

Food Systems Research for Non-communicable Disease Prevention - Inviting Ideas

The Food, Environment, and Health (FEH) program, within Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) develops evidence, innovations, and policies for healthier food environments and the prevention of food-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Our aim is to improve population health and prevent the burden of NCDs through food systems research and interventions in low- and middle-income countries.

Since 2012, we have funded over 30 projects valued at over \$14 million across Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa. Over the next years, we will continue to invest in food systems research in order to build the evidence and the field by supporting low- and middle-income researchers and institutions to carry out research projects that will help transform the food environment for healthier outcomes.

We are interested in growing our knowledge and networks of researchers in this field and to strengthen the evidence, particularly in the regions where we are presently less active. To this end, we invite you to review the information below outlining the context for our work, our approach, our thematic areas of focus, and get in touch with us regarding ideas that you may have for future investments in this body of work.

The context - key drivers of food systems and diets in LMICs

While access to food is increasing for a large number of people around the world, new challenges are emerging. The world's increasing capacity to produce, process, and trade food is being accompanied by important changes in dietary patterns across all regions. A sharp rise in non-communicable disease burdens (e.g. diabetes, hypertension and heart disease) is imposing high human, social, and economic costs at all income levels. Low- and middle-income countries are disproportionately affected with more rapidly rising rates of non-communicable diseases in younger populations that further deteriorate health and strain economic resources for all.

A common element in these problems is an unhealthy diet, defined by the quantity, quality, and diversity of foods consumed. Diets based on a diversity of fresh and minimally processed foods have numerous health benefits to individuals, communities, and countries, including disease prevention, lower health care costs, and more productive societies. Innovative policies and community- and market-oriented solutions can improve dietary quality and diversity, offsetting an increasing reliance in low- and middle-income countries on ready-to-consume, ultra-processed food and drink products that are nutritionally poor.

Fresh thinking is needed to promote public and private efforts for tackling the economic and health burdens associated with rising non-communicable diseases. This will need practical solutions that take into account the policy, social, cultural, and economic environments that shape food systems and affect both the quality of food supplies and demand for healthy foods.

Our approach

The program is investing in **strengthening research leadership** in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and building multi-stakeholder partnerships to effectively implement solutions with measurable impacts at scale. To help support and grow research leadership on food systems, we encourage projects that support field- or network-building, through activities such as: inter-academic training and fellowship arrangements; consortia or networks of researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners; support for communities of practice, academic chairs or centres of excellence.

Prevention of non-communicable diseases requires **broad alliances for action across sectors** (e.g. agriculture, health, nutrition, education, environment, economics, and social development) and between multiple actors (government, civil society, business, academia, non-profit organizations). For this reason, we support research that applies a multi-disciplinary and multi-sector approach to guide changes in food systems for population impact.

In this emerging field, we also aim to contribute to **building a robust data environment** with locally validated tools and methodologies, and an open, accessible and affordable platform for sharing cross-disciplinary data and broader lessons.

Research that is founded on **social and gender equity, cultural sensitivity, economic viability, and environmental sustainability** are equally important to our approach. Ideas and innovations proposed must be designed and/or implemented as much as possible in ways that are accessible and affordable to all, meet the needs of women and girls in LMICs, encourage consumption of healthy local foods, take into account culinary traditions, and protect the natural environment and resources in the long term. Research is also sought that is specifically focused on gender equity dimensions of transformations in food systems.

Thematic areas of focus

We are interested in supporting research that builds understanding and opportunities to support food system changes that will enable and promote healthy and sustainable diets at the population level in LMICs. Specific topics that we have funded or are interested in funding, include but are not limited to:

The macro-economics of food systems: Healthy food systems are larger than individual value chains or single food commodities. How can we understand the dynamics of these food systems as a whole and their intrinsic link with local economies? What are the real costs of healthy and unhealthy diets? How can we understand the drivers of changing food systems (including changes in demographics, income and livelihood trends, rural to urban migration, and food industrialisation and increased influence of big companies) that contribute to increased risk and burden of NCDs?

The political economy of healthy and sustainable food systems: How can laws, regulations and other public policies create, protect and promote healthy and sustainable food systems? How do public, private and civil society actors collaborate or compete within these food systems? How can we better align policies and improve policy coherence across multiple sectors (e.g. agriculture and trade policies, transportation, non-communicable disease prevention and control) and promote healthy and sustainable diets (e.g. national food guides).

Informing, implementing, and evaluating fiscal and public policies for healthier diets and food systems:

What has been the impact of fiscal and regulatory interventions (e.g. labelling, taxation/pricing measures, and marketing restrictions that aim to increase consumption of fresh and minimally processed foods)? What evidence is needed to inform and drive new regulatory responses? Which successful approaches have potential to be applied in other country contexts? What steps are needed to cost and implement country strategies to prevent and reduce non-communicable diseases?

Developing and testing community-focused strategies and interventions, as well as drivers of change in food markets:

What drives or enables change in communities and markets to improve quality and sustainability of diets at the population level (e.g. urban agriculture and/or rural development initiatives and their links to local food supply and consumption)? What innovations, interventions, or co-operative partnerships (e.g. between producers, distributors, processors, retailers, and/or the public sector) can be developed, tested, and scaled-up to improve inclusive access to fresh and minimally processed foods, including for targeted consumer settings (e.g. schools, work place, street markets, street food, community kitchens, and/or restaurants)?

Building the research infrastructure for the study of food systems: How can new or locally adapted tools and methodologies be used to describe and intervene in complex and dynamic food systems? Further, what cross-disciplinary and cross-country platforms are needed to support the sharing of data, research and policy lessons, and to mobilize interventions through partnerships between researchers, policy-makers and community groups?

In order to maintain a strategic and focused approach within the large and complex field of food systems research, we note that the following types of projects are outside the scope of our program:

- purely descriptive research on food-related health problems
- product development, enrichment, fortification, or reformulation of individual food commodities
- projects solely focused on improving food production, quantity, and/or access;
- purely epidemiological observational studies
- projects solely focused on education, social marketing, and/or individual behaviour change
- projects solely focused on food safety

Building our program and the field – an invitation to submit research ideas

We are open to receiving ideas for research projects as a means to help our program understand the state of the field, including the scope and demand for food systems research, and inform how we invest future resources. We invite you to register your interest in food systems research by submitting a research idea, and providing your contact information so that we direct future calls for project proposals to a wide network of interested researchers and institutions. In addition to research questions, ideas for how to build collaborations, networks, and leadership among established and emerging researchers in this field are also welcome.

Please note that as this is not a call for proposals, we are unable to provide feedback on submitted ideas. Ideas should be brief, limited to two pages or less. This is an ongoing, open invitation to submit ideas that does not preclude parallel submissions to competitive calls for concept notes. As competitive calls for proposals become available, we would welcome you to submit a more fully elaborated proposal of a new or previously submitted idea. Please note that applications must be led by a researcher/institution from a low- or middle-income country. Ideas should be submitted by email in English or French to feh@idrc.ca

For more information on the Food, Environment, and Health program, please visit www.idrc.ca/feh