Nutrition labelling in Europe. First results from the FLABEL project

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Effective and efficient nutrition labelling is important for all stakeholders. Over recent years governments, food manufacturers and retailers have been very active in the area of nutritional labelling and have developed a wide variety of symbols, signposting systems, colour schemes and formats which they feel best communicate the nutritional content of their foods and perhaps more importantly for them, fit more closely with their product or brand identity. Reviews of consumer research on nutrition labelling have identified a gap in scientific evidence about whether nutrition information on food labels is exerting an effect on healthy food choices among consumers. If there is an effect, it is not known how strong the effect is, under which circumstances it occurs, what factors are responsible for it occurring, or whether the effect differs between consumer groups.

FLABEL (Food Labelling to Advance Better Education for Life) is a European Union (EU)-funded project that aims to understand how nutrition information on food labels affects consumers' dietary choices and shopping behaviour. The objectives of this presentation are to: (1) assess the penetration of nutrition labelling on various food products in all 27 EU Member States and Turkey; (2) describe a labelling typology; and (3) reflect on the types of research that will provide insights as to the expected utility of front-of-pack nutrition labelling across Europe.

In each of the 27 countries studied, food products were audited in three different types of retailers to cover as many different products as possible within the following five food and beverage categories: sweet biscuits, breakfast cereals, pre-packed chilled ready meals, carbonated soft drinks and yoghurts. The most widespread format was the back-of-pack tabular or linear listing of nutrition content. Nutrition claims and guideline daily amounts (GDA) labelling were the most prevalent forms of front-of-pack nutrition information. Among categories, breakfast cereals showed the highest penetration of nutrition information. Nutrition information was found on a large majority of products audited.

In a study carried out in the France, Poland, Turkey and the United Kingdom (with 15 participants from each country regularly responsible for food shopping for the household), the Multiple Sort Technique involving both 'free' and 'structured' sorting of a range of nutritional labelling content elements presented on cards was used to develop a typology of the current European labelling systems. In terms of developing a typology which categorises nutrition labelling with respect to the communicative elements contained within the label, an approach which relates to the degree of 'directiveness' of the label in communicating the healthfulness of the product might be an effective approach. Whilst the term 'directiveness' was not used verbatim as a construct by the participants, it has been applied here as an external variable to best explain the complex relationship between the two dominant constructs utilised by the participants; 'levels of information' and 'healthfulness'.