

THE NEED FOR THE VOLUNTARY QUALITY CERTIFICATION SCHEMES IN FOOD INDUSTRY. A CRITICAL OVERVIEW ON DUAL-STANDARD ISSUE

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of the dual standard for food products and proposes measures to combat these unfair practices. There is an ongoing debate on dual-quality as current problems dealing in food sector with significant effects on products quality, consumer's information and producer's practices, especially the multinational. With this paper, we contribute to this debate by providing by addressing several important shortcomings and gaps in the existing literature. Among the various issues in this field, the approaches addressed in this paper are: (I) an analysis of the European and Romanian situation regarding the voluntary quality certification systems; (II) concrete answers how voluntary certification schemes of food can provide a functional solution for correct consumer information. The dimension of the approach is European, given that multinational producers operating on several markets are targeted. Identical Package - Different Composition is it a fraud or lack of morality?

Key words: food quality, European certification systems, dual-quality, unfair practices

INTRODUCTION

Food supply chains and food quality and safety assurance becomes an important public concern all over the World along with the unprecedented fast economic growth. Due to the technical and demographic changes [9, 15, 12, 4], in the last period of time, the food chains for human consumption have undergone considerable changes [5, 13].

However, WHO (2015) explained that the complexity of the food chain is based on demographic, cultural, economic, and technological developments [2, 10]. Kleboth et al. (2016) suggested that today's food sector is a conglomerate of international, fast changing, and interdependent networks (WHO, 2015), which follow consumer trends, innovations and societal developments [9, 14]. However, globalization of trade has brought

quality attributes of consumption goods under the limelight [1].

Consumers and public authorities are giving weight to quality attributes such as nutritional content, safety, functionality, and social and environmental impact [1].

The increase in the number of quality assurance schemes was due to the effort to ensure food safety, but also the quality of the products, which has been achieved both internationally and at the level of the U.E [3]. According to Jervell and Borgen (2004), he points out the need and usefulness of these schemes for consumers, but also playing an important role in marketing, allowing producers to differentiate themselves in the market and add value to their products.

The international ISO 9000 and ISO 22 000 families of norms address, respectively, product and process certifications, the first

linked mostly to consumption, the second linked mostly to production [8, 15].

This paper proposes an analysis of the European and Romanian situation regarding the voluntary quality certification systems, in order to finally propose the introduction in the national rural development policy of European mechanisms and instruments adapted to the Romanian producers and to the national market. The main objectives of the discussion are to create material benefits for producers and to increase consumer confidence in Romanian agri-food products. Additionally, some critical comments on double standards with the main purpose of bringing into attention some specific and current problems dealing in food sector are presented. The comments can provide a basis for discussions about the usefulness of introducing voluntary quality schemes both as a marketing tool for food producers and as a tool for promoting food quality and market transparency for consumers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methods used in this research include analysis of collected materials, government sources, and academic sources. Government sources include the European Union Regulations, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and Romanian National Institute of Statistics. For the dependent variables, the archived materials were compiled and referenced. The collection of information consisted of the verification of the current literature, but also of the administrative norms, both at national and at European level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the consumer's perception, the quality of the food is defined by the taste experience and complemented by elements such as the origin, the method of production and how healthy the product is [6].

Grunert and Aachmann (2016) state that these elements are unknown to the consumer, prior to purchase, they determine to use quality as a

guide to form expectations about the quality of a product [7].

Usually, the consumer perceives the quality according to the following indicators: price, appearance, brand, but also the store where the product is sold.

The main purpose of these quality schemes is to encourage diverse agricultural production, to protect product names from inappropriate use and fraud, and help consumers in informed decision-making [11, 17].

The applications for the quality scheme labels, presented in Figure 1, are usually handed over through the Food National Authorities to the European Commission, which analyzes and processes the applications and grants the right of use.



Fig. 1. PDO, PGI and TSG labels
Source: [14]

On July 16, 2019, 1,451 products have been registered as fulfilling the criteria and hence have the right to use one of the labels. Of these, 639 are PDO, 751 are PGI and 61 are TSG. A distribution of quality certification schemes by type is presented in Figure 2.

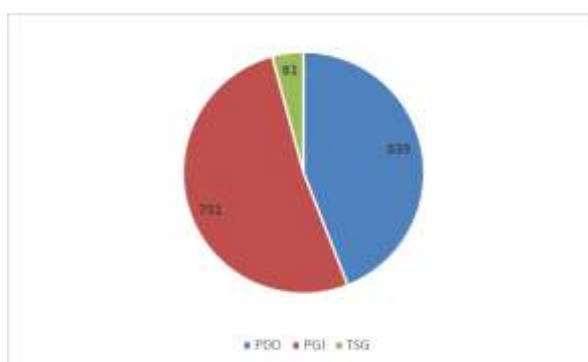


Fig. 2. Number of quality certification schemes by type
Source:

<https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/quality/door/list.html?locale=ro>, Accessed on 01.05.2019.

The geographical distribution is heavily skewed towards Southern Europe [7].

Most registrations are found in Italy (299), France (249) and Spain (196), compared to only a few registered products in Denmark (7) and Sweden (8). Unfortunately, Romania has 5 products registered, as follows: Novac afumat din Țara Bârsei, Telemea de Ibănești, Salam de Sibiu, Magiun de prune Topoloveni and Scrumbia de Dunare Afumată [15].

Critical overview

Following the model of the society described by George Orwell in his famous novel “Animal Farm”, BREXIT has introduced the idea of a two speed Europe and the notion that all European countries are equal, but some countries are more equal than others. Most of the time the equality of the countries is measured based on GDP per capita. Starting the ‘90s, the multinational companies have “adapted” their product offer based on the financial potential of the destination market but keeping the same name and visual identity of the product. In a single European market where products and citizens circulate freely, the differences in standards have been noticed by authorities in countries whose markets have been delivered with different qualities of the original product, asking for explanations for transnational manufacturers. The press, to describe the phenomenon, introduced the term double-standard or dual quality. This neologism comes from English and describes

an unequal treatment, preferentially applied to a standard, which should obviously have a unique character. Can we talk about a consumer deception or a lack of morality of the producer towards the consumer? EU rules only address those aspects of food safety and have not intervened so far in the quality policy of producers, leaving Member States the possibility to regulate these issues with strict reference to their own markets.

Between 19 and 26 of June 2017, Romania has sent a joint team of specialists from food engineering, health and food safety to take food sample in Maastricht (The Netherlands), Aachen (Germany) and Brussels (Belgium). The similar food products were collected from the shelves of the countries concerned: Lidl - Germany and the Netherlands; Kaufland - Germany; Belgium - Delhaize (Mega Image-Romania). The samples were handled by the Institute for Hygiene and Veterinary Public Health Bucharest, belonging to The National Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority, in order to make the following analysis: physic-chemical analysis for meat, milk, fish and chocolate and the presence of vegetable fats in milk and milk products. The results are presented in Table 1. Of the 29 samples analyzed, differences were found in 9 of these (Table 1).

Table 1. Analytical results of the comparative study

No.	Product name in RO	Product name in EU	Value declared on the label (kcal/100 g)	Value products RO (kcal/100 g)	Value products EU (kcal/100 g)
1	Pork parizer	Pork parizer Germany	279	259.09	274.32
2	Barbecue sausages	Barbecue sausages Germany	280	254.61	282.46
3	Canned fish	Canned fish Germany	377	307.84	210.34
4	Paté	Paté Czech Republic	238	259.98	273.54
5	Bacon cubes	Bacon cubes Belgium	233	278.58	192.14
6	Pork ham	Pork ham Germany	222	306.38	230.36
7	Canned mackerel	Canned mackerel France	13.6	20.7*	22.05*
8	Canned herring	Canned herring Germany	13	21.96*	20.36*
9	Canned mackerel	Canned mackerel France	55.11	42.87*	47.8*

Source: [17].

Dirk Jacobs, Deputy Director General and Director of Consumer and Food Information at Food Drink Europe (FDE) told interested parties that different recipes do not necessarily mean dual quality. However, the igloo fish sticks sold in Slovakia, UK, Netherlands and Portugal have a lower fish content (58%) than the same branded product in Austria (65%). The refreshing drink Coca-Cola, has significant differences in taste between the two countries, so that in Slovakia, the taste is slightly sweet, while in Austria it

is sweet. Included are differences on the label, so that in Slovakia fructose-glucose syrup is used, while in Austria sugar is used. At the same time black tea Earl Gray, in Austria tea bags are made of aluminum, while in Slovakia they are made of paper.

Emmental cheese, in Slovakia, does not have the usual structure, having a light yellow color and a different texture, while in Austria it has the normal appearance, color and texture. (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. Emmental cheese in Slovakia and Austria

Source: [16].

In the case of the mozzarella cheese, the net weight of the product on the label is 125 g. In Slovakia, the weight is 119.4 g, while in Austria is 124 g. According to a study conducted by InfoCons, differences were identified in the list of ingredients for Fanta Orange Drink - a carbonated soft drink with orange juice. In the case of soft drinks, following the analysis of products from three countries, differences were noted regarding the fruit juice content, as follow: in Romania: minimum 5% orange juice from the concentrate; in Great Britain 3.7% orange juice and 1.7% citrus juice from concentrate; Are voluntary quality certification systems viable solutions to respond to these issues? Increased transparency to consumers regarding companies (national, international or transnational) standards applied to identical products on different markets must be legislated at EU level?

It is clear that food safety is regulated by European legislation specific to each field, the breach of legislation by producers who manufacture and sells products on European territory is fraud and is punishable under the law. Food safety legislation changes according to the information obtained from scientific studies received from national and European agencies, on factors that can affect the health of the population, animals and plants. However, quality is an extremely subjective notion when it is not related to a reference analysis. The manufacturing standard used by manufacturers and communicated to control authorities when performing physic-chemical, organoleptic, nutritional analyses etc. is such a referential for an objective analysis of product quality parameters. Violation of the parameters stated in these manufacturing standards is

considered a contravention and is punishable under the consumer protection legislation.

The question is how do act when the product complies with all the safety and quality parameters present in the manufacturing standard, but analyzes made on identical products taken from different countries show variations greater than 2%? An example would be the percentage of fat content for a sausage, with a maximum limit of 50%, while the analysis shows that in the Western Europe the percentage is 20%, while in Eastern Europe the percentage rises to 49%? Or what should be done when in Germany, a producer uses pork meat as raw material for a canned product, while in the Czech version, the mechanically deboned meat from poultry is used?

At national level, a first step in this direction was made by establishment of the Agency for Quality and Marketing of Food Products, which aims at providing strategies for the development of the sector. The main objective of the Agency will be to increase the number of quality systems recognized at European level for Romanian products and certification according to voluntary certification systems in order to promote the quality of the Romanian food products.

CONCLUSIONS

The answer is one, namely increasing the transparency of product-related information, by increasing the volume of data present on the label. However, sometimes this is not enough and therefore all the manufacturers should publish the manufacturing standards for the products marketed either on their own internet site or on the websites of the authorities in the countries where they market the products. In this way, consumers either directly or through their representatives at the associative level can inform or conclude before purchasing the product. Also, the actions of small and medium-sized producers from regional or national level, who will try to value their own products through fair comparative consumer information will not be neglected.

In this way the market will be adjusted and the consumer will penalize the lack of morality through the lack of acquisition, while companies using these unfair practices will be obliged to correctly inform consumers either by selling quality identical products or by changing the names of different qualitative products. Another solution is to encourage small and medium-sized regional or national producers to apply for national or European quality systems, thus securing the established product designations to a single standard. Voluntary quality certification guarantees consumers compliance by the manufacturer with a public-quality standard. A fair price for a fair product.

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