

Towards further democratization of food consumption: Keeping the consumer informed.

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The twentieth century can be marked as a revolutionary period towards the democratisation of food. Especially in the developed world, fear starts to shift from the prospect of having no food, to having too much to choose from. Long-standing markers of social class distinction gradually experienced interesting transformations. As the food industry expanded its horizons, a plethora of exquisite and highly tasty foods turned the exception into the norm. Consumers are gradually becoming increasingly knowledgeable about particular dietary regimes and the effect on the body.

The purpose of this study is to explore the rational driving recent EU legislative developments in providing obligatory food information to the consumer. One dimension of this study tries to understand how this legislation reflects a contemporary awareness of human relations to food. This legislation tries to emphasize the democratization of food socialization, irrespective of dietary requirements or otherwise. This brings us to another dimension of this study, emphasizing the nourishing component of the legislation. This is the result of the complex relationship between food producer and the consumer. The majority of food businesses, being small and medium sized, encounter difficulties in understanding and managing food allergies. In an attempt to avert this multifaceted challenge, the EU promulgated a legislative measure emphasizing a shared responsibility between the consumer and the food business. Amid such proactive position, current evidence indicates how patients suffering from food allergies are constantly met with significant difficulties.

Today, anxiety is not necessarily generated as a result of the human interested of exploring 'new' foods. Humans are increasingly feeling unsafe even with the food they are familiar with. As the production of consumption becomes more the prerogative of the food business, the consumer is faced by the dilemma of not exerting enough control over food.

There are some 150 million people worldwide (Elucidare, 2011) who suffer from one or more food allergies. At a glance, the person at risk of any food allergy only needs to be protected from the offending food that could cause harm. However, ensuring

that the information provided is accurate and communicated effectively to the consumer is far from simple.

Recent EU Regulation addresses the provision of food information to the consumer with the scope of providing a basis for the assurance of a high level of protection of the consumer's information needs, including non-pre-packed food also known as loose food. Food business operators are legally bound to devise systems to ensure that the food they supply would be safe. This clearly puts a moral responsibility on the food producer to offer only food that will not put the health of the consumer, including sensitive individuals, at risk.

The sense of democratisation, as uniform as it might seem, is fraught with challenges. This generates psychological distress and impacts the quality of life. In the absence of adequate information and effective communication, customers suffering from food allergies either opt out from participating in acts of conviviality or else resort only to those restaurants that are usually known to cater for these specific needs. Psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, are caused as soon as food starts to act as an anti-social agent. Not to appear overtly demanding, some might decide to participate in the act of conviviality even when aware that they would eventually suffer physical discomfort due to their food allergy. Others choose to either opt out or else take their own food as part of their diet management programme. Without any doubt, fear and anxiety remains especially since reactions could simply be the result of cross-contamination or an unexpected substituted ingredient.

The ability to control our food also means establishing order in our lives by avoiding unnecessary anxieties. The new EU legislative measures are meant to reduce such anxieties by bringing a sense of food safety. The persistent fear of cross-contamination, unlabelled products, the nature of ingredients and the difficulty of understanding product labels are considered as among the main challenges towards the democratization of food. In this case, the challenge impacts not only the consumer's body, but also the person's identity.

Although great caution and care must always be exercised, living with food allergies does not have to mean a life of constant fear. The EU legislative measure is intended to ameliorate the life of people suffering from food allergies. The ability to establish effective communication helps the patient to deal with those overwhelming emotions as well allows space to embrace the new lifestyle. Accurate labelling and informed food service providers allow individuals not be defined by their food allergy. As soon as consumers start to make the right choices, consumers regain control over their food-related excitement, security, and self-assurance. In order to produce loose food that would be suitable for allergy sufferers, accurate ingredient information, complete knowledge of any previous preparation, knowledge of transportation and storage facilities and the accurate preparation of the recipe according to established standard operational procedures is of utmost importance. All this information need to be available and ready to be communicated to the consumer first and to the enforcer on demand. The new legislation allows the use of new technological means to communicate accurate information at different stages of food production.

Food law including the latest addition reinforces legal obligations for businesses to be compliant with the food tractability requirements by stating that it is mandatory to have information on the identity and composition, properties or other characteristics of food. Whatever the means of communications it is important that the information provided from end-to-end of the supply chain is transferred without errors. The key here is accurate transmission of food information from source to source without transforming a pleasant dining experience into a clinical environment, yet enabling each consumer to make educated food choices based on solid accurate information.