

## MEP HEART GROUP MEETING

### TRANSFORMING EUROPEAN FOOD AND DRINK POLICIES FOR CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH

**TUESDAY 24 APRIL 2018 12:00 – 14:30 | ROOM A1G369 - EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT,  
BRUSSELS**

#### **Outcome of the meeting**

(Note: presentations from the meeting can be downloaded from the [MEP Heart Group website](#))

In her welcome words, **Ms Karin Kadenbach, MEP, co-chair of the MEP Heart Group** described the heavy burden of cardiovascular disease (CVD), in terms of human loss, but also in terms of the economic costs to society. Dietary risks make the largest contribution to cardiovascular deaths. Promoting a cardiovascular health-promoting diet (a diet rich in fruit, vegetables and fibre, and with limited intake of salt, sugar, trans fatty acids and alcoholic beverages) will help reduce the burden of CVD. Consequently, access to food products that make up a healthy diet is crucial. There is a ‘disconnect’ in the food chain between policies on production and distribution (which address primarily competition and consumer protection concerns) and nutrition and public health policies. A radical change in food production is essential to create an environment where the healthy food choice is the default choice. The inclusion of health priorities in the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has good potential for supporting this change, and thus be conducive to positive dietary changes, which, in turn, will promote cardiovascular health.

**Mr Jo Jewell, Technical Officer, Nutrition, Division of Noncommunicable Diseases and Promoting Health through the Life-course, WHO Regional Office for Europe** informed the audience that notwithstanding the great progress made in reducing CVD mortality, more remains to be done, as there is a high prevalence of certain risk factors for CVD at population level. Addressing CVD is key to achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the WHO targets in the global monitoring framework for non-communicable diseases; yet with respect to the latter, EU Member States are not on track to reach the targets on obesity and on salt reduction. WHO’s recommendations include policies on rigorous controls of the marketing to children of ‘unhealthy’ foods, fiscal measures, front of pack nutrition labelling, reformulation, and healthier food supply in schools. Additionally, it is necessary to improve the food supply chain to align it with dietary recommendations. This can be done by placing health-promoting diets as a central goal of the food system at different levels: food production and agriculture, food storage and trade, transformation process, as well as at the retail stage.

**Mr Herbert Dorfmann, MEP, rapporteur for AGRI on the report ‘The future of food and farming’** emphasised that the CAP is about agricultural policy, not food policy. Budget constraints, mostly due to Brexit, will impact the future CAP. Currently the CAP costs over €55 billion/year, and citizens rightly ask that the CAP provide public goods. Mr Dorfmann suggested that the ‘greening’ objective, which has been part of direct payments under pillar 1, has not been effective. He supported conditioning under pillar 2 with a high level of subsidiarity for achieving objectives on organic farming, short food chains and local production, for example. He accepted that there were some more

problematic products and that we should reflect on whether voluntary coupled subsidies that do not contribute to healthy food production should be discontinued. Mr Dorfmann supported continuing subsidising 'healthy' food, (notably the existing school fruit and milk scheme).

**Mr John F. Ryan, European Commission, Director, DG SANTE, Dir. C — public health, country knowledge, crisis management** gave an overview of DG Santé's activities in the field of public health. He underlined the importance of the EU commitment to the SDGs - both in terms of health and the economy - and added that appropriate nutrition was part of those goals. Mr Ryan referred to the work of the Steering Group on Promotion and Prevention, where the current focus is on nutrition and physical activity. He explained that the Commission focuses on helping Member States in implementing good practice, prioritising those Member States which are not so advanced. He suggested that this would be more effective than improving the average. He stressed that there are opportunities for improving the CAP: it should move towards alignment with national nutritional guidelines (less meat, more fruit and vegetables); the EU should be self-sufficient for food, and he suggested that close adherence to national nutritional guidelines would improve self-sufficiency. Furthermore, supply and demand are closely linked; initiatives from the production-side influence consumer choice. He referred to the School Fruit Scheme and to the Tartu Declaration (September 2017) where Commissioners Navracsics (sport and education), Andriukaitis (physical activity and nutrition) and Hogan (food) called to strengthen the cooperation across different policy areas to promote healthy lifestyles, including in schools.

**Mr. Jens Schaps, European Commission, Director, DG AGRI, Dir G – markets and observatories** explained that the CAP needs to include other sector objectives, to provide value for taxpayers' money, and to be beneficial for all stakeholders. He added that DG Agri invests in the promotion of healthy food and the CAP supports with €250 Mio the EU school schemes. Promotion goes further than just fruits and vegetables. It also includes promotion of healthy food like the Mediterranean diet. He said that all products deserve a place on the market, but policies should help to steer towards healthier products whilst stressing that 'Brussels' will assist this orientation and more responsibility should be given to Member States.

**Ms Karin Schindler, Head of Division Mother, Child, Adolescence and Gender Health, Nutrition - Austrian Ministry of Health and Women's Affairs** started by thanking the Commission for introducing the School Fruit Scheme, as this had led to extensive and beneficial cooperation between the agriculture and the health sector in Austria. She outlined the priority that the Austrian Council presidency (July – December 2018) had chosen: connecting food and health, and bringing all concerned sectors to the table to consider the co-benefits of addressing food systems, with a view to making them healthy and sustainable. To that end, the Austrian Presidency will organise a conference in Vienna in November 2018.

## PANEL DEBATE

Before opening the debate, Ms Kadenbach stressed the impact of other policies on health and agriculture. She gave the example of pork exports to Russia, which discontinued due to the EU sanctions against Russia. As a consequence, pigs were kept longer in European stables where they

grew fat and subsequently high amounts of very fatty pork meat was put on the EU market at a very cheap price.

Points raised during the discussion were as follows:

- What is the role of industry? Their main concern is profitability, so how do we make health or healthy products profitable?
- The CAP has several objectives. It is not exclusively to provide a decent income to farmers. Agriculture is also responsible for the supply of products. How can we make the CAP healthy and sustainable?
- Inequalities within countries and between countries explain the varying degrees of CVD burden. What can the EU do to help reduce these inequalities? Would an EU taxation policy be possible?

In his response, Mr Schaps mentioned that some countries use tax or VAT policies to steer what people buy but highlighted this is not an EU competence. Mr Ryan gave the example of food banks in France (project with EU financial support) which apply minimum nutrition standards to the food provided to the users. He also gave the example of the CUORE project in the Veneto Region in Italy, which provides CVD screening at population level; and he referred to the EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, where participants have to submit commitments which are evaluated by the JRC, WHO and Commission. Mr Ryan also referred to the Maltese Council Presidency which launched a tool for translating national school food standards related to health and nutrition, into food procurement specifications incorporating dietary guidelines into public procurement instruments in school meals. Jo Jewell also stressed that there is extensive knowledge on how to move forward with effective food policies to promote healthy diets. This knowledge should be shared with countries that are lagging behind so that they can ‘leapfrog’ and hence reduce inequalities between countries. More can also be done to align incentives between agricultural and food supply chain policies on the one hand, and health and consumer policies on the other hand. Karin Schindler made a plea for making a better case for health in other sectors. Preventing health problems is easier and better than fixing them.

Further points raised were:

- Need for more focus on prevention in physicians’ curriculum
- Need for more and better technology so that healthy options, e.g. fruits and vegetables, can be served in a better way in vending machines (perishability).
- Need for more research (and more funds), especially for interventional studies in the field of cardiovascular prevention.