. However, what Eastern consumers are now facing is far from equal because the quality of food traded in the West is significantly higher than that of products marketed under the same brand in the East. This issue has attracted a lot of attention, as this model has been shown by well-known international food companies (Diadiun, n.d).

The problem of the double standard is especially relevant for food products. Dietary risk factors are recognized as the leading causes of serious illness and even global mortality, leading to important care interventions to support healthy eating (Bartková, 2019). In this regard, the first large-scale research on food quality in the West and East was already conducted in 2011. The Slovak Consumers' Association tested beverages, coffee, chocolate, and other products with the same labels in Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Austria and Bulgaria. The double quality of foodstuffs under the same brands has already been confirmed. However, the European Commission has called these allegations unfounded, saying that this is how companies adapt to different markets. For example, in a study of Bartková et al (2018) it was shown that some tests performed in Slovakia revealed that the products sold as identical under the same brand and the same packaging had a double composition or quality and, in most times, their worse version were offered on the Czech and Slovak markets.

Dirk Jacobs, Deputy General Manager and Director of Consumer and Food Information at Food Drink Europe (FDE) informed stakeholders that different recipes do not necessarily mean double quality. However, fish croquettes sold in Slovakia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Portugal have lower fish content (58%) than the same product, with the same brand, in Austria (65%). The Coca-Cola soft drink has significant differences in taste between the two countries: in Slovakia, the taste is slightly sweet, while in Austria it is sweet.

Differences are also included on the label, so fructose-glucose syrup is used in Slovakia, while sugar is used in Austria. At the same time, regarding Earl Grey black tea, in Austria tea bags are made of aluminum, while in Slovakia they are made of paper. Moreover, Emmental cheese from Slovakia does not have the usual structure, with a light-yellow color and a different texture, while in Austria it has a normal color, texture and appearance. And the examples can continue (Pădure et al, 2019).

According to research on Czech consumers, up to 90% of them are not satisfied with the existence of a dual quality. The voice of the EU's angry population is becoming stronger, so the European Commission has begun to address this issue by developing a unified testing methodology and is also preparing legislative changes (Bartková, 2019). After years of research and struggle, this issue has finally been addressed by the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. He called this situation unacceptable in the "Union of Equals". Clearly, this was a message of equality, called for by Sustainable Development Goal 10 (SDG10) - reduced inequalities.

Commissioner for *Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality* Věra Jourová said it was essential to eliminate discriminatory practices and "make sure that all consumers are treated equally". One of the goals of SDG10 is to create social protection policies, which would contribute to achieving greater equality. Following this call, the Commission has published a set of guidelines, which aim to provide Member States with all the necessary information on the implications of the EU food and consumer law. The Commission's Joint Research Centre has also published the EU's harmonized testing methodology. It aims to create a system aimed at monitoring whether food laws are enforced to eliminate unfair commercial practices. Thus, this action will eliminate the dual standards between East and West and Europe will be one step closer to reaching SDG10 (Diadiun, n.d).

At the same time, food safety legislation is amended in the light of information obtained from scientific studies by national and European agencies on factors that may affect the health of people, animals, and plants. However, quality is an extremely subjective notion when it is not related to a baseline analysis. The manufacturing standard used by the manufacturers and reported to the control authorities when performing physico-chemical, organoleptic, nutritional analyses, etc. is a reference example for an objective analysis of product quality parameters. Violation of the parameters mentioned in these manufacturing standards is considered a misdemeanor and is punishable under consumer protection law. The question is how to act when the product meets all the safety and quality parameters present in the manufacturing standard, but the analyses made on identical products taken from different countries show variations

greater than 2%? An example would be the percentage of fat content for sausages: the maximum limit is 50%, but analyses show that in Western Europe the percentage is 20%, while in Eastern Europe the percentage increases to 49%. Or what to do when in Germany a producer uses pork as a raw material for a canned product, while in the Czech Republic mechanically separated meat from poultry is used? (Pădure et al, 2019).

Most consumers are calling for local governments and the European Union to ban the procedure. According to them, that practice should be banned and closely monitored in order to comply with the ban and, in the event of a breach, to impose sanctions. In fact, many consumers consider the issue of dual quality of daily consumer goods to be economic, but even more of them consider it a legal issue, which not only local governments but the EU institutions should focus on (Bartková, 2019). In addition, most people prefer the legislative ban on dual quality as the ideal solution to this problem. Lyliana Pavlova, Minister of the Bulgarian Presidency of the European Union, attaches great importance to protecting and improving the rights of all European citizens. It states consumers deserve the same level of quality no matter where they are in the EU. It is not just about the ingredients, it is about the quality. Consumers need clarity about the amount of sugar in their drinks, the number of fish in their bites, and so on. It has become clearly disturbing that some food companies believe that they can move away from offering sub-standard products in the Central and Eastern European markets. This is a completely unacceptable double standard (Pavlova, 2018).

At the same time, increasing the transparency of product information by increasing the volume of data written on the label can be another beneficial measure to eliminate this double standard. However, sometimes this is not enough and therefore all manufacturers should publish the manufacturing standards for the traded products either on their own website or on the authorities' websites in the countries where they trade the products. In this way, consumers, either directly or through their representatives, can find out before buying the product. Also, the actions of small and medium-sized producers at regional or national level, who will try to capitalize on their own products through fair comparative information for consumers, will not be neglected. In addition, the market will be adjusted, and the consumer will penalize the lack of morality by the lack of purchase, while companies using these unfair practices will be forced to properly inform consumers either by selling identical quality products or by changing the names of different poor-quality products. Another solution is to encourage small and medium-sized regional or national producers to apply for national or European quality systems, thus ensuring that product designations are

set to a single standard. Voluntary quality certification guarantees the conformity of consumers by the manufacturer with a public quality standard. Therefore a fair price will be set for a fair product (Pădure et al, 2019).

In the context of food overproduction in Europe, it is crucial to ensure sustainable production and consumption. If consumers in Eastern European countries were educated on sustainable living, they would react differently to the injustice of the quality of food they have faced all these years. Through the Sustainable Development Goals, this situation can be turned into an opportunity to improve the quality of life for millions of people who have been marginalized before. In addition, governments could encourage people to boycott both low-quality and unhealthy foods. This could be a way for the population of Eastern Europe to be brought to a better quality of life, while ensuring sustainable development for the entire region (Diadiun, n.d).

National and international nutritional programs

Medical pathologies related to nutrition, resulting from inadequate quantitative and / or qualitative intake (malnutrition or overeating) and / or metabolism (malabsorption syndromes, enzymatic defects) of nutrients can directly induce changes in the skin or the whole body (Babilas, 2020). From this point of view, non-communicable diseases - resulting from tobacco use, physical inactivity, unhealthy diet, and harmful alcohol consumption - are the more important killers in the world, with 38 million deaths annually, of which 16 million are premature- under the age of 70 (<https://www.who.int/activities/preventing-noncommunicable-diseases>).

Children's food choices as well as their consequences are a global concern (Jones & Kervin, 2011). Direct exposure to certain types of food, such as processed foods or snacks, which are generally high in fat and sugar and have a higher energy density, can contribute to the development of obesity in children (Jackson-Leach & Lobstein, 2006). Many studies indicate that the prevalence of childhood obesity is increasing (Halford et al, 2004). In 2016, over 340 million children and adolescents between the ages of 5 and 19 were overweight or obese, and 40 million children under the age of 5 were overweight or obese in 2018. Also, in 2016, over 1.9 billion adults over the age of 18 were overweight, of whom over 650 million were obese (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight>). The prevalence is increasing in almost every country to the point where overnutrition competes with malnutrition as the main food problem, even in developing countries (Harris et al, 2009).

There are many ways and options to prevent, and even tackle, obesity and chronic non-communicable diseases. The first step in combating these problems is the personal choice: people have to decide whether to spend the rest of their lives being obese or to fight to overcome this health problem, to improve their lives and to feel healthy. Secondly, there should be population education programs that address this issue and inform people how serious it is, and then provide the population, especially children, with a way to learn about obesity and how to prevent it (Schwartz & Ridgeway).

Decreasing the incidence of obesity among children and adolescents involves first and foremost paying special attention to their diet and daily physical activity. According to data from the Health Behavior in School Aged Children (HBSC) study conducted in 2014, the percentage of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds students who report physical activity in the last week according to WHO criteria is alarmingly low (29% boys and 16% girls). Regarding eating behavior, the same study reveals that less than half of Romanian students aged 11, 13 and 15 serve breakfast; daily fruit consumption decreased between 2004-2016 (only 1/3 of boys and 41% of girls consume fruits daily), and daily vegetable consumption is reported by only 1/3 of students.

Thus, to maintain and improve the health of the population, to facilitate the adoption of safe behaviors for health and to make the authorities accountable for the development of public policies favorable to health, it is necessary to carry out health promotion activities in accordance with recommendations of the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organization. These activities aim to: promote lifestyle change, environmental and social behaviors and conditions, in order to facilitate the development of a “culture of health and well-being” among individuals and communities; educational and social communication activities designed to promote healthy conditions, lifestyle, behaviors and environments; reorienting health services to develop models of care that encourage health promotion; intersectoral partnerships for more effective health promotion activities; assessing the impact of public policies on health; risk communication; awareness and interventions on social determinants and for equity in health (Integrated Multiannual Plan for Health Promotion and Health Education).

In an age of over-consumption and obesity, healthy eating habits are essential to keep away a wide variety of chronic diseases. Obesity, cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis, cancer, and many other conditions have at least one etiological factor in common: inadequate nutrition. Even if other determinants are more important for these diseases, it is the diet that can be influenced on a personal level and with huge consequences. Unfortunately, changing already established habits is difficult, so it is particularly important to

create the characteristics of proper nutritional behavior from an early age. In addition, parents are extremely influential factors for their children in various fields, including eating habits. As a result, it is necessary to set up educational programs on adequate nutrition targeting important demographic groups, such as women with children. Programs must be adapted to different levels of understanding, to reach all women, overcoming differences in training and education and must provide solutions for a healthy diet even in a low-income household (Zugravu, 2012).

Nutritional education programs - successful examples

1. Adopted by the World Health Assembly in 2004 and recognized again in a 2011, the policy statement on noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), the **“WHO Global Strategy for Diet, Physical Activity and Health”** describes the actions needed to support healthy diets and regular physical activity. The strategy calls on all stakeholders to act at global, regional, and local levels to improve diets and physical activity patterns in community.

The overall goal of the strategy was to promote and protect health through healthy eating and physical activity. The global strategy has four main objectives:

- reducing the risk factors for chronic diseases arising from unhealthy diets and physical inactivity, through public health actions.
- increasing awareness and understanding of the influences of diet and physical activity on health, the positive impact of preventive interventions.
- developing, strengthening, and implementing global, regional, national policies and action plans to improve diets and increase physical activity that are sustainable, comprehensive, and actively involve all sectors.
- monitoring and promoting scientific research on diet and physical activity.

Creating changes in physical activity habits and eating patterns will require the combined efforts of many public and private stakeholders, over several decades. A combination of sound and effective actions is needed at global, regional, national, and local levels, with careful monitoring and impact assessment. The Global Strategy outlined the responsibilities of those involved and provided recommendations for action to key stakeholders, including: Member States, the World Health Organization, international partners, civil society and non-governmental organizations and the private sector. The implementation of the strategy by all those involved will contribute to major and sustainable improvements in people’s health (https://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/strategy/eb11344/strategy_english_web.pdf)

2. **Childhood obesity prevention program - Healthy bag** was launched in Iasi, in 2012. It is an educational program dedicated to children and their families, which promotes a healthy lifestyle, respecting local traditions. It is based on scientific evidence and is coordinated by experts from the Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Iasi. It is internationally recognized, being included in the largest organization for the fight against childhood obesity, the EPODE International Network (EIN), along with programs from 30 countries.

The program's activities include original educational materials, films for parents and children, campaigns for a healthy lifestyle, professional nutritional research, conferences for the prevention of obesity, and school competitions. The educational package "Healthy Bag" includes an innovative collection of boards, worksheets, stories, and attractive games, which addresses students in primary and preschool, being an excellent support in creating positive attitudes towards nutrition and physical activity. The book and the CD promote an original idea, that of a traditional bag in which children will put everything that is healthier for them.

The message of the program, based on the educational package "Healthy bag - healthy eating behavior in children" and stories with the three kids, *Subțirel*, *Mijlocel* and *Voinicel*, have a great educational force, children acquiring knowledge based on games and stories. In this program, children will discover everything that is best for their health: healthy food, clean water and lots of play (<http://www.traistacusanatate.ro/index.php>).

3. In March 2011, the PRAIS Foundation officially launched the national movement "**I live healthy too!**" - **SETS**, which has as main objectives the prevention of childhood obesity and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle among families in Romania, through extra-curricular programs dedicated to primary school students. Since its launch, the SETS movement has become an active member of the EPODE International Network - EIN, the largest global obesity prevention network. In 2012, the EIN network, of which SETS is a part, was designated by DG SANCO as the "Best health promotion European project", and the interventions on physical activities within the "I live healthy-SETS" movement were appreciated as a model of good practice.

The SETS national movement is based on the long-term public-private partnership, which includes multinational companies, renowned medical and sports organizations, ministries, academics, and opinion leaders. In all primary schools involved in the SETS movement, the PRAIS Foundation provides free extra-curricular educational materials to students and their staff. Through these materials, they want to promote the benefits of daily exercise and

balanced nutrition, Olympic sports - values and models to follow, along with other informative materials, based on which, during the school year, teachers give lessons during extracurricular hours.

A new phase has begun since last year - SETS 2020. The new direction of the SETS project aims at a 3-year program based on existing SETS benchmarks and a new approach: promoting a healthy lifestyle, balanced nutrition, physical activity and sports, the importance of quality sleep, moral values, and hydration, with an emphasis on general well-being, diversity, social inclusion, self-respect and respect for others.

The results of the national movement "I live healthy too-SETS", from 2011 until now, are visible - the implementation of the project in 252 schools in Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Otopeni, Ploiești, Roman and Timișoara; over 179947 students in preparatory classes up to the 4th grade, actively involved in the project; 3000 teachers and approximately 360000 parents. The national movement SETS had as partners the Faculties of Physical Education and Sports from Bucharest and Cluj, with which it conducted 624 open lessons in the schools involved, attended by 591 volunteer sports students and over 34,790 students.

Through the large number of children, but also parents involved, intervention programs at school level can increase children's knowledge about healthy foods and a healthy lifestyle. In addition, children are very excited when they actively participate in any activity that involves them, whether it is cooking, experimenting or running, which makes them feel important, appreciated. Parents are also extremely happy that their children are participating in health-beneficial activities that help them form a healthy lifestyle. Moreover, what most health education programs aim for, and some of them even succeed, is to increase the level of information, awareness, motivation, and education of the whole family about the importance / benefits of adopting a healthy lifestyle.

Conclusions

Some food products of a brand may have a different composition, in different countries, for example, the aroma of the product may be conditioned by the habits or preferences of the population for a certain taste. However, this should not affect the quality of the food. Numerous studies in Eastern Europe have shown that there is a difference in the quality of the food, using ingredients of different quality from those used in Western countries. Therefore, imposing guidelines for the food industry but also educating the population to consult product labels and their components is an important step in ensuring the health of the population.

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