FOOD SYSTEMS AND HEALTH POLICY SCAN 2025

Bendigo Health

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We acknowledge the First Peoples of Australia who are the Traditional Custodians of the land and water where we live, work and play. We celebrate that this is the oldest living and continuous culture in the world. We are proud to be sharing the land that we work on and recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.

We welcome all cultures, nationalities and religions. Being inclusive and providing equitable healthcare is our commitment

BENDIGO HEALTH

Purpose of the Food Systems and Health Policy Scan

A policy scan was performed to synthesise key policy documents relating to food systems and health, seeking to answer the following questions:

- How are food systems problematised within existing policy, and how do these problems relate to local food systems/environments?
- What intervention options are available at a local level?
- Who is responsible for implementation at a local level?

Working Resources

Policy analysis was completed (July 2024) using a modified version of the US Centre for Disease Control's Policy Analytical Framework

Local food-related policies were identified using the University of Sydney's Strengthening Food Systems Governance at the Local Level – Australian Local Food System Policy Database.

Key policies examined include:

- Victorian Food Systems Consensus Statement
- VicHealth Strategy 2023-2033
- Policies for tackling obesity and creating healthier food environments: Scorecard and recommended actions for the Victorian Government
- Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan (2023-2027)
- Healthy Kids Healthy Futures
- The State of Diabetes Mellitus in Australia in 2024 report
- National Obesity Strategy 2022-32
- National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2030
- Roadmap to Reshaping Australian Food Systems (CSIRO)
- Collaborative Framework for Food Systems Transformation
- Transforming food and agriculture to achieve the SDGs
- Flourish Regional Food System Framework
- North East Local Food Strategy
- Greater Bendigo Food System Strategy 2020-2030
- Cardinia Community Food Strategy and Action Plan 2018 – 26
- City of Ballarat Good Food for All

Summary of findings

There is public health consensus that simultaneous increases in diet-related disease and obesity in almost all countries seem to be driven mainly by changes in the global food system and its economic market logic. This produces more processed, affordable, and marketable foods – contributing to a passive overconsumption of energy and displacement of healthy foods from human diets.

It is asserted that our current food system is a consequence of political decisions that have created and maintained (dis)incentives that 'lock' us in to producing and consuming food in certain 'unhealthy' ways.

According to policies such as the Towards a Health, Regenerative and Equitable Food System in Victoria, A Consensus Statement, food systems can be transformed long-term by acting on policy leverage points, which in turn act to lock in (incentivise) new ways of organising food systems. These policy leverage points are distributed across levels of government, as articulated in the 2015 VicHealth Fair Foundation Framework for Healthy Eating, requiring cooperation between policy actors to generate change – often at a national or state/provincial level.

Leverage points available at a local level include:
- Transitioning all public sector food procurement and retail to preference healthy and sustainably produced food (Victorian Government Healthy Choices policies).
- Supporting local councils to lead the participatory development of community food system strategies (for example, through the VicHealth Local Government Partnership Core Module – Building Better Food Systems for Healthier Communities).
- Coordination and development of the food relief sector, seeking to improve dignified access to fresh and healthy food.

Other identified local level actions include:
- Improved urban design – making space for community food production, informing the placement of food retail, and linking food retail to public and active transport routes.
- The development of farmers markets, direct to consumer food sales, and food hubs and delivery schemes.
- Improved public housing location and quality, linking housing developments to transport plans that encourage active travel and access to fresh-food retailers.
- Implementing multicomponent whole-of-school interventions.
- Tailoring education and skill building programs to the needs of population groups.
- Focusing education campaigns on specific target foods and nutrients, delivered through multiple channels.
- Providing incentives for retail stores to sell fresh, healthy foods, and to preferentially promote these over unhealthy foods.

A search for local, regional, and state food systems strategies and plans across Australia identified 14 documents, with local government organisations authoring eight of these policies (seven of which were located in Victoria).

Examining a sample of five local area food policies across inner and outer regional Victoria, the following key actions and issues were identified, noting considerable variation between plans:

- **Public engagement:** There was evidence of extensive public consultation in the development of local food policies, although limited evidence of application of specific models or frameworks of democratic food governance.
- **Partnerships:** There is evidence of good representation from local government, health services, sustainability and food-related community groups, tourism, and natural resource management. However, there was limited evidence of participation by food retail, larger primary producers, or agribusiness.
- **A focus on developing regional economies**, particularly through tourism-related activities, extending to the creation of a local food brand or identity.
- **Intention to expand implementation of existing public health and health promotion programs**, with the intention of increasing coverage, improving implementation, and incorporating sustainability lens into food-related activities.
- **Focus on creating an enabling environment for small scale food production**, providing training for smallholders, protecting peri-urban areas for small-scale food production, providing access to required processing equipment, and providing logistical or wholesale support for movement of produce to market.
- **Support for urban gardening and food preparation**, including resourcing and training for the development of community and household gardens and the development of food sharing networks.
- **Re-directing waste** from agribusiness, small-scale producers, retailers, and households towards food relief or composting.
- **Ensuring First Nations Peoples have a role in caring for country and continuing traditional food cultivation and hunting practices**.

Implications

1. There is a need to identify an appropriate steward for food system (and food security) assessment and intervention at a local level, which to date has mostly been directed towards and taken up by local government.
2. There is scope for local and state government (funded) organisations to improve the reach and quality of implementation of food-related policies and programs, and to ensure policy coherence within their organisation.
3. The relative absence of agribusiness, food retailers, and other (powerful) commercial actors present challenges in building local agency for change. The absence of these actors in local food system action and the impact of this absence on desired outcomes should be critically examined.
4. While notions of food democracy are intimately tied to food system transformation, there are limited examples of how food democracy has been applied and realised at scale – at least within the reviewed policies. Care should be taken in identifying and applying appropriate models of democratic food governance in food system planning.