



EKHA's part in the Roadmap for Action on Food Product Improvement:

Netherlands Presidency Conference, 22-23 February 2016, Amsterdam

As a key EU stakeholder in the fight against chronic diseases, EKHA participated in conference on 22-23 February 2016 in Amsterdam. Led by Dutch Health Minister Edith Schippers and Agriculture Minister Martijn van Dam, it was the first time a country with EU Presidency took a similar focus to their health initiatives. The outcomes of the conference are expected to lead to the adoption of EU Council Conclusions at the EPSCO Health Council meeting in June 2016 which could in turn lead to binding action. The Dutch Presidency has embarked on this path by drafting a '[Roadmap for Action](#)' outlining how stakeholders should work together to reduce salt, sugar and fat from food, into which EKHA has lent its expertise.

*The **Presidency of the Council of the EU** is an exceptional opportunity for a Member State to influence the EU agenda and guide EU programs for the coming year(s). The Netherlands is holding the rotating Presidency of the EU from 1 January until 30 June 2016. During this period, the Netherlands will be responsible for drafting the agenda of EU Council meetings, chairing the meetings and trying to reach compromise between the 28 EU Member States. In the area of health, the Dutch have stated their priorities includes Improving the Quality of Foodstuffs (reduction of salt, sugar, trans fats, etc) to encourage **healthier consumer choices**.*

EU Health Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis gave a speech at the conference, saying "If a pack of cookies full of fat and sugar costs less than €1 and you find it in every corner of supermarkets; and a pack of whole grain cereals cost four times more, and is difficult to find; what choice are people given?". The Commissioner also said he wanted to ensure that health claims on food products are not misleading and to solve the legal uncertainty surrounding nutrient profiles, which would rank food based on their nutrient value. The Commission is currently evaluating whether to introduce nutrient profiles — which was expected to happen more than six years ago — or do away with them from EU law. Read the full speech of Commissioner Andriukaitis [here](#).

Professor Raymond Vanholder's impressions of the conferece:

EKHA was one of the only four NGO's invited to the meeting, as was the European Chronic Diseases Alliance (ECDA) of which EKHA is a member. The conference was in effect sponsored by two food companies, one of them being the giant Nestlé. Participants were linked mostly to industry or European and national government. There were only 9% of NGO members among the audience which does not quite match expectations of the term 'stakeholder conference'.

However, the meeting was well organized and followed an excellent flow of ideas in an interesting format, although there was perhaps too little opportunity for discussion on day one. On day two on the other hand there was a lot of interactivity.

The focus was on how to move society and individuals towards a healthier food intake; a process taking place in a complex context, involving taste, culture, convenience, cost, financial and social possibilities, society at large, personal liberty, industry, industry shareholders and governmental initiatives from regulation through to education. This is a labyrinth which unfortunately has no shortcut.

It is clear that already steps have been taken. One industry member (Nestlé) has already been working since 2009 to reduce by 20% salt addition and 31% sugar to its products. Remarkably enough they don't try to educate people into desiring less sugar, but rather add another replacement sweetener, in this case inulin, which however as a counterpart increases cost by 10%. If asked why they do this, they say that "they can't change taste".

The big debate was obviously about the dichotomy between personal and corporate freedom vs. measures imposed by government. There was no real consensus among participants. The general compromise ensuing from this discussion was that governments should not impose rules but give recommendations which may or may NOT be taken up by the industry. It should be said that large companies have done already some efforts (but to my opinion not enough) and that in part the problem now lies in the hands of SMEs who sell their products to the larger companies and to the retail sector. The latter in its turn must be willing promote healthier food.

On the other hand, my strong feeling was that the government should apply some resources to educational initiatives as well.

Another debate was about simple label (logo) vs. detailed labeling (concentration values). Here also there was no real consensus and two sides to the coin seem equally valid. The information should be given to the consumer who wants to consider them, but there should also be a more general health label that offers a perspective at one glance. The problem here is that those healthy food labels are not always recognised and also that there is disparity among European countries with regards to type of label, whereas several countries still have none.

My criticisms of the Conference: I found too much podium was given to industry and not enough to health-related issues and health-economic aspects – which, at the end of the day, is the reason we are even discussing this issue. In fact, on that note, there was only a short presentation by the representative of European Heart Network, also from ECDA, Susanne Løgstrup. When I got the microphone to explain why our preference was in favor of large food industries taking responsibility and giving the example towards offering healthier preparations, and I started explaining about kidney disease, hypertension and diabetes, the moderator cut me short and said, 'these are the consequences, we are only discussing the measures to be taken'. Thus, the industry was never far away, and sometimes presentations contained a certain degree of advertisement.

The second day consisted of a range of workshops which looked at practical actions :

- **Health education in the Netherlands:** This explained methods used by the Dutch food agency on raising public awareness. Specific attention was given for schools and education of children.
- **Innovation, research and best practices of product improvement:** This was about developing better collaboration between industry and government.

- **Front-of-pack labeling to help consumer choice:** This was a sort of comparison the four existing European healthy food labels, looking at pros and cons, what works, what could be improved.