

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 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 methodologies¹ 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

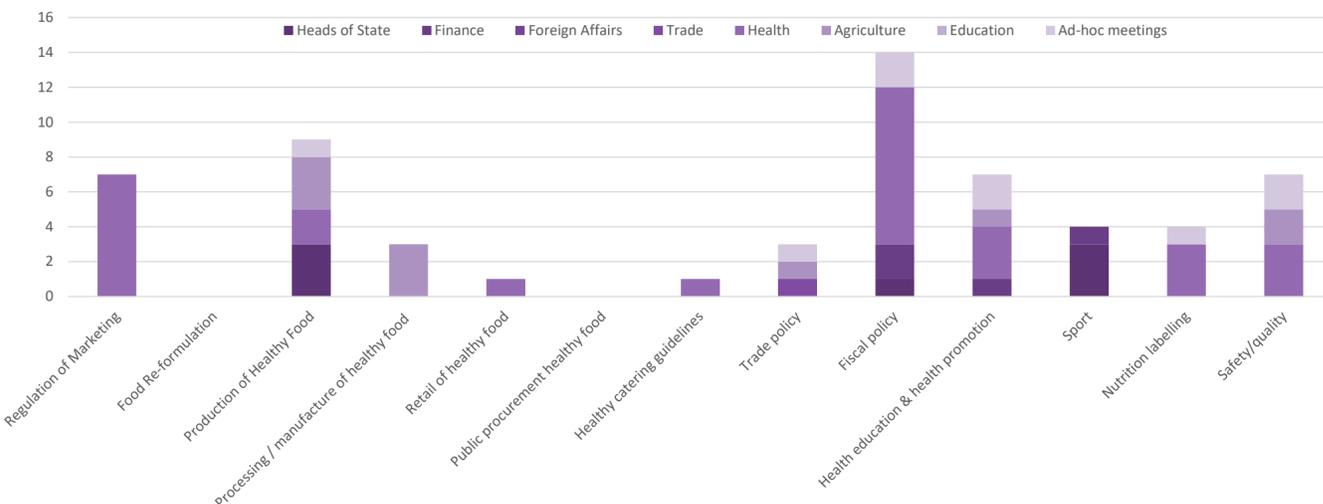
We identified 58 relevant regional forums between 2008 and 2018. The majority were ministerial (or heads of state) meetings, though we also found 11 meetings of departmental secretaries in the health and education sector.

NCDs are a high priority for Heads of State and the health sector, receive significant attention from agriculture and trade sectors, but are relatively neglected by education and finance 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 Plan² 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



Priorities to strengthen the Pacific NCD response:

The Pacific has articulated strong commitment to addressing diet-related NCDs, at the highest levels of Government. However, there is opportunity to broaden and deepen the policy response in many sectors.

Regional fora, supported by regional technical agencies, could play an important role in catalysing new actions and resolving inter-sectoral tensions. Specifically:

- Action to neglected areas (Figure 1) such as food labelling, restrictions on marketing and support for implementation;
- Identifying nutrition-related regulatory interventions compatible with trade agreements;
- Comparing progress across countries to strengthen accountability through the Monitoring Alliance for NCD Action.³

Table 1: Chronological series of proposed actions, by sector

SECTOR	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Heads of State			Sports Fiscal Policy	Sports	Sports					
Finance					Fiscal Policy Production	Education	Fiscal Policy			Sports
Health	Fiscal Policy Marketing Quality/Safety Education Production	N/A	Fiscal policy Quality/Safety	N/A	Fiscal Policy Marketing	Fiscal Policy Marketing	Fiscal policy Marketing	Fiscal Policy	Fiscal Policy Marketing	Fiscal policy Marketing
Agriculture	Production Processing Quality/Safety Education*** Labelling	N/A	Production Processing Quality/Safety Education	N/A	*	N/A	Production Processing Quality/safety *	N/A	*	N/A
Ad Hoc Meetings		Food Secure Pacific: Safety/Quality Labelling Production				Joint Health and Finance: Safety/Quality		NCD Summit:		
		Education			Fiscal Policy SIDS: Education		Fiscal Policy			
							Trade			

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

References

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3. Tolley H, Snowden W, Wate J, Durand AM, Vivili P, McCool J, et al. Monitoring and accountability for the Pacific response to the non-communicable diseases crisis. 2016; 16:958.

