

September 2020:

SAFE RECEIVED EUROPEAN FUNDING FOR A NEW PROJECT TACKLING DUAL QUALITY IN FOOD PRODUCTS

On September 24th, SAFE held the kick-off meeting with the partner organisations involved in its project “Empowering Consumer Organisations: towards a harmonised approach tackling dual quality in food products” (ECO Project). This meeting was intended to provide involved partners with all the necessary information for the implementation of the project and to offer them the opportunity to discuss the project. SAFE would like to thank all partners involved in the project for their commitment and we are truly convinced it will be a great success.

What is the project about?

SAFE received funding from the DG Justice of the European Commission under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (REC). The ECO project aims at limiting dual quality practices in food and strengthening consumer organisations in the EU.

SAFE will work in a partnership involving two consumer organisations: the *Associazione per la Difesa e l'Orientamento dei Consumatori* based in Italy and *InfoCons Association* in Romania. The one-year project, which began this September, intends to strengthen the capacity of consumer organizations to test food products for dual quality, disseminate test results, and identify and report potential unfair practices.

What is dual quality in food products?

Dual quality is defined as “*a practice in which companies use different recipes, formulations or standards for items sold under the same brand name and with very similar looking packaging*”. Under EU law and Single Market principles, trading companies are free to differentiate their products for different markets according to local preferences, for example. However, consumers cannot be misled by the fact that different products are presented to them as identical in the absence of legitimate and objective reasons, and this is what happens with dual food quality in some cases.

Dual quality is not a new issue, even though it has recently received a lot of attention on the EU's political agenda after its President Juncker declared that “*there can be no second-class consumers*” in the EU. On the basis of this, the Commission has therefore decided to take various measures to address this issue, such as guidelines on the application of EU food and consumer legislation to dual-quality products and the development of a harmonised guidance methodology for testing.

However, the data collected are not extremely representative as some of the products analysed were tested in only a few countries rather than in all EU Member States and not all of them used a common methodology to carry out their tests. In addition, a simplified testing guidance is missing. Therefore, by not providing this harmonised and comprehensive overview of the situation, these frayed studies and tests cannot provide the common voice required for consumer organisations to alert the competent national and European authorities and invite them to take the necessary action.

Objectives of the project

Our project wants to reach consumer organisations in order to provide the relevant authorities (at national and EU level) with a full and accurate assessment on dual food quality in the EU. By raising

the awareness of the relevant authorities on this issue and by providing them with full and accurate information, our project will help to tackle this problem. Thus, the main project's objectives are to:

- Develop a guidance to test products,
- Empower consumer organisations
- Foster cross-national cooperation
- Improve advocacy to have better policies in the EU.

Activities and deliverables

Based on the EU harmonised testing methodology, the project will develop a harmonised guidance for testing products and identifying misleading branding strategies (TPIMS). We will also create training materials such as a guidance manual, a tutorial video and a webinar that will be available on an online platform. This platform will contain a database which will report and share misleading branding strategies with results of at least 500 products uploaded by consumer organisations.

The project will also create a certification system with the registration of a minimum of 6 companies to improve the defence of consumer organizations. We also seek to foster cooperation between consumer organizations, competent authorities and private stakeholders by organising a European conference where the test results will be presented.

This project thus offers a concrete answer to consumer organisations on dual quality issues. SAFE and involved partners are very enthusiastic about this project and we invite all of SAFE's Members to collaborate to achieve the widest possible dissemination.