

WN Feedback

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Sick societies. Informas

Measuring the drivers of obesity, disease, health and well-being



Bellagio, Como, Italy. First Informas meeting. November 2012. Above: David Sanders, Tim Lobstein. Mike Rayner, Justin Macmullan, Bruce Neal, Wendy Snowden, Stefanie Vandevijvere, Jixiang Ma, Sharon Friel, Mary L'Abbé, Chris Walker, Bridget Kelly. Below: Carlos Monteiro, Simon Barquera, Francesco Branca, Janice Albert, Shiriki Kumanyika, Boyd Swinburn (in the shades), Gary Sacks, Amanda Lee, Sailesh Mobaen, Godfrey Xuereb, Corinna Hawkes

Boyd Swinburn and Stefanie Vandevijvere write:

We write here to bring *WN* readers up to date with the progress of the INFORMAS (International Network for Food, Obesity and Non-Communicable Diseases Research, Monitoring and Action Support) initiative.

This letter updates your information first published about INFORMAS in January 2013, after our launch at the Rockefeller Center at Bellagio, on the shore of Lake Como, Italy, in November 2012. Our founding group is in the picture above.

For new readers, here is who we are, what we do, and why. Here are some of the questions that have concerned us and colleagues worldwide for many years now. How does the relative healthiness of food environments compare across countries? What is the extent of implementation of policies and actions by governments and the food industry to reduce obesity and diet-related chronic non-communicable diseases in different countries? Which policies or combination of policies are most effective to reduce obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases? How can health professionals better communicate about the relative healthiness of food environments and policies, to trigger effective action and better support advocacy efforts of national and global non-government civil society organisations?

The Bellagio launch

In the light of these important questions and a great ambition and urgency to address and to answer them, we launched INFORMAS at the Bellagio meeting (1,2). It is now an expanding network of public interest civil society organisations and researchers, whose purpose is to monitor, benchmark and support public and private sector actions to create healthy food environments and to reduce obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases and their related inequities. From the start INFORMAS has been and remains supported by the World Health Organization and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. Its partners also include a range of international professional and public interest organisations including Consumers International, the World Obesity Federation, and World Cancer Research Fund International.

A rapidly increased amount of recent research has shown that unhealthy diets globally are driven by the increasing availability of inexpensive, energy-dense, nutrient-poor and heavily promoted ultra-processed food products (3). Despite this, impressive evidence, it is predominantly consumers rather than governments or the food manufacturers and caterers that are held accountable for what is now the pandemic of obesity and soaring rates of diabetes.

The global non-communicable disease monitoring system instituted by WHO only includes two 'upstream' indicators on food environments. Upstream indicators, which relate to food environments as a whole, are however more responsive to policy changes than downstream indicators such as death rates. Up to now though, these broader determinants have not been effectively measured. To influence and persuade policy-makers and decision-takers, indicators need to be robust and set out comparatively, so that a country's policy efforts (such as on food marketing to children or on sodium in food supplies) can be reliably compared with international best practice. This is what INFORMAS is set up to do – to monitor and compare food environments and policies in a standardised way.



Pakiri Beach, New Zealand. Informas meeting held in March 2014 Upper row: Mike Rayner, Simon Barquera, Amanda Lee, Wendy Snowdon, Bruce Neal, Clare Dominick, Jillian Wate Middle: Bridget Kelly, Cliona Ni Mhurchu, Gary Sacks, Boyd Swinburn (in the shades), and then Tim Lobstein, Sally Mackay, Wilasinee Aduhyanon, and Mary L'Abbe. Lower row from the left are Shiriki Kumanyika, Visith Chavasit, Sirinya Phulkerd, Michelle Crino, Melissa Mialon, Thaksaphon Thamarangsi, Anandita Devi, Jane Landon, Sharon Friel, Stefanie Vandevijvere

Since our launch, we have made great progress on a range of issues, and we hope that public health nutrition researchers will be stimulated to consider undertaking INFORMAS surveys of food environments in their countries

The Pakiri Beach follow-up

We held a follow-up meeting this March at Pakiri Beach, New Zealand. Those present are shown above. A 14-paper open access supplement in *Obesity Reviews* (2) outlines the monitoring frameworks and indicators for the INFORMAS modules. These are:

- Government policies
- Private sector actions
- Food composition
- Food labelling
- Food promotion
- Food in public sector settings
- Food retail
- Food prices
- Food in trade and investment agreements

A wide range of countries are currently actively involved in INFORMAS. These include New Zealand, Australia, the UK, Canada, Fiji, Thailand, South Africa,

Mexico, Chile, Brazil and Guatemala. New Zealand is the first country in the world undertaking a full national survey to measure its food environments and policies as a baseline for future monitoring and research. To help other countries to follow this example and contribute to the global database on food environments and policies, design and methods for such a national survey have been published open access (4)

INFORMAS' Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (FOOD-EPI)(2) has now been applied in New Zealand. This is the first comprehensive assessment of the extent of implementation of national food policies. Thailand and Fiji are following, and other countries have shown interest in this tool and process. In New Zealand, an expert panel of 52 public health experts, with representatives from medical associations and other non-governmental organisations, have rated the extent of implementation of policies on food environments and infrastructure support by the New Zealand government against international best practice. Their ratings for each of the 42 good practice indicators were informed by documented evidence, validated by government officials and by international best practice.

Based on the implementation gaps identified, the experts have recommended concrete actions to the New Zealand government and identified seven of these for immediate implementation. The methods and the scorecard of the New Zealand Food-EPI study are now published online(5). Measurement and comparison with best practice using these indicators shows where policy actions are mostly needed.

Our aspirations

The aspiration of INFORMAS is to improve food environments and to reduce obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases, by:

- Identifying international best practice public and private sector policies and actions, and indicators of the healthiness of key aspects of food environments.
- Measuring progress towards achieving these best standards, including trends over time and comparisons between countries.
- Creating an open-access global database for research into the determinants of obesity and related diseases and for evaluating the impact of policy solutions.
- Promoting accountability of the public and private sectors for their actions, and building research capacity in low and middle income countries
- Contributing to global work on monitoring diet-related non-communicable diseases, complementing the work of WHO.

Our purpose is to increase the accountability of governments and the private sector through regular, direct evidence on their levels of action or inaction and the comparative states of health of the national food environments they are creating. This is powerful. It attracts attention of decision-makers and has already changed policies and practices concerning breastfeeding, alcohol and tobacco (6-8).

With time series and cross-country comparisons, INFORMAS will become a critical data resource for analysing changes in determinants of obesity and related diseases. Also, the impacts of national policies cannot readily be measured using methods such as randomised trials. But a rich data series measuring levels of policy implementation, impacts on food environments, and health outcomes is one of the few robust ways to evaluate international and national policies.

We encourage countries of varying sizes and income levels to consider and apply the INFORMAS approach, in addition to WHO's monitoring framework; We believe this will improve and increase actions on food environments by governments and the food industry, and enhance effectiveness of civil society organisations' advocacy.

Boyd Swinburn

Stefanie Vandevijvere

School of Population Health

University of Auckland, New Zealand

Email: s.vandevijvere@auckland.ac.nz

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