The Food Governance Node at the Charles Perkins Centre

Background

The Food Governance Node is a platform for cross-disciplinary research on law, regulation, and policy that aims to create a healthy, sustainable and equitable food system. The Node was co-founded by Dr Alexandra Jones (The George Institute for Global Health) and Dr Belinda Reeve (The University of Sydney Law School) in 2016 with the support of an initial collaboration team, including Professors Bruce Neal (The George Institute), Roger Magnusson (Sydney Law School), and Andrew Wilson (the Menzies Centre for Health Policy), and Associate Professor Anne Marie Thow (the Menzies Centre).

The Node sits within the University of Sydney's Charles Perkins Centre (CPC). The CPC was established in 2012 to create an interdisciplinary research hub to address the burden of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. The CPC's academic strategy is based on four subject domains (Biology; Populations; Society and Environment; and Solutions), supplemented by six cross-cutting themes, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health; Nutrition; and Politics, Governance and Ethics. These four subject domains and six themes are populated by project nodes, which are multidisciplinary initiatives that aim to address major gaps in our understanding of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other related conditions. There are currently 52 nodes within the CPC, including the Food Governance Node.

Who is involved in the Node?

The Node's membership includes Australian academics and civil society advocates working on food governance issues in the areas of diet-related health, equity, and food system sustainability. It includes researchers from multiple disciplines including law, business, public health, nutrition, and health policy, as well as academics from different academic and research institutes across Australia. Where relevant, for example where the regulatory systems are trans-tasman/bilateral, research colleagues from New Zealand may be interested in being involved in the Node or may be invited to collaborate in Node activities.

Collaboration between Node members and international colleagues is encouraged and the partnership between the Node and the O'Neill Institute to convene the 2021 Global Food Governance Conference will increase this international presence. However, the core objectives and scope of the Node (and therefore its membership) relate to food governance issues at a national level in Australia and New Zealand.

The Node has previously focused on food governance and diet-related health, but we welcome new members who are interested in the intersections between law, policy or regulation, and food systems, health, and sustainability.

What are the Node's objectives?

- To provide a forum for bringing together Australian and New Zealand researchers in food governance, with the goal of creating new research relationships and collaborations;
- To translate research into impactful regulatory advice, provided mainly through submissions to law and policy research processes; and
- To undertake and support research-related activities such as preparing grant applications and supervising summer scholars

What is the scope of the Node?

The Node uses a "food system" lens to guide its activities. It defines the food system as "[t]he web of actors, processes and interactions involved in growing, processing, distributing, consuming and disposing of foods, from the provision of inputs and farmer training, to product packaging and manufacturing, to waste recycling" (IPENS 2015, 30). This definition of the food system extends to the broader economic, social, political, and technological drivers of food system change, and conceptualises the food system as divided into three main elements: food supply chains, food environments, and consumer behaviour.

A food system model highlights the multiple activities (and actors) within the food system that can be targeted for government intervention (e.g., food production, distribution, retail, and consumption) (Hawkes, Parsons and Wells, 2019, 7). The adoption of a food systems approach reflects a growing awareness of the interconnections between food production and consumption, environmental sustainability, population health, and equity (Johnson, 2015), and the corresponding need for laws, regulation, and policies that tackle the drivers of (and interrelationships between) unsustainable, unhealthy, and inequitable food production (Capone et al 2014). This involves forms of governance directly concerned with the food system, as well as those in other sectors (e.g., education or trade) that impact food system functioning.

The implication of this approach for the Node's activities is that the Node will aim to promote governance, research, and other activities that consider diet-related health and food system sustainability in an integrated or coordinated way.

How we define "regulation" and "governance"

The Node is underpinned by a broad definition of regulation as "the sustained and focused attempt to alter the behaviour of others according to defined standards or purposes with the intention of producing a broadly identified outcome or outcomes, which may involve mechanisms of standard-setting, information-gathering and behaviour modification" (Black, 2002, 26). This definition captures legal rules that are created (and enforced) by governments and which prohibit or set standards for certain forms of behaviour. However, it recognises that other instruments used by governments can be conceptualised as regulation, including taxes, permits, information disclosure, and altering the physical environment. This definition also captures the idea that an increasing amount of regulation is developed by non-state actors, including both civil society organisations and private sector entities such as trade associations (as with industry self-regulation). "Private" regulation may be created independently of the state (and may be in some circumstances the predominant form of regulation rather than state-based regulation) or may operate within a framework of tacit or explicit state approval or involvement (as with public-private partnerships).

The Node is also underpinned by the idea of regulation as a process rather than a static tool of government, with key regulatory processes including creation, implementation, administration, monitoring, review, and enforcement.

Aligning with our broad definition of regulation, we define "governance" as the formal and informal rules, institutions and organisations that influence agricultural and food systems, as well as the patterns of organisational behaviour to which they give rise (Von Braun and Birner, 2017)

Proposed activities and goals for the Node 2021-2025

Year one: 2021	Years 2-5: 2022-2025
Coordinate an international Food Governance Conference in partnership with the O'Neil Institute. Produce a document outlining the scope, objectives, and membership of the Node. Make submissions to the review of the food regulatory system currently underway in Australia and New Zealand. Provide other regulatory advice, as needed. Consider the extension of the Node's work to food system sustainability and its implications for the Node's membership (i.e., whether to invite new members with a focus on food system sustainability). Begin groundwork for a regular email and presentation schedule where Node members present research or invite others to present their work. Prepare for handing over Node leadership/train new Node leaders.	Consider hosting an international food governance consortium that meets every two years and produces a consensus statement. Build stronger links with similar research centres and organisations in other jurisdictions. Apply for an ARC centre of research excellence grant enabling extension of the Node's work. Create a leadership program to foster new leaders in the food governance space (similar to the UK Food Systems Leadership incubator).

References

- Black, J. Critical reflections on regulation. *Australasian Journal of Legal Philosophy*. 2002;27: 1-46.
- Capone R, Bilali HE, Debs P, Cardone G, and Driouech N. Food system sustainability and food security: connecting the dots. *Journal of Food Security*. 2014;2(1):13-2.
- Hawkes, C, Parsons, K and Wells, R. Brief 2: *Understanding the food system: Why it matters for food policy*. London: Centre for Food Policy; 2019.
- International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food). *The new science of sustainable food systems: Overcoming barriers to food systems reform*. Belgium: IPES-Food; 2015.
- Johnson, H. Eating for health and the environment: Australian regulatory responses for dietary change. *QUT Law Review*. 2015;15(2):122-39.
- von Braun, J, and Birner, R. Designing global governance for agricultural development and food and nutrition security. *Review of Development Economics*. 2017;21(2):265-84.

For more information

Belinda Reeve | The University of Sydney Law School
T +61 2 8627 0663 | **E** Belinda.reeve@Sydney.edu.au

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY