

THE HINDU

Food for thought: conclave calls for promoting good food and discouraging the bad

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Draft food labelling regulation that proposes to place warning labels on foods with high fat, salt, sugar content to come out soon in public domain

"You cannot let industry run our kitchens," said Sunita Narain, director general, Centre for Science and Environment.

She was speaking at the National Conclave on Food, a day-long event that aimed to strengthen the conversation around food, health, and environment. The agenda was to "promote good food and discourage bad food", said CSE deputy director general Chandra Bhushan.

A panel discussion around 'regulating bad food' addressed the draft food labelling regulation which will soon be released for public comments. "It is done from FSSAI's side and we expect the draft to come out soon," said **Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)** adviser Kumar Anil.

The thrust of the draft, which is not in the public domain, is the labelling of HFSS (high in fat, salt, sugar) foods, and their regulation. “There may be problems, but at least it is a beginning. We are addressing the word HFSS,” said Mr. Anil.

Red-food category

The definition of the category of packaged foods is based on the World Health Organization guidelines, with fat (including trans and saturated fats), sodium, and sugar over a certain limit getting a red marking.

When the draft comes into effect, HFSS foods will have a front-of-the-pack red warning label. “We wanted a ban on red-category foods,” said Ms. Narain. “But we agreed to the word ‘restrict,’” with immense pressure from the ‘big food’ industry, she added. Taking a cue from tobacco control, warning labels have been seen to work in 37 randomised-control trials. Six countries have so far used the system, with Chile leading. The draft also looks into a freezing of serving size to standardise it across brands, in consonance with the recommended dietary allowances.

At present, mandatory elements on a label are: energy (in Kcal), along with protein, carbohydrate (with sugar), and fat. Information is mentioned as per 100 g or 100 ml. Salt or sodium information is not mandatory, despite the knowledge that a high, unreasonable amount is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease. In addition, there are gaps of ultra-processed food, exemption of small packs from labelling, and the presentation of an unhealthy food as healthy through methods like fortification.

Indian Academy of Paediatrics (North Zone) vice-president Rekha Harish set the context of India’s obesity epidemic and spoke about the cradle-to-grave tactics that food companies use to capture children’s minds. This begins from in-app advertising in games for infants, setting unhealthy habits from the very start of life. “You are not expected to take more than 2 grams of sodium [a day], and just one soup has 3,977 mg (almost 4 g) of sodium,” she said.

She also pointed to conflict of interest with industry manipulating research as well as influencing national and international policy. “Trans-national companies, with their huge financial strength, have displaced the long-established food systems and dietary patterns world over,” she said.