

Label inventory: Executive summary

Background

Switzerland intends to develop and introduce a 'healthy choice label' for foods and beverages into the Swiss market. As a first measure, the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (www.bag.admin.ch) commissioned the Swiss Society for Nutrition (www.sge-ssn.ch) to compile an inventory of label organisations in Switzerland and abroad with information about how these labels have been developed and introduced, how they are awarded, monitored and marketed and how effective they are.

Methodology

After compiling a list of existing label organisations and developing a questionnaire, 27 organisations were contacted for either a personal interview or written self-completion of the questionnaire. 19 organisations (9 of which award a 'healthy choice label') agreed to participate. For reasons of completeness, the final inventory was amended with publicly available information from two other 'healthy choice labels'.

Findings

In Switzerland, there are two 'healthy choice labels' which focus on meals and eating out but none in the retail environment. Outside of Switzerland, 9 'healthy choice labels' could be identified; most of them mainly award foods in the retail environment.

Most of the identified 'healthy choice labels' are fully funded by licence fees, some are publicly funded, others have mixed funding models.

It took the surveyed organisations between 1 to >5 years (mean 26 months, including an average of 19 months to develop the criteria) and required between 0.4 to 4 full-time positions to develop the label. Some worked on a volunteer's basis; others had budgets up to CHF 900'000 for the developing period. All organisations agreed on the usefulness of external experts and/or consultants.

All but one 'healthy choice label' organisation have category specific (mostly nutrient based) criteria, some with up to 87 (mean 34) categories. Criteria are revised and updated either according to a specific routine or when justified. The most often used criteria for 'healthy choice labels' are sodium, saturated fatty acids and fibre, followed by total fat, trans fatty acids and sugar. Further criteria include serving size, energy and certain vitamins and minerals.

Most 'healthy choice labels' are awarded in-house, contrary to many Swiss label organisations which require an independent certification by an accredited audit firm. Monitoring as well is mostly done in-house and/or outsourced to independent laboratories, independent auditors or accredited audit firms and benefits from the so-called 'social control' among competitors. In Switzerland and Sweden monitoring is also conducted by official food inspectors.

The organisations market the labels according to their annual marketing budget (mean CHF 590'000 for 'healthy choice labels', mean CHF 1.3 Mio for other labels) with a multitude of marketing methods. Additionally, they rely on marketing efforts of their licencees.

The effectiveness of 'healthy choice labels' is often only measured by awareness and market penetration. Both measures appear to increase with time and it is also possible to reach high numbers within a relatively short time. Comprehensive scientific evaluations of the effectiveness of 'healthy choice labels' do not exist yet, but are planned or have already been started for some labels.

Conclusion and outlook

This inventory presents and summarises the procedures used for developing, introducing, awarding, monitoring and marketing labels and gives indications about operating costs, manpower requirements and effectiveness. It will be used to prepare a proposal for the attention of the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health on the best way of how to develop, introduce and manage a 'healthy choice label' in Switzerland.