

OUR COMMUNITY



“There are so many different ethnic groups living here and we always claim Hong Kong is an Asian metropolis. Does the government realise how these people will be affected?”

In Kowloon's Jordan district, corner shops selling Indian and Nepalese groceries are crammed with food and ingredients imported from the home countries of Hong Kong's ethnic minorities. But soon, many of these food items and ingredients may have to be re-labelled or taken off the shelves. Once the new Labelling Scheme on Nutrition Information comes into force on July 1 next year, all packaged food will have to carry standardised labels showing their nutrient content.

Jasbir Singh Bal, the owner of a corner shop selling Indian and Nepalese snacks and food in Nanking Street, came to Hong Kong more than 40 years ago. He said he seldom paid attention to the labels. He has not heard about the new regulations and said it was none of his business.

But it *is* his business. Mr Singh considers imported buffalo milk an essential ingredient to make authentic naan bread (a flat bread typically eaten with South Asian food), saying that naan made without it was no different from pizza from Pizza Hut. Yet, without radical repackaging, this ingredient will not qualify for sale under the new scheme.

He has no idea how to correct the situation and has no alternative but to accept the likely increase in the price of the imported food.

This is because the amount of money spent on extra nutrient testing and re-labelling would make up a large proportion of production costs for an item that is not mass produced.

Leo Yuen Chung-on, the founding chairman of the Hong Kong Food Science and Technology Association, is also concerned about the impact of nutrition labelling on Hong Kong's ethnic minorities. Much of the food and spices they sell are directly imported from their home countries in Southeast Asia. Sometimes, they do not even know the actual name of an ingredient, so it would be almost impossible for them to make the corresponding nutrition labels.

“There are so many different ethnic groups living here and we always claim Hong Kong is an Asian metropolis. Does the government realise how these people will be affected?” he asked.

Very few members of the ethnic minorities have heard of the implementation of nutrition labelling requirements, even those who have lived in Hong Kong for many years. Yet, the government has not provided them with any special education. The ethnic minorities could easily violate the law without realising it.

Despite the government's good intentions in putting forward the new nutrition labelling scheme, various questions and difficulties in its execution could hinder its effectiveness.

In a written reply to *Varsity's* enquiries, a spokesman for the Centre for Food Safety said the government has adopted some “trade facilitation measures” to help lower production costs and enable the food industry to comply with the new requirements next year.



Jasbir Singh Bal, who owns a corner shop selling Indian and Nepalese food in Nanking Street, said he had not heard about the new nutrition labelling scheme.



Many Indian and Nepalese food stores in Jordan sell various kinds of pre-packaged imported food with no labels.

The government has launched the Small Volume Exemption Scheme, which allows products with annual sales volumes not exceeding 30,000 units to apply for exemption from nutrition labelling requirements.

However, some food suppliers in the industry, especially small and medium-

sized enterprises, are still struggling to survive under the scheme and doubt the efficacy of such exemptions.

Simon Wong Ka-wo, chairman of the Hong Kong Food Council, a non-profit organisation which promotes better standards in the food industry, said that any exemption would still involve additional costs and cannot really benefit small companies.

He said large corporations might have sufficient resources to comply with the new law easily, but small companies face huge difficulties.

“Even if you have successfully applied for the exemption, you still have to stick a special label with a sequence of numbers on each of the products for identification purposes,” Mr Wong explained.

In addition, food suppliers are required to pay an annual fee for each exempted item. The fee is HK\$345 for the first year and HK\$335 annually for the following years.

The expenses would be considerable for companies that handle numerous kinds of products, while continuous applications are also required for every new product to be introduced.

Mr Wong also pointed out that those selling health foods would be greatly affected by the new regulation. That is because they handle a wide range of products targeting small but specific groups of consumers with special dietary needs, such as diabetics.

Therefore, the new regulation would lower the incentive for less competitive

companies to introduce new products. Some food items with small sales volumes would disappear from the market due to high production costs.

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Mr Wong suggested the government should set up some funds to subsidise small and medium-sized enterprises to prevent a monopoly by large corporations and ensure greater consumer choice.

Not only will consumers face fewer food items on the market, they may also be forced to read confusing labels caused by non-standardised testing methods.

Under the new nutrition labelling scheme, the food manufacturers can use a laboratory to conduct nutrient analyses of food items or simply refer to the existing food composition database, like the one initiated by the Food Research Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

However, food suppliers are only *recommended* to select accredited laboratories for conducting nutrient analyses. The results from various laboratories may differ since the government has no strict regulations on the qualification of laboratories and their methods of analysis.

Joey Lau Yuk-luen, manager of the Hong Kong Standards and Testing Centre Limited, admitted that different testing methods might lead to different results. The Hong Kong Standards and Testing Centre Limited is one of the five laboratories under the Hong Kong Laboratory Accreditation Scheme.

To ensure test results are accurate, Ms Lau said laboratories should obtain a greater number of representative samples at different stages of the production process.

She said some suppliers would send samples to laboratories in the mainland to save costs, but consumers could suffer if the laboratories are not up-to-standard.

“I think it’s better for the government to stipulate that all testing should be done in Hong Kong, so that the clients would not bear any unnecessary risk,” she said.

Leo Yuen Chung-on, the founding chairman of the Hong Kong Food Science and Technology Association, also expressed his strong opposition to and fears about the upcoming nutrition labelling scheme.

He explained that Hong Kong is a food importing city, not a food



MANDY CHUNG

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manufacturing country like the U.S. or European countries. In fact, two-thirds of the food in Hong Kong is imported from other countries, while the remainder is produced by local companies mainly using imported ingredients.

“I don’t understand why the government is unwilling to accept other countries’ established nutrition labels and has to develop its own,” said Mr Yuen. “It would cut down on a lot of procedures and resources if it did so.”

According to Mr Yuen, Hong Kong’s nutrition labelling scheme is the third most complicated system in the world. It will require almost all general pre-packaged foods to list out their energy content and seven core nutrients (1+7), including protein, carbohydrates, total fat, saturated fatty acids, trans fatty acids, sodium and sugars.

In the EU, nutrition labelling for most foods is optional but food producers there usually list four to six nutrients. While the U.S. and Canada uses a “1+14” system.

He was also critical of the government’s implementation guidelines. For example, he said there was no regulation on the size and the positioning of the nutrition labels. He joked that some suppliers have made the labels as small as they can so they occupy the least space on the package.

Still, others have pointed out the scheme is a big improvement on the current situation. The government has emphasised it only wants to help consumers in making informed food choices, and to try to regulate misleading or deceptive labels and claims printed by food manufactures.

Chan Kwok-pan, a UK registered dietician who actively participated in

the discussion on nutrition labelling, agrees the scheme’s implementation should be seen as progress on what we have now – just a food ingredient list.

“The purpose of nutrition labelling is mainly to provide more useful information to customers as reference,” he said. “After all, they have the right to know more about the food they’re consuming.”

Mr Chan said it would be much easier to compare nutritional values of different food items with standardised nutrition labels.

Although healthier eating habits will not be achieved solely through the implementation of a nutrition labelling scheme, the scheme can help the community to make healthier food choices. But there is a lot that the government still needs to do to ensure the scheme benefits every member of the community. ▣

SUGARS

CARBOHYDRATES

SATURATED FATTY ACIDS

TOTAL FAT

SODIUM

PROTEINS