The politics of food in the Pacific: coherence and tension in regional policies on the food environment and non-communicable diseases

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Background

The Pacific has among the highest rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the world, but also boasts an innovative and proactive response. Heads of state have declared NCDs a ‘crisis’ and countries have committed to specific prevention activities set out in a regional ‘NCD Roadmap.’ However, exposure to diet-related NCD risk-factors remains stubbornly high and many countries face challenges in establishing a healthy food environment.

Methodology

We mapped regional policy commitments relevant to promotion of healthy diet, using documents from regional meetings over the last 10 years. We focussed on agriculture, education, finance, health, trade and Heads of State forums. Drawing on relevant political science methodologies3 we looked at how these sectors “frame” the drivers of and solutions to NCDs, their policy priorities, and identified areas of coherence and tension.

Objectives

Our study analysed evolving regional commitments on food policy in the Pacific. We aimed to understand regional priorities and the context of policy development, to identify opportunities for progress on diet-related NCDs.

Results

We identified 58 relevant regional forums between 2008 and 2018. The majority were ministerial (or heads of state) meetings, though we also found 11 meetings of departmental secretaries in the health and education sector.

NCDs are a high priority for Heads of State and the health sector, receive significant attention from agriculture and finance, but are relatively neglected by education and trade sectors. The contribution of unhealthy food imports to diet-related NCDs is a prominent concern, and there is a consensus on nutrition education and taxes on unhealthy food as effective responses (Figure 1, Table 1). Other actions recommended by WHO’s NCD Global Action Plan3 are less visible in regional commitments.

We found some inconsistencies and tensions in policy goals, for example between:

- Reducing unhealthy food imports and free trade
- Increasing economic returns from agriculture by adding value to food production through processing, and decreasing consumption of unhealthy, processed food
- Improving food security through increasing the supply and affordability of locally-grown food; and improving nutrition, through encouraging consumption of healthy foods, regardless of origin.

Figure 1: Proposed actions to address diet-related NCDs, by regional meeting

Table 1: Chronological series of proposed actions, by sector

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N/A means no meeting held that year * Denotes communique only, no meeting report available

References