A systematic review of the effectiveness of food taxes and subsidies to improve diets: Understanding the recent evidence

In 2011, the United Nations General Assembly High-Level Meeting on non-communicable diseases recommended the implementation of fiscal measures, such as taxes and subsidies, to improve diets and health. Indeed, advocates argue that fiscal policies would correct for the tendency of market forces to encourage the consumption of fatty, sugary and salty foods. This systematic review includes 43 papers and aims to reduce confusion and inform policymaking by consolidating recent evidence and explaining the differences in methodologies used.

The review assesses four types of fiscal policies to promote healthy diets: sugar-sweetened beverage taxes, fat- and calorie-based taxes, nutrient profiling-based taxes, and healthy food subsidies. Regarding sugar-sweetened beverage taxes, sixteen studies modelled the effects of a 5% to 30% tax on the consumption of sugary drink. Overall, the studies successfully indicated that fiscal measure can be effective in promoting desired dietary changes. In fact, the systematic review highlights that taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages and subsidies appear to be most efficient in producing changes in consumption.