

Advertise here

# The Island

Monday June 8th 2015 Online

Advertise here

HOME | NEWS | FEATURES | SPORTS | BUSINESS | OPINION | EDITORIAL | IMAGE GALLERY | CONTACT US

NAVIGATE : [Home](#) » » [Towards healthier diets in Sri Lanka: The role of Nutrition Labeling](#)

## Towards healthier diets in Sri Lanka: The role of Nutrition Labeling

March 16, 2015, 6:06 pm



By Raveen Ekanayake  
& Chayanka Wickramasinghe

In this article to mark World Consumer Rights Day (WCRD) 2015 under the theme 'Healthy Diets', Raveen Ekanayake and Chayanka Wickramasinghe take a look at the importance of Nutrition Labeling to promote healthy diets.

Unhealthy diets are linked to four of the ten biggest causes of deaths worldwide: overweight and obesity, high blood pressure, high blood glucose and high cholesterol. In 2010, it is estimated that over 11 million deaths globally resulted from Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) linked to unhealthy diets. The impact of poor diets on health now exceeds that of smoking. The effect of obesity (US\$2 trillion per year) on global GDP is now equivalent to the cost of war, gun violence and terrorism. Increased

productions of processed food, rapid urbanization, and changing lifestyles have led to a shift in dietary patterns. Increasingly, people around the world are preparing less food from raw ingredients and buying more processed, pre-packaged food. Over the last decade or so, global sales of pre-packaged foods have increased by 92 percent, reaching 2.2 trillion US dollars by 2012. This increase in production, promotion, and consumption of processed foods that are unhealthy - energy dense, nutrient poor and high in fat, salt or sugar - has become a global driver of unhealthy diets in high, middle, and low-income countries.

The growing incidence of NCDs linked to unhealthy diets has gradually led to more consumers becoming conscious of the inputs that go into the production of the food items they consume. Labeling, Nutrition Labeling in particular, has been widely recognized as a powerful tool in allowing consumers to quickly and easily interpret the nutritional value of packaged foods and inform and help them decide on their diet. This article takes a cursory look at the importance of Nutrition Labeling, the regulatory environment concerning labeling, and issues pertaining to the effective implementation of such regulations.

### Nutrition Labeling

Consumers around the world are increasingly becoming conscious of what goes into the food they eat. Moreover, a large number of health conscious consumers look for key information presented on the 'Nutritional Facts' given on product labels. For example, the amount of carbohydrates, calories, vitamins, minerals, cholesterol, sodium are some nutritional facts at the forefront on the minds of the consumers. In some cases, consumer behavioural patterns can be observed as a result of such labeling. For instance, the inclusion of unhealthy ingredients on the labels would encourage or motivate consumers to switch to alternative product which they deem to be healthier. However, if the nutrition content of the products is not labeled, the consumer cannot make an informed decision. As a result, labeling offers a certain degree of minimal protection for consumers.

The current set of regulations governing food labeling in Sri Lanka, mandates that in addition to the date of manufacture and expiry, product labeling must clearly disclose all ingredients and permitted additives used in the product. However, there is no mandatory requirement on the disclosure of nutrition related information. With growing health concerns due to the consumption of unhealthy foods, from a consumer's view point, it is important that regulatory authorities implement mandatory nutrition label requirements on processed and prepackaged foods for sale.

### Ensuring coherence

In addition, regulatory agencies must seek to ensure coherence in the information provided in these labels. The flavour enhancer mono-sodium glutamate commonly referred to as MSG is one such example. The consumption of MSG is commonly linked to symptoms such as diarrhoea, headaches, and insomnia. However, when it comes to labeling, there is no mention of MSG. Rather it is substituted by a range of associated terms such as yeast extract, glutamate, glutamic acid, etc. Hence there is a

### Breaking News

#### Await Breaking News

Last Updated Jun 07 2015 | 09:12 pm

...

### Featured News



[Send Flowers in Sri Lanka](#)

[Kapruka Shopping | News](#)

**Marriage**

**Sri Lanka Telecom**  
**Mobitel**  
We Care. Always.

**Flowers & Gifts**  
**FREE Delivery**  
in Colombo, Kandy, Negombo & suburbs!

**War on terror revisited**

**STARTrack**  
with Ivan Alvis  
Plus Track Albums

**Friendship / e-pal & Marriage**  
Insert your profile & search your partner

**CSE**  
**STOCK REPORT**

**PHOTO**

**INET** Colombo, Sri Lanka  
9th June 2015



ARCHIVES | RELATED LINKS

[Monday, 8th June 2015 \[Current Issue\]](#)

[Sunday, 7th June 2015](#)

[Saturday, 6th June 2015](#)

[Friday, 5th June 2015](#)

[Thursday, 4th June 2015](#)

[Wednesday, 3rd June 2015](#)

tendency for consumers to be misled by the information provided. Due to the absence of specific mandatory guidelines governing the type of nutrition related information included on a label, firms have the opportunity to pick and choose nutrition related information that best suits the marketing needs of their product, and leave out essential information that are key for consumers in making an informed decision.

Regulatory authorities must develop a set of guidelines and make it mandatory to include key nutrition facts on the labels of food products in order to ensure uniformity of information. This will also guarantee that the consumers are not misled by the provided information. Likewise an ingredient naming convention must be established. For instance, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) stipulates that firms must always list the commonly used names of ingredients unless there is a regulation that provides a different term, for example, using the term 'sugar' instead of its scientific name 'sucrose'.

#### Raising consumer awareness

Whilst nutritional labeling is a useful tool to highlight essential information about the nutritional value and composition of products, the effectiveness of such regulations in promoting healthy diets, rests largely on how well consumers take notice of these Nutrition Labels. Understanding nutrition labeling is closely linked to nutrition knowledge of a consumer. For Nutrition Labeling to be effective, it is first and foremost important for consumers to have a basic understanding of nutrition, which will aid them in choosing prepackaged foods. Studies suggest that the level of knowledge and use of food labeling information increases with age, level of education and family income. It is therefore pivotal that targeted consumer awareness programmes be implemented to boost the general public's knowledge on nutrition. In India, a number of initiatives have been organized at the grassroots level with the involvement of the regulatory agencies, business, both local and multinationals and the NGO sector in improving consumer knowledge on basic nutrition facts. In Sri Lanka too a leading apparels manufacturer and a leading public school has teamed up with a local NGO to raise awareness on nutrition knowledge amongst its constituents. Encouraging such initiatives in the country will help improve consumer knowledge on nutritional values of the food they consume.

#### What can be done?

The growing incidence of NCDs associated with unhealthy diets poses a serious public health challenge for governments across the world including Sri Lanka. Nutrition Labeling has been recognized as a key tool in the government's arsenal in tackling this problem.

Many governments in the developed world have recognized this and mandated compulsory Nutrition Labeling requirements on prepackaged products. For effective implementation of such regulations, it is key to establish a specific set of labeling guidelines to ensure consistency and transparency so that the consumers are not misinformed or misled by the information given in the labels.

In this regard, the regulatory authorities must work together with the private sector and relevant NGOs to raise nutrition knowledge and awareness to promote healthy diets in society.

(Raveen Ekanayake is a Research Officer at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) and Chayanka Wickramasinghe is a Project Intern at the IPS. To view this article online and to comment, visit the IPS Blog 'Talking Economics' - [www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics](http://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics))

 Hits: 557  [Send to Friend](#)



www  island.lk

#### Polls

**Which Sri Lankan cricketer should be inducted into ICC Hall of Fame first?**

- Duleep Mendis
- Arjuna Ranatunga
- Aravinda de Silva
- Sanath Jayasuriya
- Muttiah Muralitharan

#### Announcements