

Benchmarking Food Environments: Experts' Assessments of Policy Gaps and Priorities for the New Zealand Government



Top Priorities for Improving the Healthiness of Food Environments

The Expert Panel recommended 34 concrete actions¹ to improve the healthiness of food environments with seven recommendations prioritized for immediate action. All recommendations are aligned with the World Health Organisation's global NCD action plan, which was endorsed by New Zealand in May 2013. The priority actions for increasing the healthiness of food environments and population diets are:

Restricting unhealthy food marketing to children and adolescents requires regulations for:

1. All broadcast media, with an initial priority on television,
2. Non-broadcast media with an initial priority on sports sponsorship, food packaging and point of sale.

Industry self-regulation has been shown not to work and several countries have regulations to protect children from being targets for unhealthy food marketing.

Sufficient funding is needed to implement the comprehensive plan.

Funding for population nutrition promotion is currently about \$29m a year and needs to be restored to at least \$70m a year. Funding for Healthy Families NZ is a good first step.

Statements of intent and targets are needed to drive national action towards:

1. Reducing childhood and adolescent obesity.
 2. Meeting WHO recommended population intakes of salt, saturated fat and sugar.
 3. Achieving reductions of sodium and saturated fat in key food groups.
- Several countries have such targets in place.

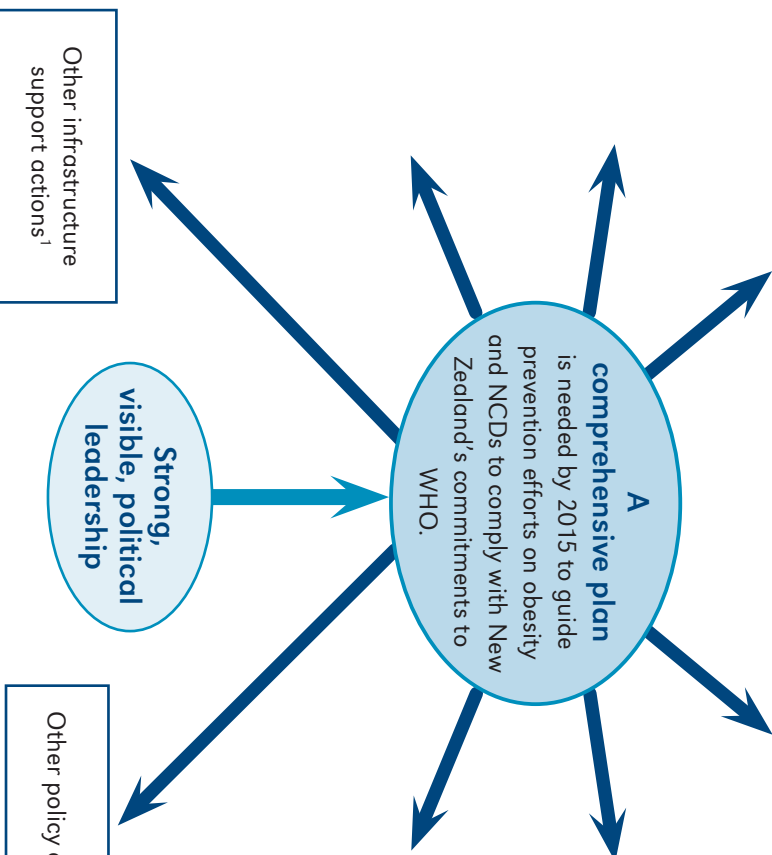
Healthy food service policies for schools and early childhood education (ECE) services need to be re-instated so that foods are consistent with dietary guidelines. Most Australian states have mandatory nutrition standards in schools and ECEs.

The Health Star Rating System

for foods has been approved for introduction to New Zealand, initially on a voluntary basis. New Zealand should align with Australia in moving to regulations if there is not widespread implementation by industry.

A 20% excise tax on sugar-sweetened beverages should be

instated to reduce premature deaths and disease caused by sugar-sweetened beverages and raise revenue (about \$40m per year) which could be applied to promoting healthy eating. Several countries, most recently Mexico, have instituted such a tax.



¹ The full list of actions recommended by the Expert Panel can be found in the full report on www.informas.org

"Let me remind you. Not one single country has managed to turn around its obesity epidemic in all age groups. This is not a failure of individual will-power. This is a failure of political will to take on big business"

Dr Margaret Chan, Director General, World Health Organisation, June 2013

INFORMAS
Benchmarking food environments

Executive Summary

The full report is available at www.informas.org
Swinburn, B., Dominick, C.H., and Vandevijvere, S.

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Summary

This report is from a New Zealand Expert Panel of over 50 independent public health experts and representatives from medical associations and NGOs. It used an evidence-based approach to benchmark policies and actions of the New Zealand Government against international best practice for creating healthier food environments. Some policies and actions were at the level of international best practice, but many large ‘implementation gaps’ were identified, including the absence of a comprehensive national plan, policies to reduce food marketing to children or ensure healthy foods in schools.

The Expert Panel recommended 34 actions, prioritising 7 for immediate action. The government is strongly urged to act on these recommendations to improve the diets of New Zealanders, reduce health care costs and bring New Zealand towards the progressive, innovative and world leader in public health that it can be.

New Zealand’s Implementation of Policies to Create Healthy Food Environments

Unhealthy food environments drive unhealthy diets. Dietary risk factors and excess energy intake account for 11.4% of health loss in New Zealand. Adults have the third highest rate of obesity within OECD countries. Health care costs attributable to overweight and obesity were \$686million or 4.5% of New Zealand’s total health care expenditure in 2006.

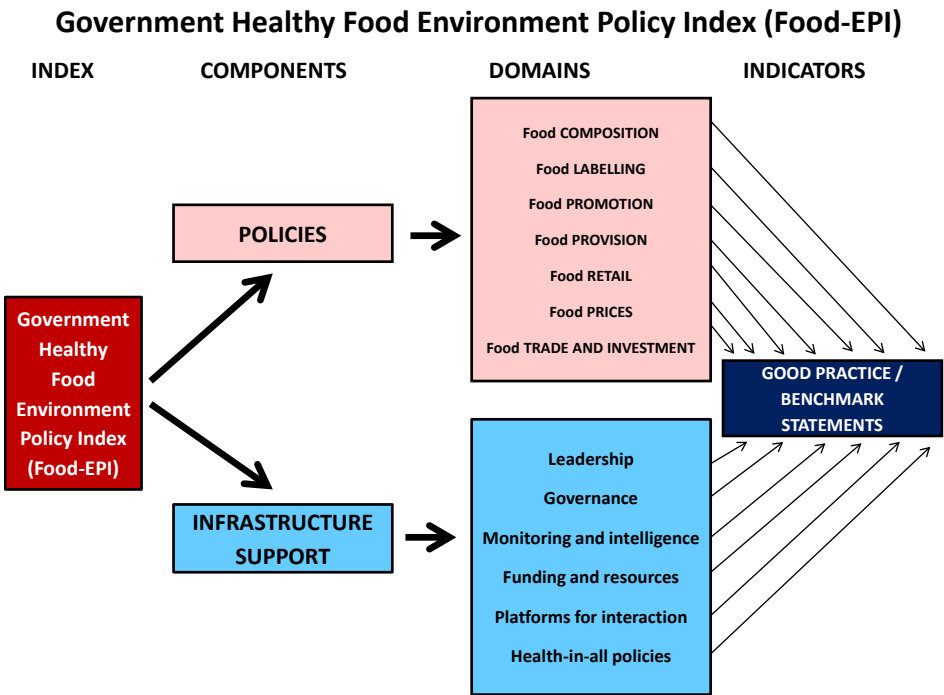
Governments have a critical role to play in creating healthier food environments. This study is an initiative of INFORMAS (the International Network for Food and Obesity/non-communicable diseases (NCDs) Research, Monitoring and Action Support) which aims to monitor and benchmark food environments and policies globally to increase the accountability of governments and the food industry for their actions to reduce obesity and NCDs.

A Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI) study was conducted.

An Expert Panel of 52 public health experts, and representatives from medical associations and NGOs rated the extent of implementation of policies on food environments and infrastructure support by the New Zealand Government against international best practice.

Their ratings for each of the 42 good practice indicators were informed by documented evidence, validated by government officials and international best practice benchmarks.

The level of implementation was categorised as ‘high’, ‘medium’, ‘low’ or ‘very little, if any’.



The New Zealand government is performing well, at the level of international best practice in regards to preventing unhealthy foods carrying health claims, providing ingredient lists and nutrition information panels on packaged foods, transparency in policy development processes, providing access to information for the public and monitoring prevalence of NCDs and their risk factors.



However, there are major ‘implementation gaps’ with about three quarters (74%) of the policy indicators and half (48%) of the infrastructure support indicators rated as ‘low’ or ‘very little, if any’ implementation. There is no comprehensive NCD action plan and restrictions on unhealthy food marketing to children, fiscal policies, food retail policies and protection of food environments from trade and investment agreements are virtually non-existent.

Level of implementation of food environment policies and infrastructure support by the New Zealand Government against international best practice (April-May 2014)

