

Pacific nations tax unhealthy foods to tackle non-communicable disease crisis

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Pacific Island governments are increasingly imposing taxes on unhealthy foods as they battle a non-communicable disease crisis, a New Zealand study shows.

The research, led by the University of Otago, Wellington, found that since 2000, a quarter of the 22 Pacific Island countries and territories studied had introduced taxes targeting unhealthy foods, a strategy in line with recommendations from the World Health Organization.

The study of food taxation policies over the 20 years to 2020 is published in the journal [*Public Health Nutrition*](#).

Senior Research Fellow Dr. Andrea Teng, from the University's Department of Public Health, says five of the countries in the study introduced new excise taxes during the period, while 14 made changes to tariffs on imported foods.

Processed foods, sugar, fatty meats and salt were the main targets of the taxes. Sugar-sweetened drink taxes were not included in the research, but have also been widely implemented in small island states.

Dr. Teng says there were a total of 279 taxes identified by food group, of which 15% were excise taxes targeting [unhealthy foods](#), and 85% were import tariffs.

"Some excise taxes are significant, ranging from up to 8% in Samoa to 22% in New Caledonia and up to TOP 5/kg in Tonga (US\$2.10), CFP

120/kg in French Polynesia (US\$1.10) and VT 20/kg in Vanuatu (US\$0.17). French Polynesia, for example, has applied a tax to foods such as biscuits, [ice cream](#), jams and chocolate based on their sugar content.

"Taxes like these are an important tool in addressing the food environment and the rising trend of non-communicable diseases."

Six of the countries, Fiji, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu applied both excise taxes and import tariffs to food products. The Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Wallis and Futuna used only import tariffs, while American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Kiribati, Palau, the Pitcairn Islands, Tokelau and Tuvalu had no identified food tax policies.

Dr. Teng says governments in the region are increasingly recognizing that dietary policies are a crucial way of addressing high levels of chronic diseases.

"These measures promote healthier food choices, and can improve people's health."

But, she says, food taxes need to be applied to unhealthy ingredients in a systematic way to make sure they are as effective as possible.

"Ensuring taxes are based on the level of sugar, fat and salt in foods is a really effective way of encouraging producers to reduce the amount of unhealthy ingredients in products, without placing a high tax burden on consumers."

More information: Emilee Walby et al, Food tax policies in Pacific Island Countries and Territories: systematic policy review, *Public Health*

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