Building healthier food systems

The Food, Environment, and Health (FEH) program supports evidence, innovations, and policies to improve health and prevent chronic diseases through healthier food systems in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

We are enabling leadership and change for:
- Policies for healthier food environments
- Community healthy food initiatives
- Reducing salt, sugar, and fat
- Food marketing and labelling

Policies for healthier food environments

Food policies and regulations influence the affordability, availability, accessibility, and diversity of healthy foods and shape food choices made by consumers.

IDRC-supported research is contributing to fiscal and policy solutions:

In the Caribbean, researchers are helping health ministers and heads of state from across the region to sustain, improve, and advance regional policy commitments to prevent and reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases.

In Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand, researchers are investigating government and food industry policies and their impact on promoting healthy diets. Their work will improve understanding of the successes and failures of current policies, and it will inform the development of healthier and more sustainable food policies.

In Chile and Mexico, evidence from the first ever systematic evaluation and comparison of food environments and policies in developing countries is helping benchmark and compare the impact of government and private sector action. Results on progress and recommendations for improvement will be shared directly with government and private sectors, and made publicly available.

Community healthy food initiatives

Poor dietary consumption is associated with adverse health outcomes and the risk of food-related chronic diseases.

IDRC-supported research is exploring and testing market and community innovations with population-wide impacts:

In Peru, researchers demonstrated the feasibility and economic viability of including more fruit and vegetables in lunches served by Comedores Populares — community kitchens that provide more than 500,000 meals weekly to low-income individuals.

In Ecuador, research is helping to develop an understanding of how civil society-led marketing campaigns and citizen action can help government agri-food policies and programs, as well as families and neighbourhoods from all socio-economic sectors, tackle pressing food-related chronic diseases and associated social and environmental concerns.

In Bangladesh, low vegetable and fruit intake has been identified as a major risk factor for the rise in non-communicable diseases. To promote healthy diets, researchers are reaching at least 1 million consumers with messages about the nutritional value of indigenous vegetables and providing training to 28,000 smallholder farmers to meet consumer demand for indigenous vegetables.
Reducing salt, sugar, and fat

High salt, sugar, and fat intake is associated with increased risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and stroke.

IDRC is contributing to efforts to reduce salt, sugar, and fat:

In Costa Rica, salt reduction targets were established based on research results. Costa Rica is now leading a consortium of five Latin American countries to conduct research to implement and evaluate the expansion and scaling-up of current and future salt reduction programs. The salt content of packaged foods and street food is being assessed and compared against national and regional sodium reduction targets, with the goal of improving policies and diets for reduced salt consumption.

Influential research helped provide the evidence for a new sugar-sweetened beverage taxation in South Africa, announced by the finance minister in his 2016 budget speech.

Scientific evidence helped inform and influence salt and trans-fatty acid (TFA) policies in Argentina. The policies were passed into law in 2014, positioning Argentina as food policy regional leader in salt and TFA reduction.

Food marketing and labelling

Food marketing and labelling used on high-energy, low-nutrient, prepackaged foods has been recognized as a substantial driver of obesity and other related non-communicable diseases in LMICs.

IDRC-supported research is improving food marketing and labelling practices:

In Peru, research about the impact of TV food marketing on unhealthy eating behaviours influenced the government to pass a new law. In 2013, a law regulating food marketing to children and adolescents was passed as part of efforts to reduce and control the rise of cardiovascular diseases.

In Guatemala, research has proved that the use of licensed characters, such as cartoon characters, on food labels affects a consumer’s buying choice and eating patterns. With this scientific evidence, the national Chronic Disease Commission has expressed interest in taking action on current marketing techniques that target children.

The Brazilian Institute for Consumer Defense (IDEC) has identified barriers and opportunities for improved regulation of unhealthy food marketing. Their efforts will particularly target adolescents and children, in the interest of improving Brazilian policies to regulate the promotion of unhealthy packaged and prepared food.