



UNSCN

United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF POLICIES TO SUPPORT HEALTHY FOOD ENVIRONMENTS AND HEALTHY DIETS

Implementing the Framework for Action of the Second International Conference on Nutrition

The Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) embraced the concept of 'malnutrition in all its forms', rather than dealing with under- and over-nutrition in silos. The Conference highlighted the role of food systems – the way food is produced, processed, distributed, marketed, prepared and consumed – as crucial to the fight against malnutrition in all its forms including overweight and obesity.

To this end, in the **ICN2 Rome Declaration**, Member States committed to enhance sustainable food systems by developing coherent public policies from production to consumption and across relevant sectors to provide year-round access to food that meets people's nutrition needs and promote safe and diversified healthy diets (Commitment 15c). They also committed to raise the profile of nutrition within relevant national strategies, policies, actions plans and programmes, and align national resources accordingly (Commitment 15d). In order to follow through on these commitments, it is implied that policies need to be assessed for their impact on diets and access to nutritious food. The framework below illustrates how food environments affect food access, and the outcomes of diet, nutrition, and health status.

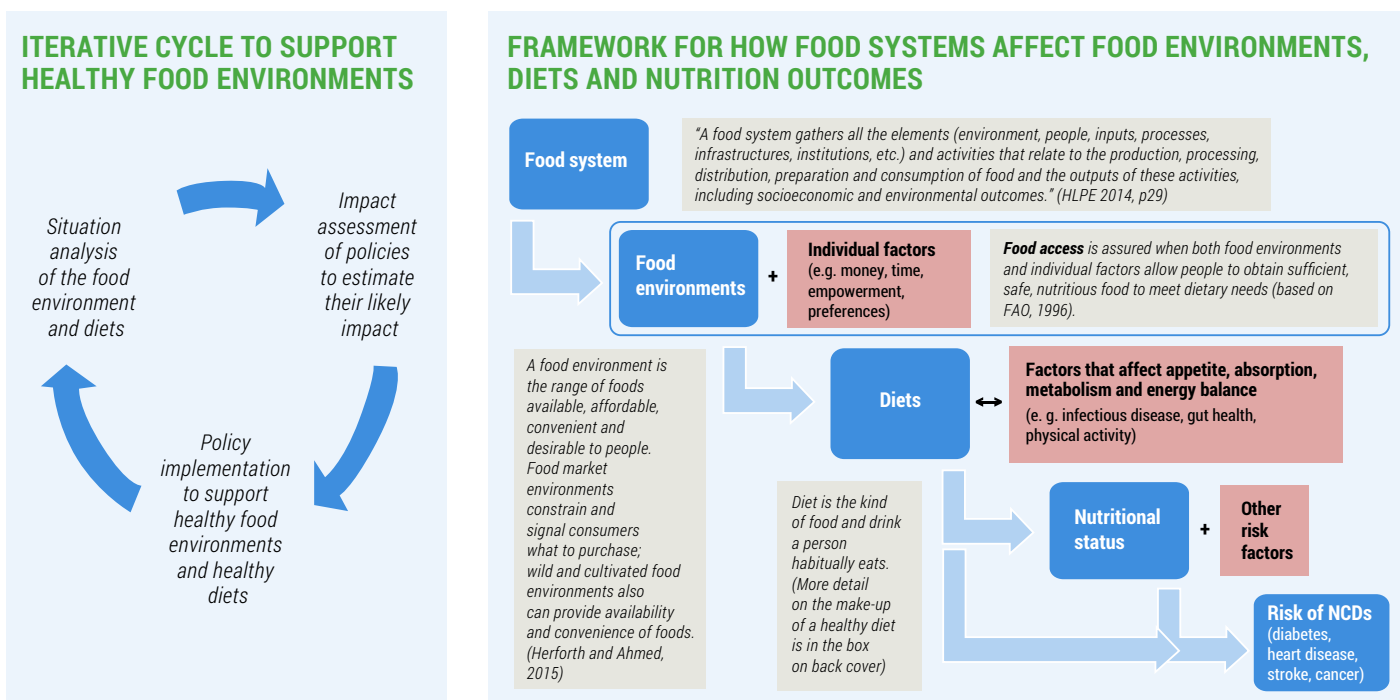
The **Sustainable Development Goals** include in SDG2 the target, *by 2030 end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food all year round* (Target 2.1).

Impact assessment is a potential tool that could be used to improve nutrition sensitivity of policies. When new policies or programmes are considered, they are often subject to some sort of review on social impact, health impact, and environmental impact. Policies rarely serve all interests equally; typically some values are prioritized over others. Missing in policy debate, however, is impact assessment on public health nutrition. Impact assessment is the use of methods to predict the likely impacts of a policy or programme on affected populations and population sub-groups. *Ex ante* impact assessment of food system policies is envisioned to support healthy food environments and healthy diets. These terms are further defined on the back page of this brief.

Impact assessment implies two elements: **1.** The ability to measure and monitor relevant food environment and dietary outcomes; **2.** A process and system to review policies *ex ante* for their likely impact on these outcomes.

An iterative cycle of the three steps shown in the figure is envisioned, with the desired outcome of improved food environments and diets, which contribute to improved nutritional status and improved health such as lower rates of noncommunicable diseases.

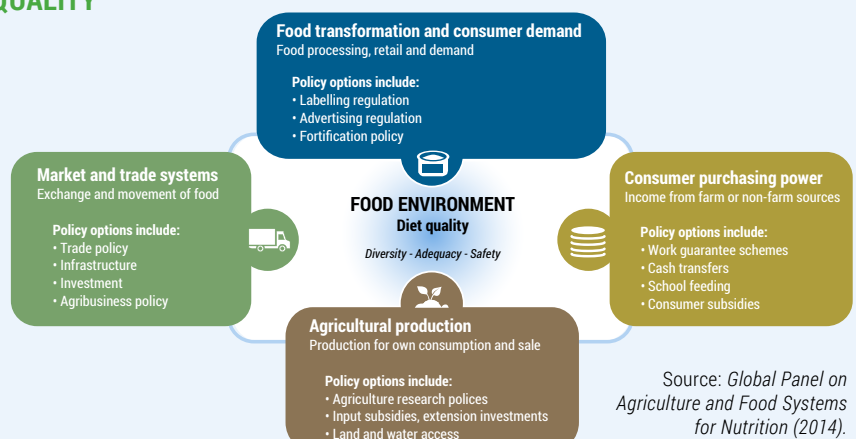
This paper explores opportunities and challenges to the envisaged goal of coherent policies that would support year-round access to food that meets people's nutrition needs. The intent is that all governments – whether high income (HIC), low or middle income (LMIC), independent of the type of food system and the nutrition situation in their countries – are able to include an assessment of impacts on food environments and diets in policy deliberation. The paper proposes options to review policies for their likely impact on food environment and dietary outcomes, which rests on ability to measure those outcomes.



TYPES OF POLICIES THAT AFFECT FOOD ENVIRONMENTS AND DIETS

Impact Assessment is most important for policies that most directly affect food environments and diets, such as in the areas of: (1) agricultural production, (2) market and trade systems, (3) food transformation and demand, and (4) consumer purchasing power. The figure provides examples of policies in each area.

HOW FOOD SYSTEM POLICIES LINK TO FOOD ENVIRONMENT AND DIET QUALITY



DEVELOPING A PROCESS FOR IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF POLICIES (EX ANTE)

Three possible ways to approach impact assessment of policies on food environment and diet outcomes include:

1. Ad hoc impact assessment of policies designed to benefit nutrition as a primary purpose, for their likely impact on Food Environments and Diets (FED). An example is carrying out a FED impact assessment on a proposed sugar-sweetened beverage tax.
2. Policy portfolio review of the food and agriculture sector to assess the cumulative impact of the existing policy portfolio on food environments and diets, and where opportunities lie for improving impact through a new policy or revision of existing policies. The primary policy areas for this approach include those indicated above.
3. Integrate FED impact assessment into existing broader Health or Social Impact Assessments of new policies, focusing on the food systems policy areas listed above.

Recommended actions for sustainable food systems promoting healthy diets include *to review national policies and investments and integrate nutrition objectives into food and agriculture policy, programme design and implementation. ICN2 Framework for Action (FFA), Recommendation 8.*

DEVELOPING FOOD ENVIRONMENT AND DIET QUALITY MEASUREMENT

Impact assessment implies the ability to measure and monitor relevant food environment and dietary outcomes. A necessary suite of **food environment** indicators would give a sense of what the food environment looks like; that is, which kinds of foods are most available, affordable, convenient and desirable/marketed. Monitoring these indicators would signal areas where policies may positively or negatively impact the overall healthiness of the food environment and thus the possible choices available to consumers.

- Currently food environments are typically measured only in terms of availability and prices of starchy staples; total calorie availability; and an aggregate price of food using a food basket that does not necessarily reflect the dietary needs of people.
- The most important additions to these existing indicators are the availability and prices of diverse food groups (e.g. fruits and vegetables); and the price of a food basket that reflects a healthy diet. These additional indicators need to supplement the indicator of calorie supply from non-staples to ensure that the non-staples available can provide healthy diets.

Indicators to measure **diet quality** need to reflect two basic components: *dietary adequacy* meaning getting enough of certain foods and essential nutrients and *dietary moderation* which means not getting too much of certain foods or nutrients. WHO defines a minimum daily recommended amount of fruit and vegetable intake, in addition to recommended intake levels of calories, water, and vitamins and minerals. On the other side, WHO recommends maximum intakes for sodium and added sugars, and states that industrial trans fats are not part of a healthy diet.

- Dietary Diversity indicators are the main indicators currently available to measure diet quality. These that reflects the micronutrient adequacy of diet, and include Minimum Dietary Diversity for women (validated by not yet typically collected), and for children 6-23 months (collected in periodic surveys such as Demographic Health Surveys).
- Other additions where indicators have already been defined by global frameworks but data are not necessarily collected include: consumption of fruits and vegetables, salt, dietary energy from free sugar, and trans fats.
- The consumption of ultra-processed food is also important but indicators have not yet been defined and agreed upon; this needs further work.
- Monitoring systems need to be improved to measure diet quality. Full dietary surveys are costly and infrequent.

CHALLENGES TO IMPACT ASSESSMENT FOR FOOD ENVIRONMENTS AND DIET QUALITY

Currently a number of challenges to impact assessment exist and need to be addressed. These include:

- Available indicators and monitoring systems are not sufficient to fully capture healthy food environments and healthy diets, the envisaged outcomes of coherent food systems policies.
- In most countries, there is not a system in place that ensures that such outcomes are routinely part of policy deliberation.

The needs for improved metrics, and for a feasible political process for reviewing policies with a nutrition lens are universal, irrespective of a country's type of food system, income level or malnutrition problem. Building the global and national capacity for this work is a long-term undertaking that requires vision and sustained commitment, the benefits of which can be seen in the enormous utility and impact that has accompanied the Demographic and Health Surveys over several decades of development and implementation.

Under the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025 the **monitoring food environments and diets**, and building a **system for impact assessment** of food systems policies on those outcomes, would help countries to follow through on the ICN2 commitments: to raise the profile of nutrition within relevant policies, and to develop policies to provide year-round access to food that meets people's nutrition needs and promote safe and diversified healthy diets.

The vision of a healthy food system is inherent in the ICN2 outcomes and commitments and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025 provides a further stimulus. The following recommendations can help transform this vision into reality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop and monitor feasible, valid metrics that reflect desired outcomes of healthy food environments and diets.
2. FAO and WHO work toward aligning their global databases and flagship publications to cover food environment and diet information, and agriculture and food system policies, in view of enabling tracking of the 60 recommendations of the ICN2 Framework for Action and ensuring easy accessibility to the information by countries.
3. Build capacity to do impact assessments, whether food environment and diet impacts are incorporated within a broader Health or Social Impact Assessment (HIA or SIA), or assessed in an independent effort on food systems.
4. Continue building capacity and political priority for nutrition in country, including priority for transformation into healthy food systems, healthy food environments, and healthy diets, so that impact assessments on food environments and diets would be demanded by countries and citizens and used in the policy process.

TERMINOLOGY

Healthy food systems - The ICN2 FFA contains a set of recommendations for “sustainable food systems promoting healthy diets.” In short, this is a healthy food system, which allows and promotes consumption of diverse, nutritious and safe foods through environmentally sustainable production, trade, and distribution.

Healthy food environments are environments in which the foods, beverages and meals that contribute to a population’s diet meeting national dietary guidelines are widely available, affordably priced, reasonably convenient, and widely promoted.¹

The outcomes of the ICN2 articulated in the FFA include these recommendations related to healthy food environments:

- Improve access and affordability of fresh food.
- Increase production, reduce wastage, improve distribution of fruit and vegetables and reduce transformation into juices.
- Increase production and use of unsaturated fat instead of trans and saturated fat.
- Make safe drinking water accessible to all.
- Offer healthy food in public institutions and in private catering outlets.
- Align marketing to public information and end marketing of unhealthy foods.

A **healthy diet** helps protect against malnutrition in all its forms, as well as noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), including diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancer. According to the WHO Healthy Diet Fact Sheet, a healthy diet² contains:

- Fruits, vegetables, legumes (e.g. lentils, beans), nuts and whole grains (e.g. unprocessed maize, millet, oats, wheat, brown rice).
- At least 400 g (5 portions) of fruits and vegetables a day.
- Less than 10% of total energy intake from free sugars.
- Less than 30% of total energy intake from fats. Unsaturated fats (e.g. found in fish, avocado, nuts, sunflower, canola and olive oils) are preferable to saturated fats (e.g. found in fatty meat, butter, palm and coconut oil, cream, cheese, ghee and lard). Industrial trans fats (found in processed food, fast food, snack food, fried food, frozen pizza, pies, cookies, margarines and spreads) are not part of a healthy diet.
- Less than 5 g of salt (equivalent to approximately 1 teaspoon) per day and use iodized salt.

¹ Adapted from Swinburn et al. (Obesity Reviews 14 (S1) 2013) and Herforth and Ahmed (Food Security 7(3) 2015).

² Although this paper focuses on how food systems provide access to healthy diets as defined for people over the age of two years, it is also important to ensure healthy food environments that support optimal infant and young child feeding and care practices. The WHO Healthy Diet Fact Sheet provides further specification on a healthy diet for infants and young children (WHO 2015).

Resources

The UNSCN discussion paper, written by Anna Herforth PhD, Adjunct Associate Research Scientist, Columbia University, US, on Impact assessment of policies to support healthy food environments and healthy diets can be found on the UNSCN website: www.unscn.org

The outcome documents of the Second International Conference on Nutrition, Rome Declaration on Nutrition and the Framework for Action can be found at: <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/icn2/en/>

WHO fact sheet on healthy diet, update from September 2015 can be found at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs394/en/>

Global Panel 2014. Technical Brief 1. How Can Agriculture and food system policies improve nutrition? <http://www.glopan.org/>



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