



What can diets and food systems do to prevent obesity and non-communicable diseases in Fiji?

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 one of the focus areas of this study on what diets can do to prevent overweight, obesity, and NCDs in Fiji.

1 • Background

In the past 20 to 30 years, accelerated changes to local food systems and dietary patterns in Fiji have contributed to rising rates of overweight and obesity. The rise in these forms of malnutrition has led to an increase in the incidence of a range of diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes, certain cancers, and cardiovascular diseases. NCDs are now behind over 80 percent of deaths in Fiji annually, generating a significant social and economic burden.

Dietary intake has been shifting from traditional food consumption patterns to being heavily and increasingly reliant on imported and processed foods, and this is apparent in both rural and urban populations. Although many communities still rely on subsistence lifestyle, declining self-sufficiency has led to a reduction in the consumption of locally produced and acquired foods and the introduction of imported, store-bought and non-perishable food items.

Despite the importance of understanding the various drivers of these changing consumption patterns in Fiji for getting relevant insight towards policy development and public health interventions, this area has been under-researched. Some studies describe price, availability, access, freshness, convenience, time barriers, preparation and palatability as important factors. However, these studies do not represent all Fijians and further analysis is required.

2 • Some key findings

A mapping of food environments

The research carried out two types of mapping and a Healthy Food Basket survey. The first mapping activity assessed the local environment for food availability, mapping 284 food outlets. Secondly, a GIS mapping of the fresh food systems, including fruits and vegetables, was undertaken. A total of 1 185 commercial outlets were surveyed, including 505 shops, 278 fixed road-side stalls, 179 mobile road-side stalls, 137 supermarkets, 63 cluster road-side markets, and 19 municipal markets. A survey among Fijians was also conducted to determine the availability of fruits and vegetables in their local community.

The mapping of local food environments showed that there is a high availability of energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods in urban and some rural areas. Beverages, including sugar sweetened beverages (and their no-sugar versions) and pre-made juices were highly available, including in the area directly outside schools.

In the GIS mapping, only 9 percent of outlets sold five or more types of fruits, and 9.6 percent of all outlets sold five or more types of vegetables.

The availability of items from the Fiji Healthy Food Basket¹ was limited (mean availability of 56.3 percent), with the majority of food items with the highest availability being processed and imported. Fresh or minimally processed items had least availability.

Most participants (82.2 percent) reported growing some of their own food and having access to communal fruit trees (91.8 percent) and wild harvested leafy greens (69.1 percent). Similar proportions reported access to livestock domesticated for consumption (e.g., cows, pigs, and chickens) and fish or seafood from local rivers or the ocean.

The role of schools

Schools can provide an environment to promote and support healthy diets for both students and the wider school community. This research also purposefully mapped food availability in outlets near schools. The most common food items available in the 197 surveyed outlets were sugar sweetened beverages (80 percent), lollies, candy, and confectionary (63 percent) and fried beans and potato chips (50 percent).

Limited consumption of all these products is recommended in the Food and Health Guidelines for Fiji. While this shows the kind of foods available in the immediate school environment, more work is required to assess purchasing and consumption behaviours in school-aged children and advertising and marketing within the school environment zone.

The impact of the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to avoid its spread have also impacted Fijian food systems. A survey of food vendors noted challenges in sourcing product, and that consumers, although seen in lower levels than pre-COVID-19, purchased less product. This reduced demand was likely due to increased market supply from semi-subsistence farmers and home gardens. Post-harvest losses also increased as a consequence of COVID-19 as observed by smallholder farmers and market vendors in Fiji.

Dietary changes as a result of COVID-19 were also reported by farmers, vendors and consumers. Some farmers (10 percent), market vendors (15.3%) and consumers (18.8 percent) indicated that they had reduced their consumption of fruits and vegetables, with farmers reporting increased consumption of more processed or tinned meat. Almost 19 percent of Fijian women in the study reported decreased consumption of fruits and vegetables due to COVID-19 impacts, as compared to 12.1 percent of males.

3 · What are policies doing?

‘Food and nutrition security’ is included as a standalone sector in the Fijian Government’s Five-Year Development Plan (2017-2021), with the goal that ‘Every Fijian has access to adequate food of acceptable quality and nutritional value’.

¹ The Fiji Healthy Food Basket assessment is a cross-sectional survey of the costs and availability of basic food items that promote healthy food choices

To improve multi-sectoral coordination of national food security and nutrition action, a whole-of-government Policy on Food and Nutrition Security has been prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MOHMS) and five implementation partner ministries and is awaiting cabinet approval.

Food production

In its own Four-Year Strategic Development Plan (SDP), the MoA is committed to scaling up commercial agricultural production in Fiji for both crops and livestock. These initiatives to 'expand agricultural production' include a diverse range of healthy nutrient-rich foods and align with MoA's (and Fiji's whole-of-government) priority to improve food and nutrition security. There is, however, a particular emphasis on expanding rice production that should be accompanied by complementary measures in order to avoid displacement of the production and consumption of more nutrient-rich foods.

Increased production of nutrient-rich foods in urban communities is an outcome of the MoA's SDP under the priority to improve food and nutrition security. The MoA is also undertaking research to strengthen and revitalise traditional food crops, and their annual Costed Operational Plan (COP) has a target for 12 indigenous crops to be available for distribution to farmers in the 2020/21 financial year.

To deliver on its commitment to sustainability, the MoA will also need to appropriately manage its pursuit of farm mechanisation. This specifically refers to concerns that mechanisation and the use of chemicals for agriculture are damaging waterways: this has a negative impact on fisheries and potentially on nutrition and food security among some communities.

Food marketing

The Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport is committed to improving market access for locally produced foods in domestic, regional, and international markets. For that purpose, roadside market stalls have been established and are functioning across the country. Additional initiatives like the boosting of the Agricultural Marketing Authority under the MoA to assist producer's market agro-produce or the Markets for Change project implemented by UN Women and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are also strategic to facilitate the domestic availability of and access to fresh nutrient-rich locally produced foods.

Investment in domestic markets for local produce could detract the economic value of export markets and a lack of technical skill is a barrier to enhancing nutrition-sensitive food processing and preservation techniques.

Food environments for children

Additional measures have been taken regarding School Food Environments. In 2017, a revised Policy on Food and School Canteens was introduced by the Ministry for Education, Heritage and Arts, requiring '*canteen operators, management, school heads and teachers to collaboratively engage towards the provision of healthy food and beverages in the school canteen and to promote a healthy food environment in the school*'. The Policy contains a list of foods that are prohibited for sale in school canteens, including sugar-sweetened drinks and processed snack foods. New regulations to control the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic drinks to children have been drafted by the MOHMS, but are awaiting formal approval

Beyond schools, no policy measures are in place to control the physical sale of unhealthy foods. Municipal council zoning policies have been found to neither limit the density of fast-food outlets nor require the availability of retail spaces selling fruits and vegetables.

In terms of marketing of unhealthy foods, the 2010 Marketing Controls (Foods for Infants and Young Children) Regulations and the 2009 Food Safety Regulations both contain measures restricting the promotion and distribution of breastmilk substitutes.

Food imports

The Fijian Government has also taken a number of steps to control the importation of unhealthy foods and support the importation of healthy foods.

In 2000, Fiji introduced a ban on the supply of mutton flaps (high in saturated fat and low in nutritional value). In 2012, the fiscal import duty on monosodium glutamate (MSG) and palm oil was raised to the highest level allowed by international trade rules, and in 2018 the fiscal import duty was raised on 'sweetened and carbonated drinks'. Biscuits, instant noodles, and some animal products also attract a high fiscal import duty, though this is not only related to health purposes, but also to support domestic industries. In 2018, the fiscal import duty was removed on a range of fruits and vegetables, such as apples and carrots, to ensure affordability of healthy foods.

In 2020, to lessen the economic impact of COVID-19, 'bold taxation and customs tariff reductions' were introduced, with mixed implications for nutrition. Import excise duties were removed on some unhealthy foods like biscuits and confectionary, while fiscal duty on some imported vegetables was reduced.

Food consumption

The Food and Health Guidelines for Fiji 2018 comprise a set of nationally endorsed dietary guidelines. The guidelines are currently used by dietitians, nurses, and community health workers, who provide nutrition counselling to patients and communities. The National Food and Nutrition Centre also conduct nutrition awareness campaigns and provide education and training on nutrition as well as growing nutrient-rich foods ('Grow Your Own Food') and support the My Kana Fiji mobile app, which is available to all Fijians and available for other Pacific Island Countries. My Kana allows users to plan their meals and learn how to grow and maintain their organic home gardens. Food Switch another App created by the George Institute for Global Health in Sydney, Australia, is now available in Fiji allowing consumers to scan the barcode and visually see the healthiness of the product through a traffic light system or preferred Front of Pack labelling.

Another initiative utilising technology is the Pacific Island Food Revolution, a communications-for-development program comprising a reality television program and online recipes encouraging Pacific Islanders, including Fijians, to 'revolutionise their diets' by moving away from imported highly-processed foods and returning to their traditional diets of local nutrient-rich foods.

4 · Are policy capacities sufficient?

While confident to prepare ministry-level policies and procedures for internal approval, policy officers often lack the expertise and time to prepare or review larger policies, legislation or strategic planning documents that require stronger technical skills, advanced policy expertise, multisectoral coordination and cabinet approvals.

Amidst the pressure to finalise policy – and particularly to secure budget approval – policy officers also admit reducing policy implementation budgets to minimum levels. Others have declared to give only limited consideration to the budget for policy implementation from the start of the policy's development.

Implementation staff are not adequately resourced to deliver the large number of policies and initiatives with which they are tasked. This is especially challenging as policies and initiatives are

not harmonised during policy development and a lack of implementation procedures creates barriers to coordinating delivery with other ministries or agencies. Similarly, those involved in policy monitoring and enforcement are burdened by the complexity of policies and inadequate resourcing. This permits a reactive approach to monitoring policy compliance only.

In addition to these factors, Fiji's geography also creates innate challenges to policy delivery, such as the cost and frequency of inter-island transport and impeded internet connectivity. Strong weather events can also cause policy delivery and development to be delayed, re-aligned or abandoned.

5 • What's next?

The next step in this work is to undertake policy dialogues and outline pathways for transforming the local food systems with key stakeholders.

Recently, Fiji has completed six dialogues as part of the UN Food System Summit (UNFSS) preparation for September 2021. Five Action Tracks dialogues were carried out from May to June 2021, focusing on specific areas in the food systems. The final National Food Systems Dialogue was held for three days from 21 to 23 July 2021, where different food system actors came together to discuss pathways for transforming the local food systems.

Pathways identified below as outcomes from the national dialogue discussions will be part of Fiji's submission to the UNFSS in September and will be included as a way forward in transforming the local food systems in Fiji.

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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