

A call for smart food policies to create an ‘appetite for health’

1 October 2013

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In keeping with the issues covered in this week’s new book “Appetite for Destruction”, we are calling for some smart food policies to create an ‘appetite for health’. In this blog, we discuss what a new network of university researchers and NGOs are developing to get us on the road to implementation of smart food policies in New Zealand and internationally.

If we want to pave a clear way towards creating appetite for health through the solutions outlined in this new book by Morgan and Simmons, we need the policies which will improve access and availability of healthy diets at affordable prices. These solutions seem straightforward, but in many countries, including New Zealand, the implementation of strong public health policies is lagging, mainly due to powerful industry influences. Some renowned scientists recently even made a declaration on Big Food’s influence on undermining healthy food policies¹.

The new network of nine university groups and five global non-government organisations, called INFORMAS (The International Network for Food and Obesity/non-communicable diseases (NCDs) Research, Monitoring and Action Support)² aims to balance Big Food’s influence over governments by defining the international benchmarks for healthy food environments and monitoring the progress of governments and the food industry towards meeting those standards of good practice. For example, how well is the New Zealand Government doing on protecting children from junk food marketing compared to, say

Sweden or Norway, or how well is the food industry in this country going on reducing salt in its food products compared to say, the UK? The INFORMAS group is monitoring policy-responsive indicators of the healthiness of food environments and comparing them across

countries. This is likely to increase accountability, more closely engage stakeholders in evidence-informed debates about improving food environments, and stimulate policies and actions to shift diets towards meeting dietary guidelines.

One of the INFORMAS tools for achieving these goals is the “government healthy food environment policy index” (Food-EPI)³. The Food-EPI includes a ‘policy’ component with seven domains to address the key aspects of food environments that can be influenced by governments to create readily accessible, available and affordable healthy food choices (composition, labelling, promotion, provision, availability, affordability and trade). There is also an ‘infrastructure support’ component with seven domains (governance, leadership, monitoring and intelligence, funding and resources, platforms for interaction, workforce development, health-in-all-policies) to strengthen systems to prevent obesity and NCDs.

The Food-EPI will be piloted and trialled for the first time in New Zealand this year and some other countries next year. In these settings, a national expert committee of non-government public health nutrition experts and NGOs will be invited to rate their government’s level of policy implementation towards good practice. National and international benchmarking and comparisons of public sector policies should assist in lifting the urgency and the public voice in support of increased government action to improve food environments. A separate assessment of private sector actions and practices⁴ draws on experience from the recently launched Access to Nutrition (ATNI) index⁵, but in addition aims to comprehensively assess the less visible practices of companies. These include lobbying, political donations and charitable monetary donations. Ranking companies according to their actions on food environments should increase pressure for more healthy food industry practices.

The global INFORMAS database will also allow a deeper understanding of how food policies and environments affect obesity and NCDs and allow evaluation of the impacts of new food policies and actions on food environments, obesity and NCD risk factors. This is important as no countries to date are able to even comprehensively describe their food environment.

- The INFORMAS work is under the auspices of the International Obesity Taskforce, and is being coordinated at the University of Auckland.
- The INFORMAS papers are available online
- The INFORMAS website

Please say what you think of these ideas in the comments box below or contact me at s.vandevijvere@auckland.ac.nz

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Public Health Expert Briefing (ISSN 2816-1203)

Source URL:

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