

Industry involvement in nutrition policymaking and agenda setting

HFSA Policy Position Statement

Date adopted: March 2nd 2021

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Key Message:

Policymaking should be conducted by national, state, and council level governments or non-governmental organisations with expertise in the area and no conflicts of interest. Whilst the food industry (and their representative organisations) should be appraised of any policies that may affect their business, they should not have a role in the development of policy itself. This is because the interests of the food industry include profit and revenue growth and thus can lead to conflicts regarding public interests of health, sustainability and equity. Thus, nutrition and food policy (as well as monitoring and evaluation) should be a transparent and publicly accessible process, devoid of industry involvement.

Values: Healthy Food Systems Australia (HFSA) takes a strong stance on industry involvement in nutrition policymaking and agenda setting – including in scientific and knowledge development. HFSA affirms that:

1. The food industry - from farming, processing, manufacturing, marketing, and peak representative bodies – should have no mandate or place at the table in relation to policymaking for public health nutrition or development of nutrition and food policy science and knowledge in Australia.
2. Policymaking for nutrition should be solely made in the public interest, and actors who are responsible for public interest should take the lead (i.e. government). The government should have sole authority in both regulation and surrounding activities to protect and promote health and safety of the community and the environment.
3. The involvement of the industry in policymaking can lead to policy development that is biased towards the interests of industry and prioritises a favourable industry environment over public interest. Examples of such policies include industry self-regulation, nutrient-focused policy, as well as the absence of health and environmental policies that may threaten profits of these companies.

Background and evidence:

Food and nutrition policy should uphold population health and environmental wellbeing as its top priority. As elected bodies, government development of policy should be free of undue influence by actors whose priority lies in profit development. The involvement of the food industry in policy

development therefore presents a clear conflict of interest. Specifically, a conflict between that of private interest (e.g., profit and sales growth) and public interest (e.g., public health, environmental wellbeing, safe and equitable food systems), may lead to barriers in creating and implementing effective and evidence-based policy (1).

The food industry, whilst may publicly claim to be aligned with public health goals, has historically worked to shape government policy (both directly and indirectly) to create a favourable environment for their business interests (2). This has manifested in several ways – from financial incentives; policy substitution; and destabilisation of policymaking (2). For example, the food industry regularly advocates for self-regulation (such as setting its own monitoring standards) as a means for achieving better public health outcomes. However, this merely gives the *appearance* of being aligned with the public good, and in Australia, has consistently fallen short of actually achieving their purported aims (3).

Furthermore, the involvement of the food industry with policy development at the level of government and/or organisational agencies can lead to the undermining of public trust and confidence in the independence and objectivity of these bodies due to the potential compromising of integrity (4). This can hold true both with actual conflicts of interest and perceived conflicts (4). Evidence demonstrates that these conflicts are more likely to arise when the driving concerns of an external actor (e.g. food industry) is related to the product of policy interest (1).

HFSA advocates that:

1. All food and nutrition policy development should be led by federal, state, and council level government, with input from public health nutrition organisations or non-governmental organisations with expertise in areas with no conflicts of interest, without solicitation from the food industry or peak body representatives.
2. Policymaking should be aligned with World Health Organization technical guidance around managing conflicts of interest (1).
3. The monitoring and evaluation of existing food and nutrition policies, where the outcome of such processes may affect the commercial interests of the food industry, should not involve any food industry representatives.
4. Food and nutrition policymaking and consultation should be a transparent process that is fully visible to the public (of whom is primarily affected by said policies)
5. The food industry may be consulted regarding the implementation of policy initiatives that affect them (rather than in the decision-making process); however, this process must also be transparent and visible to the public.

6. The food industry should be barred from lobbying or providing political donations to all levels of government. Any visits to members of government by the food industry should be made public.
7. The food industry should be barred from funding or sponsoring groups or committees that are developing food policy.

REFERENCES

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