What role could agri-food policy play in shaping health outcomes?

John Cranfield

Food, Agricultural & Resource Economics
University of Guelph

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What’s the connection?

- Rising rates of obesity in many countries of the world
- Information barrage - new tonics, cleanses, diets and exercise programs that aid weight loss
- Calls for action by government to address the obesity problem omnipresent
- Raft of proposed strategies to reduce rates of overweight and obese in Canada - being fat is the canary in the coal mine of broader, long-term health outcomes
Proposed policies and strategies that cite overweight and obesity as a problem
Include enhancing Canadians’ health as a policy objective
Implication is that agri-food policy can be used to enhance the health of Canadians.
But can it?
Narrowing the focus

- Health has to do with the absence of disease
- Separate communicable from non-communicable diseases
- Agri-food policy little direct role regarding many communicable diseases
- Some non-communicable disease (e.g. cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes) have clear connections with food and nutrition
- Focus on non-communicable diseases.
Genetics, environment and behaviours

‘You can choose your friends, but you cannot choose your family’: agri-food policy cannot affect one’s genetic based risk for developing non-communicable diseases

Agri-food policy and the environment: reduce risk of exposure to compounds associated with non-communicable disease

Discussion regarding health outcomes centres around behaviours

Behavioural aspects the underpinning of policies/strategies designed to enhance health.
Efforts to shape behaviours

- Caloric intake and caloric expenditure important
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Net nutrition equation

- Calories in > Calories used → Gain weight
Evidence from the United States

- Average calories from snacking ↑ 90 and 112 percent for males and females
- Number of snacks per day that has risen, not the caloric content of a snack per se
- Caloric expenditure did not change appreciably
- ‘...most plausible explanation for the rise in obesity involves increased caloric intake, not reduced caloric expenditure.’ (Cutler et al. 2003, p.104).
- Increased rates of obesity are correlated with ‘...access to new food technologies and to processed foods.’ (Cutler et al. 2003, p.94)
Regulations

- Trans-fats = BAD
- Used widely in food production and preparation
- Voluntary ‘bans’: e.g. Voortman Cookies in 2003
- Legislated ‘band’: Denmark in 2003; Switzerland in 2008

But is this something agri-food policy can address?
HC, AAFC, and provincial/territorial counterparts chasing different objectives

Agency’s *raison-d’etre*

Coherence or coordination between agricultural policy, food policy, nutrition policy and health policy?

AAFC does not have dog in fight related to health policy

HC does not have dog in fight related to agricultural policy.

Administrative and governance structure lead to wicked problems

Solution to a problem in the health domain can cause an unforeseen problem in the agricultural domain, and vis-a-verse
Economic consequences of regulating?

Food ingredient mixes as a least cost feed problem

Will regulation result in a higher cost of production? (e.g. sugar and HFCS)

Absorbed (unlikely) or passed on

Long-term economic impact of ban or other health-oriented regulations?

Cost of compliance versus health care cost savings, enhanced productivity or growth in income and earnings

Is the compensation test passed?
US have programs with characteristics similar to a thin subsidy - income transfer

What foods are included?

Could an agricultural policy maker ever advocate a program that serves to benefit some agricultural commodity producers but not others?

Are governments prepared to add further program spending?

Cash et al. (2005); one per cent subsidy on F&V

Differential effect across income brackets

Reflects differential price responsiveness
Benefits that might come about from enhanced nutrition may not be realized for a number of years.

Pay it forward.

When in the future will the benefits be realized?

Timeframe over which economic benefits might be realized are much longer than the political lives of policy deciders.

Who owns this problem?

AAFC, HC, Finance?

Wicked problem.
Fat Taxes

- NO
- They’re regressive
- Will hurt the poor the most
- Substitution possibilities?
- Availability of healthy choices?

- Blends of fat taxes and thin subsidies?
- SERIOUSLY?
- Deadweight loss
- Administrative costs
- Who decides?

- Cash et al. 2011: FAT not TAX
Labels
- Facts
- Claims
- Scarlet letter

Nutrition information

Kitchen sense

Are these in the remit of agri-food policy?

Agri-food sector (public and private) has a stake

Is it net nutrition?