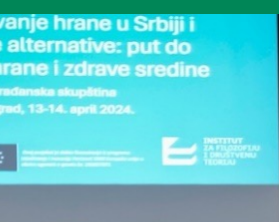


WHERE: **Belgrade, Serbia**
WHAT: **Citizens' Assembly**
WHEN: **13-14 April 2024**

SERBIA CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON FOOD LABELLING

On **13-14 April 2024**, 70 citizens from all over Serbia participated in a Citizens' Assembly in Belgrade. The focus was on food labelling, specifically exploring the development of front-package labelling that would help Serbian citizens make more informed choices regarding nutritious and environmentally friendly food options. The event, titled **'Food Labelling in Serbia and Possible Alternatives: Road to Healthy and Environmentally Friendly Diets'**, was part of the EU research project [REAL DEAL](#) and was organised by the [Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory \(IFDT\)](#) in Belgrade, an independent research and practitioner institute with expertise in the concept, design, and operation of deliberative events, including the respective facilitation techniques.



BEFORE THE EVENT: PREPARATION

TOPIC FRAMING

Many citizens in Serbia face challenges related to food safety, selecting healthy options, and understanding food labels, which often lack clarity and accessibility. The Citizens' Assembly on food labelling aimed to address these concerns by improving the labelling system to better inform consumers about ingredients, nutritional content, and expiration dates. These improvements are essential for enabling informed food choices, reducing consumer confusion, and aligning Serbia's practices with public health recommendations and European Union standards.

The organisers strategically focused on food and environmental labelling to highlight its dual significance as both a public health issue and a critical factor for sustainability. The impacts of intensive agricultural practices – such as greenhouse gas emissions, soil and water contamination, and the overuse of antibiotics and pesticides – point to the need for clearer and more comprehensive labelling. The EU’s “Farm to Fork” strategy, which is part of the European Green Deal, includes mandatory labelling with nutritional information, country of origin, expiration dates, and sustainability practices (eco-labels). On this basis it was decided that participants would explore the integration of eco-labels and sustainability practices into food labelling as a means of empowering consumers to make informed choices that benefit both their health and the environment.

The Assembly focused on identifying what citizens consider the most crucial aspects of food and environmental labelling, emphasising the core question: **“What kind of front-package labelling could assist Serbian citizens in choosing more nutritious and environmentally friendly food options?”**

RECRUITMENT

An external company was tasked with recruitment, employing a stratified random sampling approach to avoid self-selection and to ensure diversity among participants in terms of age, gender, region, and education level. Recruitment took place primarily via an online panel with face-to-face interviews. During the interviews, candidates were also asked about their views on whether food packaging provides enough information and how often they read food content labels when shopping, ensuring that not only those with a strong interest in the topic were included.

Invitations were then sent to 1000 randomly selected candidates. This initial invitation, with limited details about the assembly, yielded a positive response rate of 39%. From this group, 70 citizens were randomly chosen to participate in the Assembly. To fill any remaining gaps in representation, the agency conducted additional recruitment through door-to-door interviews and phone calls. These efforts were integrated into the agency’s regular operations, with field interviewers and phone operators reaching out to randomly selected individuals. To accommodate participants traveling from outside Belgrade, lodging at the venue was offered the night before the Assembly. To guarantee that 70 participants were present at the start of the event, five additional individuals were invited as back-ups. On the first morning, two scheduled participants did not arrive and were replaced by back-ups, while the remaining three were not required to participate.

KNOWLEDGE PREPARATION – INCLUDING A STAKEHOLDER ROUNDTABLE

Several experts contributed to the preparation of an informational booklet for the event, ensuring that all relevant perspectives were included. To maintain transparency, the booklet listed all contributing experts and was printed and sent to participants in advance of the Assembly.

In December 2023, a few months prior to the Citizens’ Assembly, a stakeholder roundtable was held in Serbia as part of the REAL DEAL project, with the aim of feeding the results into the planned Citizen Assembly. It was organised by the [Environmental Ambassadors of Sustainable Development](#) (EASD), a Serbian NGO with a wide spectrum of expertise, including [education for sustainable development](#).

Panel discussion



The theme of the roundtable was “Food and Health”, with a special focus on the nutrition of school-age children. The roundtable was attended by representatives of ‘eco-schools’, experts from various fields related to the food industry, the academic community, local governments, governmental institutions, the Institute of Public Health, medical workers, NGOs, as well as parents.

The original intention was for the roundtable discussions to inform the Assembly by highlighting various stakeholder interests, enabling the development of actionable recommendations that combined these perspectives with citizen-driven insights. However, ultimately, the topics of the two events diverged significantly, preventing full alignment. Despite this, the roundtable organisers contributed to the preparation of the booklet, integrating relevant insights into the Assembly’s materials.

DURING THE EVENT

KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

The Assembly began with an introductory session (see agenda below), followed by group discussions in which participants generated questions for the experts. These questions were collected, categorised, and discussed during a plenary session with a panel of four experts.

On the second day, a panel of four governmental representatives participated. The draft recommendations developed by the participants were presented to the decision makers, who provided statements in response. To conclude, a representative from each subgroup posed a question to the panel members.

Summarised agenda of the two-day Assembly

Day 1	
60 minutes	Introduction
60 minutes	Breakout Group Discussions: Exchange of individual views on the topic & articulation of questions related to food labelling.
30 minutes	Coffee break
60 minutes	Breakout Group Discussions: Drafting questions for experts in the plenary session, and proposals for improving food labelling in Serbia.
90 minutes	Lunch break
90 minutes	Q&A Plenary Session with Experts
30 minutes	Coffee break
90 minutes	Breakout Group Discussions: Revision of draft proposals in light of expert feedback.

Day 2	
60 minutes	Preparation of Session with Decision Makers in Breakout Groups: Summary of questions and drafting of policy recommendations
90 minutes	Plenary Session with Decision Makers: Presentation of recommendations and feedback
30 minutes	Coffee break
90 minutes	Breakout Group Discussions: Reflecting plenary session with decision makers, and revision of recommendations
60 minutes	Closing Plenary Session: Summary of proposals that groups had agreed upon.
30 minutes	Feedback survey
60 minutes	Lunch

Breakout group discussion





Plenary session

FACILITATION AND INTERACTION

Each subgroup was facilitated by a professional moderator, supported by an employee from the organising institute who took notes. Moderators and facilitators were provided with a detailed facilitation guide beforehand and had met several times in preparation. The guide contained an elaborated course of discussions throughout all the sessions, providing a common structure for all discussion groups and achieving the objectives of individual sessions and the entire Assembly. In addition, moderators and facilitators had adopted feminist moderation principles, inspired by an [online course](#) on feminist deliberation created by the NGO [Women Engage for a Common Future \(WECF\)](#). Common features of such an approach include supporting equitable and inclusive discussion, establishing a 'safety and care protocol' person during the process, and paying attention to managing subtler mechanisms of exclusion or discrimination; these were discussed among moderators and facilitators and agreed upon as the core values of the discussion process. A lead moderator introduced themselves at the start of the Assembly and was present throughout. While they did not participate in group discussions, their dual role was to coordinate the facilitators and serve as a point of contact for participants facing any challenges during the discussions.

Moderators actively encouraged participation from all group members, making particular efforts to engage younger participants, who were less inclined to speak up.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All subgroups formulated recommendations on the topic of food labelling. A voting session was initially planned for the end of the second day to allow participants to select which recommendations should be included in

the final report. However, since the recommendations from each group were very similar, the organisers substituted the voting session with a plenary discussion. During this session, participants had the opportunity to voice disagreements or suggest adjustments to the wording of the recommendations (see Annex).

AFTER THE EVENT

FEEDBACK

Participants of the event were asked to complete a survey after the event. A great majority (average score of 4.77 out of 5) were very satisfied with the Citizens' Assembly and would recommend it as a format for including citizens in policy processes (average score 4.86). They felt that all participants were treated equally and given opportunities to share their arguments or perspectives with others.

Participants indicated that at the beginning of the Assembly they were unsure about what would happen with the results of the event. At the end of the event, they had a better idea about this.

FOLLOW-UP

A brief presentation including the consensual proposals, along with a link to the dedicated [Real Deal multilingual online platform](#), was shared with the participants soon after the Assembly. While it was initially planned to discuss the Assembly's results with relevant public bodies, this has not yet happened, due to an unfavourable political climate. Instead, the team decided to prioritise scholarly outputs in order to maximise the Assembly's impact, and will revisit the dissemination of policy recommendations to the authorities once conditions improve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON **FOOD LABELLING** **IN SERBIA**

(April 2024)

FOOD LABELLING ON FRONT PACKAGING

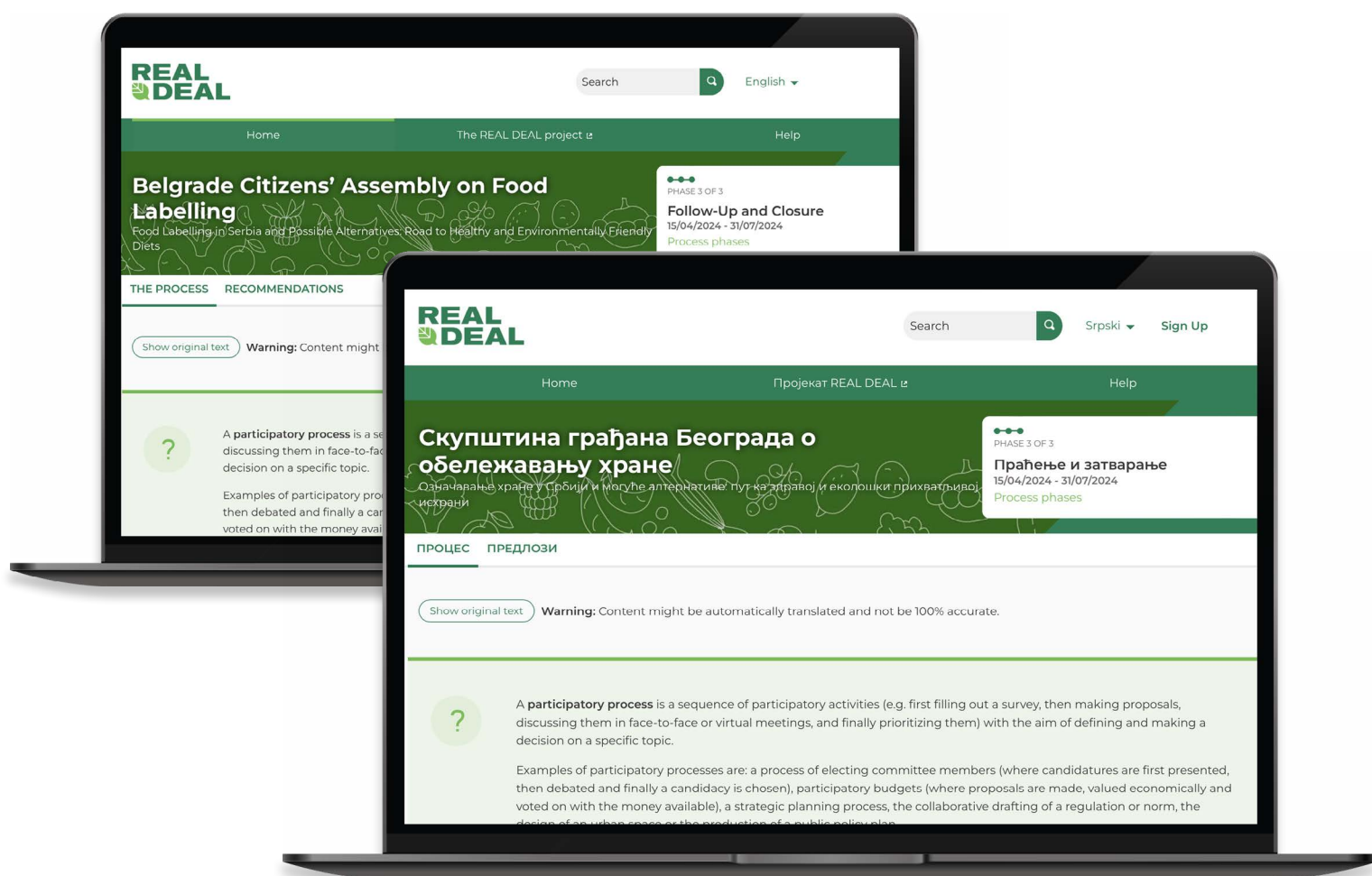
- Introduce front-of-pack labelling of products that includes standardised and simple eco-labels on basic food composition (gluten-free, sugar-free, lactose-free, vegan) based on clearly defined criteria.
- On the front, alongside existing information, there should be a mandatory Nutri-Score, assuming that everyone knows what the labels mean (provide explanatory tables and posters in supermarkets).
- Introduce a mandatory Nutri-Score system and harmonise it with the Traffic Light labelling system, with mandatory highlighting of ingredients of poorer nutritional value if present, and an additional warning sign for the number of harmful substances. This should be followed by public information campaigns about the meaning and importance of Nutri-Score on TV, social networks, and info desks [This was the only recommendation that achieved a majority but not ultimate agreement]

FOOD LABELLING ON BACK PACKAGING

- In addition to existing information, back packaging should include mandatory expiration date of the product after opening, the date of the last quality control, and the name of the accredited institution that performed the control, along with a QR code leading to additional information about the product.
- A QR code on the back of every product package should provide standardised and detailed multilingual information about the product's composition, production method, and its environmental and health impacts, in addition to mandatory labelling information.

SYSTEMIC CHANGES

- Comprehensive education across all levels and through diverse channels regarding food safety, quality, and labelling, to be conducted by certified educators.
- There is a critical need to prohibit deceptive marketing practices related to food products.
- Existing laws must be enforced more rigorously, with enhanced monitoring and penalties for violations by all stakeholders in the supply chain, from farm to table.
- Providing subsidies to producers and processors of foods with higher nutritional values is essential.
- It is imperative to encourage a sustainable recycling system that offers tangible benefits to producers, distributors, and consumers at every stage of the product life cycle.



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In the REAL DEAL project, researchers and civil society organisations worked together on green transition and democracy. They conducted research on deliberative methods to find out what works best for involving citizens on the European Green Deal.



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