Making Prepared Foods Healthier & More Sustainable

The Case for Regulating Ready-made Meals in the EU
Executive Summary & Key Findings

Europeans’ dietary habits adversely affect both their health and the health of the planet. They overconsume salt, sugar, fat, animal proteins (beef, pork, eggs, dairy, and poultry in particular) and calories; and under-consume vegetables, fruits, whole grains and legumes.

Nearly one million annual deaths are attributable to unhealthy diets in the European Union (EU).1 The global food and agriculture system is also responsible for 87% of deforestation worldwide, and nearly a third of greenhouse gas emissions.

An important part of this problem is ready-made meals, which make up a large and increasing part of what Europeans eat. Ready-made meals currently represent more than a sixth of all calories consumed in the EU; they also contain disproportionately large amounts of salt, sugars, fats, animal proteins and calories.

Regulating this fast-growing and particularly unhealthy segment of the food industry could have huge public health and environmental benefits. This food segment is particularly pertinent from a regulatory perspective because it is controlled by a small number of large actors (supermarkets, food service companies and restaurant chains). This relatively small number of non-SME (Small & Medium Enterprises) food retailers shape food environments,2 conditioning the choices of consumers by determining which foods are most available and accessible, as well as the nutritional composition of those prepared meals.

A group of consumers, health and environmental organisations commissioned the system change company Systemiq to assess the impacts of a potential new EU policy that would require large (non-SME) companies to align the content of ready-made meals they sell in the EU with health and sustainability standards. The impacts have been assessed using a combination of guidelines from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet & Health.

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1 https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/health-promotion-knowledge-gateway/eu-burden-non-communicable-diseases-key-risk-factors_en#:::text=visualisation%3A%20Mortality%20chart

2 Food environments can be defined as the “physical, economic, political and socio-cultural context in which consumers engage with the food system to make their decisions about acquiring, preparing and consuming food” (HLPE (2017) Nutrition and food systems. A report by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome)
This study found the following:

- Ready-made meals make up about 17% of calories currently consumed in the EU. This is growing at a rapid rate: over the past 15 years, people in Italy, Germany and Spain have been eating between 40% and 60% more ready meals. Today, consumption of ready-to-eat meals in France and Spain are nearing levels seen in the US and the United Kingdom (UK) in 2008 – countries with high consumption of prepared foods. Thus, regulating now avoids future problems as the category grows in the next five years.

- Ready-made meals are an outsized contributor to the health and environmental problems caused by European diets: they contain three times more salt than recommended by WHO Guidelines, twice as much meat as the average European diet, and more than four times as much red meat as recommended by Eat-Lancet.

- Ready-made meals are mostly sold by large companies: in the retail sector, non-SME companies sell 78% of ready-made meals, and in the food service sector they sell nearly half (48%).

- Requiring large ready-made meal distributors in the EU to comply with health and/or sustainability standards would have the following impacts:
  
  - It could help reduce the main diet-linked diseases in the EU, such as cancer, cardiovascular disease (including heart disease and stroke), liver disease and diabetes.
  
  - It could save EU consumers €2.8 billion every year in cheaper and healthier food due to reduced costs for ingredients used in ready-made meals.
  
  - It could reduce the EU’s greenhouse gas emissions by around 40 to 48 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e), equivalent to taking up to 38 million new cars off the road every year.

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3 Calories are calculated on average adult male consumption; therefore, this number likely understates the consumption levels of females and children.
Placing such regulatory requirements on companies would be consistent with existing EU laws that regulate middle-chain actors. It would also be consistent with the wishes of a large majority of Europeans: according to a 2023 opinion poll, 75% of Europeans think that large manufacturers should bear the responsibility to ensure the food they sell is sustainably produced.

Finally, it would be consistent with the guidance of the European Commission’s Scientific Advice Mechanism, who have recommended that the EU mandate food product reformulation to increase availability of healthy and sustainable food, with a particular focus on pre-prepared dishes and processed food. The Scientific Advice Mechanism also urged a focus on food operators in the middle of the supply chain, as they hold much more power than other actors, and thus have a significant influence over consumers’ food choices.

The Spanish Consumers and Users’ Federation (Federacion de Consumidores y Usuarios – CECU), European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), Fern, the German Alliance on Climate Change and Health (KLUG), Italian Consumer Defense Association (Associazione Italiana Difesa Consumatori), Madre Brava, Physicians’ Association for Nutrition, Portuguese Association for Consumer Protection (DECO), BirdLife Europe & Asia and the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) call on the EU to require large food retailers and foodservice companies to comply with minimum sustainability and health requirements for the ready-made meals they sell in the EU. Ultimately, this policy measure will help make healthier, more sustainable foods the easiest and cheapest option for consumers.

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