

# Implementing healthy food environment policies in Aotearoa

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## Summary

Food-EPI (Healthy Food Environment Policy Index) was recently conducted for the fourth time in Aotearoa New Zealand to benchmark government policies influencing food environments against international best practice. Some policies were comparable with international best practice, but New Zealand falls short in many areas including for healthy food and drinks in all schools, fiscal policies influencing food costs, and restricting marketing of unhealthy foods that children see.

Sixty experts prioritised the need for a **comprehensive multi-sector food systems strategy** and for people to have **sufficient income** to make healthy food choices with autonomy. Five policy actions and five infrastructure support actions were prioritised for immediate action. A mandatory approach needs to be adopted in many policy areas, such as marketing of unhealthy food to children and healthy food policies in schools, and a new national nutrition survey is urgently needed.

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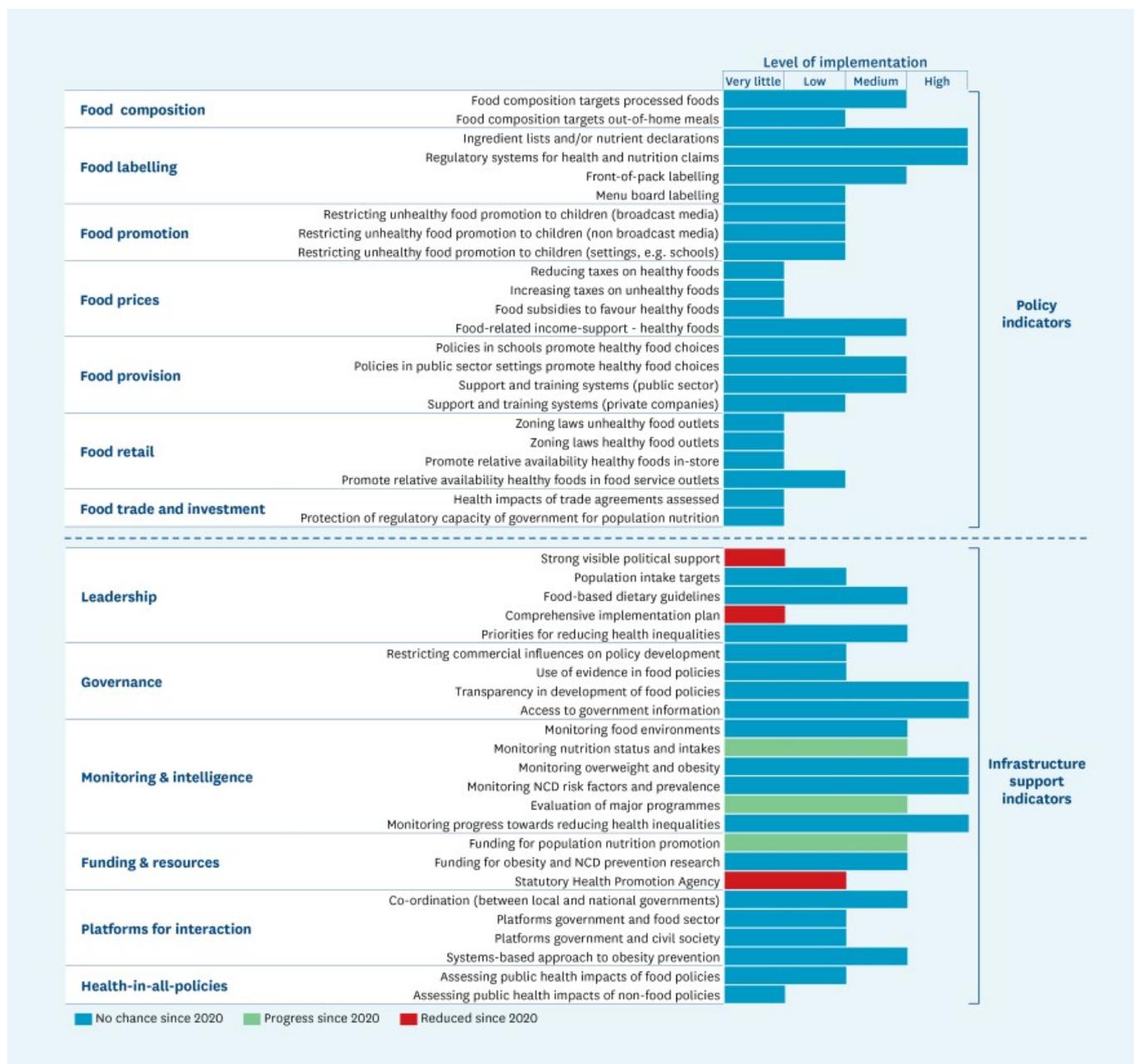
This briefing outlines how we conducted Food-EPI in Aotearoa NZ. It looks at progress by the Government on food environment policies and infrastructure support and concludes with an urgent call to action. This research was conducted by Health Coalition Aotearoa and The University of Auckland and supported by over 60 public health experts.

## How was Food-EPI conducted?

Diet-related non-communicable diseases are the biggest preventable cause of death in Aotearoa NZ<sup>1</sup>. These are related to our food environments<sup>2</sup>. Health Coalition Aotearoa and The University of Auckland recently conducted Food-EPI (Healthy Food Environment Policy Index) for the fourth time in New Zealand. Food-EPI is an initiative of INFORMAS that assesses government actions contributing to improving food environments and implementation of policies and actions to prevent obesity and nutrition-related non-communicable diseases<sup>3</sup>. Food-EPI was conducted in May 2023 with an Expert Panel of over 60 independent and government public health and nutrition experts, and previously in 2014, 2017 and 2020<sup>4</sup>.

Food-EPI considers government actions in two areas, policy and infrastructure support. Thirteen different domains with 47 good practice indicators are assessed (Figure 1). We compiled evidence of current implementation in NZ for policies on food environments and infrastructure support by documenting publicly available information and validating this with government officials.

**Figure 1:** Level of implementation of food environment policies and infrastructure support by the New Zealand Government in 2023 against international best practice



## What progress has Government made?

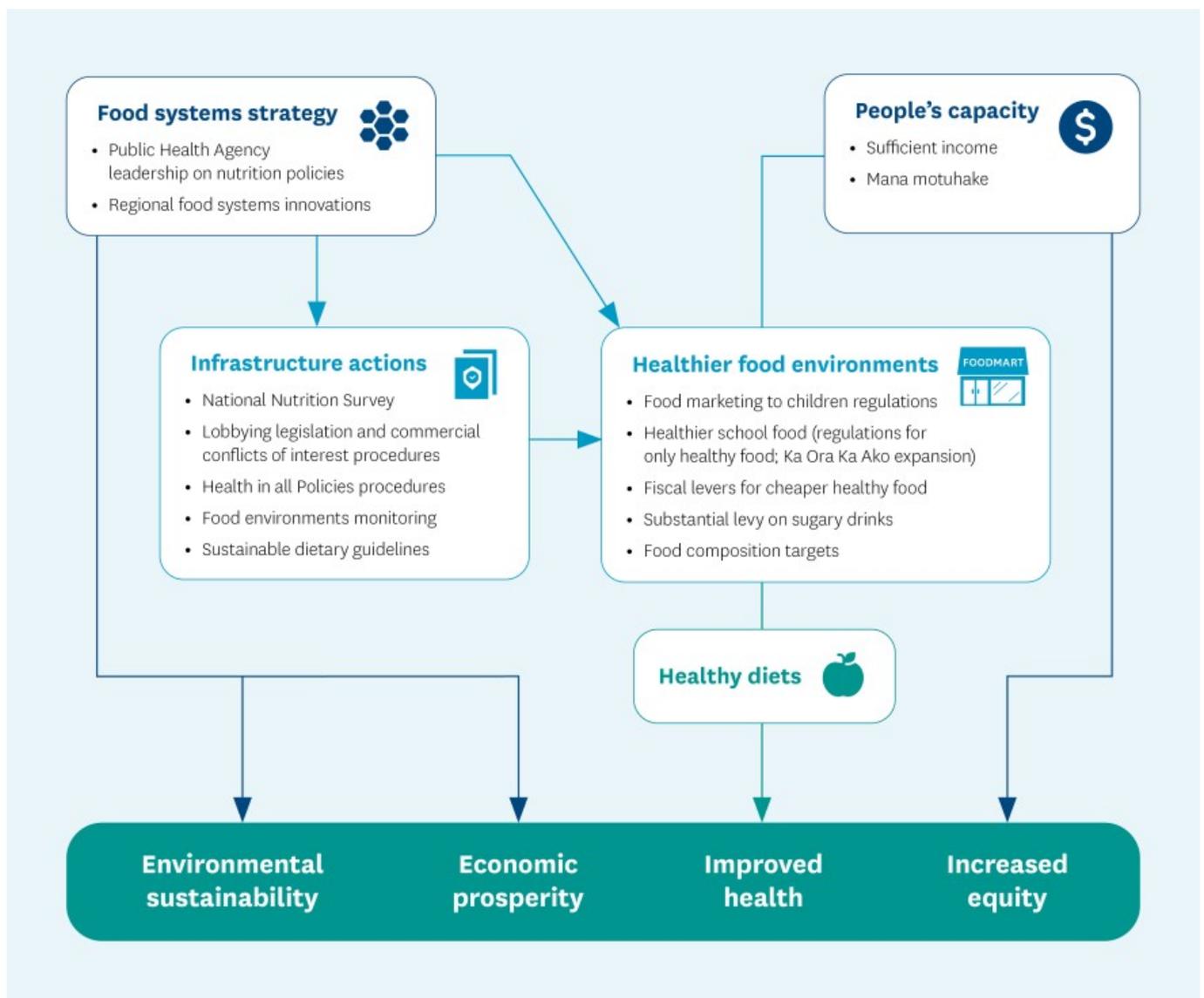
Using this evidence, the research team benchmarked policies and actions of the Government against international best practice for creating healthier food environments. The level of implementation was categorised as 'high', 'medium', 'low' or 'very little, if any'. When we looked back over all four Food-EPI assessments there has been remarkably little progress over the last 12 years.

Nevertheless, some progress has been made since 2017 regarding the provision of healthy school lunches (Ka Ora Ka Ako), implementing the recommendations of the review of the Health Star Rating System, and planning for a future national nutrition survey. While some policies were considered at the level of international best practice, Aotearoa NZ was seen to be falling short in many areas including for healthy food and drinks in all schools, fiscal policies influencing food costs, and restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks that children see. Gaps were also identified relating to inadequate national infrastructure support for prevention of obesity and diet-related diseases, in particular the lack of government leadership and limited monitoring of progress.

## What actions are recommended?

We held three workshops with over 60 participants (the Expert Panel) in May 2023 to recommend actions for the NZ Government. Following the workshops, 50 experts ranked these actions by importance and feasibility, to recommend actions for immediate implementation. Experts were asked to consider the impacts of the actions on health, environmental sustainability, national and local food sovereignty, and equity, as well as adherence to the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Over-arching enabling actions and ten specific actions were prioritised to improve the healthiness of New Zealand's food environments, grouped into four main areas: Food Systems and Nutrition Strategy; People's capacity; Infrastructure; Healthier Food Environments (Figure 2).



The Expert Panel expressed concern about the extent of food insecurity exposed by the cost-of-living increases, prioritising 'mana motuhake' to ensure **households receive an adequate income** to enable autonomy to make healthy food choices.

The Expert Panel was very clear that for any progress to be made, there needs to be **clear leadership from the Public Health Agency**, and development of a government-led

## **multi-sectoral National Food Systems and Nutrition Strategy.**

Also of major concern was the need for committed funding for a **national nutrition survey**, with the previous Child and Adult Nutrition Surveys conducted 21 and 15 years ago respectively. Major policy decisions are being made in the absence of evidence about the current nutrition status, food consumption patterns of the population and food supply.

To protect our children's health the Expert Panel calls for **mandatory policies** to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food that children see, and that only healthy foods and drinks are provided or sold in schools and early learning services. Previous voluntary approaches have proven to be ineffective as they are not enforceable and therefore not implemented or adhered to.

These actions would collectively result in positive outcomes for environmental sustainability, economic prosperity, improved health and increased equity. If the New Zealand Government invests in the highly cost-effective policies and programs recommended by WHO5 we could meet the standard of those countries currently leading the world on food policies for health and wellbeing.

### **What is new in this briefing**

- Minimal Government progress over the last 12 years in implementing policies and infrastructure support for healthy food environments.
- Over 60 experts recently evaluated evidence and prioritised 14 actions for Government.
- Actions needed are a food systems and nutrition strategy, enabling sufficient income, mandatory policies particularly focused on children's environment and conducting a national nutrition survey.

### **Implications for public health policy**

- Government needs to act quickly after over a decade of inaction to make progress on prevention of obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases.
- Food-EPI provides a list of actions considered for feasibility and importance for immediate Government action.
- Implementing these actions will improve health, sustainability, food sovereignty and equity and uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

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## Additional information

[1] INFORMAS (International Network for Food and Obesity / Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) Research, Monitoring and Action Support) is a global network of public-interest organisations and researchers that aims to monitor, benchmark and support public and private sector actions to increase healthy food environments and reduce obesity and NCDs and their related inequalities.

[2] The Health Star Rating is a voluntary front-of-pack labelling system implemented in New Zealand and Australia that rates the overall nutritional profile of packaged food and assigns it a rating from ½ a star to 5 stars. Adopted in June 2014 it was formally reviewed in 2019 with recommendations to deliver improvements to the system made.

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