



WHY DO WE NEED A FOOD POLICY?

Food is life; it fuels everything we do and we cannot survive without it

Food has an impact on the health of people, the health of the environment and on basic human rights, yet we have paid little attention to the sustainability or fairness of the systems that deliver food to us in the shops and supermarkets.

Food is big business. The industry is huge, involving a multitude of interests from producer to consumer. Food is therefore also one of the greatest contemporary actors on the political stage.

Community concern about the food system

There is growing community concern about the cracks appearing in the food chain, and the lack of planning for our future food security. These concerns are being voiced by a diversity of stakeholders including environmentalists, farmers, health workers and human rights organisations, encompassing issues as diverse as food prices, food additives and new technologies, reduced competition in the retail food industry, soil depletion, food miles, the effects of climate change and the impact of urban sprawl on access to fresh local food.

Although food in Australia is cheaper today than it has been for most of the past two centuries, more than a million Australians - many of them children - experience regular food insecurity and do not get enough to eat. There is also mounting scientific evidence to show that cheap foods high in fat and sugar are contributing to the rapid increase in chronic conditions such as Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers. These threaten to shorten the lifespan of future generations and will impose significant health-care costs.

Global food security

In 2008 soaring global food prices linked to the demand for biofuels, crop failures and speculation in food commodity markets sparked deadly riots and export bans across the world, raising the spectre of a worldwide food crisis. It was a wake-up call to the international community. It has been estimated that in the next 50 years, the world will need to produce as much food as has been produced throughout human history.

Governments are realising that today's food systems will not be able to meet the basic food needs of the future global population.

What is happening in Australia?

Australia is not immune to global food shocks and the factors causing them. Climate change poses unknown threats to agricultural production here, as well as overseas. Already the Murray-Darling Basin, which for decades has produced a third of Australia's food supply, is almost on its knees due to water shortages. So too, demand for land for housing is putting the squeeze on agricultural land in the Sydney Basin.

'It is highly likely that diets will be reshaped by the need to lower food's climate change and water impact. These two considerations alone might well alter current dietary advice and which foods are produced and distributed.'

What can we do about future food security?

As a community, we need to seriously reconsider the value we ascribe to food – how it is produced; what is done to it before we eat it; how much of it we waste; how good is it for our health?

Across Australia local groups and networks are forming to actively address these issues in their own communities.

The Sydney Food Fairness Alliance (SFFA) believes that these local initiatives need to be supported, and supplemented by comprehensive and integrated planning to address future food security. The SFFA advocates for the development of a NSW food policy through the joint efforts of community, government and business.

While food policies can't prevent or fix all of the problems, they can provide frameworks and strategies to develop and maintain food systems that deliver nutritious food, are genuinely equitable and, importantly, are sustainable.



Urban agriculture in Sydney

What is a food policy?

'One everyday answer to the question "what is food policy" is that food policy is to food what economic policy is to economics, foreign policy is to foreign affairs and social policy is to the shaping of society.'

A food policy is a plan of action to meet a society's food and nutrition needs. Food policies can operate from the local scale to the global, and have been developed in local councils (Maribyrnong Victoria 2002, City of South Sydney 1995), large cities (London and New York), as well as at the national level (Norway and Scotland).

Ideally, a comprehensive food policy should guide decision-making on all aspects of the food system, from farm to plate and beyond. This would include the many components of the food chain, such as provision for agricultural land and production, ensuring adequate returns to growers and maintenance of agricultural knowledge and skills, systems for food processing, packaging, distribution, consumption and disposal, as well as their impacts on the environment. It would also consider the science of food including new technologies such as genetically modified food and nanotechnology, the use of additives and preservatives, food labelling and advertising. Finally a comprehensive food policy would address social justice issues with strategies to mitigate the impact of poverty on food access, and on consequent short- and long-term health effects.

'Food policy has to address the triple challenge of health, environment and social justice, or it is nothing.'

Does Australia have a food policy?

There is no formal, comprehensive national food policy for Australia.

Current food policies in Australia are limited to regulatory frameworks such as food safety and biosecurity; and are found piecemeal across several different departments.

These include:

- **Food safety and standards:** Australian Department of Health & Ageing
These regulations ensure that food is safe to eat, not necessarily healthy to eat, nor that everyone has enough to eat, nor that enough is being done to ensure long-term food security.
- **Health policies:** Australian Department of Health & Ageing
Cover nutrition and health education, prevention of chronic disease.
There are also agricultural policies, trade and foreign affairs policies and environmental policies all of which concern food systems.

Who should be involved in developing food policy?

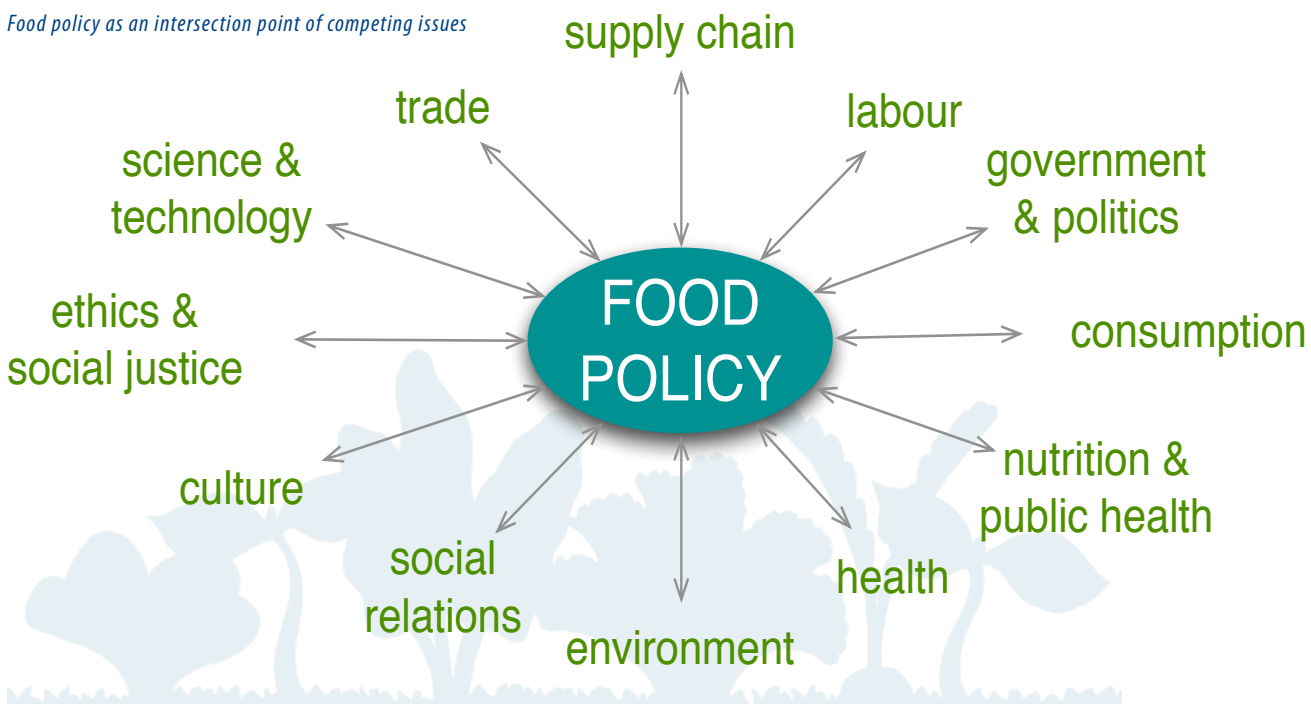
It is not uncommon for a dozen or more government departments to have some involvement in a comprehensive food policy, making it a highly complex area of policy to devise and implement. There may be competing priorities between departments, for example requirements of land for new housing versus need to retain land for farming. An environment department might strongly disagree with both agricultural and planning departments.

It goes without saying that the food industry has a role in developing sustainable food policies, as does the education sector, in order to plan for relevant skills development and retention.

NGOs like Oxfam, World Vision and the Red Cross can influence food policy at local, regional, national and global scales. Through media campaigns and political lobbying, they can exert significant influence on government policy and on industry. Campaigns against battery hens, trans fats in foods, GM crops and powdered milk donations to developing countries are examples of such influence.

Community groups also have a part to play in developing food policy that responds to local needs and opportunities, and supports flexible and innovative approaches to all aspects of the food system. The figure below illustrates the complexity of food policy.

Food policy as an intersection point of competing issues

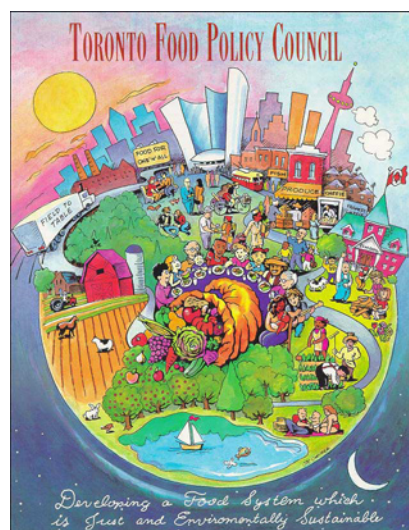


FOOD POLICY

Attempts to forge a national food policy to date have focused on increasing Australia's food system productivity and competitiveness in international markets, but have not included local food security.

A 2009 Senate committee undertook an Inquiry into Food Production in Australia that aimed to find out how to produce food that is affordable to consumers, viable for farmers to produce, and is environmentally sustainable. This committee was due to report on November 27, 2009.

'In the absence of explicit government policy, economics and the role of the consumer have become the central drivers of an implicit food policy. This unwritten food policy fails to deal with food system issues such as over- and under-consumption, the environment and public health.'



Do any state or territory governments have a food policy?

Not as yet. Victoria is the most advanced in seeking to formulate a 'joined-up' whole-of-government food policy that addresses health, environment and social justice.

In most jurisdictions, food policy is principally the remit of the departments of health (the nutrition/disease/consumption aspects of food) and agriculture/industry and trade (the production, processing and selling of food).

In NSW, primary responsibility for food policy lies with the NSW Food Authority (part of the new super-ministry, Industry & Investment NSW) and its focus is on food regulation and consumer education. The Department of Planning has a role to play in state food systems insofar as it is responsible for policies like the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy, which has to juggle demand for land releases for new housing and industry with the protection of existing agricultural land.

Why has food policy been neglected?

- Most people take the current food system for granted and don't question or challenge it until forced to do so by crises like drought, climate change, rising prices and food-related scares like 'mad cow' disease. This means there has been little upwards pressure on politicians to act.
- Governments have generally been reluctant to intervene in determining individuals' food choices, preferring to let markets prevail and consumers make their own decisions.
- Politically, food policy may be in the 'too-hard basket', given the need for cross-departmental co-operation, as well as inter-departmental competition for resources.

Does anyone have a food policy? CAN FOOD POLICIES BE USEFUL?

Over the last few years, local and national governments around the world have started to develop food policies. The recent burst of activity has been driven by community concerns about the many food-related issues confronting us, including: ill-health due to poor nutrition, diminishing agricultural lands near cities, climate change and consumers' growing mistrust of industrialised food systems.

The following are examples of recently developed food policies.

BRITAIN:

- **Scottish Government:**
Recipe for Success (2009) Focuses on health and maintaining a strong, sustainable food industry in Scotland. Widely consulted throughout Scotland in 2008.
- **City of London:**
Healthy and Sustainable Food for London (2006) Focuses on health of its citizens, maintaining London's attraction as culinary Mecca, the food system's contribution to climate change, reducing food waste.
- **British Government:**
Food Matters: towards a strategy for the 21st century (2008) Focuses on a future food system that is economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. Final report due by October 2009.

NORTH AMERICA:

- **New York State Council on Food Policy (2007):** Acknowledges the importance of agriculture to state's economy; focuses on nutrition, health, local and organic food.
- **Toronto Food Policy Council (established 1991):** Focuses on food security and environmental health. Its 1991 food charter set a food security benchmark for local governments throughout the developed world.
- **City of Vancouver Food Charter (2007):** Focuses on local food production and the right of all citizens to nutritious food.

What is a food charter?

A food charter is a community-generated declaration. It is based on key principles such as that all citizens have a right to access affordable, nutritious, culturally appropriate food at all times. Charters are usually drawn up by groups of individuals, with broad community consultation and are intended to inform good policy-making on food issues, from production through to consumption.

The Sydney Food Fairness Alliance has been working to develop such a declaration during 2009, through a series of public forums held in Central Sydney, Blue Mountains, Illawarra, Central Coast and Macarthur.

TORONTO FOOD CHARTER

*Food and Hunger Committee Phase II Report,
December 2000*

In 1976, Canada signed the United Nations Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, which includes "the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger." The City of Toronto supports our national commitment to food security, and the following beliefs:

Every Toronto resident should have access to an adequate supply of nutritious, affordable and culturally-appropriate food.

Food security contributes to the health and well-being of residents while reducing their need for medical care.

Food is central to Toronto's economy, and the commitment to food security can strengthen the food sector's growth and development.

Food brings people together in celebrations of community and diversity and is an important part of the city's culture.

Have food policies/charters made an impact?

The Toronto Food Policy Council published a 10-year evaluation in 2001. Among its achievements it lists:

- initiating a 'Buy Ontario' food program to encourage public hospitals to procure food supplies locally
- initiating farmers' markets in the city
- developing a plan for how Toronto could produce 25% of its fruits and vegetables, within the city limits, by 2025
- helping community groups to raise millions of dollars for affordable, nourishing food projects
- contributing towards a seven-fold increase in school food programs
- helping to more than double the number of community gardens in the city.

In today's fast-paced, urbanised world, a return to growing and raising one's own food is not a realistic option for most people. That should not prevent us trying, individually or in our communities. Toronto's experience shows that alternatives to buying industrially produced food in a supermarket can improve nutrition, especially for the more vulnerable members of society, can generate local jobs in food production, educate children about the true value of food and make inroads into creating sustainable, equitable, food systems.

The SFFA believes that a comprehensive approach to future food systems would incorporate support for local initiatives alongside improved strategic planning to manage and maximize the resources of land, water, and soil to guarantee food into the future.

A first step in this direction could be the establishment of a Food Policy Council for NSW with members drawn from government, business and community.

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