

EU obesity platform under fire for rejecting award-winning NGO

Commission gave SAFE awards for its NCD work but for two years rejected its application to join Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health

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Non-governmental organisation (NGO) Safe Food Advocacy Europe (SAFE) has revealed that the European Commission repeatedly rejected its applications to join the EU's Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, whilst hailing its work on obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) as a best-practice example.

SAFE spoke out after seven NGOs abandoned the Platform July 3 on grounds it was not fit for purpose in tackling obesity and related issues.

For two years, SAFE has been trying to join the Platform but repeatedly seen the Commission turn down its applications. Yet, the Brussels-based NGO underlines that it has been coordinating many EU-supported projects to tackle obesity and related NCDs for more than four years, including an award-winning project.

Pointing to the decision by the seven NGOs to quit the Platform, SAFE states: "Rejecting the membership application of an NGO like SAFE after two years of waiting is yet another example that this platform has been malfunctioning."

Best Practice award

The statement emailed to European Food Law notes that just last month at a June 19 ceremony in Brussels, SAFE was awarded a certificate of Best Practice for its Sugar Project by Commissioners Vytenis Andriukaitis (Health and Food Safety), Tibor Navracsics (Education, Culture, Youth and Sport) and Phil Hogan (Agriculture and Rural Development) during the recent Tartu Call for Best Practices ceremony. The award recognised the project's efforts to tackle obesity and NCDs through training courses focused on the overconsumption of sugar.

The Commission's health and food safety directorate general (DG SANTE) "even organized a meeting where SAFE presented its project and training courses on the overconsumption of sugar to representatives from national health ministries interested in replicating them in their countries," SAFE says.

In Belgium, with the support from the Ministry of Education of the Federation Wallonia-Brussels, SAFE launched training courses for children, teenagers and adults to raise awareness about the health risks of excessive sugar intake.

"From September 2016 until today, SAFE indeed organized 90 workshops and taught 120 classes in 20 different schools in Belgium. In total, 2.500 children and teenagers aged eight to 18 benefited from SAFE's training, as well as more than 60 parents and more than 120 teachers, headmasters, educators and government officers," SAFE explains.

Pan-European training courses

These training courses are now to be rolled out across Belgium and 10 other EU member states (Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the UK) through the 'Tackling Adolescent Obesity' Erasmus+ project, which is also coordinated by SAFE.

SAFE is moreover the coordinator of a very large transnational project, "Tackling Adolescent Obesity & promoting inclusion through nutrition trainings for disadvantaged youth" financed by the Erasmus+ Programme, which involves partners in 10 EU member states. This project will support the fight against obesity by providing teenagers with important information on nutrition, mental health and the necessity for physical activity to tackle adolescent obesity.

"Despite all its efforts to target specific public health issues like obesity and the overconsumption of sugar, SAFE has been denied the right to represent consumers' interests and to share its best practices to meet the goals set by the Platform itself: increasing regular physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviour; reducing the intake of salt, saturated fat, trans fat and added sugars; increasing the consumption of fruit and vegetables; reducing the exposure to and impact on children of marketing of foods; reducing diet and physical activity related inequalities," the statement complained.

"The decision to reject SAFE's application came with little to no justification. While NGOs have had little representation so far, representatives from the food industry still hold the majority of the existing seats," SAFE continued.

"To exclude from the EU platform on Diet, Physical Activity & Health an NGO which is successfully working to tackle obesity in the EU confirms the malfunctioning of the platform and the lack of consideration for the work of NGOs on this issue," commented SAFE Secretary General Floriana Cimmarusti.