

## **Leveraging agriculture and food systems for healthier diets and noncommunicable disease prevention: the need for policy coherence**

*Prepared for FAO by*

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*June 27, 2013*

### **The issues**

- Poor quality diets associated with non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as heart disease, diabetes and some cancers, and their metabolic risk factors, such as elevated blood pressure, cholesterol and overweight, have led to a significant burden on health globally.
- There is consensus that multisectoral approaches are needed to improve diets and address NCDs, as recognized by the UN High Level Meeting on NCDs and the WHO Global Action Plan for NCDs. Key interventions include food and nutrition education, improving the food market environment, and upstream intervention in the food supply, including in agri-food systems.
- To date there have been very few actions taken to leverage agriculture and food systems for NCD prevention. Yet they have important implications for the effectiveness, economic impact and political acceptability of policies to promote higher quality diets. These implications all concern “policy coherence” between agriculture and food systems and policies that aim to improve diets.
- First, existing agrifood policies can influence the effectiveness of policies to promote healthy eating by reinforcing – or undermining – them. For example, policies to increase market access for fruits and vegetables reinforce policies on fruit and vegetable intake. On the other hand, there can be direct conflicts between agricultural policies and nutrition policies designed to moderate consumption of the same products, such as the case of palm oil and other fats.
- Second, specific interventions can be made in agricultural production, and the processing, transport, distribution, processing, manufacturing and retail of food in order to positively influence the food market environment i.e., food availability (and the nutrient quality of the available food), affordability and acceptability. Most examples of these interventions to date have been through “short” chains (e.g. increased production of local, indigenous foods in island communities, urban agriculture, farm-to-school programmes). In these short chains, changes in production can be transmitted directly to consumers; they can also have the cultural effect of “re-connecting” people with food and agriculture. To date, no interventions have aimed to lever the more complex, often globalised “long” chains for NCD prevention. Such approaches could give rise to very large gains given their upstream nature, but must be carefully assessed given the potential for substitutions and transformations of foods and their ingredients through the chain.

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- Third, food policy interventions to prevent NCDs can have upstream repercussions for the food supply chain. Actors in the food supply chain, including the large numbers of low-income, asset-poor farmers and workers in low and middle income countries as well as large, highly-capitalised food manufacturers and retailers, may be affected by policies to promote healthy eating. Policies may directly benefit actors in the food value chain, but policies that restrict, label or tax specific foods or nutrients can have negative implications for their producers, processing techniques, and cost structures in supply chains. This implications lead to political and economic barriers to policy development, thus reducing the likelihood of implementation.
- While examples are emerging that shed light into the policies and tools through which agriculture and food systems could help prevent NCDs, the area is at a relatively early stage of development. Research is needed to provide more insights, and research methods need to be tested. Three promising methods are participatory multistakeholder analysis, consumption-oriented food supply chain analysis and value chain analysis.

### **The recommendations**

**UN agencies and the international financial institutions.** The WHO, FAO and other UN agencies should develop an effective interagency mechanism to realize the commitments included in recently adopted WHO Global Action Plan for NCDs (2013-2020) and the UN Political Declaration on NCDs. Key tasks of this interagency mechanism should be 1) to identify a clear role for international institutions concerned with agriculture and food in NCD prevention; 2) to assess coherence between international agricultural policies and programmes and nutrition objectives; 3) to work to address any incoherence identified, and promote coherence.

**Governments.** Governments should develop a policy environment supportive of “short chains” that bring benefits for employment, income generation and poverty reduction in the agricultural sector as well as nutrition objectives. They should develop cross-government governance structures to identify how policies across government could be mutually reinforcing to prevent NCDs and bring economic benefits. This would require nurturing a commitment to nutrition in sectors rarely included in health discussions, such as commerce, trade and transport. Governments should also identify strategies for alternative livelihoods and economic opportunities for producers and workers in the food supply chain who may be impacted through the effective implementation of policies to promote healthier eating.

**Private sector.** Producers of fruits, vegetables, legumes, and other nutritious foods consumed in inadequate quantities should work with agricultural and health policy makers to identify opportunities to increase both market access and consumer demand among populations and the sub-groups most in need, while also generating income for private sector actors.

**Civil society.** NGOs concerned with nutrition should highlight policy incoherences and advocate their removal, get involved in implementation of short chain approaches, and support the implementation of measures in the food market environment to reduce demand for unhealthy diets.

**Academia.** The research community should develop clearer methods to identify: (i) policy coherence and incoherence between agrifood system and nutrition objectives; (ii) the impact of healthy diet policies on agrifood systems and the actors within them; and (iii) effective points of intervention in food value chains to improve the availability, affordability and acceptability of foods that promote good health, while also leading to benefits for actors in the food supply chain.