Front-of-Pack Food Labeling (FOPL) as a Strategy to Address Non-Communicable Diseases in Nigeria: Challenges and Opportunities
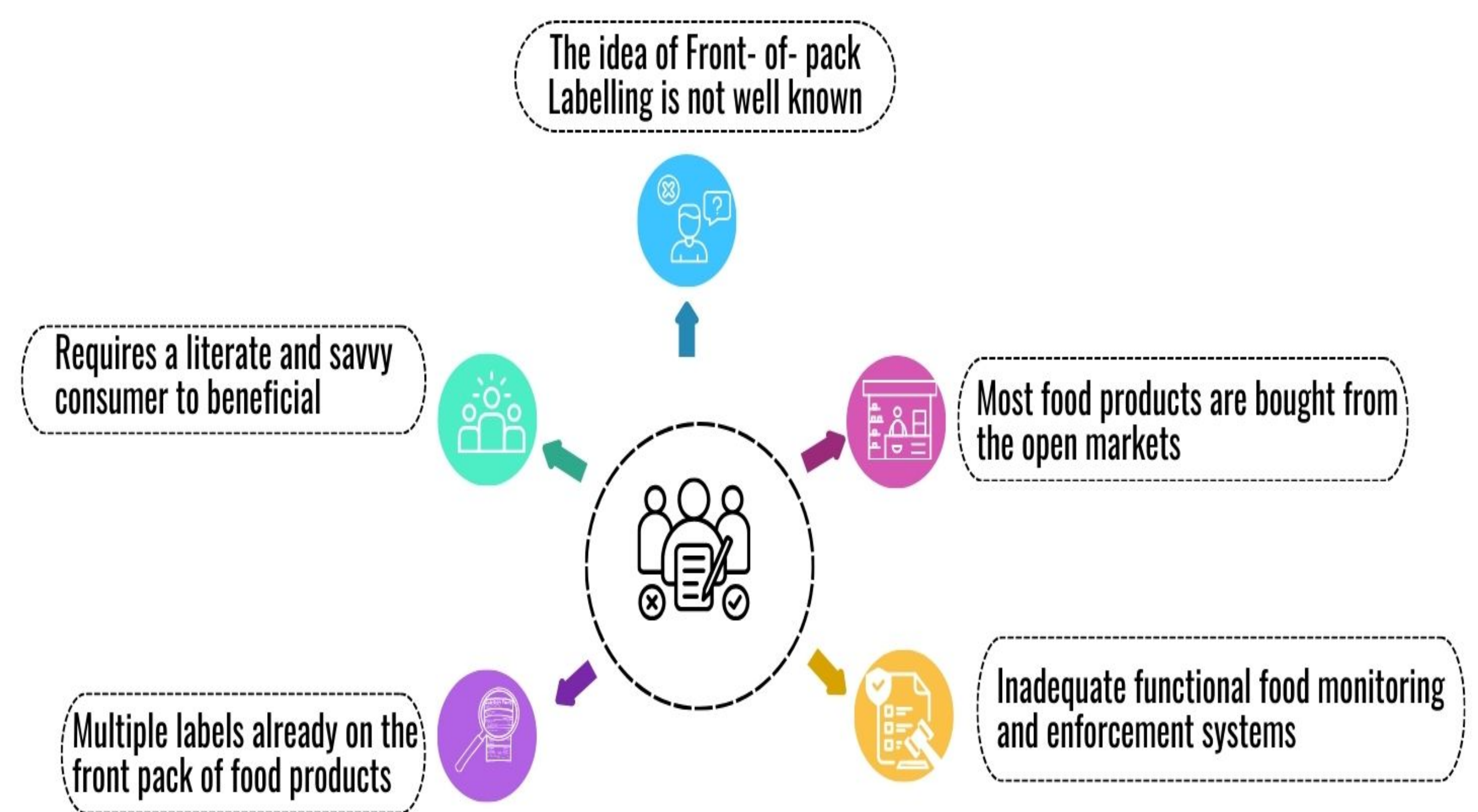
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FOPL can **empower consumers to make healthier food ch**oices through clear and accessible information on the nutritional quality of food products. Successful implementation requires **robust regulatory framework**s, **public awareness campaigns**, **funding, multisectoral coordination** and **targeted consumer behavior research.**

BACKGROUND

The Double Burden of Malnutrition (DBM) in Nigeria, characterized by the coexistence of undernutrition and overnutrition, along with diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs), poses a significant Public Health issue. Globally, it is associated with high morbidity and mortality rates. One of the main drivers of malnutrition is the rapid dietary transition, characterized by increased consumption of processed foods high in salt, sugar and trans fats, and reduced intake of natural and locally available foods rich in fiber. These dietary changes have adverse effects on health outcomes, such as increased risk of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancers. This study aims to identify policy gaps and recommend improvements to better address the DBM in Nigeria. This will facilitate the national efforts in achieving both the national and global nutrition targets.

METHODS

A qualitative research design was utilized, combining a comparative policy analysis with stakeholder interviews. The policy analysis compared Nigeria's food and nutrition policies with international guidelines from organizations such as UN, FAO, WHO, EAT forum, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), World Food Program (WFP), World Bank (WB), UNICEF, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Global Panel on Agriculture and food systems for Nutrition. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders from government, academia, private sectors, and NGOs to gain deeper insights into policy gaps and implementation challenges.

RESULTS

The comparative analysis revealed significant gaps in the National Policy on Food and Nutrition in Nigeria (NPNF), particularly in strategies addressing overnutrition and diet-related NCDs. Key strategies like front-of-pack labeling (FOPL), reformulation policies, and private sector engagement were missing. FOPL, a strategy enabling consumers to make well-informed nutrition decisions through interpretive labels on food products, was identified as a critical component lacking in the current policy. Stakeholder interviews emphasized the need for capacity building, including enhanced funding, regulatory frameworks, and public awareness campaigns. Challenges highlighted include complex consumer behavior, regional disparities, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms within the food regulator agencies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Barriers to implementation of FOPL

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- The idea of Front- of- pack Labelling is not well known
- Most food products are bought from the open markets
- Inadequate functional food monitoring and enforcement systems
- Multiple labels already on the front pack of food products
- Requires a literate and savvy consumer to beneficial

CONCLUSIONS

An integrated approach addressing undernutrition, overnutrition, and diet-related NCDs is crucial for combating the DBM in Nigeria. Implementing FOPL can empower consumers to make healthier food choices through clear and accessible information on the nutritional quality of food products. Successful implementation requires robust regulatory frameworks, comprehensive public awareness campaigns, and targeted consumer behavior research. Strengthening food regulatory agencies capacity and ensuring sustainable funding are essential for effective enforcement and monitoring. Collaborative efforts among government, private sectors, and international organizations are vital for overcoming challenges and ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of these strategies. Addressing the DBM through a coordinated and well-regulated approach can significantly reduce the prevalence of diet-related NCDs and improve nutrition and public health outcomes.

ADDITIONAL KEY INFORMATION

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Building on this research, we used the Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI) to assess Nigeria's progress in adopting international food environment policies, with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Rockefeller Foundation. Keep an eye out for our upcoming publication.
No conflict of interest. We welcome partners and collaborators as we progress on this work. We sincerely thank all individuals and institutions who contributed their support and insights to this research.

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