



Making healthy diets a reality in Fiji

The role of policy in supporting food systems that work for health

In 2020, the University of Sunshine Coast (USC) from Australia and the FIRST Programme (a partnership between the European Union and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations for policy assistance) carried out a research project titled **The role of diets and food systems in the prevention of obesity and non-communicable diseases in Fiji**. The paper provides evidence and information to facilitate and enhance policy dialogue in various forums, to produce recommendations and a roadmap for policy change to prevent overweight, obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in Fiji. This brief outlines the key findings of this study.

1 • National and international agendas shape food systems and diets in Fiji

The **Fijian Government's agenda** and strategic priorities – as informed by their international and national commitments – end up shaping Fijian food systems, and the diets of Fijians. This agenda **influences policy decisions and can either support or deter Fijian food systems from providing affordable and healthy diets** for its population in a sustainable manner.

For example, by adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Fijian Government has committed to achieving food security, improving nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture (SDG 2). The SDGs agenda incorporates other important aspects such as gender equality, decent work, responsible consumption and production and climate action that allow for a multi-sectorial approach to food system-related policies.

At the national level, the 20-Year National Development Plan (NDP) 2017-2036 sets the Government's long-term strategic vision, including how it will deliver on the SDGs and other international commitments. **Food and nutrition security is included as a focus area** for achieving inclusive socioeconomic development, and is to be achieved **by increasing local food production**, but with **no targets relating to food consumption** or improved nutrition. This approach may support supply-side food policy action, while deterring action on the demand-side. However, **other national development targets** – such as reducing premature mortality from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) – **could be used to address food systems and diets from a more comprehensive perspective**. A final element to consider is the potential counter effect to promoting local healthy production of some economic-related targets through, for example, increasing the amount of container port traffic.

Fiji's national agenda and policy priorities are further defined in ministry or sector-specific strategic documents, aligned with the NDP. Recognising that food systems and diets are influenced by many sectors' priorities, several ministries – including those of Agriculture, Health and Medical Services, Fisheries, Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation and Education – have partnered to develop a **Fijian Policy on Food and Nutrition Security (FPFNS) to facilitate the multi-sectorial coordination** of actions to address these issues. The policy is ready to be sent for Cabinet's approval.

The first strategic priority of the Ministry of Agriculture in its Strategic Development Plan is to improve food and nutrition security for all Fijians. This includes targets to increase the production of and access to diverse and nutrient-rich foods and supports a multi-sectorial approach as

reflected in the PPFNS. Another example is the Fiji National Adaptation Plan (NAP) 2018 prepared by the Ministry of Economy, which oversees Fiji's climate change portfolio. The **NAP identifies food security and nutrition as one of five sectorial priorities for adaptation**, and details actions for the agriculture and fisheries sectors to “transform and reorientate the agricultural system to support food production without degrading resources.”

Nevertheless, **some sectors could positively influence food system transformations** by including some specific policy actions in this regard. Some suggestions include that the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts incorporates goals related to **improving food and nutrition security**, and **initiatives supporting a healthier school food environment**. The Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport may consider these two groups of actions to discourage the availability and promotion of unhealthy foods and to encourage **consumption of healthier options by improving the investment and business climate** for school food.

COVID-19 has had a large impact on the predefined long-term agenda of many ministries and sectors. Annual Costed Operational Plans indicate ministries' short-term priorities as they navigate the nutrition crisis; in some cases, boosting, while in other cases reducing budgets for activities that support healthy food systems and diets. Fiji's National Budget 2020-21 includes fiscal measures to stimulate investment and support businesses. Some of these hold potential to promote as well as deter from efforts to achieve healthy food systems and diets.

2 · Healthier diets require policy action throughout the food system and across sectors

The food system is made up of the functions and elements involved in taking food from production to consumption. **Each food system function impacts food availability and accessibility** and provides entry points for policy measures to support healthy diets. Since a wide range of sectors with varying agendas and strategic priorities are engaged in the food system, diverse policy measures can align or conflict with each other and support or impede Fijians from achieving affordable and healthy diets.

These are **some of the main policy measures** applied by different sectors to food system functions that support healthy diets in Fiji:

- inputs and **subsidies to assist the household and commercial production** of diverse nutrient-rich foods in rural and urban areas;
- regulations to **ensure the safety, quality and transparency of foods** available (which include measures to enhance the nutritional value of certain staples);
- initiatives to **strengthen market linkages** and market infrastructure to facilitate access to local nutrient-rich foods;
- fiscal measures **to improve the affordability of imported fruits and vegetables** not produced locally, and to **reduce the affordability of imported sugar-sweetened drinks**.

However, some policy measures unintentionally impede healthy diets, including:

- **land tenure agreements** that reduce investment in long-term and sustainable agriculture;
- inputs and subsidies aiming to **intensify the household and commercial production of foods with lower nutritional value** that may displace the production and consumption of other nutrient-rich foods;
- the recent **removal of tariffs on certain imported highly-processed foods**;
- the **easing of regulations** on commercial businesses.

Finally, numerous entry points and opportunities exist for new policy measures across the food system to further support affordable and healthy diets, including:

- strengthening **coordination between Government departments** responsible for agriculture to support diverse, integrated and sustainable farming practices;
- **fostering nutrition-sensitive value chains**, where nutrition is incorporated into agricultural production, research and development and food processing;
- further **inclusion and adequate resourcing of nutrition education** in agricultural activities, particularly aquaculture and commercial agriculture;
- fostering **meaningful relationships between the health and trade sectors (including private actors)** to support the identification of impactful yet palatable policy options to control the availability and marketing of unhealthy foods;
- **reviewing food voucher and relief programs** to ensure their nutritional adequacy.

3 · Effective policy action requires strong development and implementation capacities

Policy provides an effective mechanism to improve the food system and diets in Fiji. However, for policy to be effective and achieve sustainable measurable results, the **capacities** of individuals, organisations and the policy enabling environment **need to be strong**. Other aspects, such as the concrete mechanisms (agreements, procedures etc.) that allow policy implementation, or the adequacy of budget allocation (both in quantity and quality) are also key for policy effectiveness.

Gaps and opportunities to strengthen capacities in Fiji exist throughout the policy cycle, from development and review to monitoring and enforcement. These provide entry points that can enhance the impact of existing policy measures, as well as the progression of new measures.

Policy development and review

The process of **policy development and review in Fiji is more reactive than proactive**. Reviewing and evaluating the impact of existing policies for assessing needs and for strategic planning are not a common practice. This is related to **under resourced policy units** and creates challenges for informing investments and funding decisions. Short-term consultants, often employed to address technical or functional limitations of policy units, can lack contextual knowledge and local relationships, which limits their performing capacity.

Policies considered to interfere with trade or to impact on the ease of doing business – such as a previous policy on labelling requirements or the current draft policy on marketing to children – **can expect to be delayed or postponed**, reflecting the complexity of juggling different priorities and dealing with trade-offs across the food system. The economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the difficulty of progressing on such initiatives.

Policy implementation

Stemming from the policy development process, **units responsible for policy implementation are not adequately resourced to deliver** the large number of policies and related initiatives with which they are tasked. They struggle to find time for policy implementation responding to ministry leadership and community requests and complying with commitments to donors. In addition, implementation staff **lack of time and skills for addressing underlying issues and for multi-sectorial engagement**, for which procedures are not entirely clear.

Resource limitations, together with **gaps in technical expertise, intrinsic geographical challenges and strong weather events**, have delayed or limited the reach of many policies and related initiatives. This has been exacerbated by the technical complexity of some of these policies, such as the regulations on the marketing of nutritional substances for infants and children. **Public-private partnerships are also providing an avenue** for the Government to **strengthen implementation and service delivery**, though caution is warranted to ensure such agreements do not facilitate access to unhealthy foods, even if inadvertently.

Efforts by policy units to prioritise certain policies and their implementation assisting the responsible staff in better managing their workloads are very much appreciated by the Ministry's officers. Some examples are making more information available to communities online; streamlining requests for support; and outsourcing or reassigning responsibility for the most resource-intensive activities.

Policy monitoring and enforcement

Units responsible for **policy monitoring and enforcement share many of the implementation challenges**. These include resource and time limitations, gaps in technical expertise and difficulty navigating the complexity of some policy requirements. Therefore, staff involved in policy monitoring and enforcement have a desire for policy requirements to be simplified and narrowed.

Policy monitoring and enforcement also seems to be reactive, rather than proactive. In some cases, the unclear delineation of sectorial responsibilities and the **absence of a legal framework for accountability and reporting mechanism** impedes effective monitoring and enforcement. The policy to promote healthy food provision in schools is an example of this. In addition, gaps in Fiji's testing and analysis capabilities pose challenges for those businesses seeking to ensure their own compliance.

Given the various challenges for enforcement, **incentives may provide a more effective option for achieving policy compliance**. The **Ministry of Agriculture is the first ministry to put in place a monitoring and evaluation framework** to enable informed reporting on the reach and impact of its policies and initiatives. This is a remarkable achievement that initiates a new and improved way of implementing policy and that will require consistent resources and political support to guarantee its sustainability and application by the Ministry throughout time.

For full report and references: Burkhart, S., Craven, D., Horsey, B., Perry, J., O'Connell, T. and Underhill, S. 2021. *The role of diets and food systems in the prevention of obesity and non-communicable diseases in Fiji – Gathering evidence and supporting multi-stakeholder engagement*. Apia, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb5194en>

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