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Book Review

Book review – Jill E. Hobbs, Stavroula Malla, Eric K. Sogah and May T. Yeung (2014): Regulating Health Foods - Policy Challenges and Consumer Conundrums.

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Book Review

Jill E. Hobbs, Stavroula Malla, Eric K. Sogah and May T. Yeung (2014): **Regulating Health Foods – Policy Challenges and Consumer Conundrums.**

Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, Cheltenham, UK; 266 pages;
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Increasing rates of overweight, obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes and cancer have fuelled the interest in the connection between diet and health in recent years. According to the WHO (2015), each year around 38 million people die from NCDs with ageing and the globalization of unhealthy lifestyles being considered the major driving forces of these developments. Unhealthy lifestyles refer to increasing tobacco use, physical inactivity and unhealthy diets. An inappropriate diet for example may lead to raised blood pressure, increased blood glucose, elevated blood lipids, and obesity (WHO, 2003).

Given this background there has been a steadily growing body of research investigating why consumers eat what they eat and in which way consumers' food choices might be influenced to become healthier and thus contribute to lower health care costs. One stream of the large literature on healthy eating focuses on consumer demand for so-called functional or health-enhancing foods. Functional or health-enhancing foods are usually defined as foods that are consumed as part of a normal diet and contain ingredients that have the potential to enhance human health or reduce the risk of disease beyond basic nutritional functions (e.g., SIRÓ et al., 2008; STEIN and RODRIGUEZ-CEREZO, 2008). Prominent examples of functional foods are cholesterol-lowering spreads, vitamin-enriched juices and probiotic yoghurts.

Jill Hobbs and her co-authors address this stream of the literature in their book "Regulating Health Foods – Policy Challenges and Consumer Conundrums". As the authors lay down in their introduction and in Chapter 2 *("What are health foods?"*), country-specific definitions and regulations with respect to health-enhancing foods are rather diverse leading to an array of different categories and terms such as functional foods, nutraceuticals, supplements, natural health products or medical foods across countries. Thus, the authors decided to use the catch-all term "health foods" throughout their book to refer to all these different categories.

In general, the book addresses three broad topics. First, the authors provide an overview of evolving policy issues and regulatory frameworks (*Chapter 3*) and the different existing definitions of health foods across the globe. They include not only the major markets such as Europe, the United States, Japan and Canada (*Chapter 4: "Health claim regulations in developed markets"*) but also emerging markets such as India, China and the Russian Federation (*Chapter 5: "Health claim regulations in emerging markets"*). Second, they present a summary of industry and market trends in major international markets including the USA, EU, and Japan (*Chapter 6: "Industry and market trends"*). Moreover, due to the authors' personal background a detailed case study analysis is presented for the Canadian market. Third, the authors address the drivers of the demand for health foods by reviewing the existing literature on consumer acceptance and willingness to pay for these foods (*Chapter 7: "Consumer responses to health foods"*). In the last chapter (*Chapter 8: Through the looking glass*) the authors synthesize the insights from the previous chapters and identify the primary sources of market failure that provide the motivations for policy interventions (8.1), highlight similarities and differences among regulatory frameworks and the implications for firms, consumers and policymakers (8.2) and conclude (8.3).

Consequently, the book provides a rather broad survey of aspects surrounding health foods. On the one hand, it covers regulatory issues such as allowable health claims and product approval processes across different countries and the implications for firms producing health foods. On the other hand, it addresses the existing empirical evidence on consumer acceptance of health foods which is the crucial factor for market success or failure. Even though the authors provide a rather comprehensive literature review of consumer studies in the field, it comes a bit as a surprise that their selection strategy in terms of which studies to include and which ones not to include is not made explicit. The authors definitely cover a large

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part of available studies but certainly not all. Thus, it would have been nice to make the selection strategy transparent to the reader. For example, only two studies are presented for emerging economies, namely Argentina and Uruguay. Why other studies carried out on consumer acceptance of health-enhancing foods in emerging and developing countries (see e.g., DE GROOTE et al., 2011; ZAIKIN and MCCLUSKEY, 2013) are not included remains unfortunately unclear.

With respect to the readership the authors target at students interested in food and nutrition policy as well as academics and policymakers interested in food policy and regulation. This is reflected in the style the whole book is written: easy and understandable without much scientific jargon. Most parts are of descriptive nature with a short section on economic considerations with respect to market and government failure in Chapter 3 and Chapter 8, respectively. Thus, all parts of the book are also easily accessible for non-economists.

Consequently, this book is definitely a good source for people interested in gaining knowledge on the regulations and food policies governing health-enhancing foods, especially from an international perspective and a practical point of view. Those readers who are interested in digging further into methodological questions surrounding consumer acceptance and willingness to pay for health foods might also find it useful due to its comprehensive reference list and thus provision of further readings. And even researchers already working in the field and being familiar with the literature might still gain from some very detailed information provided in the Appendix such as for example a summary of allowable health claims in various countries (Appendix 1).

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