

10 Tying it all together—food policy

Policy development is a vital tool for practitioners in the promotion of healthy eating. Most people probably think that 'policies' are something that state and federal government departments develop. However, almost any group or organisation that offers a service to others needs to develop its own policies. A policy is a set of plans to establish and achieve the desired performance goals of a group or organisation. Typically, food policies operate through institutions, instruments and information (Tansey and Worsley 1995). A workable food policy thus relies on:

- a person or group of people (an institution) being responsible for ensuring the policy is implemented. In a primary school, this group might be the canteen committee;
- instruments (such as the ability to set prices, buy or reject foods, or make bylaws governing the sale of food) enabling the policy plans to be carried out

- information about food sales or consumption (for example, the number of apples or meat pies sold from the canteen) being available to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy.

The main advantage of institutional and local area food policies is that everyone involved has a chance to negotiate the operating rules, so once those rules are agreed on, everyone knows the behaviours that are being facilitated among staff and clients. This helps to prevent arguments (between parents and school canteen staff, for example) and facilitates the evaluation of the adopted strategies.

At a broader level, the strategies of the Ottawa Charter are pertinent because they suggest approaches that food policies should encompass.

The need for consistent messages

A key advantage of a state, regional or local food policy is that it can ensure consistency in communication. Many people are confused about food and nutrition issues. A policy can reduce this confusion by using clearly defined terms and messages. Difference of opinion can be discussed during the policy's formation, and consensus can thus be achieved before any programs are launched.

Box 5: Examples of the application of the Ottawa Charter to food and nutrition policy

- *Build healthy policy*—establish institutional or local food policies.
- *Create supportive environments*—set up school canteens that actively promote healthier foods; create local healthy eating accreditation schemes for child care centres, take-away shops and school canteens.
- *Strengthen community action*—involve parents and children in the running of local policies; develop advocacy for supportive healthy eating environments, such as establishment of fresh food markets.
- *Develop personal skills*—train child care staff in principles of nutrition and dietary change.
- *Re-orient health services*—create parent healthy eating (and physical activity) advice centres in community health centres and general practice; ensure maternity and children's hospitals supply food that complies with the *Australian Guide to Healthy Eating*; ensure local maternity hospitals are in the baby-friendly hospital scheme.