

# Healthy public policy to support healthy and equitable eating: the HE<sup>2</sup> project

**The project:** A systems approach to healthy and equitable eating

**Project lead:** Professor Sharon Friel, Australian National University

**Project start:** October 2014 **Project end:** January 2018

## Key messages

- Typically, the lower people's socio-economic status, the more likely they are to eat a poor diet and be at greater risk of chronic disease
- We studied how inequities in societal factors influence healthy eating – both within the food system (for example, price, availability of food, the quality of the food supply) and outside the food system (for example, transport, housing and the built environment, and employment)
- We used a systems approach, bringing together Australian academics, policy makers, and practitioners working in the field of public health and public health nutrition to identify the social determinants of inequities in healthy eating
- Based on our findings, we developed a systems-based framework to show the interconnections between different policy areas, and tested the framework using Australian federal and state government policies
- Our framework provides governments with plausible intersectoral policy actions that have potential to advance public health nutrition equitably
- Action is needed across a range of policy areas (including health, housing, education, social and urban planning) to address inequities in healthy eating. Currently, there is little government attention outside of the health sector.



## Why is this issue important?

Typically, the lower people's socio-economic status, the more likely they are to eat a poor diet and be at greater risk of chronic disease.

What people eat is influenced by the availability, affordability, physical accessibility and acceptability of different foods. Their dietary behaviours are also a response to the daily living conditions in which they are born, live, learn, work and age – the social determinants of healthy eating.

To prevent diet-related chronic diseases and obesity, we need policy action that addresses these many interacting factors that influence what people eat.

This was the first study in Australia to examine inequities in diet from a systems perspective – that is, how the entire system influences what people eat. Our aim was to inform policy development and implementation across a range of policy areas that affect diet, including health, education, social and urban planning.

## What did we do?

- We undertook collaborative conceptual modelling workshops with an expert group of representatives from government, non-government and health organisations and academia which focused on the development of a causal loop diagram illustrating the interconnected drivers of inequities in healthy eating
- Based on the diagram, we developed a systems-based policy framework to suggest plausible policy actions that could be taken to improve healthy and equitable eating across seven policy domains
- We refined the framework with input from policy partners in the ACT and NSW government, which ensured a level of "real world" applicability and feasibility for our framework.

## What did we find?

We identified seven policy sub-systems that influence people's healthy food consumption and its social distribution:

1. Housing
2. Social protection
3. Employment
4. Education
5. Transport
6. Planning
7. Food system and environment.

We showed that inequities in healthy eating are influenced by all the sub-systems and that they all influence each other. For example, employment not only influences healthy eating but can also influence transport options and access to healthy food environments.

Using a systems approach can help identify key leverage points to more effectively address inequities in healthy eating: the HE<sup>2</sup> Framework.

# The HE<sup>2</sup> Framework

## 7. Food system and environment

Policies for coherent, nutrition-focused equity goals across sectors to improve levels of availability, accessibility, affordability, and acceptability of healthy foods.



## 6. Planning

Planning policies to support the availability and accessibility of healthy foods and limit the availability of unhealthy foods in communities.



## 5. Transport

Transport policies to support accessibility needs of all citizens; subsidise travel fares for those on low incomes or with disabilities; freight subsidies for fresh produce.



## 1. Housing

Minimum standards and pricing structures for public housing and new developments to ensure that housing that promotes healthy food environments is affordable.



## 2. Social protection

Policies to improve the conditions that perpetuate poor nutrition among disadvantaged groups, ensuring that people can afford to buy healthy food and that guidelines exist that promote healthy food provision within the emergency food sector.



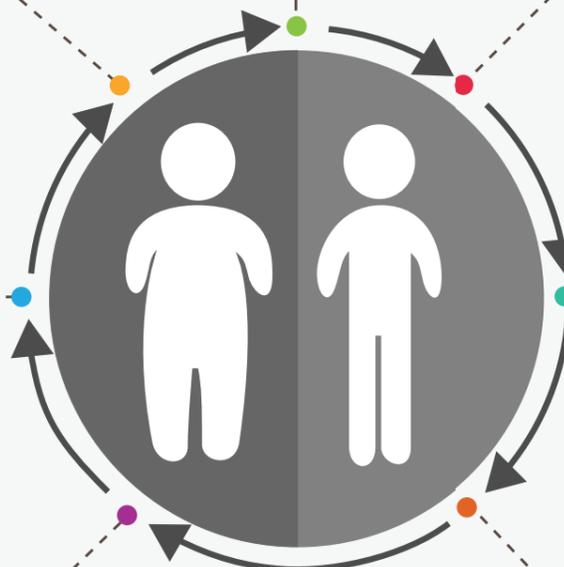
## 3. Employment

Policies to ensure access to employment/income, with comprehensive and flexible workplace policies so people are supported to make healthy food choices at work and outside.



## 4. Education

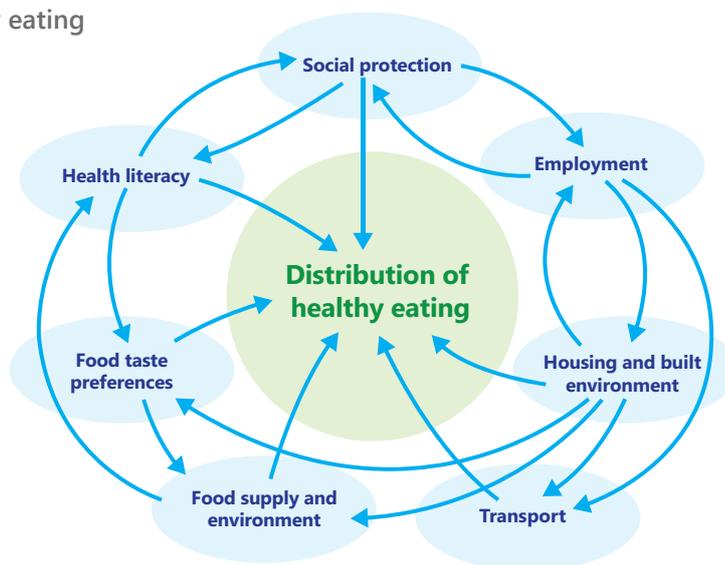
Nutrition literacy for children and families; resources to equip children to stay in the education system as long as possible.



## What did we produce?

- A causal loop diagram visualising the interconnected drivers of inequities in healthy eating (see below)
- A systems-based policy framework to address healthy and equitable diets
- Two academic papers:
  - Friel S, Pescud M, Malbon E, Lee A, Carter R, Greenfield G, Cobcroft M, Potter J, Rychetnik L, Meertens B. Using systems science to understand the determinants of inequities in healthy eating. PLOS One. 2017;12(11):e0188872. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0188872. eCollection 2017
  - Pescud M, Friel S, Lee A, Sacks G. Extending the paradigm: a policy framework for healthy and equitable eating (HE<sup>2</sup>). Public Health Nutr 2018; doi 10.1017/S1368980018002082
- Five publications
- Two World Congress on Public Health conference presentations
- One presentation to Lancet Commission on Obesity on using Systems Approaches
- One policy brief for the ACT Government
- Two systems mapping workshops with ACT Government policy makers
- One presentation to the CRE Social Determinants of Health Equity in Adelaide
- One presentation to the Rockefeller Bellagio Conference on systems approaches to inequities in health.

## Drivers of inequities in healthy eating



## Why does it matter?

This project was the first attempt in Australia to understand from a complex systems perspective how individual and societal level factors interact in a dynamic way to influence healthy and equitable eating. It highlighted that we need to look beyond the food system to address inequities in healthy eating: action is needed from all areas of government.

The framework provides plausible policy actions across each of the HE<sup>2</sup> policy domains that have potential to advance public health nutrition equitably. Our ultimate goal is to generate a movement for global action to help reduce inequities in healthy eating outside of, and in addition to, the food environment.

Our innovative methods have offered a new way of thinking – that inequity in healthy eating arises from a complex adaptive system – and have demonstrated the value of using a systems approach to create a model for complex problems. Our participatory approach was useful in engaging policy actors across a range of domains, and in building capacity for this work in Australia.

As a result of our workshops, the participants started to think about policies and interventions that they might otherwise not have. Bringing together the range of experts in the field of healthy eating enabled the identification of many connections between many factors that influence equity in healthy eating. It allowed us to engage people from across government departments – a critical first step in tackling the complex, systems-wide issue of inequities in healthy eating.

## Next steps

A key next step will be to engage with a broader range of key stakeholders and decision makers across housing, social protection, employment, education, transport, planning, and the food system and environment. We want to gain a better understanding of their different missions, values and sectoral goals so we can identify mutually beneficial ways of creating change in these areas.

The HE<sup>2</sup> Framework also provides an opportunity for future work to benchmark and rate intersectoral policy actions.



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### The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre

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### Contact us:

Tel: (02) 9188 9520

Email: [preventioncentre@saxinstitute.org.au](mailto:preventioncentre@saxinstitute.org.au)

Website: [preventioncentre.org.au](http://preventioncentre.org.au)

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