The Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI): European Union

An assessment of EU-level policies influencing food environments and priority actions to create healthy food environments in the EU

SUMMARY

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Overweight, obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are a major public health challenge in Europe. Suboptimal diets are key contributors to increasing the risk of these diseases and thereby affect the health and economic systems of all European Member States. In addition, in most European countries socioeconomic inequalities in obesity and dietary patterns are evident.

Population diets are influenced by food environments in European Member States. Food environments are the physical (food availability, quality, marketing), economic (food prices), policy (rules and food policies) and sociocultural (norms and beliefs) surroundings, opportunities and conditions that influence people's food choices and nutritional status. Food environments do not always ensure that the healthy food option is the easiest or default option.

Government policies have the potential to support the promotion of healthy diets, empower populations to make healthier choices and reduce levels of overweight, obesity and NCDs by creating supportive food environments. Yet, little is known on how European Union (EU)-level policies affect national food environment policies in EU Member States. Also, little is known on how the EU could improve its policies to create healthy food environments in EU Member States.
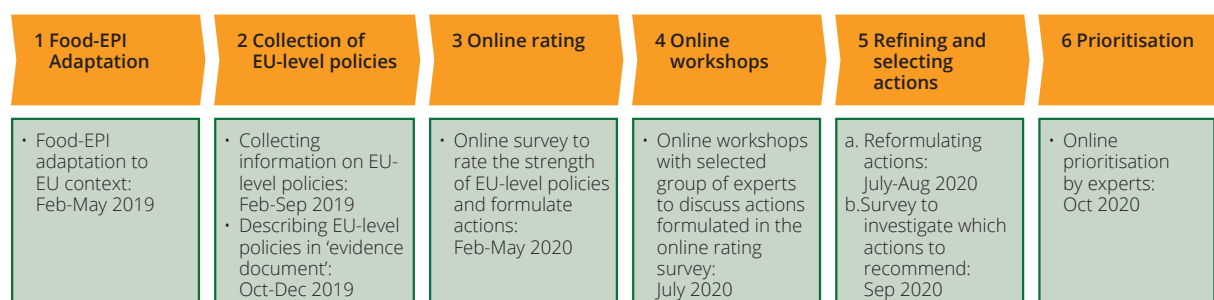
The aims of this research, applying the EU Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI), are:

1. To provide an overview of EU-level policies with a direct or indirect (potential) influence on food environments;
2. To assess the strength of EU-level policies and infrastructure support and identify implementation gaps, by non-government, independent experts;
3. To identify and prioritise policy and infrastructure support actions to create healthy food environments in the EU taking into account importance, achievability and equity, by non-government, independent experts.

Approach

This study applied the Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI), **a tool and process**, developed by the International Network for Food and Obesity/Non-communicable Diseases Research, Monitoring and Action Support (INFORMAS), to assess the strength of EU-level policies that impact on Member State food environments and identify and prioritise policy and infrastructure support actions to create healthy food environments in EU Member States.

Figure 1 *Steps of the EU Food-EPI 2019-2020 process*

1 Food-EPI Adaptation	2 Collection of EU-level policies	3 Online rating	4 Online workshops	5 Refining and selecting actions	6 Prioritisation
• Food-EPI adaptation to EU context: Feb-May 2019	• Collecting information on EU-level policies: Feb-Sep 2019 • Describing EU-level policies in 'evidence document': Oct-Dec 2019	• Online survey to rate the strength of EU-level policies and formulate actions: Feb-May 2020	• Online workshops with selected group of experts to discuss actions formulated in the online rating survey: July 2020	a. Reformulating actions: July-Aug 2020 b. Survey to investigate which actions to recommend: Sep 2020	• Online prioritisation by experts: Oct 2020

The Food-EPI **tool** includes seven policy domains that represent key aspects of food environments (food composition, food labelling, food promotion, food prices, food provision, food retail, and food trade and investment). In addition, the Food-EPI tool is comprised of six infrastructure support domains (leadership, governance, funding and resources, monitoring and intelligence, platforms for interaction and health-in-all-policies). Each domain is specified by several good practice indicators (50 in total) that encompass the directions necessary to improve the healthiness of food environments and to help prevent obesity and diet-related NCDs.

As outlined in Figure 1, the EU Food-EPI 2019-2020 is a six step **process**. In step 1 and 2, the Food-EPI was adapted to the EU context and evidence on EU-level policies was collected and verified by EU governmental officials. In step 3, independent experts assessed the strength of EU-level policies influencing food environments. In step 4 to step 6, actions for EU-level policies to create healthy food environments have been identified and prioritised.

Expert panel

The EU Food-EPI expert panel consisted of 29 independent experts, specialized in public health, nutrition, food- or health policy, obesity or chronic diseases, and working in academia, health and food organisations, health professional associations and national health institutes. For each of the 50 good practice indicators, the panel rated the strength of existing EU-level policies, using the 'evidence document', i.e. an overview of EU-level policies influencing food environments and infrastructure support that helps facilitate effective policy implementation (available via this link). This 'evidence document' was validated by EU governmental officials.

Subsequently, the experts identified in total 19 policy actions and 18 infrastructure support actions to recommend to the EU to create healthy food environments, improve population nutrition, and reduce overweight, obesity and NCDs and their related inequalities. The 19 policy actions were ranked by the experts on importance, achievability and equity. The 18 infrastructure support actions were ranked by the experts on importance and achievability.

Priority recommendations

The assessment of the strength of EU-level policies and infrastructure support by the independent, non-government experts in this study shows there is a lot of potential for the EU to improve its policies and infrastructure support influencing food environments. With respect to the policy domains, 12% of the policy indicators was rated to be 'moderate', 65% was rated to be 'weak', and 23% was rated to be 'very weak'. Regarding the infrastructure support domains, 4% of the indicators was rated as 'strong' (related to 'public access to nutrition information'), 63% was rated to be 'moderate' and 33% was rated to be 'weak'.

Based on our study, **we recommend the EU to take immediate action** on the five recommended policy actions which were prioritised highest on a combination of importance and achievability and are also most likely contributing to a reduction of socioeconomic inequalities in diet.

Figure 2 *Expert's rating of the strength of EU-level policies and infrastructure support influencing food environments in the EU*

POLICY DOMAINS		No/very weak policy	Weak policy	Moderate policy	Strong policy	Very strong policy
Domain	Indicators					
Food Com-position	Food composition targets industrially processed foods			■		
	Food composition targets meals sold from food service outlets		■			
Food Labelling	Ingredient lists and nutrient declarations			■		
	Nutrition and health claims			■		
	Front-of-pack labelling		■			
	Menu board labelling		■			
Food Promotion	Restricting unhealthy food promotion to children (broadcast media)		■			
	Restricting unhealthy food promotion to children (online and social media)		■			
	Restricting unhealthy food promotion to children (non-broadcast media)		■			
	Restricting unhealthy food promotion in settings where children gather		■			
	Restricting unhealthy food promotion to children on packaging	■				
Food Prices	Minimizing taxes or levies on healthy foods		■			
	Increasing taxes or levies on unhealthy foods	■				
	Food subsidies to favour healthy foods		■			
	Food-related income-support for healthy foods		■			
Food Provision	Policies in schools and early childhood education services provide and promote healthy food choices		■			
	Policies in other public sector settings provide and promote healthy food choices		■			
	Public procurement standards to provide and promote healthy food choices		■			
	Support and training systems (schools and other public sector organisations) to help meet the healthy food service policies and guidelines		■			
	Support and training systems (private companies) to provide and promote healthy foods and meals		■			
Food Retail	Zoning laws and policies limit quick service restaurants or other outlets selling mainly unhealthy foods	■				
	Zoning laws and policies encourage outlets selling fruit and vegetables	■				
	Support systems to promote and encourage the relative availability healthy foods in-store	■				
	Support systems to promote and encourage the relative availability healthy foods in foods service outlets	■				
Food Trade	Risk impact assessments trade and investment agreements		■			
	Measures to manage investment and protect regulatory capacity		■			

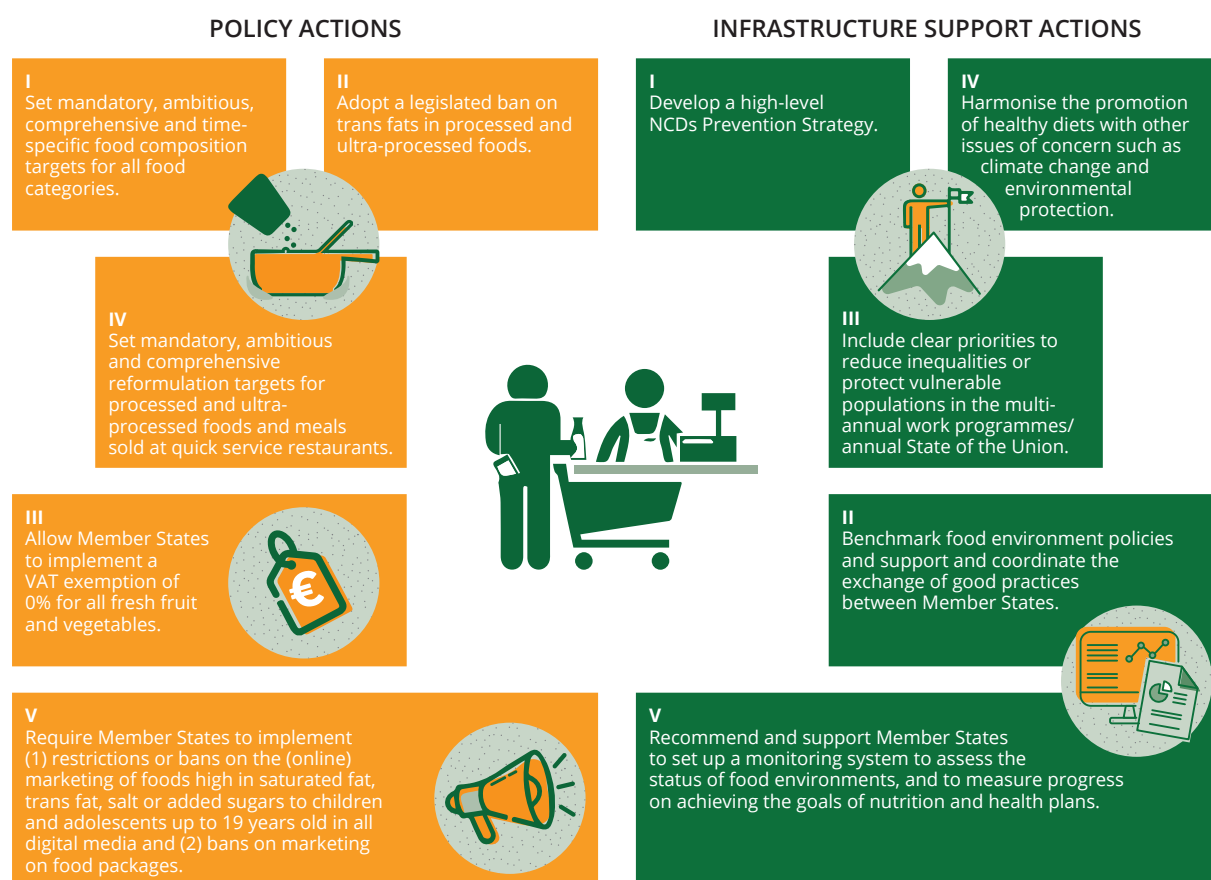| Domain	Indicators	No/very weak policy	Weak policy	Moderate policy	Strong policy	Very strong policy
Leadership	Strong visible political support			■		
Leadership	Clear population intake targets		■			
Leadership	Food-based dietary guidelines		■			
Leadership	Comprehensive implementation plan for nutrition		■			
Leadership	Priorities for reducing health inequalities or protect vulnerable populations		■			
Governance	Restricting commercial influence on policy development			■		
Governance	Use of evidence in food and nutrition policies			■		
Governance	Transparency in development of food and nutrition policies			■		
Governance	Public access to nutrition information				■	
Monitoring & Intelligence	Monitoring food environments			■		
Monitoring & Intelligence	Monitoring nutrition status and intakes			■		
Monitoring & Intelligence	Monitoring overweight and obesity			■		
Monitoring & Intelligence	Monitoring NCD risk factors and prevalence			■		
Monitoring & Intelligence	Evaluation of nutrition and health programmes & policies			■		
Monitoring & Intelligence	Monitoring progress towards reducing health inequalities or health impacts in vulnerable populations			■		
Funding & Resources	Population nutrition budget			■		
Funding & Resources	Funded research targeted for improving food environments, reducing obesity, NCDs and their related inequalities			■		
Funding & Resources	Statutory health promotion agency			■		
Platforms for Interaction	Coordination mechanisms (across departments and levels of governments)			■		
Platforms for Interaction	Platforms between government and commercial food sector		■			
Platforms for Interaction	Platforms between government and civil society		■			
Platforms for Interaction	Systems-based approach with local, national and European organisations			■		
Health in all policies	Assessing and considering public health impacts of food-related policies		■			
Health in all policies	Assessing and considering public health impacts of non-food policies		■			

These five priority policy actions (also depicted in summary in Figure 2) are:

I   Set mandatory, ambitious, comprehensive and time-specific food composition targets for added sugars, salt, and saturated fat for all food categories (including processed and ultra-processed foods) sold in EU Member States.

II   Adopt a legislated ban on trans fats (i.e. no trans-fats are allowed instead of the maximum limit of 2 grams per 100 grams of fat) in processed and ultra-processed foods sold in EU Member States.

III Allow Member States to implement a VAT exemption of 0% for all fresh fruit and vegetables and encourage Member States to implement this VAT exemption to encourage healthy food choices.

IV   Set mandatory, ambitious and comprehensive reformulation targets for added sugars, salt, and saturated fat for processed and ultra-processed foods and meals sold at quick service restaurants.

V   Require Member States to implement (1) minimum and time-based restrictions or bans on the (online) marketing of foods high in saturated fat, trans fat, salt or added sugars to children and adolescents up to 19 years old in all digital (including broadcast, online and social) media and (2) bans on food packages for marketing foods high in saturated fat, trans fat, salt or added sugars to children and adolescents up to 19 years old.

Based on this study, **we also recommend the EU to take immediate action** on the five recommended infrastructure support actions which were prioritised highest on a combination of importance and achievability. **These five priority infrastructure support actions** (also depicted in summary in Figure 2) are:

I   Develop a high-level EU Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) Prevention Strategy.

II   Benchmark food environment policies regarding food reformulation, food labelling, food marketing, food prices, food provision in public spaces and retail, and support and coordinate the exchange of good practices between Member States.

III Include clear priorities to reduce inequalities or protect vulnerable populations in the multi-annual work programmes/annual State of the Union.

IV   Harmonise the promotion of healthy diets with other issues of concern such as climate change and environmental protection.

V   Recommend and support Member States to set up a monitoring system to assess the status of food environments, and to measure progress on achieving the goals of nutrition and health plans.

Figure 2 *Priority policy and infrastructure support actions to create healthy food environments in the EU*

POLICY ACTIONS

I
Set mandatory, ambitious, comprehensive and time-specific food composition targets for all food categories.

II
Adopt a legislated ban on trans fats in processed and ultra-processed foods.

IV
Set mandatory, ambitious and comprehensive reformulation targets for processed and ultra-processed foods and meals sold at quick service restaurants.

III
Allow Member States to implement a VAT exemption of 0% for all fresh fruit and vegetables.

V
Require Member States to implement (1) restrictions or bans on the (online) marketing of foods high in saturated fat, trans fat, salt or added sugars to children and adolescents up to 19 years old in all digital media and (2) bans on marketing on food packages.

INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORT ACTIONS

I
Develop a high-level NCDs Prevention Strategy.

IV
Harmonise the promotion of healthy diets with other issues of concern such as climate change and environmental protection.

III
Include clear priorities to reduce inequalities or protect vulnerable populations in the multi-annual work programmes/annual State of the Union.

II
Benchmark food environment policies and support and coordinate the exchange of good practices between Member States.

V
Recommend and support Member States to set up a monitoring system to assess the status of food environments, and to measure progress on achieving the goals of nutrition and health plans.

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