

Media statement
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Researchers find 'huge gaps' in New Zealand's healthy food policies

- New Zealand government is failing to act in 74% of recommended food policy areas
- Two in three adults and one in three children are overweight or obese in New Zealand
- Experts call on New Zealand, and other government's around the world, to implement national action plans to address unhealthy food environments

Researchers have identified major gaps in the New Zealand government's policies to promote healthier diets, with poor progress found in three-quarters (74%) of the recommended areas, according to a report published this week by the University of Auckland [1, 2]. In New Zealand two in three adults and one in three children are now overweight or obese [3].

The publication is the first of a series of 'Food Environment Performance Index' (Food-EPI) reports which will score governments around the world on their actions to support and encourage healthy food choices. Food environments have come under increasing scrutiny in light of the global rise in the burden of non-communicable diseases and obesity. The Food-EPI reports will put pressure on governments to deliver on the promises they entered into at the UN General Assembly in 2011, and repeated in July 2014, to achieve a series of targets for reducing diet-related diseases including diabetes and obesity by 2025 [4].

Whilst scoring well in some areas, such as regulating ingredients lists and nutrition claims on food packaging, the Food-EPI report finds that the New Zealand government has made very little progress in areas such as restricting advertising of junk food to children; fast food menu labelling; using sales tax or tax exemption to promote healthier choices; protecting health in trade agreements and ensuring availability of healthy foods in retail outlets [see Figure 1].

In 2015, governments will be expected to report to the World Health Organization that they have a fully funded, comprehensive plan to reduce non-communicable diseases (NCDs) as well as report on progress on reducing marketing of unhealthy food products and reducing saturated fat in foods as part of the WHO's NCD Monitoring Framework [5].

Project leader Professor Boyd Swinburn from the University of Auckland and co-chair of World Obesity Federation's Policy & Prevention group commented "High-income countries such as New Zealand should be leading the world in progress made to tackle NCDs but, as this research finds, New Zealand is a long way off meeting expectations. Our unique report card shows that while there are some strengths there are a large number of healthy food policies that still need to be implemented in New Zealand.

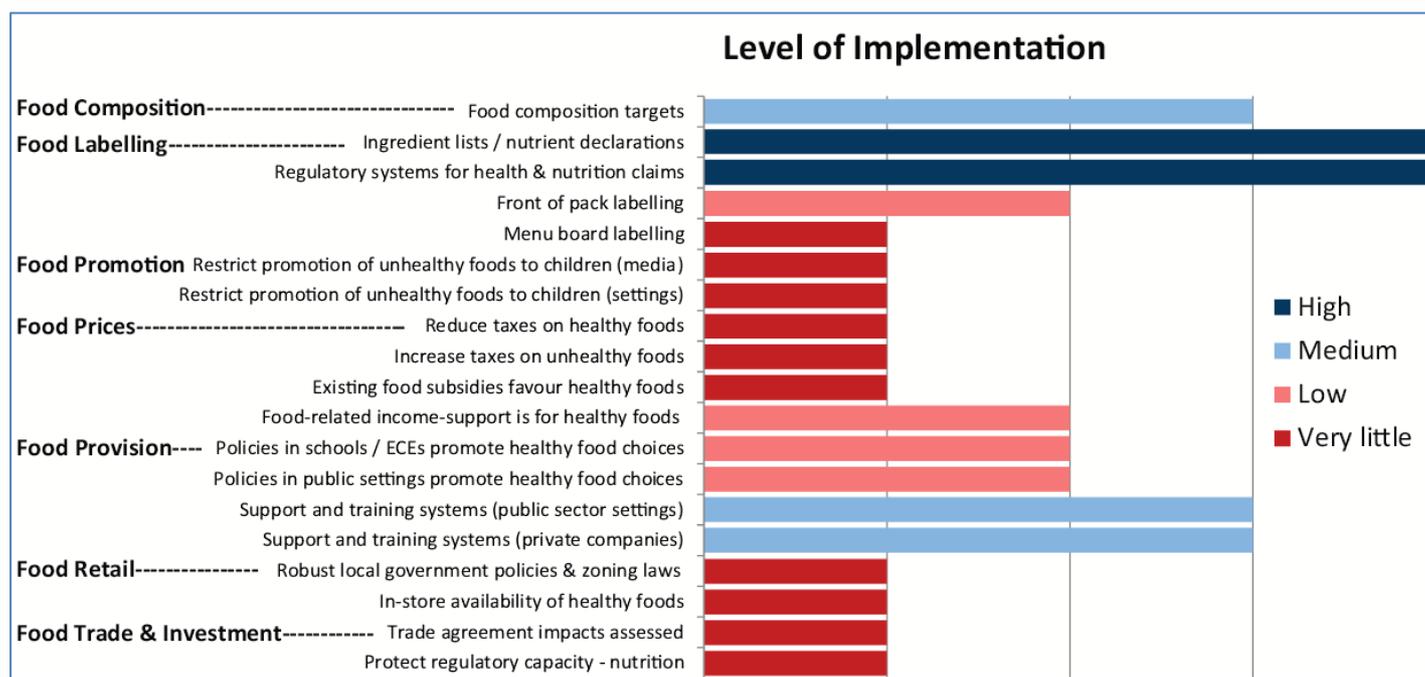
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WORLD OBESITY

“Of most concern is the large number of food policies that were rated as having ‘very little, if any, implementation’. This was especially apparent in the areas of reducing the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and using fiscal policies, like taxes on sugary drinks, to influence food choices.”

The Food-EPI report is the first systematic study on national food policies and is the first of a series of such assessments of food environments to be conducted in countries across the globe. It is part of an international network – INFORMAS – which seeks to assess public sector and private sector actions to help halt the rise in obesity and diabetes worldwide, and to monitor food prices, availability and marketing methods[6]. INFORMAS is supported by the World Obesity Federation [7] and coordinated jointly by the University of Auckland and Deakin University, Melbourne.

Figure 1: Level of implementation of food environment policies by the New Zealand Government against international best practice (April-May 2014)



The Food-EPI Expert Panel has made the following recommendations to government to improve population diet and reduce health care costs:

1. Implement a comprehensive national action plan for obesity and NCD prevention.

2. Set priorities in Statements of Intent and set targets for:

- reducing childhood and adolescent obesity
- reducing salt, sugar and saturated fat intake
- food composition (salt and saturated fat) in key food groups

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- 3. Increase funding for population nutrition promotion, doubling it to at least \$70m/year.**
- 4. Reduce the promotion of unhealthy foods to children and adolescents by:**
 - restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and adolescents through broadcast and non-broadcast media.
 - ensuring schools and early childhood services are free from commercial promotion of unhealthy foods.
- 5. Ensure that foods provided in or sold by schools and ECE services meet dietary guidelines.**
- 6. Implement the front-of-pack Health Star Rating labelling system.**
- 7. Introduce an excise tax of at least 20% on sugar-sweetened beverages.**

Notes to Editors

1. **Report:** Swinburn, B., Dominick, C.H. and Vandevijvere, S. Benchmarking Food environments: Experts' assessments of policy gaps and priorities for the New Zealand Government. Auckland: University of Auckland, 2014. Available at: <http://ebooks.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/informas-bfe-report-2014/>
2. **Food EPI methodology:** The rating of government action involved 52 members of an Expert Panel who rated the New Zealand Government against international best practice benchmarks. The Expert Panel's ratings were informed by extensive documented evidence of current implementation in New Zealand, validated by government officials.
3. **New Zealand obesity statistics:** Ministry of Health. *New Zealand Health Survey: Annual update of key findings 2012/13*. Wellington: Ministry of Health, 2013.
4. **United Nations General Assembly** Resolution of 10 July 2014, number A/RES/68/300. Available at http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/300
5. **WHO NCD Action Plan** Available at: <http://www.who.int/nmh/publications/ncd-action-plan/en/>
6. **INFORMAS** – The International Network for Obesity/Non-communicable disease Research Monitoring and Action Support –brings together public-interest organisations and researchers to **monitor, benchmark and support public and private sector actions** to create healthy food environments and reduce obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). More information is available at www.informas.org
7. **World Obesity Federation** is the new name for the International Association for the Study of Obesity (IASO) and the International Obesity TaskForce (IOTF). World Obesity represents professional members of the scientific, medical and research communities from over 50 national and regional obesity associations. Through this global community we work to alert the world to the growing crisis caused by soaring levels of obesity and to drive global efforts to reduce, prevent and treat obesity.

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