

Workshop

The Need for Food Industry Actions and Innovations

Rikard Landberg*, Professor, Chalmers University of Technology, Department of Biology and Biological Engineering, Food and Nutrition Science; Swedish University of Agriculture, Department of Food Science
Cecilia Mark-Herbert, PhD, Senior Lecturer, Swedish University of Agricultural Science, Department of Forest Products, Division of Forest Products and Markets

* rikard.landberg@slu.se



Photo: Mikael Wallerstedt

Background

The connection between the abundance of food with high contents of sugar or salt, often experienced as palatable, and childhood obesity is widely recognised. In the report “Ending Childhood Obesity”, one of the WHO Commission’s main recommendations to the private sector is to “Support the production of ... food and non-alcoholic beverages that contribute to a healthy diet”. All data show that too many children drink and eat too much poor food, rich in sugar

or fat, and low in nutrients, and that in many settings, this consumption pattern is more frequent among vulnerable socioeconomic groups.

Among the stakeholders, the food industry could play a more central role in leading children and their parents towards healthier food patterns through strategic actions, innovations and effective communication.



Photo: Mikael Wallerstedt

Representatives of consumer organizations, the food industry, patient organizations and academia shared thoughts on the need for innovations in the food industry and necessary multi-stakeholder partnerships.

An often cited argument is that the food industry has a vested interest in continuing to produce and sell food and beverages that are high in e.g. sugar and salt. But there is also a trend towards more healthy products that contribute to more sustainable business. Do we need policy changes or other interventions to drive and monitor this trend?

Ending childhood obesity can be seen as a wicked problem in that it is difficult to solve for a variety of reasons. It requires an understanding of the problem's multi-dimensional complexity and relies on a vast number of stakeholders' interest in finding solutions. These stakeholders need to contribute in various actions that no single stakeholder could accomplish alone.

The workshop delegates represented academia, the public sector, the retailers and the food industry. The proportion of delegates coming from industry was higher in this workshop (30 %), compared with other workshops at the Summit.

Aim

The aim of the workshop was to identify industrial actions needed to combat childhood obesity. The workshop also made efforts to discuss these actions in light of promoting conditions for healthy eating in general for all consumers.

Main conclusions

Conclusions were reached at several different levels, but here we summarise the most global conclusions reached during the workshop.

- It is difficult to gather stakeholders and create arenas where companies of different sizes, authorities, academia and others can achieve a constructive solution-oriented dialogue on actions to combat childhood obesity. *Multi-stakeholder partnerships have been successfully used in other areas to improve public health and could be a way forward.* Actions should rely on a firm scientific basis.

- *Political leadership* to formulate demands for actions is essential and would speed up the pace of change, but is lacking.
- *Mistrust* is a barrier that the industry should address by showing responsibility and transparency. The industry is not a homogeneous group and efforts must be adapted with this in mind.
- *Product reformulation* can lower sugar, salt, fat, etc., but should preferably be done in stages, since taste perceptions can be affected. Broad joint efforts by many actors to create a level playing field could lower the barriers for individual companies to act.
- *Food labelling, including health claims, and guidance* towards healthier eating need to be adapted to current needs from a health perspective, and must also be easy to communicate and understand, e.g. via clear labelling systems. Positive recommendations were commended and preferred to recommendations on what to avoid.

Food innovations for health

The *mind-set* was identified as an important success factor for food innovations: problems need to be seen as opportunities! Successful innovation addresses real market needs and often arises from multidisciplinary science with high levels of expertise and strong financial support throughout the process.

‘Food innovation’ may refer to value-creating solutions and processes enhancing the quality or contents of actual food products, but also enhancing the taste experience. It may furthermore be a question of innovations *connected* to products and the use of products and services, e.g. labelling and recipes. Innovation also concerns the entire food value chain, which indicates that we need to involve actors along the food chain to understand success factors for innovation.

Access to *new technology* will be crucial for the development of healthy foods, but *building the market* will also be critical for success. The introduction of low calorie formulations replacing sugar in food provides an example. This case underlined the importance of building consumer awareness and demand for products with lower calories, in this case through a centre for product design and education. Do-it-yourself courses for children, adults, and companies have proved to be effective

for acceptance, combined with social media and the use of ambassadors.

Food reformulation

The need to reduce the level of sugar, salt, and calories has been on the food industry’s agenda for a long time, and significant progress has been made. Sugar reduction is challenging due to our inherent liking for sweetness, regulatory limitations and the functionality of products, as well as negative perceptions of low energy sweeteners.

The companies at the workshop presenting their experiences of product reformulation included representatives from the global food industry. They advocated cross-industry and cross-country programmes to improve the nutritional profile of foods and beverages and to set benchmarks for different products.

Referring to progress made in food reformulation, delegates believed new technical advances will allow for lower sugar and salt levels in products whilst maintaining product acceptance by consumers. Representatives of the global beverage industry reported a steady increase in sales of ‘no added sugar’ soft drinks and low calorie products during the last decade.

To be successful, in their opinion, product reformulations should be undertaken in *small steps*, and *broad initiatives* are needed to obtain comprehensive industry engagement and impact.

Food labelling and health claims

Labelling, e.g. symbols and health claims, can guide consumers towards healthier eating. However, it may also be confusing, particularly considering the wide range of labels, symbols and claims currently in use. Research has proven the effectiveness of providing simplified information to help consumers make healthier choices. It is also important to note the diversity of information and messages presented to consumers, a flood in which labels and health information can easily drown.

Despite knowledge that labelling, symbols and claims can be used for effective consumer communication to support healthy food choices, there is limited insight into how health symbols and claims are understood in real-world shopping situations.



“Food systems are at the moment not working for undernutrition and they are also not working for obesity.”

Professor Corinna Hawkes, Director, Centre for Food Policy, City University, London.

Food industry representatives at the summit welcomed regulations on labelling and other consumer communication, as long as they are transparent and fairly similar, also in their implementation, between different countries and regions.

Health claims, i.e. statements about a relationship between food and health, are regulated in Europe, in the USA and in many other regions to protect consumers and to ensure an effective and efficient market. Only authorised claims are allowed after rigorous evaluation of the scientific evidence.

Sweden was a pioneer in this area by adopting a Code of Practice on Health Claims before

legislation was in place in Europe. The starting point was a round table discussion with industry and retailers, guided by the Swedish Nutrition Foundation (SNF). This gave rise to a mutually agreed set of rules, a code of conduct, which regulated the marketing of health aspects of food products. It is worth noticing that this was not legislation, but the outcome of a round table discussion and a commitment to a truthful and transparent dialogue with consumers. This voluntary agreement was replaced by corresponding EU regulations in 2007.

After almost 10 years of experience of having legislation in place in Europe, it has been concluded that the different nutrition and health claims being made bear little relationship to the

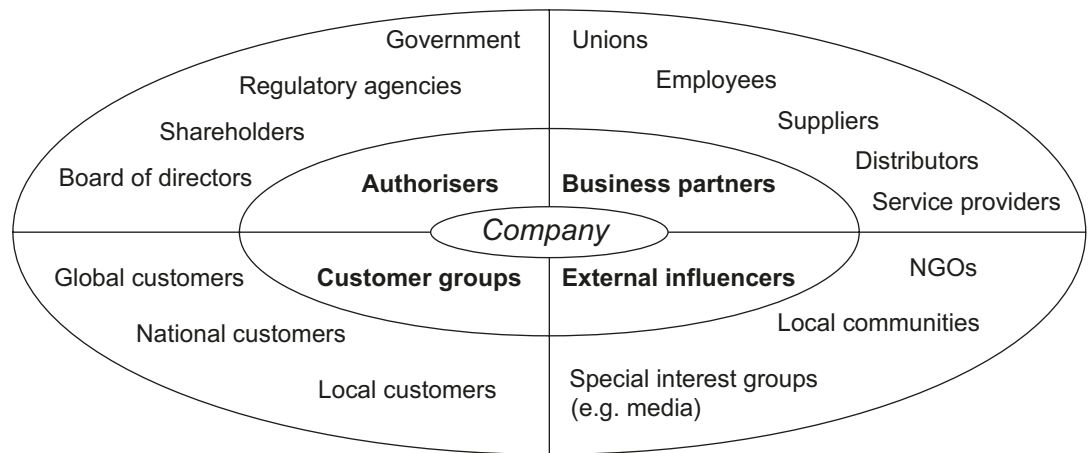


Figure 1. Different corporate stakeholder groups (adapted from Roberts, 2003, 162).

burden of diet-related disease in the EU. It can be argued that health and nutrition claims in general do not reflect consumers' actual needs. While the present legal framework for claims in the EU requires scientific substantiation, it does not require that claims be nutritionally relevant. This means that while an effect may well have been scientifically proven, its relevance from a nutritional point of view might not be high.

Moreover, despite the positive aim of promoting innovation, the EU Nutrition and Health Claims Regulation presents several challenges which may negatively affect innovation in the EU food sector. Recent surveys seem to support the view that the regulation appears not to have fostered innovation in the sector. The cost of developing scientific substantiation to back up health claims is high, which has *de facto* led many food producers to refrain from developing new products, fearing the investment will not be profitable.

The future usefulness of health claims to enhance healthy eating therefore depends on how the regulation is applied in practice. The focus could preferably be put on ensuring that approved claims are nutritionally relevant. Potential changes needed to improve usefulness include:

- Separate food from supplements.
- Prioritise claims relating to common health issues.

Voluntary actions from the food sector to improve the power of claims and consumer confidence were also demanded, but no particular examples of how to do so were elaborated.

The power of multi-stakeholder partnerships

The usefulness of the concept of multi-stakeholder partnerships is well recognised, as it allows for addressing a multitude of aspects, including ethical aspects, of organisational behaviour which may result in collective social interventions. A stakeholder perspective for this dialogue focuses on the role that stakeholders may take (Figure 1).

Figure 1 illustrates how various stakeholder roles may influence corporate actions. Authorisers, business partners, customer groups and external influencers – they may all contribute to creating conducive conditions or barriers for food industry initiatives and actions addressing childhood obesity.

The *Danish Whole Grain Partnership* is a recent example of a successful multi-stakeholder initiative. The partnership, which started in 2007, is a multi-stakeholder partnership between commercial partners (the food industry), and non-commercial partners (governmental agencies and NGOs), aimed at improving public health via increased consumption of whole grain products (to 75 g/10 MJ/day). When the project was initiated the average consumption was 36 g/10 MJ/day. Current evaluations show average consumption of 63 g/10 MJ/day. The activities undertaken include product development, communication (facts provided on food packages, a health label and dietary guidelines), availability, and efforts to gradually alter consumption-related norms. Key success factors have been identified as:

- scientific understanding as a basis for all kinds of communication
- careful documentation of outcomes
- measurable goals in the initiative to maintain a high level of engagement among the stakeholders
- patience

This example highlights the power of multi-stakeholder collaborations and shows that it is possible to provide solutions that are economically feasible for consumers and for the food industry, and that may benefit public health.

Ways to successful multi-stakeholder initiatives

Addressing challenges related to childhood obesity should be seen as *a process* that needs to be taken in steps, sometimes incremental steps and sometimes bold steps that create momentum for change. The Danish Whole Grain Partnership is an example of the need for a *long-term vision and patience* to allow for a gradual change.

Successful joint actions also require *open and transparent communication*, irrespective of stakeholder roles and actions taken. This dialogue may provide legitimacy as well as an understanding of a political process that addresses childhood obesity. Even if communication and actions must be grounded in solid scientific data, the communication also needs a language that includes a wide group of stakeholders.

Restoration of trust is needed for progress

Today many consumers distrust food industry and their incentives. Aggressive marketing towards children, food safety scandals or fraud in

the industry have received much attention, and contributed to this situation. There is great need for the food industry to restore its reputation and increase consumers' confidence. Mistrust is a barrier to the desired actions and initiatives, but corporate actions are important to create solutions to these problems. Good examples also need to be voiced, perhaps through a legitimate ambassador who can 'tell the story'.

Complex problems often require a mix of solutions, actions that individually are hard to assess and evaluate. This underlines a need for strong political policy-based long-term leadership, which is currently lacking. These are some of the problems that are contextual factors for corporate and industrial engagement in public health.

Childhood obesity actions and initiatives vary from one cultural, geographical and market context to another. Corporate strategies in a large company on the other hand may be the same, whatever the market the company is active in. The contextual aspects of actions needed in different markets may limit what large corporations are actually able to do.

Much of the responsibility pertaining to the corporate role in addressing childhood obesity is placed on large corporations, even multinationals. There is an overarching risk that small and medium-sized businesses are overlooked in the overall dialogue on solutions. Cases of local production where children or daycare centres are given active roles in community-supported production may serve as examples of educational initiatives that improve the offer of healthy products while empowering the community.

Further reading

Kaur, A., Hieke, S. and Rayner, M. (2016) *Do health and nutrition claims meet consumers' health needs?* *Agro Food Industry Hi Tech* 2016. 27(3).

Khedkar, S., Bröring, S. and Cillberti, S. (2016) *Exploring the Nutrition and Health Claims Regulation EC.No 1924/2006: What is the impact on innovation in the EU food Sector?* *International Journal of Food Science and Nutrition*, 2016 Aug 2:1–8

Roberts, S. (2003) *Supply Chain Specific? Understanding the Patchy Success of Ethical Sourcing Initiatives.* *Journal of Business Ethics.* 44:159–170.

World Health Organization, (2016) *Report of the Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity.* Geneva.

World Health Organization, (2016) *Draft Implementation Plan for the Recommendations of the Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity.* Geneva