

FOOD CONSUMPTION TRENDS IN ROMANIA

Gabriela POPESCU¹

¹USAMVB Timișoara

e-mail: alingabi@rdslink.ro

Balanced food consumption requires a satisfactory income. The analysis of the farm food networks cannot be carried out without the thorough study of food consumption. Under market internationalisation conditions, consumers turn towards those products that distinguish themselves through their quality. Many Romanians have become more and more aware of what they eat and choose natural, ecological foods often, although their price is higher. In the past years, numerous cases of diseases caused by unhealthy food products have been reported in Romania. One of the major issues in the food sector is to reduce costs and product prices. Fast food products represent another trend in the Romanian food consumption, as consumers have very little time to prepare food at home.

Keywords: food consumption, consumer, food quality

Consumption study is an important part of any market research. Consumption must be studied scientifically, in order to develop solid means of meeting its requirements and diversification possibilities. Balanced food consumption requires a satisfactory income. The analysis of the farm food networks cannot be carried out without the thorough study of food consumption.

The Romanian consumer wants to eat healthy and cheap farm food products that meet their demands and preferences.

In the course of time, the main goal in agriculture has been to meet the population's needs of food consumption. As today's problem is to define the need of consumption, the following question arises as a result: can agriculture still meet the population's growing demand? The nutritionist analysis of consumption is not satisfactory and relevant; there are differences from one population category to the other, varying with age, sex, occupation etc. The strictly nutritionist approach of food consumption needs does not provide all the necessary tools for problem diagnosis, as connections must be established between the economic, social, cultural and psychological elements involved. Experts in economy can build statistical-mathematical models to ensure a balanced diet at the lowest prices. In time, several models of this kind have been developed, starting from the population's food needs and the production costs of various food products. However, their applicability is still restricted, given that food preferences are never the same. Actually, the fact has been proved that the cultural significance of food is as important, sometimes more important, than its functional element.

Under market internationalisation conditions, consumers turn towards those products that distinguish themselves through their quality. This type of

differentiation provides the consumers with a new product conception. Thus, consumers are repeatedly confronted with words like *fast food*, *organic*, *GMO* etc.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Material and method. Changes in the Romanians' eating habits occur only in certain environments, mostly among young people with high incomes. They prefer western products, simpler foods, fruit and vegetables etc.

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Another aspect of food consumption study deals with the costs of meeting consumption demands, in other words, with the income share for food expenditures. Engel's law may be relevant in this case. This law says that the more the income of a household increases, the more stable the absolute income share for food expenditures becomes, although the relative share declines (food consumption elasticity in relation to income is positive).

As part of the objective methodological approaches of poverty estimation, poor households or individuals are the monetary expression of a **goods and services basket**, the "minimum requirements" for a "normal life". The contents of the basket varies with the necessities that the researcher considers and the minimum level of satisfaction he establishes. There is a consensus on including goods and services that meet the necessities of food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, health, rest, education and social involvement.

There are two main methods to determine the contents of the goods and services basket. The first one is normative and based on professional recommendations (in his studies on poverty performed in York, Rowntree 1901 and 1941; Rowntree and Lavers, 1951; applied in Romania by ICCV 1992, 1993, IEN and INCMMPs). Nevertheless, the basket contents established in this manner may differ considerably from the concrete structure of the consumption expenditures of the studied population. To minimize this risk, a second method was developed on a statistical basis, starting from the concrete structure of consumption (Watts Committee – USA; applied in Romania by BM and CNS). The relation with reality introduces the relativity degree that is necessary to apply the method on a particular population segment. However, one must specify that this methodological option is based on two premises: 1. the living standard in the studied population is not too low; 2. there are well-established and highly stable consumption patterns. If the studied population has a very low living standard or undergoes a process of structural changes, the consumption structure is either distorted or undergoes very deep changes. In both cases, establishing the goods and services basket starting from the concrete situation would enclose the analysis in a vicious circle.

In Romania, the food basket was based on the consumption normatives developed by the nutritionists at The Public Health Authority. The food consumption norms are expressed in calories, nutritive factors, vitamins and minerals and average doses of the main food categories a person needs daily. The normative food basket includes the amount and diversity of food products that offer each household member (according to age, sex and activity) a healthy diet varying with the geographic characteristics of the country and the cultural norms of the community.

The normative method for poverty measurement was first applied in Romania in 1992 by an ICCV research team. The first variant of the basket was determined by applying the consumption norms to two types of family: a four-member family – two children and a couple of retired individuals. In 1996, the ICCV team established the

food basket contents after combining the consumption normatives with the real structure of consumption, based on AIG 1995 (CNS) data; this basket meets both the theoretical demands of a healthy diet of all family members and the concrete consumption pattern.

Another normative food basket variant belongs to the INCSMPS researchers. Starting from the food products that are consumed recurrently to cover the needs of adult individuals, ten complete menus have been developed for every season, containing three meals a day plus two snacks. The total raw food amounts required for the preparation of the 40 menus were adjusted according to the food consumption norms and the average of 2,715 calories per day. In this way, the annual food basket was obtained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results and Discussions. The statistically based food basket was the method applied by the World Bank teams and CNS experts. The basket starts from the consumption structure of the poorest 30% families for whom the number of calories/person/day is determined. This relative estimation is adjusted statistically to obtain 2,750 calories/person/day, the caloric threshold that the nutritionists consider the minimum requirement for the proper development and functioning of an active adult individual. In other words, any of the applied methods is a combination of the consumption norms specific to our country and the concrete food consumption patterns of the population.

Of special interest are the current food consumption tendencies. The Romanian consumers' desires and expectations are complex and diverse. Consequently, a thorough investigation of consumption in the farm food system is more than necessary.

Another aspect to be analysed is food quality. Objectively speaking, food quality analysis uses two broad categories of methods: laboratory (physical, chemical, physico-chemical, technological and biological) and organoleptic examination. Irrespective of the place and time of analysis, the former provide accurate and comparable results. In practice, especially when characteristics like smell, taste or colour are analysed, they are combined with the latter, which use man's sensitive organs in measuring food quality. Even when one has concrete quantification methods, the food quality issue implies a high level of subjectivity.

In the past years, numerous cases of diseases caused by unhealthy food products have been reported in Romania. One of the major issues in the food sector is to reduce costs and product prices. More often than not, producers think of how to make profit and ignore the consumer health aspect.

Romanian agriculture has an impressive ecological production potential. This is a positive consequence of the fact that our country has not used fertilisers and pesticides excessively in the past years. Those who buy ecologic food demand a high quality natural product.

As far as ecological consumption is concerned, a sociological study performed in several national supermarkets indicates that the Romanian consumer is more and more concerned with ecological goods. Specialists assert that most of

the ecological buyers graduated a higher learning institute and earn medium to high incomes. In addition, half of them, aged 26 to 39, are ecologically oriented because this is the current trend. Sociologists hold that their main motivation is “consumer snobbism”.

Currently, less than 1% of the Romanian farm food products are ecological. Unfortunately, a good deal is exported to the European Union. The reasons for this could be the absence of a specific domestic sale market, the higher price of the ecological products and, last but not least, the lack of information about the positive effects of these products on health.

Fast food products represent another trend in the Romanian food consumption, as consumers have very little time to prepare food at home. Studies show that over 70% of the Romanians living in urban areas go to fast-foods because they offer quick meals. Over half of the respondents have a fast-food meal at least once a month. According to the opinion polls, the Romanians prefer hamburgers, cheeseburgers and various sandwiches. Men are more attracted to these products than women, who prefer salads, ice creams and cakes. All respondents prefer quick meals because they have very little time to eat. Two thirds like the taste of fast-food meals, one fourth appreciate their diversity. Cleanliness, hygiene and accessible prices are other reasons for which Romanians choose fast-food meals. Studies show that one of three Romanians goes to a fast-food only in the weekend and one of five Romanians has a fast-food meal both in week days and at the weekend.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions. Notwithstanding the disadvantages like the use of fertilisers, insecticides, herbicides and additives in finite products, genetically modified organisms, sugar, refined foodstuffs, the excessive use of meat and fat, artificial preservation methods, the modern food diet has led to changes in the health indicators. This is why many Romanians have become more and more aware of what they eat and choose natural, ecological foods often, although their price is higher.

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