

2020

Benchmarking Food Environments

Progress by the New Zealand Government on Implementing Recommended Food Environment Policies & Priority Recommendations



Report

Mackay, S., Sing, F., Gerritsen, S., Swinburn, B. Benchmarking Food Environments 2020: Progress by the New Zealand Government on implementing recommended food environment policies & priority recommendations, Auckland: The University of Auckland, 2020

Full report is available at www.informas.org

Summary

The third New Zealand Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI) was conducted in February to May 2020 by an Expert Panel of over 50 independent and government public health experts. It used an evidence-based approach to benchmark policies and actions of the Government against international best practice for creating healthier food environments. The Government has made virtually no progress on implementing healthy food policies since 2017. Some policies were at the level of international best practice, but many large 'implementation gaps' were identified, including for healthy food in schools, fiscal policies and marketing restrictions for unhealthy foods. Gaps were identified relating to government infrastructure support for prevention of obesity and diet-related diseases, in particular the lack of government leadership and limited monitoring of progress.

The Expert Panel recommended 39 actions, prioritising 13 for immediate action. There is a strong call for a renewed approach to developing a comprehensive multi-sector Food Systems and Nutrition Strategy to improve food systems and diets. The Government is strongly urged to act on the priority actions to improve the diets of New Zealanders, especially for children, and to reduce the burgeoning health damage and healthcare costs of obesity and unhealthy diets.

New Zealand's implementation of policies to create healthy food environments

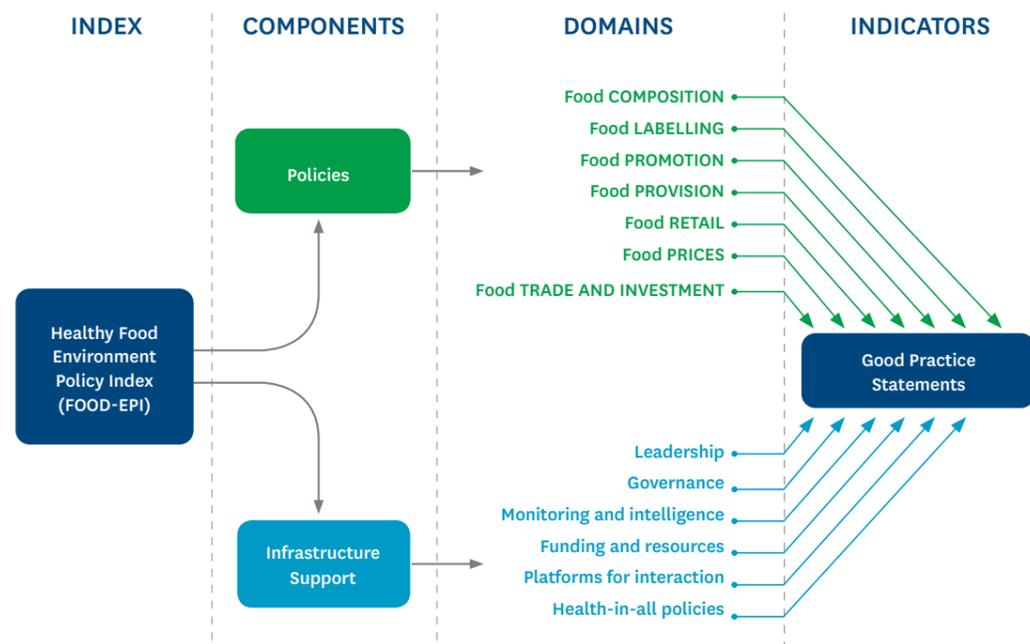
Healthy diets are essential for wellbeing. About 18% of healthy life-years lost annually are from obesity and unhealthy diets. This makes unhealthy diets by far the biggest preventable cause of ill-health and premature death in New Zealand, mainly through risks for non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Unhealthy food environments lead to unhealthy diets and excess energy intake which have consequences on levels of morbidity and mortality.

Government has a critical role to play in creating healthier food environments. Food policies are a powerful tool to increase wellbeing (including mental health) and health equity, including honouring the rights of Māori to the protection of health under the Treaty of Waitangi. Existing government policies, such as the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, would address the need to improve children's nutrition and reduce health inequities more effectively by improving the food environments that perpetuate inequity.

This study is an initiative of INFORMAS (the International Network for Food and Obesity/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.

The Food-EPI 2020 was conducted with an **Expert Panel** of over 50 independent and government public health experts who **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 47 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 full report and evidence summary are available at www.informas.org.

Healthy food environment policy index (FOOD-EPI)



Virtually no progress has been made since the 2017 Food-EPI assessment. A few indicators are at international best practice but most fall short, especially in critical policy areas. About 70% of the policy indicators and half of the infrastructure support indicators were rated as 'low' or 'very little, if any' implementation (Figure 1). Gaps were identified in:

- healthy food policies in schools;
- fiscal policies to support healthy food choices;
- implementation of restrictions on unhealthy food marketing to children;
- support for communities to limit the density of unhealthy food outlets (for example, around schools); and
- ensuring that trade and investment agreements do not negatively affect population nutrition and health.

Additionally, infrastructure gaps were identified in:

- government leadership for obesity and NCD prevention; and
- regular monitoring of adult and childhood nutrition status and population intakes.

The New Zealand Government is performing well when compared to international best practice, in preventing unhealthy foods from carrying health claims; providing 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 and inequalities (Figure 1).

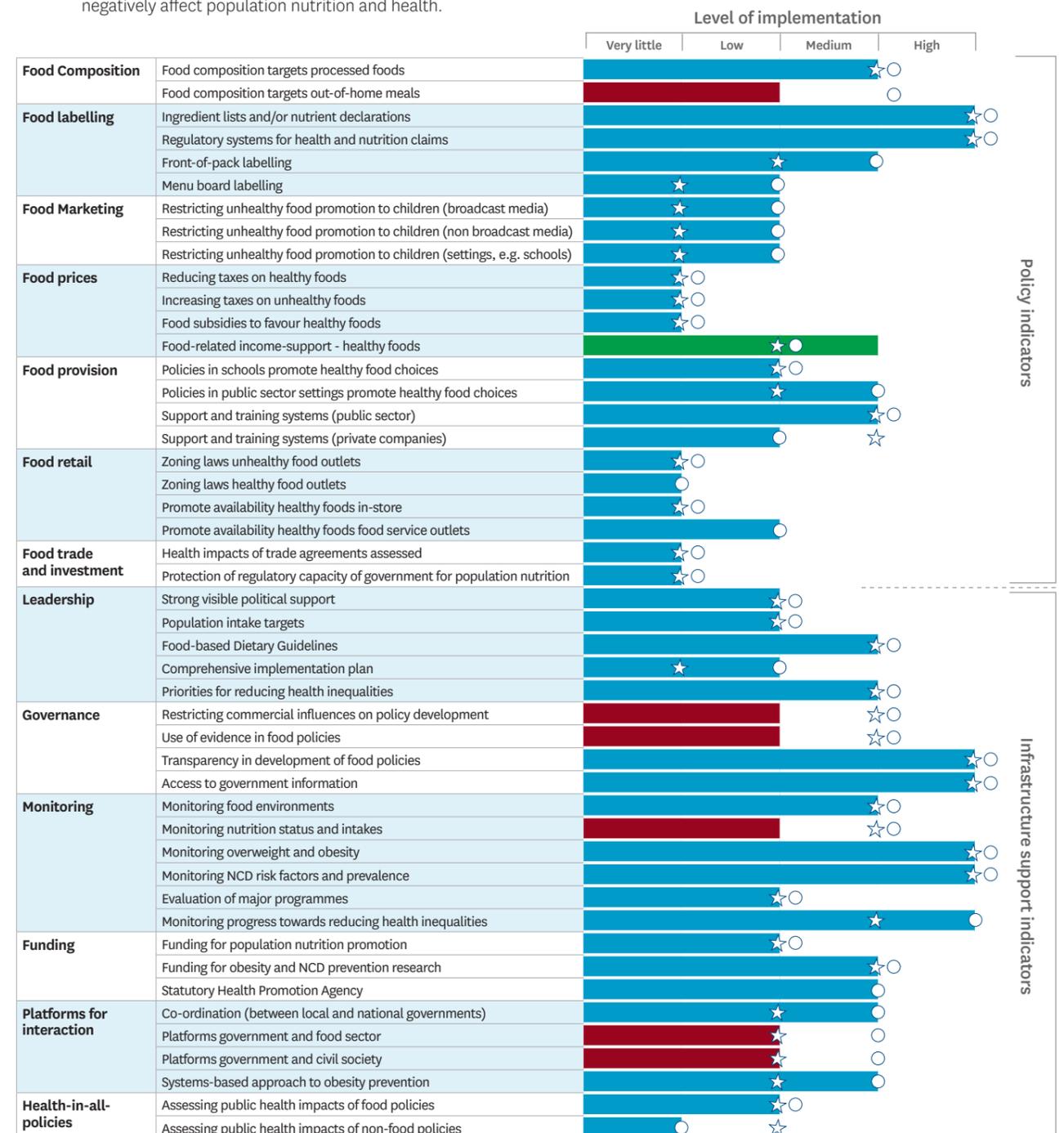


Figure 1: Level of implementation of food environment policies and infrastructure support by the New Zealand Government in 2020 against international best practice (☆ 2014, ○ 2017 ratings). Change in level of implementation: Red = Reduced since 2017; Blue = No change since 2017; Green = progress since 2017

Top priorities for improving the healthiness of food environments

The Expert Panel recommended 39 concrete actions to improve the healthiness of New Zealand food environments. Eight policy actions and 14 infrastructure support actions were considered high priority and then ranked by the Expert Panel for importance and achievability. Thirteen recommendations were rated for priority action (for the full list of recommended actions see the full report www.informas.org).

The Expert Panel was very clear that for any progress to be made, there needs to be clear leadership, and the development of a multi-sectoral National Food Systems and Nutrition Strategy guided by a Scientific Committee. The Experts expressed concern about the extent of food insecurity exposed by the Covid crisis, prioritising the policy action of ensuring households receive an adequate income to enable autonomy to make healthy food choices. Also of major importance was the need for another national nutrition survey, with the previous Child and Adult Nutrition Surveys conducted 18 and 12 years ago respectively. There is an absence of evidence about the nutrition status and food consumption patterns of the population to inform policy decisions. The Covid-19 crisis illustrated the importance of using epidemiological evidence as a foundation for a public health response; this equally applies to the chronic crisis of obesity and unhealthy diets.

The Expert Panel called for a mandatory approach to be adopted in all policy areas, as previous voluntary approaches

have proven to be ineffective as they are not enforceable and therefore not implemented or adhered to. The Expert Panel called for a mandatory approach to:

- Marketing of unhealthy food to children;
- A levy on sugary drinks;
- Healthy food policies in schools and early learning services;
- Health Star Ratings labelling; and
- Maximum levels of sodium and sugar in key food groups.

New Zealand has an excellent opportunity to take the prevention of obesity and diet-related NCDs seriously. If the New Zealand Government invests in the highly cost-effective policies and programs recommended by the WHO we could meet the standard of those countries currently leading the world on food policies for health and wellbeing.

The 13 recommendations from the Expert Panel which were prioritised for immediate action to improve the healthiness of New Zealand's food environments can be grouped into four main areas: Food Systems and Nutrition Strategy; Infrastructure; People's capacity; Healthier Food Environments (Figure 2). These actions would collectively result in positive outcomes for environmental sustainability, economic prosperity, improved health and increased equity.

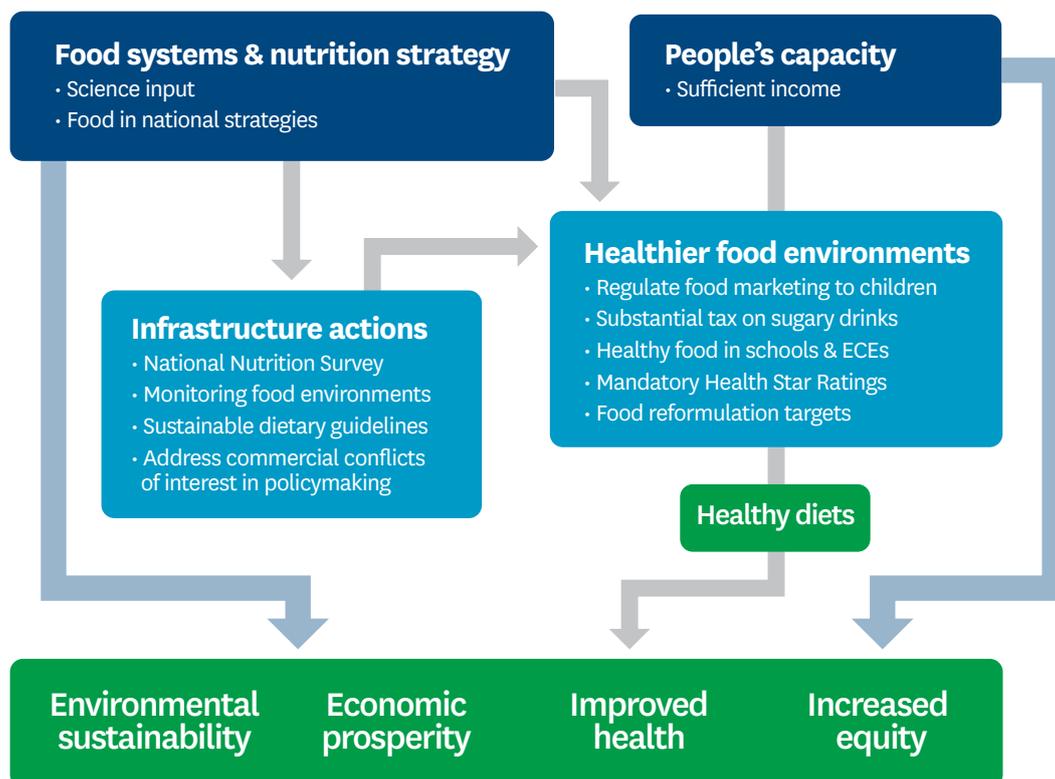


Figure 2: Actions prioritised by the Expert Panel for Government to improve the healthiness of New Zealand food environments