Effectiveness of policies targeted at promoting healthier diets

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Food safety, healthy diets and trade

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Outline

1. Ex-post evaluation of healthy eating

2. Policy options
   - Labelling
   - Fiscal measures
   - Nutrient standards

3. Trade, food safety & healthy eating

4. Conclusions
On ex-post evaluation

The challenge of evaluating (National-level) healthy eating policies:

- Focus is on effectiveness
- Settle for intermediate outcomes? (e.g. F&V intake rather than disease reduction)
- Randomized settings are seldom considered (exception: SNAP/HIP pilot in Massachusetts)
- When data are non-experimental, impact estimation is not straightforward: there may be 'noises' in measurements, non-representative samples and other policy-independent variables affecting the outcomes
- There is a trade-off between the time frame of evaluation (long-term vs. short term effects) and the identification of causal effects
## Current evidence basis: Overview

### Criteria:
- Policy with explicit nutrition focus implemented (or continued) at national (state) level after year 2000
- Evaluation must be ex post, on observational data and with some "counterfactual" consideration

### Table: Ex post evidence on national policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Adoption levels / trends</th>
<th>Ex post evidence on national policies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Availability</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Supporting more informed choice</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Advertising restrictions</td>
<td>Low (higher for voluntary codes)</td>
<td>Limited</td>
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<td>Information campaigns</td>
<td>High and rising</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nutrition education</td>
<td>Medium (rising)</td>
<td>Very scarce</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labelling regulations</td>
<td>High and rising</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td><strong>Changing the market environment</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiscal measures</td>
<td>High and rising</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>School environment</td>
<td>High and rising</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory nutrition standards</td>
<td>Medium (rising)</td>
<td>Scarce</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voluntary nutrition standards</td>
<td>High and rising</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accessibility measures</td>
<td>Low (mainly local)</td>
<td>Scarce</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mazzocchi (2017), Trade Policy Technical Notes, No. 19
Ex-post evidence on labelling measures

- High adoption (and heterogeneous approaches)
- Large body of studies, mostly experimental evidence, but also a dozen of rigorous ex post evaluations
- Evidence varies depending on target & approach, but:
  - Suggestive of small but significant effect on specific-nutrient intakes
  - Not much evidence on behavioural change and health effects
  - Increasing evidence on reformulation effects
  - More evidence on substitution patterns is needed
Taxes 'Fat & Soda' (& subsidies?)

- Exponential rise in adoption (sugar more than fat)
- They are transmitted to prices (but firm strategic behaviours exist)
- They reduce consumption, but the price effect is generally too small to generate noticeable health gains
- We don’t know enough (yet) about substitutions, potential for reformulation and signalling effects
- City-level poll-based US taxes make a major step in that direction
- Is the ultimate effect of taxes larger than the price-induced one?
Nutrient standards and reformulation

- Not very popular, mostly voluntary agreements
- Hard to isolate reformulation effect
- When clearly targeted, they are effective in improving diets (especially if compulsory)
- High potential in combination with other policy measures (e.g. labelling, but also taxation?)
Trade is crucial: it affects prices, availability and standards

Balancing nutrition, safety and competitiveness through trade policies is a huge (but worth taking) governance challenge

We don’t have much (robust) evidence on the relations between healthy eating policies and trade, while recognizing its importance
Some final considerations

- We have examples of effectiveness from most policy options, but we need more evidence on (a) substitution and reformulation patterns; (b) how to maximise health outcomes; and (c) multi-level policies;
- We struggle to evaluate long-term policies (e.g. education), does this generate a bias in adoption?
- Healthy eating policies have major trade implications, and trade policies impact on the healthiness of diets, but more evidence is needed