



Food-EPI Australia

Evaluation of activities and outcomes (2016-2020)

Summary results ¹

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¹ For detailed results, please contact Gary Sacks (gary.sacks@deakin.edu.au). The formal evaluation results have been written up into an academic publication that is currently under review (2021).



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Aim of the evaluation

- We undertook an evaluation of the Food-EPI Australia initiative to understand to what extent, and how, it has achieved its intended purpose of contributing to policy change to improve the healthiness of food environments in Australia.
- Specifically, the Food-EPI Australia initiative (2016-2020) was evaluated in terms of the way that the outputs from the initiative have been utilized, the extent to which the initiative was contributing to policy change, and to understand ways in which to strengthen and improve the initiative to increase its utilization and impact.

Methods

Evaluation of the Food-EPI Australia initiative included an assessment of both the short and medium-term impact (one to three years) of the initiative. As depicted in Figure 1, data collected as part of the evaluation included:

1. A survey conducted in March 2017 with non-government stakeholders (n=53, 52% response rate) who attended the 2016 Food-EPI Australia assessment workshops. The survey questions focused on the impact of Food-EPI Australia on participant knowledge and collaborations.
2. A follow-up survey conducted in May 2020 with non-government stakeholders (n=34, 36% response rate) who attended the 2016 Food-EPI Australia assessment workshops. The survey questions focused on the way the Food-EPI Australia reports had been used, and the impact of the initiative on participant knowledge, collaborations and advocacy efforts.
3. In-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in May-June 2020 with key government and non-government stakeholders (n=20) who had been involved in the Food-EPI Australia initiative. Interview participants were asked to reflect on the ways the Food-EPI Australia initiative had been utilized, the impact of the initiative, and their suggestions on ways in which to strengthen and improve the initiative.

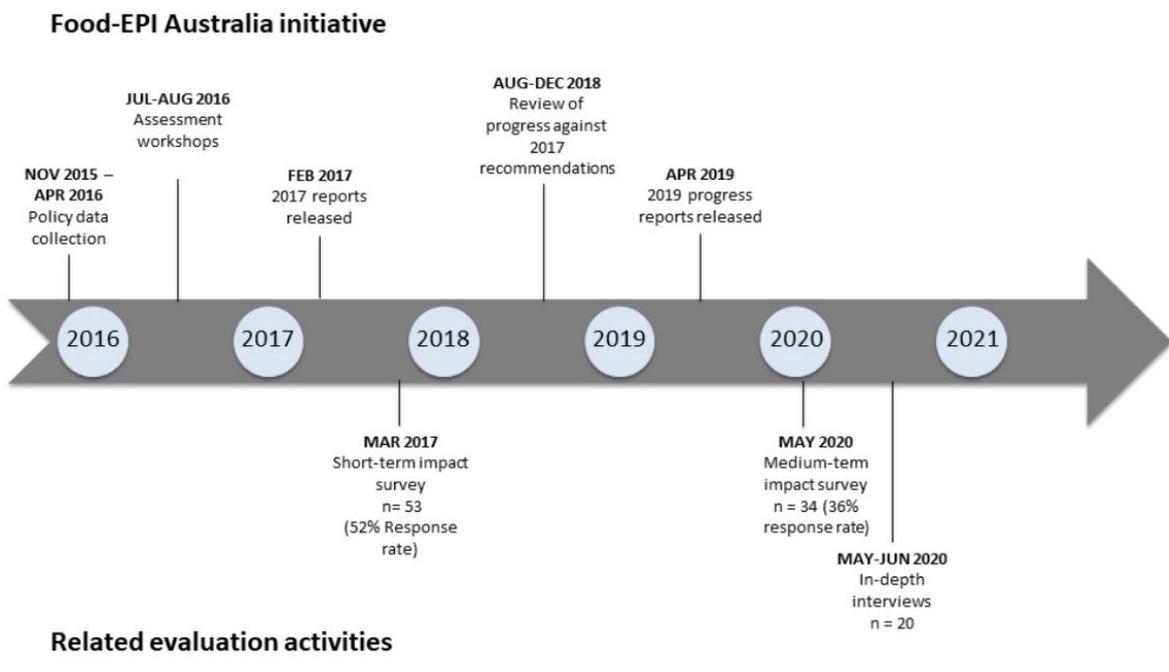


Figure 1: Food-EPI Australia timeline of data collection, reporting and evaluation activities (2016-2020)

Key evaluation findings

Engagement and awareness

- There was wide-spread engagement with the Food-EPI Australia initiative within government, with all nine eligible governments nominating a representative to support the initiative and actively contributing to data collection and knowledge exchange processes.
- There was also a high level of engagement among non-government stakeholders. In total, 101 public health experts from 53 organisations contributed to the assessments.
- The awareness of the Food-EPI Australia initiative was also high, with a broad awareness of the Food-EPI Australia reports cited from government and non-government participants.

Knowledge

- The evaluation results suggest that Food-EPI Australia was widely utilised by both government and non-government stakeholders as a knowledge product and to facilitate policy learning (Figures 2 and 3).
- Government interview participants noted that Food-EPI Australia helped demonstrate the complexity and breadth of policy areas related to food environments. They universally identified that Food-EPI Australia had increased understanding amongst policymakers of:
 - the suite of recommended policy options
 - the evidence to inform their prioritization
 - international and national good practice in each area.
- Participants valued the simple scorecard approach which was noted as a useful tool to helping to communicate the information succinctly and clearly.
- The majority of survey participants at both time points (2017 and 2020) agreed that Food-EPI Australia had increased their understanding of best practice to create healthier food environments; of relevant policies in their state or territory and at the federal/national level; and of policy action among Australian governments.
- Food-EPI Australia was acknowledged as one of many sources of practical evidence that could be utilised by government and stakeholders to help build a strong evidence base to inform policy processes.

Collaborations and partnerships

- The Food-EPI Australia processes facilitated collaboration across stakeholders with survey respondents indicating that they had formed or strengthened existing connections through the assessment process.
- Interview participants from government indicated that connections and collaborations made through participation in the Food-EPI Australia process were helpful when planning whole-of-government initiatives and for responding to relevant policy issues.

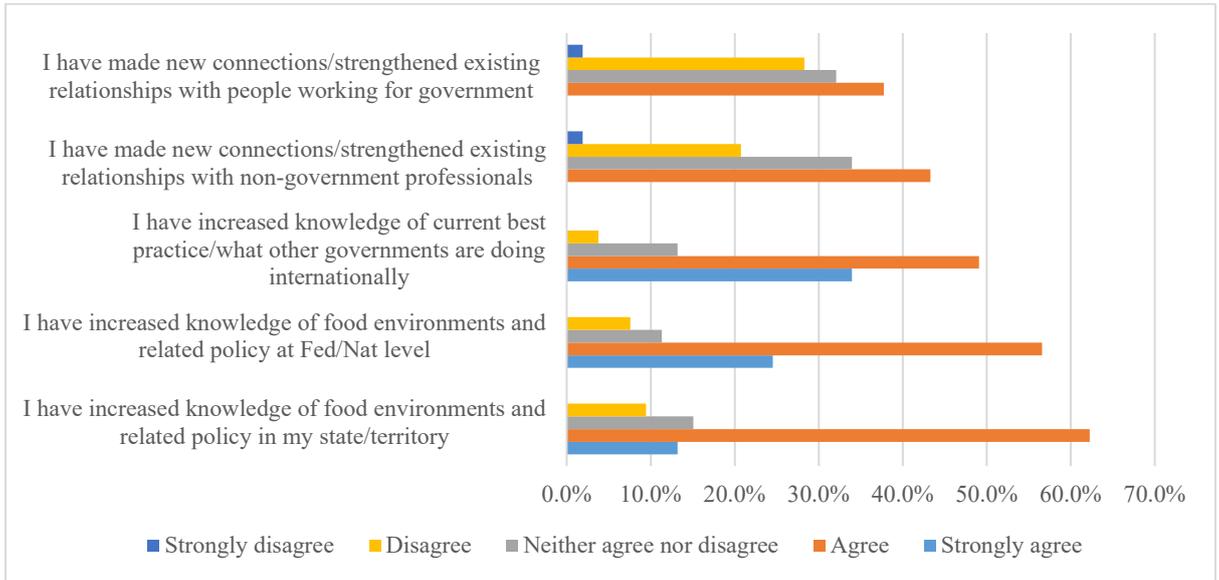


Figure 2: Perspectives of non-government Food-EPI Australia participants on the personal impact of the initiative in **March 2017** (n = 53)

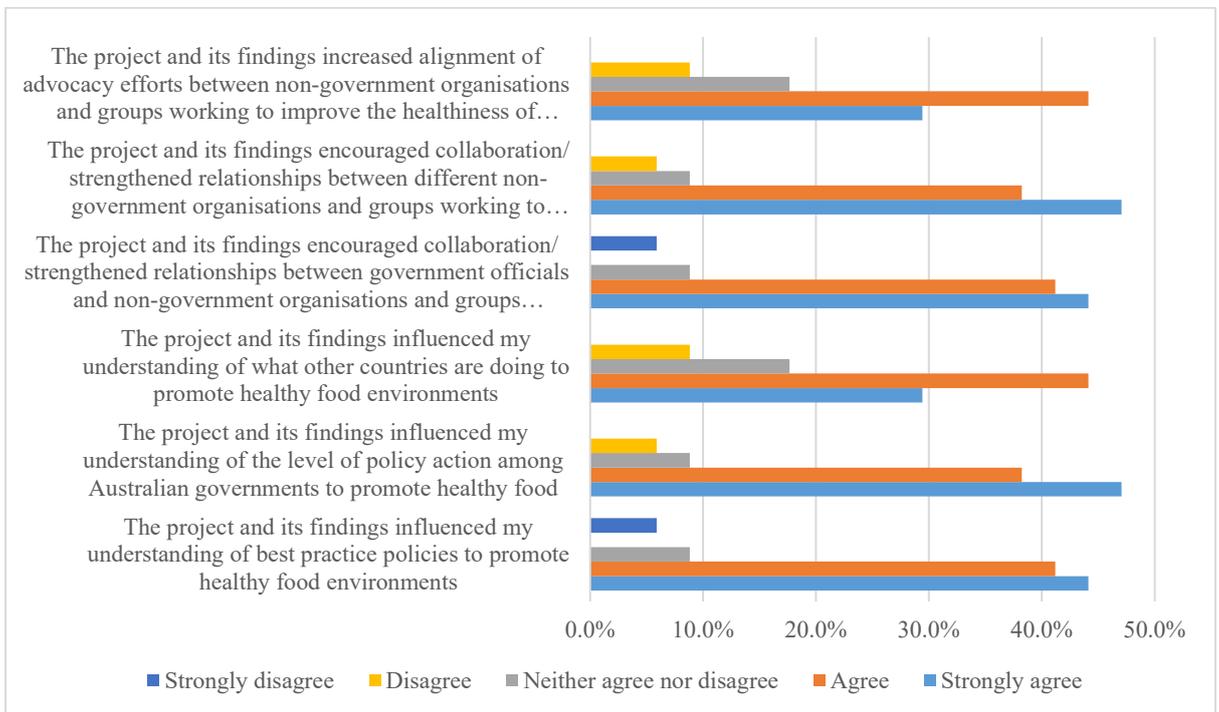


Figure 3: Perspectives of non-government Food-EPI Australia participants on the impact of the initiative in **May 2020** (n = 34)

Contribution to policy change

Policymakers indicated that Food-EPI Australia has been utilised to contribute to specific policy change and provide valuable support in the continuation of policy. For example, one policymaker described the use of information to justify the need for additional public health nutrition resources.

“I drew [a senior decision-maker’s] attention to [the Food-EPI results] when I was advocating to get more public health nutrition positions within our branch.”

(Government stakeholder)

Food-EPI Australia was described by interview participants as an authoritative reference to identify policy gaps and to take stock of government progress and could be used to help substantiate the merits of particular policy decisions.

“Policy is informed by a range of different things including stakeholder views and a whole stack of evidence, and this is one of the evidence tools, which was very useful because it was a practical evidence tool, used to inform policy.”

(Government stakeholder)

Non-government stakeholders described Food-EPI Australia as a particularly helpful tool to help support advocacy efforts and to keep governments accountable for policy progress; particularly with the reports making it is easy to compare the policy rating and progress of one jurisdiction to another.

“I think being able to compare state jurisdictions was definitely the most important part [of Food-EPI Australia]. And that way of being able to show the stronger states and the weaker states was its most important contribution.”

(Non-government interview participant)



Future directions

Survey and interview respondents were universally supportive of the continuation of Food-EPI Australia through repeated assessments. Several opportunities described by participants to strengthen the rigour and impact of the initiative will be implemented in future assessments.