

International research team maps food policies in South Asia

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An international team of researchers, including scientists from The George Institute for Global Health, has completed a comprehensive study mapping the food policies and supporting infrastructure in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The team benchmarked and assessed the level of implementation of these policies and identified priority actions for the primary prevention of diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

The team comprised researchers from academic and government organizations from the UK, Belgium, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. The details of this work have been published in the journal *The Lancet Regional Health - Southeast Asia* and may be accessed at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2772368224000787>

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading cause of illness and death worldwide. South Asians, in particular, face a higher risk of developing Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases compared to other populations. The prevalence of diabetes in South Asia is projected to be about 151 million by 2045.

The causes of NCDs are complex, but an unhealthy diet is a leading modifiable risk factor. Evidence suggests that improving food environments and implementing effective food-related policies are key to achieving healthier diets and reducing the prevalence of NCDs.

Rapid urbanisation and economic growth in South Asia have shifted dietary habits. Traditional, locally sourced diets rich in low-fat, high-fibre foods are being replaced by ultra-processed foods high in unhealthy fats, sodium, and sugar. This shift is driven by increased purchasing power, greater availability of processed foods, technological advances, and aggressive marketing strategies.

Policies that promote healthy food environments play an important role in fostering healthy food choices and preventing NCDs. The food environment includes a wide array of factors influencing individuals' access to and consumption of food, such as physical infrastructure, socio-economic conditions, cultural influences, marketing strategies, and individual preferences. Unhealthy food environments promote the availability and attractiveness of energy-dense but nutrient-poor foods.