

How can policies be improved to create healthier food environments in Europe? Application of the Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI) in the EU and in five European countries.

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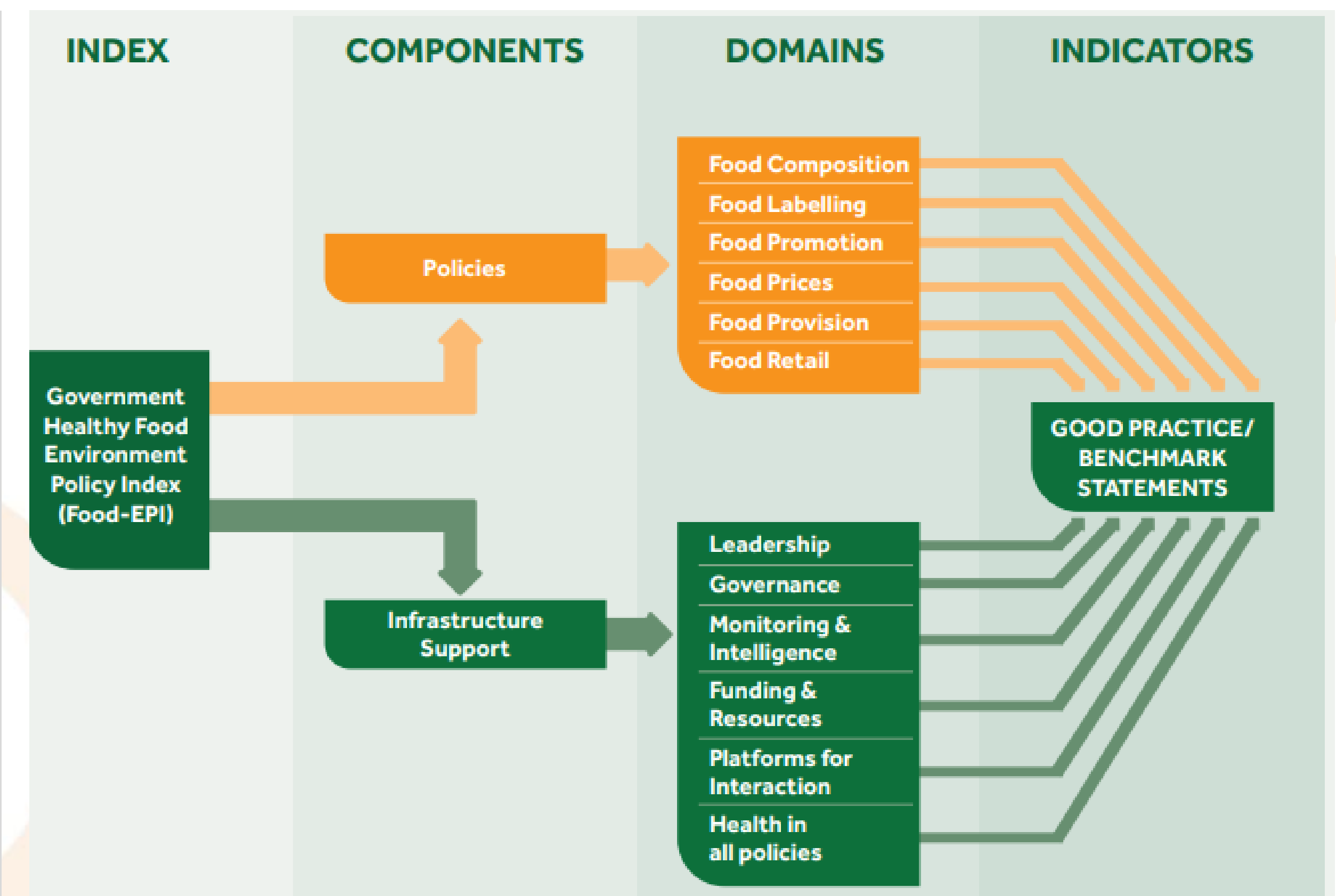
What is already known on this topic

Priority of the problem

Overweight, obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are major public health concerns in Europe (2) with figures expected to rise(3). Unhealthy diets are the major risk factor and therefore an important target for overweight and NCD prevention. Governments worldwide recognize the importance of a healthy diet for good health and wellbeing (4). Further, it has been widely acknowledged that unhealthy food environments are a major driver of poor population diets and obesity. Moreover, food environments have been identified 'as the interface where people interact with the wider food system to acquire and consume foods'. (5)

Benefits and harms

The current food system is failing, pushing food quantity over quality. This system is not supportive in helping consumers to make healthy food choices in line with recommended nutrition outcomes (7). Governmental policy and infrastructure support have the opportunity to improve food environments by implementing effective policies. The aim of the PEN Food-EPI study was to compare the extent of policy implementation to create healthy food environments by national governments across five European countries and by the European Union.



What our studies add



Resource Use

The research teams compiled international benchmarks for each indicator and collected evidence of the policy status in each country and in the EU. A comprehensive list of the international benchmarks can be found in the country specific evidence documents available on the PEN website: <https://www.jpi-pen.eu/reports.html>.

Outcome importance

The Food-EPI was applied in Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Poland, and the European Union. Experts panels identified and prioritised actions needed to address critical gaps in government policies and infrastructure support and reduce the rates of NCD's in Europe, with respect to health inequalities.

Equity effects

Progressive, evidence-based and equitable food policies must be adopted to tackle the unhealthy and unequal food environments in Europe. For the first time, PEN incorporated an assessment of socio-economic inequalities into the Food-EPI tool.

Outcome importance

Monitoring the level of implementation of government food policies and benchmarking against international best practice is imperative for progress towards better nutritional health and to create food environments that foster healthy living and address the specific needs of vulnerable groups. A concerted effort by policy makers to develop robust policies is necessary to reverse the trend of deterioration of our food environments and move to establishing healthier food environments for all.

Policy implications

1. With the exception of Norway, all countries had predominantly 'low' to 'very low' implementation scores for policies which directly shape food environments.
2. Priority actions proposed in all countries and the EU were divided over the sub-components of the policy and infrastructure support domains, clearly outlining the need of a comprehensive policy package covering multiple areas to improve food environments and public health nutrition and prevent obesity and diet-related NCDs.
3. Not all countries proposed actions where implementation gaps were highlighted in the compiled evidence documents.
4. Shared priority action areas across the five countries and the EU include:
 - Food price policies to increase the price of unhealthy foods and decrease the price of healthy foods;
 - Setting nutrition standards in public settings;
 - The regulation of food marketing to children;
 - Strong leadership;
5. Allocating funding and resources to health promotion and disease prevention, as well as adequate monitoring of these efforts and improvements of the food environment were also prioritized



¹Lakerveld J, Woods C, Hebestreit A, Brenner H, Flechtner-Mors M, Harrington JM, et al. Advancing the evidence base for public policies impacting on dietary behaviour, physical activity and sedentary behaviour in Europe: The Policy Evaluation Network promoting a multidisciplinary approach. Food Policy. 2020 Oct 1;96:101873.
²WHO/Europe | Obesity - Data and statistics [Internet]. [cited 2021 May 4]. Available from: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/obesity/data-and-statistics>
³Pineda E, Sanchez-Romero LM, Brown M, Jaccard A, Jewell J, Galea G, et al. Forecasting Future Trends in Obesity across Europe: The Value of Improving Surveillance. Obesity Facts. 2018 Nov 1;11(5):360–71.
⁴Naghavi M, Abajobir AA, Abbafati C, Abbas KM, Abd-Allah F, Abera SF, et al. Global, regional, and national age-sex specific mortality for 264 causes of death, 1980-2016: A systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2016. The Lancet. 2017 Sep 16;390(10100):1151–210.
⁵Turner C, Aggarwal A, Walls H, Herforth A, Drewnowski A, Coates J, et al. Concepts and critical perspectives for food environment research: A global framework with implications for action in low- and middle-income countries. Global Food Security. 2018 Sep 1;18:93–101.
⁶Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition. Food systems and diets: Facing the challenges of the 21st century. London, UK; 2016

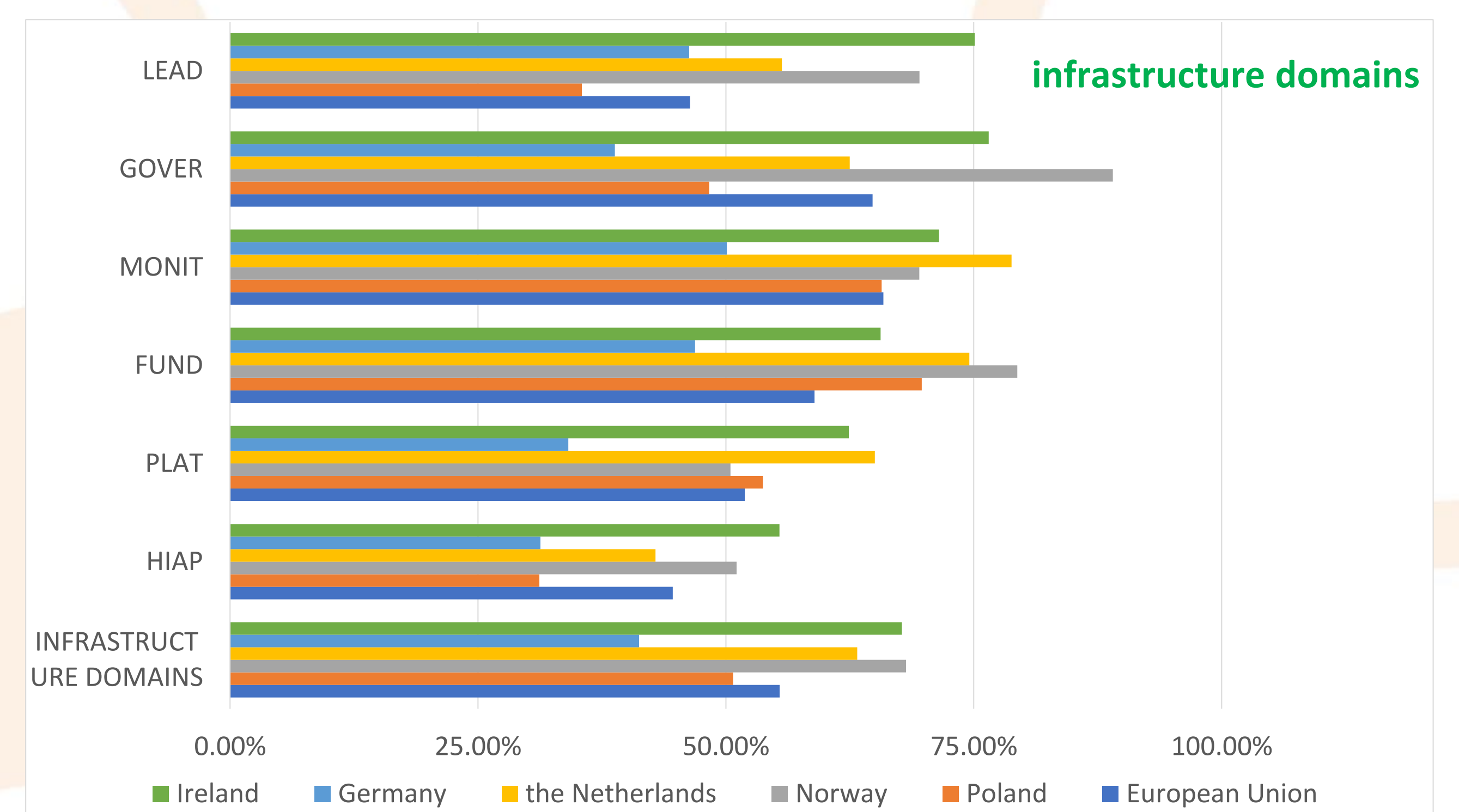
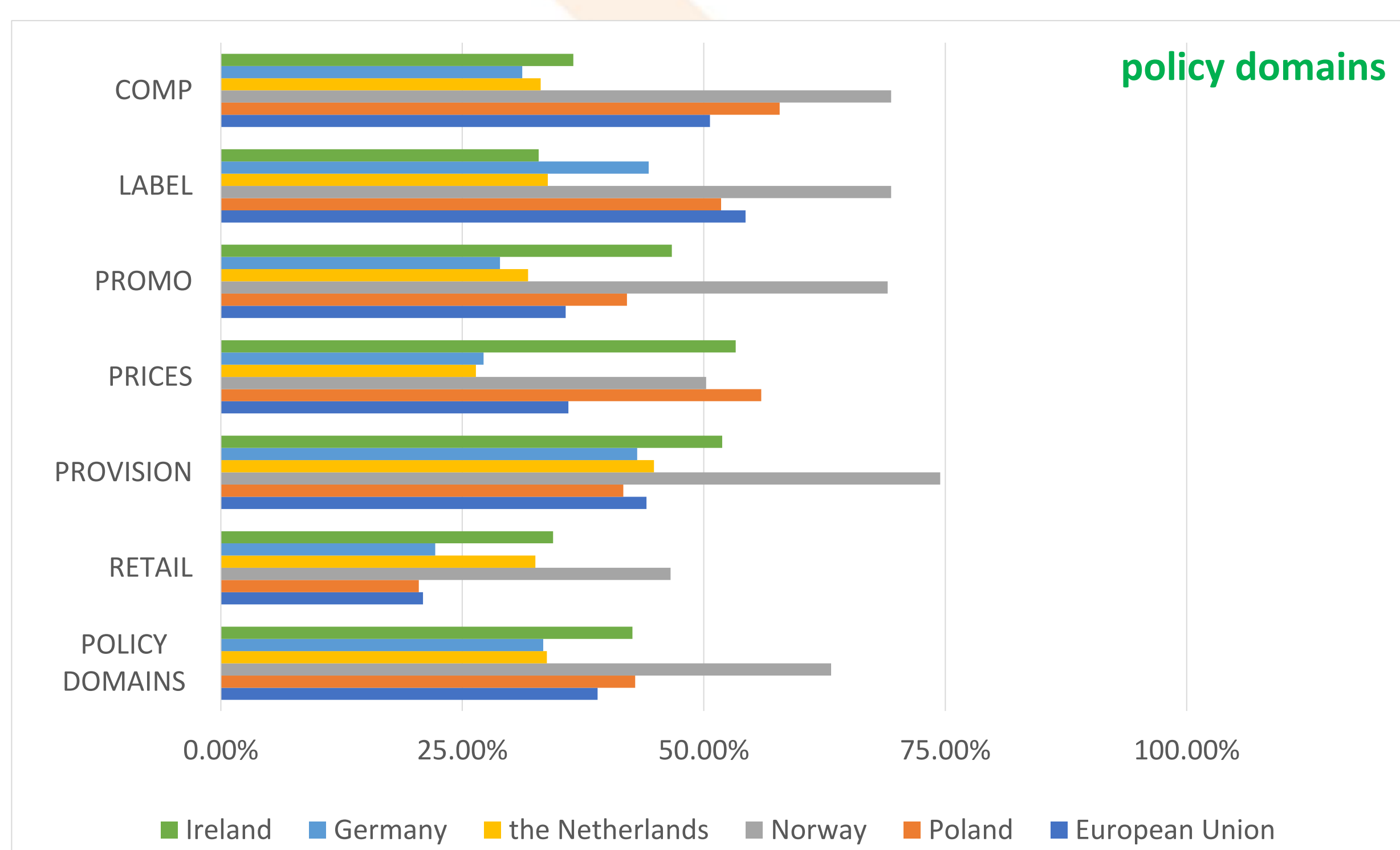
Additional Information

The Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI) aims to assess the extent of implementation of recommended food environment policies by governments compared with international best practices and prioritize actions to fill implementation gaps. The Food-EPI was applied in Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Poland, and the European Union. Expert panels (n= 17-37) benchmarked the extent of implementation of 47 policy and infrastructure support good practice indicators by their government against best practices, using an evidence document verified by government officials. In addition, experts identified and prioritized actions to address implementation gaps.

The Food-EPI score card provides a visual representation of the proportion of indicators at “very low if any,” “low,” “medium,” and “high” implementation, overall Food-EPI scores and priority actions. Moreover, top 5 recommendations across countries and the EU are outlined. Outcomes are further detailed and discussed in the corresponding manuscript.

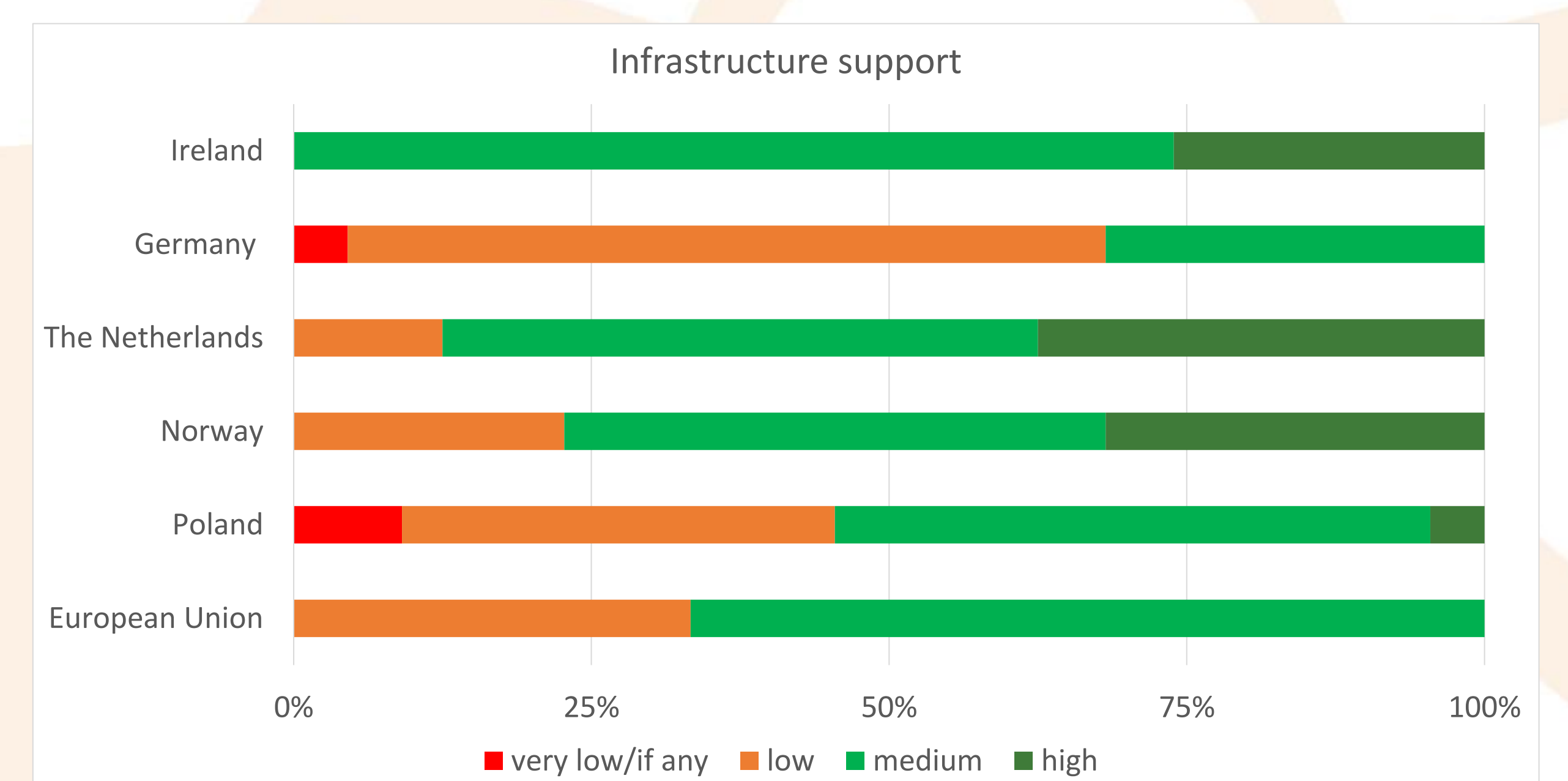
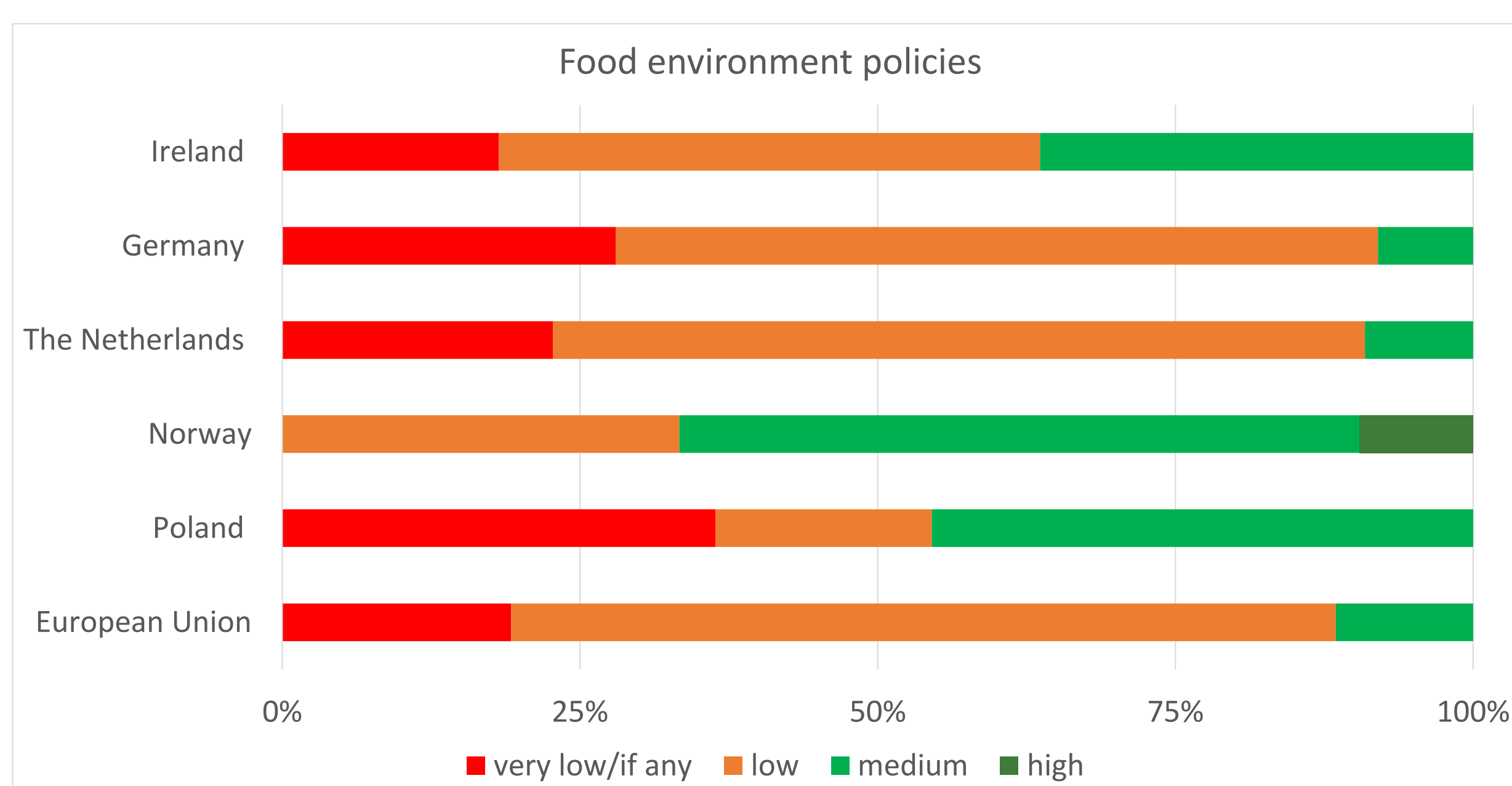
Level of policy implementation

These figures show, for policy indicators and infrastructure support indicators separately, the level of implementation in each country compared to international best practices, and 'very low if any' 'low', 'medium' or 'high' strength of the policies in the European Union.



Proportion of policy implementation

The following figures illustrate the proportion of policy (top) and infrastructure support (bottom) indicators with 'very low if any' 'low', 'medium' or 'high' implementation in each country compared to international best practices and 'very low if any' 'low', 'medium' or 'high' strength of the policies in the European Union.



Proportion actions in each Food-EPI subcomponent

These figures illustrate the number of actions in each sub-component of the policy (above) and infrastructure (bottom) domains, expressed as a proportion of the total number of actions (in brackets) prioritized in each country and the EU.

