Reviewing Interventions for Healthy and Sustainable Diets

Research Paper
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Summary

- Human obesity has reached pandemic proportions. More than 1.9 billion adults worldwide are now overweight. Of these, 600 million are classed as obese. Around 3 million people die each year as a result of being overweight or obese. This is a problem for the entire global community, not only high-income countries, and action can be taken.

- Environmental costs of food production are very high, with agriculture a key driver of water scarcity. Irrigation accounts for approximately 70 per cent of freshwater withdrawals around the world – up to 90 per cent in some low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Food production is also responsible for 30 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions. These impacts are unsustainable.

- What is good for public health is often good for the environment. However, rising to the challenge of changing patterns of food consumption on the scale needed to have an impact at the global level is a complex task. Behaviour can be influenced through many different approaches.

- There is no single definition of a healthy and sustainable diet. The range of relevant eating behaviours is large, and although the reduction of some dietary constituents – such as red and processed meat – can offer clear co-benefits for health and sustainability, in other areas, ‘win-wins’ may not be possible.

- Most research on interventions is concerned with either health or sustainability objectives, but evidence on interventions designed to achieve co-benefits is scarce. There is also a lack of evidence on interventions in LMICs. This is an obstacle to progress, since high population and economic growth, along with rapid urbanization, mean that it is in LMICs that much of the increase in consumption of unhealthy and unsustainable foods will occur in the future.

- The available evidence is strongest for the impact of fiscal and restrictive measures. In isolation, neither information provision nor ‘nudges’ appear likely to change consumption patterns sufficiently at the population level. However, combination strategies are likely to be important.

- The evidence highlights the risk of unintended consequences, such as leakage and substitution effects, rebound effects and ‘halo’ effects. Modelling can help anticipate some of these factors, and independent evaluation can be incorporated into interventions, not only to build evidence but also to monitor unintended consequences and inform modifications to policy and strategy.

- This paper offers a preliminary overview of the available evidence for interventions, to inform policy decisions for strategies aimed at encouraging healthy and sustainable diets. It is intended to promote discussion and follow-on activities.
Introduction

Current global dietary trends are a problem from both a public health and a sustainability perspective. In 2014, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 1.9 billion adults were overweight, of whom over 600 million were classed as obese.¹ Some 42 million children under five years of age were classed as overweight or obese in 2013.² More than half of adults in industrialized countries (i.e. countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – OECD) are overweight, and nearly one in five is obese.³ The problem is not confined to high-income countries (HICs): half of the world’s overweight people live in nine countries including China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia and Turkey. North Africa, Central America, South America and Southern Africa have some of the highest levels of obesity in the world – exceeding 25 per cent of the adult population.⁴

Poor nutrition and overconsumption come at great cost to societies. It is estimated that obesity and excess weight result in the death of 2.8 million people globally each year as a result of the increasing incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) – coronary heart disease, ischemic stroke, type 2 diabetes and some common cancers.⁵ Dietary factors are estimated to account for approximately 30 per cent of cancers in industrialized countries, with diet ranking second after tobacco in the preventable causes of cancer. Four out of five deaths from diet-related NCDs occur in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs),⁶ and this rate is expected to rise as diets shift towards – and outpace – patterns of consumption seen in HICs.⁷ The costs of diet-related NCDs are considerable and are rising in line with dietary trends,⁸ accounting for an estimated 50 per cent increase in OECD country health expenditure between 1999 and 2009.⁹ Within the United Kingdom, obesity-related health issues are estimated to account for more than 5 per cent of the National Health Service (NHS) spending in England alone.¹⁰ The economic costs associated with diabetes in the United States have been estimated at the equivalent of 1.3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP); in Mexico 2.6 per cent of GDP; and in Brazil 3.8 per cent of GDP.¹¹

² Ibid.
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The environmental costs of food production are also very high. Agriculture is a major driver of increasing water scarcity. According to UN-Water, irrigation accounts for 70 per cent of water withdrawals worldwide, while in the majority of the world’s least developed countries agriculture accounts for at least 90 per cent of water withdrawals. By 2030 it is estimated that agricultural demand for water may have increased by 30 per cent, leading to increased tensions with industrial and municipal water users.

Food production is responsible for some 30 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Production of meat and dairy products results in more greenhouse gas emissions than the total generated by aircraft, trains, motor vehicles and ships combined. Recent analyses indicate that without radical shifts in global meat consumption, it is unlikely that global temperature rises can be kept below 2°C – the international community’s stated aim. Agriculture is, furthermore, the primary driver of habitat destruction, genetic erosion and species loss. According to one recent study, agriculture accounted for more than half of global deforestation between 1990 and 2008.

The social and environmental costs associated with current patterns of consumption imply that a widespread move towards more healthy and sustainable diets would yield significant benefits. However, to achieve behaviour change on the scale needed is an immense and complex challenge.

Rising to the challenge is made more complex because it does not simply involve eliminating the consumption of foods harmful to health and the environment, even if this were achievable. Many foods can bring health benefits, or are not harmful, when consumed in moderation; although eating too much red meat can increase heart disease and colorectal cancer risk, consuming small quantities can provide important nutrients.

The link between consumption and production practices must also be taken into account. For example, although a significant amount of palm oil is produced at the expense of rainforest, it can be produced in a more sustainable manner. Supply-side interventions such as regulations, subsidies and extension services can make production more sustainable, but changes in consumption preferences may also play an important role. For example, demand-side interventions that increase demand for sustainably produced foods can incentivize sustainable production. This paper is concerned with demand-side interventions to influence dietary choices, but both supply- and demand-side interventions will be required to make progress in the medium and longer term.

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12 According to the Water Resources Group, global demand for water already exceeds sustainable supply; and by 2030 the supply gap could be as high as 40 per cent. See 2030 Water Resources Group. Charting Our Water Future. 2009.
In addition to discouraging unhealthy and unsustainable diets, interventions must also encourage the consumption of sustainable, healthy alternatives. There is no single, precise definition of a sustainable diet, but there is a broad consensus that diets that are lower in meat, fish and dairy products, and higher in whole grains, fruits, vegetables and legumes can provide good nutrition at lower environmental cost.\textsuperscript{20} Even though the health benefits of fish are well known, a minimally processed diet that is predominately plant-based is ‘decisively associated with health promotion and disease prevention’, according to a recent review of the scientific literature.\textsuperscript{21}

Building an evidence base on which stakeholders can design effective and appropriate strategies to promote healthy and sustainable diets is a critical research challenge. This paper offers a preliminary overview of the evidence available, recognizing that considerable gaps and uncertainties exist. It draws on a supporting literature review,\textsuperscript{22} which, in light of the requirement for rapid results, was inevitably constrained. The review focuses on a specific subset of four key eating practices within the general pattern of a healthy and sustainable diet: increased plant foods, especially fruit and vegetables; reduced meat; reduced palm oil; and reduced sugar. It has a bias towards HICs, as this is where much of the pertinent research has been undertaken.

This paper also incorporates expert advice from a roundtable discussion held at Chatham House on 10 April 2015.

The limited evidence base means it is not possible at this stage to arrive at concrete recommendations. However, this paper does offer some initial thoughts for policy-makers to consider alongside proposals for further research and action. The paper is intended to inform an ongoing process involving further consultation and with more extensive analysis, as part of the next steps towards the development of definitive policy options and recommendations.

### Health and environmental co-benefits

What is good for public health is often also good for the environment. Table 1 provides some examples of particular foods where reduced consumption could generate important environmental and public health co-benefits.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health concerns</th>
<th>Environmental concerns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Diets high in red and processed meat are associated with increased risk of heart disease and colorectal cancer.</td>
<td>• Livestock products embody more than half of agricultural deforestation and almost 15 per cent of global anthropogenic emissions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Widespread use of antibiotics in intensive livestock systems may increase risk of antimicrobial resistance, and have a negative impact on human health.</td>
<td>• Climate change models indicate that without a shift in consumption trends, it will probably be impossible to limit global warming to 2°C.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Animal grazing and feed production are major drivers of biodiversity loss.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Effluent from intensive livestock systems can pollute water systems.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health concerns</th>
<th>Environmental concerns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Palm oil</strong></td>
<td>• Palm oil is high in saturated fat, and consumption is associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Deforestation is primarily of peat swamp and lowland rainforest in Indonesia and Malaysia – of high carbon stock and high biodiversity.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sugar</strong></td>
<td>• Sugar consumption is linked to obesity and increased risk of NCDs, in particular diabetes.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Research has linked high levels of sugar consumption to increased risk of cardiovascular disease and death, irrespective of other factors such as body mass index, activity levels and diet.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sugar consumption is a major cause of tooth decay, which accounts for 5–10 per cent of health spending in HICs.</td>
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### Examining the evidence

There is an important policy agenda concerned with the promotion of more healthy and sustainable diets. Researchers have developed a variety of conceptual frameworks to understand and organize interventions to influence consumer behaviours. 30 Approaches can be considered in terms of a continuum of increasing intervention, 31 ranging from providing information and ‘nudging’ consumers towards better choices, 32 to fiscal incentives and finally to banning undesirable foods outright. Approaches may involve different actors. For example, governments are required to develop regulations or fiscal measures, and retailers can shape the contexts in which purchasing decisions are made. Governments, business or civil society can provide consumers with information, and many approaches may lend themselves to collaboration. These different interventions can be organized into a three-by-three matrix, shown in Figure 1.

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32 Such approaches encourage consumers to make better choices using insights from behavioural economics. They emphasize designing the ‘choice architecture’ to increase the likelihood of desirable decisions, through for example changing the default option or shaping the context in which choices are made. See Thaler R, Sunstein C. *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness.* New York: Penguin Books; 2009.
There is a wide range of available approaches that use different policies, include different actors and target different foodstuffs. However, considerable uncertainty surrounds the potential of different interventions, making it difficult to design effective strategies. Particular issues include:

- **Efficacy**: How effective will the intervention be at delivering the desired result?
- **Implementation**: How challenging, both technically and financially, will it be to design and implement an appropriate intervention?
- **Distributional effects**: How might outcomes vary across different sections of society and income groups?
- **Unintended consequences**: What are the risks of perverse outcomes?
- **Reaction**: What are the risks of criticism, for example for governments at risk of complaints of ‘nanny state’ interference?

**Figure 1: Targeted interventions for influencing food consumption**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inform and empower</th>
<th>Guide and influence</th>
<th>Incentivize, discourage or restrict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Business</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product labelling with nutritional or environmental information</td>
<td>Positive positioning of healthy and sustainable foods within retail settings</td>
<td>Voluntary commitment to use sustainable ingredients, e.g. 100% sustainable palm oil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduced plate sizes in restaurants to encourage lower consumption</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborative</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government–industry agreements on standardized labelling</td>
<td>Government–industry agreements to reduce sales of unhealthy or unsustainable foods</td>
<td>Government–industry agreements to reduce content of undesirable ingredients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-stakeholder certification schemes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Government</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public information campaigns</td>
<td>Changed default food options in public institutions, e.g. make salad or green vegetables rather than chips the default side order in schools, hospitals, etc.</td>
<td>Banning or taxation of unhealthy or unsustainable foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising regulations</td>
<td></td>
<td>Subsidized healthy and sustainable foods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labelling regulations</td>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusion of unhealthy or unsustainable foods from public procurement</td>
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<td>Nutritional guidelines</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Inform and Empower

The least intrusive strategy to influence consumer behaviour involves providing people with information. There are two propositions for how this can influence consumer choice. The first is that better information on the health or environmental impacts of foods can empower people to make better-informed choices. The second is that providing people with information on the behaviours of others can encourage them also to make certain choices; this is often termed normative feedback.

Better information

Consumers can be informed of the environmental or health impacts of food choices through a variety of channels, including public information campaigns, guidelines, and labelling and certification initiatives.

Public information campaigns

In some countries, governments have launched public information campaigns to encourage healthier diets. However, the evidence generally shows that while these have been successful in raising awareness, this has not been translated into the desired positive changes in consumption.

Guidelines

Many governments have adopted food-based dietary guidelines. These can provide guidance for public and institutional procurement as well as for public information and education campaigns. Very few have incorporated environmental considerations, but increasingly these are being taken into account. Guidelines are unlikely to influence consumer selection directly, but they can provide a benchmark against which to assess the food offer of manufacturers, catering companies, restaurant companies and public institutions such as hospitals and schools, helping to provide an incentive for supply-side change.

Labelling

Foods can be labelled with environmental and nutritional information. Nutritional labels – for example providing information on calories and on salt, fat, carbohydrate and protein content – are much more widespread. The evidence is mixed regarding how effective such labels are. Research indicates that the impacts that labels have on consumer awareness and selection is complex and highly context-specific. Methodologically, it is difficult to isolate the impact of labelling from other contextual, demographic or policy factors. Fundamentally, there is considerable evidence that at the population level, better-informed consumers do not necessarily make better-informed choices, even when they state that they would like to do so. Factors such as price, taste, habit or convenience...
have been shown to be more important than health or environmental concerns in shaping purchase decisions. Consequently, providing information to people has limited impact on selection at the point of sale. Nevertheless, nutritional labelling could contribute to other positive outcomes – in particular, there is some evidence that it provides an incentive for food manufacturers to reformulate their products.

Certification

Most environmental labelling schemes are certification initiatives: rather than providing information about the environmental impacts of a particular food, the label simply confirms that its production has met minimum sustainability standards. As such, they may help consumers to make a simple choice, selecting one product over another similar one. Many commodity certification schemes, such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) or Bonsucro (for sugar cane), set both social and environmental standards. Most of these schemes are multi-stakeholder initiatives, with participation from the private sector, civil society and sometimes government.

Certification schemes appear to have been somewhat successful in shifting the market towards certified products. However, it is not clear that this has been due to consumer demand. For example, the RSPO, perhaps the most established food commodity certification scheme, is not ‘consumer-facing’. RSPO certification provides information to food manufacturers rather than to consumers; no label appears on retail products containing RSPO-certified palm oil. Use of RSPO-certified palm oil can perhaps be explained by the desire of companies to demonstrate their sustainability credentials and mitigate the risk of potentially damaging criticism from NGOs (some of which have run high-profile campaigns on palm oil and criticized well-known companies). Governments and public authorities might also drive demand for certified products, for example by making certification a requirement for procurement.

Normative feedback

It is well established that people can change their behaviour when presented with information about the behaviour of others. People might be encouraged to behave healthily or sustainably when they are shown that others do so. However, research on alcohol consumption among students indicates that normative feedback sometimes has limited efficacy.

On environmental issues, studies have identified potentially significant impacts on reducing household energy or water use by including information on neighbours’ consumption with utility bills. But changes in behaviour are often not sustained, and households soon ‘backslide’ to previous patterns of consumption. More research is needed on the effectiveness of normative feedback in relation to healthy and sustainable diets.

38 Hawkes C et al. Smart food policies for obesity prevention. 2015.
It might be considered that changing the price of an item or providing information could encourage rational consumer behaviour. But a significant body of evidence demonstrates people do not always behave rationally and instead make contradictory choices – such as the person trying to lose weight who nevertheless picks up a chocolate bar while queuing at the checkout. Here, the retailer has designed an environment at the point of sale that increases the likelihood of selling food that the customer had no intention of buying when they entered the shop. This is distinct from influencing choice through price or the provision of information, both of which appeal to conscious reasoning.

Such approaches are in widespread use for commercial advantage in the retail sector. However, in recent years there has been a growing interest in using them in public policy development, potentially to guide people towards choices that are desirable from a societal perspective. Illustrative examples are given in Table 2. Strategies commonly aim to change contextual cues, alter the prominence of different options or change default options. These types of intervention are commonly referred to as ‘nudges’. They may have low implementation costs and hold particular appeal for governments wishing to avoid regulation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy objective</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase pension enrolment</td>
<td>Change the default from ‘opt in’ to ‘opt out’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve diet</td>
<td>• Provide a cue to purchase fruit and vegetables in supermarkets by including a designated space in shopping trolleys.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increase the prominence of healthy foods in canteens or on supermarket shelves.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Change the default side option in restaurants and cafeterias from chips to salad or green vegetables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase physical activity</td>
<td>• Provide a cue to use the stairs by designing buildings so that stairways are more prominent and appealing.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increase the prominence of cycling in towns by building cycle lanes and rolling out cycle hire schemes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce alcohol consumption</td>
<td>• Make smaller glasses or lower-alcohol wines the default option in bars and restaurants.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increase the prominence of low-alcohol beers on supermarket shelves.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Authors’ analysis; Marteau et al (2011). 43

However, despite showing success in commercial applications, a large body of literature on designing so-called ‘choice architecture’ for public health, and the high hopes of policy-makers and politicians, there is little empirical evidence that these approaches can deliver sustained results at scale or perform better than alternative strategies.44 This is not to say that nudges cannot play a role as part of combination

44 Ibid.
strategies that include these interventions. This appears to hold in institutional settings – such as workplaces, schools and hospitals – where government (or the relevant administrative authority) can specifically design the choice architecture directly, as well as in commercial settings.45

The important question in commercial settings is not whether nudges are more or less effective than alternative interventions, but rather whether there is meaningful scope for companies to use nudges for environmental or health objectives. The business case for designing choice architectures that are supportive of health and/or environmental objectives may in some cases be clear. For example, when a food that is good for the environment or health has a high retail margin, then the incentive is there for the retailer to maximize sales at the expense of other products with a lower profit margin. Therefore, to the extent that sustainable and/or healthy foods can command a price premium, there is a rationale to design choice architectures that favour these products. In other cases, it might be the role of government to work with or incentivize business to nudge consumers towards more healthy and sustainable choices.

There are various examples of voluntary agreements between government and business on public health issues where nudge approaches have been used. One such is the UK’s Public Health Responsibility Deal, launched under the auspices of the Department of Health in 2011, whereby ‘partners’ have made a series of pledges in areas including reducing alcohol, salt and saturated fat content.46 ‘Nudging’ was central to the strategy, and explicit in the then secretary of state’s notion of the Responsibility Deal: ‘Rather than nannying people, we will nudge them by working with industry to make healthier lifestyles easier’.47 The deal has been criticized by organizations including the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Physicians for undermining prospects for more effective regulatory interventions and providing companies with undue influence over policy-making,48 but has been defended on the grounds that business has an important role to play in public health and should be a stakeholder.49

In general, evidence on public health interventions demonstrates that voluntary agreements with the food, alcohol and tobacco industries have been less effective than have regulatory alternatives.50 In practice, voluntary agreements tend to be more effective the less ‘voluntary’ they are. Those including coercive elements such as economic incentives and sanctions have tended to perform best.51
Incentivize, Discourage or Restrict

Governments can discourage consumption of unhealthy and/or unsustainable foods by increasing their price relative to alternatives. Conversely, they can incentivize consumption of healthy and/or sustainable foods by lowering the relative price. The most straightforward way to do this is via fiscal measures—i.e. by means of taxation or subsidy. Government can also impose restrictions and limits on the sale or use of undesirable foodstuffs, or ban them outright. In addition, business can voluntarily restrict unsustainable ingredients in foods.

Restricting ‘bad’ foods

Governments have a number of means at their disposal to restrict consumption of harmful foods. Public procurement is a clear example. Although national governments do not typically apply this to food, there is growing interest in doing so. In the United Kingdom, for example, where public procurement for offices, prisons, hospitals, schools and the military accounts for about 10 per cent of the catering sector, the government has committed to a target of 100 per cent sustainable palm oil by the end of 2015 as part of a wider initiative with industry groups and NGOs.52 There are further examples of sustainable food procurement policies among local, municipal and regional governments.53

In the public health arena, much attention is currently focused on restricting consumption of salt, excessive consumption of which is associated with an increased risk of hypertension, heart disease and stroke. Legislation to restrict salt content in Japan and Finland resulted in reductions of 5g a day per person; in the United Kingdom voluntary commitments from food manufacturers have seen more modest reductions.54

Moves to restrict partially hydrogenated oils (PHOs – the primary source of dietary trans fats, which are strongly associated with cardiovascular disease) have particular relevance for health and sustainability. Denmark, Austria, Switzerland, Iceland and Sweden have all imposed limits on PHO content; the US Food and Drug Administration has proposed that PHOs should not be ‘generally recognized as safe’, which, if followed through, would effectively constitute a ban.

In response, the food industry has increasingly turned to palm oil as an alternative. However, palm oil contains a high proportion of saturated fat, which is also associated with cardiovascular disease. Palm oil consumption in LMICs has been linked to higher rates of cardiovascular disease mortality.55 The link in HICs is weaker, probably in part reflecting the low levels of palm oil consumption relative to other sources of saturated fat (such as meat and dairy products). For these reasons, increasing use of palm oil as a ‘healthier’ alternative to PHOs is a cause for concern.56

Increasing palm oil demand also has environmental consequences. More than 80 per cent of production occurs in Indonesia and Malaysia, where demand has been met primarily by the expansion

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53 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
of plantations into peat swamp and lowland rainforest – among the world’s most biologically diverse and carbon-rich biomes.

**Fiscal measures: subsidizing the good and taxing the bad**

Experience with fiscal measures, whether through subsidies, taxes or combinations of the two, is mainly confined to the health sphere. The most common interventions have been taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs). The rationale for targeting SSBs, rather than sugar itself, is that sugary drinks constitute a ‘disposable’ part of an individual’s diet, so the tax might be considered less intrusive. Countries that have used SSB taxes include Hungary, France, Finland, Norway, the United States (at state level), Mexico (see Box 1) and a number of Pacific islands (see Box 3). Subsidies have tended to focus on fruit and vegetables.

**Efficacy and evidence**

A general lack of empirical data makes assessing the effectiveness of fiscal measures difficult. Implementation often occurs in the absence of a suitable monitoring and evaluation process that would result in publicly available data, although this was not the case in Mexico, where preliminary results from a real-time evaluation process are encouraging (Box 1).

**Box 1: Mexico’s tax on sugar-sweetened beverages**

Mexico has an obesity crisis. Two-thirds of the adult population are overweight or obese. Some estimates suggest that as many as one in six may have diabetes, which, with heart disease, is one of the top two causes of death in the country.

Mexicans consume more soda than almost any other population in the world, with the average person consuming almost half-a-litre a day. Amid growing concern about the state of the nation’s health, attention has turned to the role of SSBs as a possible contributor to the crisis.

In 2013 a civil society coalition launched a provocative media campaign to raise awareness about the sugar content of SSBs and the links with diabetes, accompanied by a demand for a 20 per cent tax on SSBs. As momentum for the tax grew, beverage manufacturers responded with their own campaign warning that a tax would cost jobs and hit small independent retailers and low-income consumer households hardest.

The outcome was a 10 per cent tax, effective from 1 January 2014, introduced alongside a proposal to allocate resulting revenues to improving access to drinking water in schools. Mexico’s National Institute of Public Health also established a monitoring and evaluation programme. Comprehensive data are not yet available, but preliminary data for the first quarter of 2014 reportedly indicate a 10 per cent decline in consumption of SSBs and an increase in consumption of bottled water.

Proponents of the tax have argued that the social signal sent by the tax – that SSBs are harmful and should be dealt with in the same way as tobacco and alcohol – is more important than the economic signal. In the words of one health official, it is an ‘educative tax’ that ‘sends a message from the government to the people that this is bad for you’.
Despite this challenge, the number of cases in which governments have applied fiscal interventions provides researchers with a relatively large – if imperfect – evidence base. Modelling can also help policy-makers and researchers anticipate the impacts of prices in the absence of robust empirical data. However, models are only an approximation of reality, and results depend heavily on the assumptions made regarding, for example, price, demand and substitution effects. Reviews of empirical and modelled data in HICs indicate that taxes can reduce consumption of unhealthy foods. Changes in consumption tend to be proportional to the level of the tax, suggesting that significant interventions may be required for major behavioural change. Nevertheless, marginal changes in consumption can still generate important health benefits in many cases.

The evidence base concerning environmental measures is weaker. Models of carbon pricing typically focus on energy and industrial uses, despite the food system accounting for as much as 30 per cent of global emissions. Nevertheless, those studies that do exist indicate that a carbon tax on food products could reduce agricultural emissions, particularly through reduced consumption of meat. Modelling also suggests that a carbon tax on foods could have important health benefits through reduced consumption of meat and saturated fat, leading to reduced prevalence of diet-related NCDs.
The ‘Macro’ Context

The interventions discussed so far and summarized in Figure 1 target the consumer directly (through price or information, for example) or indirectly (by shaping the ‘micro’ context in which purchasing occurs). However, diets are also heavily influenced by a wider set of social, political and economic conditions – the ‘macro’ context.

Trade

Trade affects the availability and affordability of foods. Increasing trade and investment has contributed to the nutrition transition in LMICs, where consumption is shifting from traditional to more ‘Western’ diets that are heavy in processed foods. As foods become more processed and value chains become longer and more complex, the link between farm-gate prices and retail prices weakens, potentially reducing the ability of demand-side price interventions to influence agricultural practices.

Trade integration also increases the risk of leakage and substitution effects. For example, the efficacy of a national intervention to reduce agricultural emissions through a carbon tax on meat would be undermined if the livestock sector simply reoriented to export markets. The low price and high availability of palm oil have made it the ‘marginal oil’ of the global food system. It has become the substitute of choice when food manufacturers have switched from PHOs, with potential consequences for the environment and health.

In addition, the international trade regime may limit the policy space for governments to pursue certain interventions. Actions taken to reduce the importation of ‘harmful’ foods could be considered discriminatory under World Trade Organization (WTO) rules if other foods that might be considered ‘like’ products are not subject to the same interventions (see Box 2). It is also difficult for governments to discriminate on the basis of how otherwise identical foods are produced. For example, a measure that favoured ‘sustainable’ palm oil over other palm oil might be challenged under WTO rules.

The retail and restaurant sectors

Food retailing is increasingly dominated by the modern supermarket. Supermarkets have made the option of a diverse diet available to more people. However, they have also increased the availability of unhealthy processed foods and encouraged overconsumption. As such, the spread of supermarkets in LMICs is argued to have contributed to the nutrition transition.

The nature of retail and restaurant options available to communities has implications for health. Various studies have identified a strong link between the density of shops and restaurants selling highly processed food and rates of obesity, although other studies have shown no link. Nevertheless, there could be a potential role for public planning in improving people’s food choices.

63 ‘Leakage’ refers to when capital, income, goods or services exit one economy for another; for example, as a consequence of increased regulation or unfavourable economic conditions in a country. Environmental regulations can, for instance, result in leakage when firms seek to reduce costs by relocating production or reorienting exports from regulated markets.


Box 2: Tackling obesity and NCDs in the Pacific islands

The Pacific island states provide a good example of nutrition transition. Consumption of traditional, locally produced foods has been replaced by a diet high in imported, energy-dense and processed foods. The islands are now highly dependent on imports, and obesity rates have increased markedly – along with the incidence of NCDs, which now account for three-quarters of deaths. In some states, improvements in life expectancy appear to have reversed in recent years.

Public awareness campaigns have contributed to political and public support for tackling the problem. However, government capacity and resources are generally low. Stakeholders have identified a range of interventions tailored to local capacities and contexts, and governments have implemented taxes on SSBs and other sugary foods. None the less, minimal monitoring and evaluation mean that the impact of these measures is unclear.

The food import dependency of the islands means trade policy can be a useful instrument with which to influence the availability and price of unhealthy foods. However, governments are constrained by international trade rules. Many island governments have raised import tariffs on unhealthy foods up to the bounds permitted under WTO terms, but these limits are generally low compared with many other countries, reflecting the islands’ relatively low capacity and weak bargaining power.

Trade rules have also constrained the ability of governments to ban harmful foods. In 2011, for example, Samoa agreed to remove a ban on the import and domestic distribution of turkey tails – a high-fat poultry offcut – and turkey tail products, as part of its accession agreement with the WTO, on the grounds that it was discriminatory because it did not apply to other similarly high-fat foods. Tonga was dissuaded from banning mutton flaps – a high-fat sheep offcut – in part by WTO rules and also because the primary exporter was New Zealand, a principal aid donor.

Sources: Snowdon 2010; Snowdon 2013.

Advertising

Advertising of processed foods has increased as their production and availability have grown. Studies have shown that children are often heavily exposed to such advertisements, particularly through television and the internet, and that this affects their food choices and the requests they make of their parents.66

Norms and values

In most countries, there are foods of particular social or cultural significance for which people may be especially reluctant to modify their consumption behaviours. For example, a number of studies indicate that this is often the situation with meat. Similarly, public attitudes to health and sustainability are likely to be important in determining how consumers respond to information-based interventions. Studies generally show that health is considered to be more important than the environment in shaping consumption patterns.

Political economy

Although desirable from a societal perspective, reducing consumption of particular foodstuffs will often have a negative impact on certain interest groups. These groups can therefore be expected to make efforts to block change, as happened when the soft drinks industry took action against the proposed SSB tax in Mexico (see Box 1). There are many other examples of business mobilizing against proposals to restrict advertising, or to impose taxes or labelling requirements. For instance, soft drink manufacturers are estimated to have spent more than $40 million on lobbying in the United States in 2009 – eight times the equivalent spending in the previous year – when Congress was considering a tax on SSBs. Industry may seek to raise the political stakes for governments by emphasizing risks to jobs or poor consumers. Manufacturers’ responses to Denmark’s saturated fat tax, introduced in 2011 but withdrawn the following year, emphasized regulatory costs to industry, job losses and regressive impacts on poorer households. A lack of evidence can be used to justify inaction, particularly if there is a plausible risk of unintended consequences from well-intentioned but poorly designed interventions. Public support for government action may provide a countervailing effect in such circumstances.

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69 Bailey R et al. Livestock – Climate Change’s Forgotten Sector. 2014.
Considerations for Policy-makers

Inform and empower

There is little evidence that information alone can improve diets at the population level. Populations are heterogeneous, and different sections of society will have different levels of awareness about health and environmental issues, as well as different preferences for healthy and sustainable foods, and will be faced with different barriers to making healthy and sustainable choices. To be effective at the point of sale, information interventions may need to be tailored to specific groups and contexts. Attention should also be paid to the risk of unintended consequences; in particular, some studies have shown that nutritional labelling can lead to the overconsumption of healthier foods.

Nevertheless, the wider impacts of information should not be underestimated, and there is evidence that although information may not always empower consumers, it can influence procurement policies, product reformulation and agricultural practices.

Guide and influence

Although there is little doubt that nudges used by the food industry are commercially both very efficient and effective, the evidence for nudge-based public policy on diets is weak. Studies have been largely concerned with small numbers of distinct nudges in restricted circumstances, and – with the exception of some interesting examples – have generated underwhelming results. It may be that in order to have material impact, nudges must be designed and implemented en masse or as part of large-scale composite strategies incorporating price and information interventions. However, there is little knowledge about how nudges can be employed to achieve behaviour change at the population level.

The weak evidence base is not helped by inconsistent definitions within the literature and by a lack of comparability. Nudges may suit environmental objectives, given that sustainability is less of a conscious motivating factor than health is, but the evidence that does exist is primarily concerned only with health outcomes. As policy development continues in this new space, it will be essential to undertake and publish rigorous evaluations.

As with other types of intervention, nudges may have unintended consequences. Rebound effects could occur where consumption is reduced. For example, a study of reduced portion sizes in a Dutch workplace cafeteria found that almost one-fifth of people overcompensated for the smaller meal by

70 Hawkes C et al. Smart food policies for obesity prevention. 2015.
72 Ibid.
Reviewing Interventions for Healthy and Sustainable Diets

buying more food than they would otherwise have eaten.\textsuperscript{75} Similarly a ‘halo’ effect can result when people over-consume foods with a healthy default side option.\textsuperscript{76}

**Incentivize, discourage or restrict**

Policy-makers considering fiscal measures are faced with a number of other challenges. First, food taxes may be regressive in countries where poorer people tend to be more likely than richer people to consume unhealthy foods (i.e. in HICs).

Second, and related to the first, taxes may be unpopular. A food tax that falls harder on low-income consumers could still be progressive in health terms, but this may be a difficult argument for politicians to make successfully. Taxes perceived to be primarily for the purpose of raising revenue are likely to be more unpopular, and this may go some way to explaining the short life of Denmark’s abortive saturated fat tax.\textsuperscript{77} There is some opinion that public acceptance can be increased if tax revenues from health taxes are reinvested in health programmes.\textsuperscript{78}

Third, an intervention may have unintended consequences. For example, the relatively low carbon footprint of sugar means that consumption could increase under a carbon tax, with adverse consequences for public health.\textsuperscript{79} Models suggest it is possible to design fiscal interventions so as to avoid this outcome, but it is not always straightforward to anticipate and mitigate such problems at the outset.

**Key points**

Despite the relatively thin evidence base regarding the efficacy of different interventions, it is still possible to identify a number of key points for policy-makers to consider.

**Be clear what is meant by a ‘healthy and sustainable diet’, and be prepared to prioritize**

Although there is general consensus on the principal elements of a healthy and sustainable diet, there is no single definition. The range of relevant eating behaviours is large, and although there are some clear areas – such as with meat – that offer clear co-benefits for health and sustainability, equivalent ‘win-wins’ may not be possible in other areas. For example, fish forms part of a healthy diet, but overfishing causes stocks to collapse and results in extensive damage to marine ecosystems.

Clarity and transparency about what constitutes a healthy and sustainable diet will help policy-makers identify priorities, make trade-offs, design regulations and policies, and monitor for unintended consequences. Clarity of message is also critical to achieving traction with senior policy-makers and politicians.

**More evidence is needed, but this is not an excuse for inaction**

Most research on interventions is concerned with either health or sustainability objectives, but there is very little evidence on interventions designed to achieve co-benefits.

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\textsuperscript{76} Marteau T et al. Judging nudging. 2011.


\textsuperscript{78} Lavin R, Timpson H. Exploring the Acceptability of a Tax on Sugar-Sweetened Beverages. 2013.

There is also a lack of evidence on interventions for LMICs. This is an obstacle to progress, since high population and economic growth, together with rapid urbanization, mean that it is in these countries that most of the increase in consumption of unhealthy and unsustainable foods will occur. Many middle-income countries are already struggling with obesity and NCD burdens.

Existing evidence highlights the risk of unintended consequences, such as leakage and substitution effects, rebound effects and halo effects. Modelling can help anticipate some of these problems and inform mitigation strategies. Independent evaluation processes can be integrated into interventions, not only to build evidence but also to monitor for unintended consequences and inform modifications to policy.

*Consider indirect and cumulative impacts*

The evidence is strongest for the impact of fiscal and restrictive measures. In isolation, neither information provision nor nudges appear likely to change food consumption patterns on the scale needed to have an impact at the global level.

However, interventions are not mutually exclusive, and there is scope to design broad strategies combining price interventions, restrictions, nudges, and information and education strategies. Composite strategies are likely to be important.

Other areas of public policy-making can support these strategies. For example, procurement and catering policies can have important consequences for the availability and accessibility of particular foods.

Government interventions may have an important signalling effect. For example, labels and nutrition guidelines may encourage consumers to accept restrictive or fiscal interventions, or may encourage product reformulation. Interventions to tax or restrict the availability of foods may help to educate people about the social or environmental consequences of consuming these products.

*Consider the ‘macro’ context*

Wider social, economic and political factors are important in shaping diets and consumer choices. The combined effect of these factors is often to encourage unhealthy or unsustainable consumption, and they may also undermine the efficacy of targeted interventions. Bringing about far-reaching changes will require a reshaping of the ‘macro’ context to form an ‘enabling environment’ for healthy and sustainable diets. Important areas to consider include trade policy, public planning, advertising regulation and wider public education campaigns on health and the environment.

*Learn from other areas and sectors*

Examples of success and failure from other areas and sectors might be helpful to efforts to encourage healthy and sustainable diets. From the health sector, areas to consider include tobacco control, efforts to address harmful alcohol consumption, and individual policy initiatives such as the UK Public Health Responsibility Deal. In the environment sector, policies and regulations to reduce energy consumption and change transport behaviours could offer important insights. More research is needed to identify transferable lessons.
Moving forward

Encouraging transition towards healthy and sustainable diets is a complex policy challenge. This paper, and the literature review on which it draws, provide some initial considerations for policy-makers, but more research and evidence is needed to address questions relating to the barriers to and enablers for success, and to develop actionable recommendations for policy-makers and business.

A multi-stakeholder task force – including representation from government, civil society, the private sector and academia, and with membership from high-, middle- and low-income countries – should take this agenda forward, developing recommendations where it is possible to do so and identifying priorities for further research. Key elements of the agenda could include:

- Development of 'deep-dive' case studies from around the world, examining experience with different intervention strategies in different contexts, and identifying barriers and enablers as well as transferable lessons;
- Provision of advice to policy-makers on frameworks for identifying priorities and ‘best-bet’ interventions, and in designing smart composite strategies;
- Regionally focused workshops to explore the research findings and tailor recommendations to specific contexts.
Acronyms

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>CO₂e</td>
<td>Carbon dioxide equivalent</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross domestic product</td>
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<td>HICs</td>
<td>High-income countries</td>
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<td>LMICs</td>
<td>Low- and middle-income countries</td>
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<td>NCDs</td>
<td>Non-communicable diseases</td>
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<td>NHS</td>
<td>National Health Service</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>PHOs</td>
<td>Partially hydrogenated oils</td>
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<td>RSPO</td>
<td>Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil</td>
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<td>SSBs</td>
<td>Sugar-sweetened beverages</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
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