# Euro Coop Position on Functional Foods

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# Introduction

Consumers’ demands focus increasingly on functional foodstuffs. There is currently no EU harmonised definition of functional foods; for the purpose of this paper functional foods will be intended as foods that have “satisfactorily demonstrated to affect beneficially one or more target functions in the body, beyond adequate nutritional effects, in a way that is relevant to either an improved state of health and well-being and/or reduction of risk of disease” [[1]](#footnote-1).

Several Euro Coop members have launched their own range of functional foods, which include products such as biscuits, cheeses and yoghurts. Examples of these products are the [*bene.si* range](http://www.e-coop.it/web/guest/prodotti-funzionali1) produced by Coop Italy, the [*C brand*](https://om.coop.dk/sammen+om+bedre+mad/sundere+at+leve+nemt.aspx) produced by Coop Denmark, and the [*Sannia* range](http://www.eroski.es/nuestras-marcas/eroski-sannia/) produced by Eroski in Spain.

Euro Coop members view functional foods as products that have a positive impact on health and well-being and/or on certain conditions. However, a lack of legal clarity and legal harmonization, ongoing legislative developments, as well as the potential for fraudulent activities, may hamper the potential of functional foods and their development on the EU market.

## Lack of a harmonised definition of functional foods

Euro Coop believes that the absence of a harmonized definition of “functional foods” at European level may be a **source of confusion for consumers**, as well as a recipe for market segmentation. In addition, clarification should be made as to the difference between functional foods and **nutraceuticals**, as well as between **food supplements**, which are specifically regulated under EU legislation, and nutraceuticals. “Nutraceuticals” is a term for which definitions differ depending on the source and that may encompass both food supplements and functional foods.

## Analytical methods

Euro Coop sees the need for **harmonized analytical methods** in order to assess whether the compositional characteristics as declared on the packaging of the functional food are indeed reflected in the functional food itself. Therefore, Euro Coop calls on EFSA to develop and/or refine such analytical methods, and to draft a guidance that would ensure that the same methods are used in the same way across European Member States, in order to obtain comparable data. Indeed, harmonized analytical methods and comparable data are paramount in (1) assessing **compliance with national and EU legislation** with regards to both quality and safety aspects, (2) **preventing and detecting fraudulent practices**, as well as (3) fostering and **maintaining consumer trust**.

## Preventing fraudulent practices

Euro Coop deems the prevention of fraudulent practices as a key factor in building and maintaining consumer trust. Past food fraud incidents, such as the horse meat scandal, have shown that, once broken, consumer trust is difficult to rebuild. Therefore, more emphasis should be put on the prevention of fraudulent practices, or on the detection of these practices before food products reach the final consumer.

## Research and Development

The field of functional foods offers opportunities to use new ingredients and/or techniques that may be beneficial to health. Indeed, a functional food can be a natural food, a food to which a component has been added, or a food from which a component has been removed by technological or biotechnological means[[2]](#footnote-2). Although Euro Coop welcomes efforts made towards innovative solutions benefitting public health, food safety should always be a priority, together with adequately informing the consumer.

## Relation with the new Novel Foods legislation

Functional foods may be covered by the novel foods framework in cases in which the functional food in question “*was not used for human consumption to a significant degree within the Union before 15 May 1997*”[[3]](#footnote-3). One of the main reasons cited by consumers for not buying functional foods relates to their concerns about novel foods[[4]](#footnote-4). Therefore, Euro Coop believes that careful attention and monitoring should be given to the implementation of the recently approved new novel foods framework. Specifically, as specified in Euro Coop’s stance on the new Novel Foods legislation[[5]](#footnote-5), **novel foods must be safe for consumers and properly labelled** as to not mislead consumers. Provided that these two conditions are met, Euro Coop is of the opinion that novel foods represent interesting market opportunities as they are a means of producing new and innovative products, and increasing consumer choice. As a consequence, Euro Coop is of the opinion that functional foods may also be novel foods, provided that they are appropriately labelled as such.

## Nutrient profiles and nutrition and health claims

Nutrition and health claims are an important way of communicating to consumers the potential benefits of foods in general and of functional foods in particular. Nutrition and health claims are covered by [Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02006R1924-20121129&from=EN) which is currently undergoing an evaluation by the European Commission with regards to certain provisions, e.g. nutrient profiles. In its opinion on nutrient profiles[[6]](#footnote-6), Euro Coop has already expressed that without nutrient profiles the work that has been carried out until now under the previously mentioned Regulation would not be complete. Without nutrient profiles, nutrition or health claims may still mask the overall nutritional status of a food product, thus potentially misleading consumers when trying to make healthy choices in the context of a balanced diet.

# Conclusion

Functional foods have the potential of affecting beneficially one or more target functions in the body. However, the lack of a harmonised definition of functional foods, as well as the lack of harmonised methods in order to verify the content of the latter, may result in (1) market segmentation and (2) in consumer confusion and/or a decrease in consumer trust.

Also, it will be essential to monitor during the next few years any potential changes in the functional food sector that may be brought by the new novel foods regulation, as well as by amendments of the nutrition and health claims regulation. Indeed, the safety of functional foods, and the correct information of consumers should remain a priority.

# About Euro Coop

# Euro Coop is the voice of the co-operative retailers in Europe. Our associations brings together the national associations of consumer co-operatives in 19 European countries, which represent 4,500 local/regional cooperatives, employing 500,000 citizens across Europe and operating 36,000 stores which serve 32 million consumer-members daily. Euro Coop’s members together are Europe’s strongest retail force – accounting for € 76 billion in annual turnover from sales.

# Euro Coop’s Secretariat in Brussels represents the interests of its members before the European Institutions and facilitates the inter-member exchange between the national associations. More information is available at [www.eurocoop.coop](http://www.eurocoop.coop).

# For more information, please contact:

Silvia Schmidt, Policy Officer for Food and Retail

[sschmidt@eurocoop.coop](mailto:sschmidt@eurocoop.coop)

Tel: + 32 2 285 00 74

1. Working definition of functional foods used in « Scientific Concepts of Functional Foods in Europe » of the European Commission Concerted Action on Functional Food Science in Europe (FUFOSE), available here: <http://www.ilsi.org/Europe/Publications/1999Sci_Con.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Characteristics of functional foods as described in « Scientific Concepts of Functional Foods in Europe », see footnote 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Regulation (EU) 2015/2283 on novel foods, available here : <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32015R2283&from=EN> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chapter on consumer awareness, attitudes, and willingness as presented in « Scientific Concepts of Functional Foods in Europe », see footnote 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Euro Coop stance on Regulation (EU) 2015/2283 on novel foods: <http://eurocoop.coop/en/publications/position-papers/610-euro-coop-s-stance-on-regulation-eu-no-2015-2283-on-novel-foods> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For the complete Euro Coop position on nutrient profiles, please see: <http://eurocoop.coop/en/publications/press-releases/613-euro-coop-s-stance-on-regulation-ec-no-1924-2006-on-nutrient-profiles> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)