

**Comments on the Draft Report of The WHO/FAO Expert Consultation  
on Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases  
(Geneva, 28 January – 1 February 2002)  
By Bejon Misra, Vice Chairman, Consumer Coordination Council,  
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It is my privilege to share the views of the 50 leading consumer organizations of India on an issue, which never bothered the civil society of the developing countries earlier because of their sustainable life style and close linkage with nature. Consumer Coordination Council (CCC) is a national coalition of the major consumer groups in India and has members who are opinion makers on consumer related issues in the country. CCC is also a member of Consumers International, who has official relationship with WHO.

The draft report on Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases has all the necessary scientific data to establish the evidence on how the burden on chronic diseases will deplete the already scarce resources of the poor and vulnerable communities of the developing world due to high commercial interest. The consumer groups are concerned with the contents of the draft report and suggest that we should immediately try to quantify the damages caused to the community by misinforming the consumers about their dietary and nutrition needs. The draft report must include components of public consultations on this issue and today's intervention is a step in the right direction.

I congratulate the experts for developing the report, which is exhaustive and educative. The draft report should have carried a short summary of the report for facilitating prompt response and the contents page did not indicate the page numbers. We are particularly concerned with the recommendations and strategies mentioned in pages 45 to 53 of the report. It is note worthy to see that the experts have recognized the need to work with consumer groups to influence the Governments and educate the consumers about healthy food and its benefits. The report has no mention about the dubious role of the food industry in promoting genetically modified organisms in the global food chain without full information to the consumers. In the Codex Alimentarius Commission the committee on food labeling has been facing stiff resistance from the industry dominated member states on mandatory labeling of GMOs. We are already aware about the various tactics adopted by the multinational corporations (MNCs) to influence country policies and legislations. The consumer organizations have fought many battles and are still mobilizing resources to counter the global campaigns adopted by the MNCs to promote harmful products like tobacco and artificial milk for infants.

The draft report must contain a chapter on compensation and liability towards marketing of unwanted products in the grab of making tall claims on nutrition and dietary needs of innocent consumers globally. There should be recommendation for strong punitive actions on all such misinformation and effective legislations should be framed to tackle such inhumane practices.

The report should also try and build a strategy on how to recognize institutions, industries and countries that encourage physical activity and enable citizens to adopt clean and green life style. We find in schools these days more of classrooms than play fields. Children are

pressurized by parents, teachers and institutions to spend more time on the computer rather than on physical activities. There are several examples on how we have slowly moved away from healthy activities and adopted plastic and synthetic life style. All such institutions and organizations must pay a cost towards developing healthy citizens.

The consumer organizations urges WHO/FAO to launch a global action to expose the unethical practices adopted by the food industry engaged in manufacturing high sugar, high fat content products with ingredients which are harmful to the consumers. Today in countries like India, a World Bank study has revealed, more than 65% of the patients access health care by either selling their assets or by creating a mortgage and majority of the disease burden are avoidable if physical activity along with nutritious food are made accessible to the consumers.

The consumer organizations will no longer tolerate the abuse inflicted on the poor and disadvantaged consumers by experimenting on them on products, which are established as harmful and carcinogenic. Already in countries like India in the remotest villages traces of genetic modified organisms have been found in the edible oil and food grains distributed to the children and elders suffering from severe poverty. Even in the up market food chains in Delhi two of the imported packed products manufactured by MNCs were found containing GMOs, when they were tested in recognized accredited laboratories. In India today we have very strict legislations on commercial use of GMOs but to our surprise we find the MNCs have managed to circumvent the rules of the land. The draft report must document a chapter on such violations and bring strong recommendations on effective implementation of all existing laws on food safety and global boycott of such brands, which practice unethical approaches and strategies.

Consumer organizations are prepared to assist WHO/FAO in this direction by writing a chapter on the issues raised by us. I strongly feel that the expert group must have representatives from consumer organizations and PINGOS and not allow participation of industry and BINGOS in such initiatives within WHO/FAO. We are fully aware about the implications but in the interest of the consumers and the civil society we must all agree to adopt this policy.

We wish this initiative all success and hope to get further involved in the future interventions.

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