



Food and Nutrition policy for Cook Islands

Vision

A Cook Islands where food systems and the environment sustainably support healthy food choices to enable optimal health across the life course.

Goal

To provide environments and settings that support and encourage a healthy diet, in all population sub-groups and to prevent further increases in overweight and obesity.

Situational background

Food and nutrition are linked to health, beginning before birth and continuing throughout the life course. Indeed, 12 of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) require nutrition in order to be met. Without adequate nutrition, individuals cannot achieve good health, be ready to learn, or meet their full potential in personal and professional development. However, achieving adequate or even optimal nutrition is not just about individual choices. Food systems are large and complicated; and many factors contribute to dietary patterns both individually and nationally. Governments can and must work to prevent all forms of malnutrition, build sustainable food systems, and support healthy diets across the life course.

These are complex issues. Food systems have changed over time as reliance on imported foods has increased with access to all sorts of conveniences and variety. Modernisation has also contributed to less time, interests and skills in growing, preserving and preparing food. Global food manufacturers, distributors and marketers may influence food choice as much or more than culture, knowledge, or skills. Emerging threats of climate change, economic upheaval, and global pandemics risk food security and human health.

There are many valuable global and regional goals, frameworks, plans, targets for, and commitments to, improving food and nutrition. Within this context, this policy identifies intent and commitment to act on factors that influence food choices and make it easier to eat healthy in Cook Islands.

While there are gaps in data such as rates of micronutrient deficiencies, stunting, and breastfeeding rates, it is well-known that malnutrition in the form of overweight and obesity is highly prevalent. Non-communicable diseases rates are high and diet is a major contributor to this public health crisis.

The 2016 Cook Islands STEPS reports that very few people consume the recommended five servings per day of fruits and vegetables; rates of overweight and obesity are high, and it suggests that salt consumption is high:

- On an average day 85.4% people consumed less than five servings of fruit and/or vegetables (Men consumed fruit and/or vegetables statistically less frequently on average per day than women).
- More than one third, always or often added salt to food before or while eating and almost half of respondents added salt to their food when cooking or preparing foods at home
- Of the respondents 89.5% were either overweight or obese.

The 2015 Global School-based Student Health Survey reports that:

- Among 13 to 17 year old students 67.5% were overweight and 35.4 % were obese; and that
- 53.9% usually drink carbonated soft drinks one or more times per day.

It is predicted that by 2030 there will be 2,461 children (5-19) who are obese in the Cook Islands and that 45.9% of 5-9-year-olds will obese.

Principles

1. Collaboration - All agencies will work in a collaborative manner.
2. Commitment - Healthy and sustainable food systems and environments requires commitment in the form of advocacy, resource mobilization, and technical capacity-building and programmatic action.
3. Community Engagement - Community members are consulted and engaged in decisions and problem-solving to improve the food environment that affects their health.
4. Evidence based - Food and nutrition policies and systems strategies will be based on evidence and best practice, contextualized to Cook Islands.
5. Equity - Everyone has access to food security.
6. Human rights - Everyone deserves access to enough safe and healthy food.
7. Independence - The food and beverage industry must not be able to influence decisions about health.
8. Protect youth - Government can and should protect youth from undue influences of marketing and advertising.

Objectives to meet the vision

- 1. Objective one: To reduce excess consumption of unhealthy foods particularly those that are high in salt, sugar and fat and to prevent consumption of trans fat**

Policy and law

Enacting and enforcing legislation including restrictions on marketing, fiscal measures influencing price and affordability, labeling requirements, bans on products of concern to health such as trans-fat are all evidence-based strategies to create food environments that support healthier consumer choices. Policies such as school food guidelines and national food-based dietary guidelines can also reduce consumption of unhealthy foods.

Enforcement and monitoring

Implementation must be supported by strong enforcement and monitoring systems to enable accountability and track progress.

2. Objective two: Increase healthy eating including increased consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Policy and law

Fiscal policies that make healthy foods more affordable, policies and programmes that support biodiverse agricultural production and/or harvest of healthy foods, as well as school food policies and national food-based dietary guidelines are all effective tools to increase healthy eating. Food safety laws and regulations can be effective to set standards for specific foods, to ensure hygienic practices, provide information to consumers and address food of concern.

Enforcement and monitoring

Implementation must be supported by strong monitoring systems to enable accountability and track progress. Identification of roles, responsibilities and timelines can support accountability and implementation.

3. Objective three: Protect youth and consumers from industry influences.

Policy and law

Effective legislation can support healthy eating by preventing commercial influences on decision making about food and beverages as well as on breastfeeding or breastmilk substitute decisions.

Enforcement and monitoring

Monitoring and compliance mechanisms support effective implementation. Breastmilk marketing systems restrictions include system policies and practice in healthcare settings. Objective Four: Increase knowledge and awareness of healthy eating and the risks of poor dietary intakes across the life course.

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Policy and law

National food-based dietary guidelines, food labeling requirements, school food programmes that align with health education curricula, healthy eating campaigns, and access to nutrition services in healthcare settings, and breastfeeding education and support can create more knowledgeable individuals.

Enforcement and monitoring

Monitoring and tracking will support implementation and guide next steps.

Objective Five: Increase food security so that all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food.

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Policy and law

Policies that support biodiverse, nutrition-sensitive agriculture and along with trade and import practices that support increased access to nutritious food can strengthen food systems and food security.

Enforcement and monitoring

Monitoring and tracking supports successful implementation and demonstrates opportunity for strengthening.

Relevant Documents

- Customs Tariff Act 2012
- Food Act 1992-1993
- Food Regulations 2014
- Ministry of Health 2013 Act