

L.4.1

Developments in food processing and increasing gaps in consumer competence of food handling - the challenge for nutrition policy in Europe

U. Ollersdorf

Federal Research Centre for Nutrition
Institute for Nutritional Economics and Sociology
Haid-u.-Neustr. 9, 76131 Karlsruhe - Germany

Human evolution is accompanied by innovations in food processing. In industrialised countries the food chain is characterised by rather few farmers and many other partners and a high input of energy and resources. The results are remarkable: There is food security, as there is surplus on cheap, safe and high quality food. Modern human lifestyle needs processed foods.

Despite this situation nutritional studies reveal that there are still nutritional problems in the world. In the year 2000 there was a historical event in mankind, there were as many overfed people in world as underfed ones. Food security is only a precondition but no guarantee for nutrition security.

The causes of nutritional problems are complex. There is poverty, ignorance and social injustice, in short neglecting of basic human rights. In industrialised societies the importance of the last links of the food chain, being the competence of consumers regarding food and nutrition, is ignored. Whereas the global knowledge on food processing is increasing continuously, a reverse trend regarding consumer competence can be observed. Despite the scantiness of relevant empirical data, it is obvious that the knowledge and experiences of consumers on food handling is decreasing in an accelerating way. The consequences of these reciprocal trends have to be observed and studied. People with less food and nutrition competence are susceptible to disorientation and misguided behaviour. It is likely that the trend accelerates since the traditional ways to learn food and nutrition competence are diminishing; this is valid for the private sector (households, families) and for the public (schools). Even in food professionals, like cooks or bakers, there is clear evidence of lack of practical experiences. It is convenient for all to use convenience foods.

Nutrition and food policy has to focus on this gap. The most important nutritional problems are no longer those of food quality, but related to consumer behaviour. Orientation towards the European dietary goals need well trained consumers, who not only have enough knowledge about food and nutrition, but also practical experience. Today's consumers need high qualification to use all the opportunities to

manage the everyday tasks. Considering that food is only one part of daily life, it is still important to select the right foods, and also to have the expertise to store and process it and to use efficiently all the household equipment. Without fostering such training (not only for the general population, but also for food professionals we in Europe are in danger of becoming a food illiterate population. The gastronomy is disappearing and "gastro-anomy" appearing.

Email: Ulrich.Ollersdorf@bfe.uni-karlsruhe.de

