Food policy councils make healthy foods more accessible
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At the end of May, physical activity and nutrition experts from all over the country, as well as overseas experts, gathered at the Agencies for Nutrition Action conference in Wellington.

The focus of the conference was on promoting nutrition and physical activity in sustainable ways. It also highlighted that many sectors – such as food businesses, conservation, education, transport, recreation, social development and local government – are well placed to influence nutrition and physical activity.

Dr Karen Webb, from Sydney University's School of Public Health, shared her extensive experience of working with communities to improve food choices, food environments and food security. She told conference delegates about food policy councils in North America and how these were used as models to set up a similar group within the Penrith City Council on the fringes of western Sydney.

"When the Food Policy Council first started out, we set several objectives – among them, improving the availability of healthy food choices; improving household access and resources to acquire healthy foods, preserving local agriculture and sustainable practices for food production and distribution, as well as protecting food safety."

The Penrith Food Project became the first of its kind in the country, and has now been running for nearly 20 years.

"Before a project like this can get off the ground, it's important to assess its feasibility within any particular community. Think about the challenges you're likely to meet and whether you have the support you need from both government decision makers and local organisations," Dr Webb says.

"Food policy councils typically address important issues that undermine healthy eating and food security in the community. Conducting audits of local food outlets, schools, worksites, public places, emergency food distribution etc can generate a good starter list for policy action. Often, you have to run activities and events and demonstrate what you mean by improvements in healthy food choices and food security, and then work towards the policy action.

"For example, we ran open farm days for the public which became a tourist destination for greater Sydney and an electoral plus for the Mayor of Penrith. Eventually, the city council began taking steps to strengthen their support for preserving local agriculture. We learned a lot about other sectors simply by working with people such as farmers and learning about how they do business."

The Penrith Food Project and the food policy council are an example of people taking leadership in a community for making healthy food more available and affordable for disadvantaged groups.

"The project tackled these issues in a number of ways. One example was dealing with the transportation to acquire food – the bus routes to local shopping centres were altered to make food more accessible for the community.

"Home delivered fruits and vegetables were made more available to all 21 suburbs as well. We worked to get planning guidelines in place to require parenting rooms in new public buildings…a quiet place for mothers to breastfeed when on outings. This idea was so popular it won the support of the National General Assembly of Local Governments in Australia.

“We worked to support changes in regulations about farmgate sales, and changes in regulations prohibiting fruit cart sales on train station entrances.

Dr Webb says one of the reasons the project was so successful was the effective collaboration between different sectors, led by senior people from many organisations including agriculture, local government urban planning and social services, tourism, local retailers, and the transport sector.

“It takes a lot of work to get a food policy project implemented and it involves constant political management and advocacy. You have to use your senior champions well, at strategic times to command the respect and be persuasive on issues.

“But it’s wonderful to see a committed group of people able to achieve so much more than they could do by themselves. I’d encourage people to have a go. There’s an awful lot more to learn about how we can work together and help communities build food security. We need people out there in every sector who will stand up and be champions for the cause.”