

Policy Coherence and the Australian Food System

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The benefits of policy coherence

Australians expect a lot from our food system, and our aspirations for Australia’s food system are growing. We want it to meet multiple and often conflicting goals, such as prosperous livelihoods for farmers as well as low cost but nutritious food for consumers. We expect food retailing businesses to provide most Australians with the cost and quality advantages of scale economies while also providing affordable and nutritious food to remote and vulnerable communities. We orient our economy to export bulk commodities but want local manufacturing to support diverse food cultures and experiences. We expect fresh produce to be available in all seasons, while despairing at the waste this generates.

Meeting growing aspirations for Australia’s future food system is going to depend, at least in part, on more coherent and connected policy across the range of sectors and actors involved in the food system. Food policy spans all the processes of producing and distributing foods, from the natural resources like water and soils that support agricultural production, through the manufacturing and distribution of food to consumption and its impacts on nutrition and human health (figure 1). Of particular concern for Australian food policy is whether an historical focus on agricultural production and commodity exports has prepared us to meet broader sustainability, health and social inclusion challenges, including those associated with a changing climate¹.

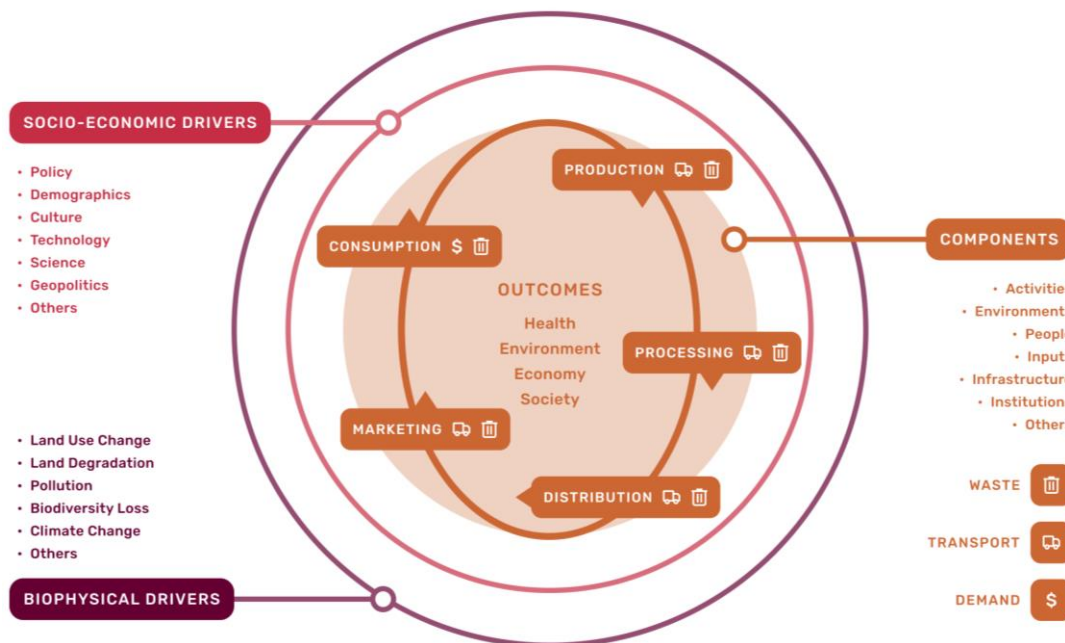


Figure 1 The scope of food policy

¹ Lawrence, G., Richards, C. & Lyons, K. 2013. Food security in Australia in an era of neoliberalism, productivism and climate change. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 29, 30-39.

Analysing policy coherence

Policy coherence has been defined as “an attribute of policy that systematically reduces conflicts and promotes synergies between and within different policy areas to achieve the outcomes associated with jointly agreed policy objectives”². For food policy, coherence is about the degree to which policies across the food system reinforce or contradict each other in meeting collective societal aspirations³. The degree of coherence required will depend on what these aspirations are and how they change over time. It will often involve trade-offs with the resources available to pursue coherence.

Policy coherence can be analysed using a range of methods. Discourse analysis can be used to compare the goals of different food-related policies, the reasons used to advocate for policy goals and the actions seen as acceptable to achieve those goals⁴. The level of effort invested in analysis can be varied to match the degree of coherence required. Rapid qualitative assessments can be used to identify the most prominent policies across the food system, and provide preliminary assessments of their coherence. More in-depth methods can be used to investigate the deeper coherence of goals, actions and pressures for change, and the underlying values on which these are based.

Policy coherence analysis can be conducted over time and across portfolios (horizontal coherence, for example, from environment to health) and jurisdictions (vertical coherence, for example, national, state and local) (figure 2). Insights can be drawn from areas with strong coherence and the coordination mechanisms that underpin them, and applied to other areas of food systems where greater coherence is needed.

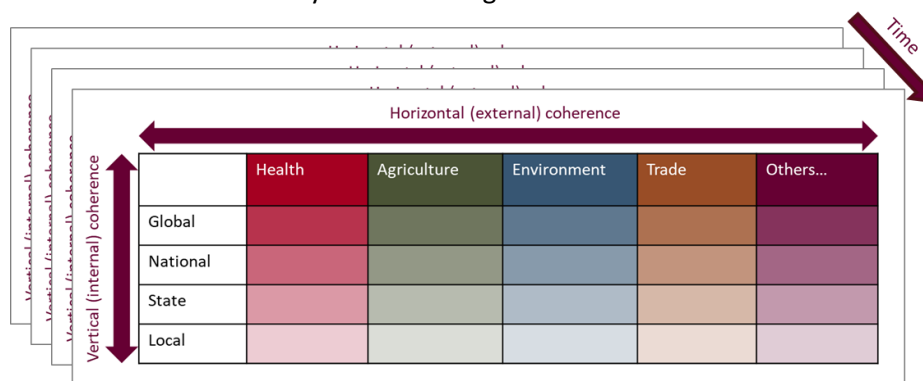


Figure 2 Types of food policy coherence

The potential scope of policy coherence

Many portfolios across Australia’s commonwealth and state governments play various roles in food policy. Environment portfolios are interested in the natural resources such land, water and biological diversity which affect the productivity of agriculture. They are also interested in the environmental impacts of the food system including waste, greenhouse gas emissions and impacts on biological diversity. The agricultural portfolio is interested in production, exports and the profitability of farm businesses, and factors that affect these such as biosecurity. Responsibility for food manufacturing sits in the industry department, while the health and social welfare portfolios focus on the health implications of food access, consumption and nutrition. Other public sector institutions, such as the ACCC and Treasury, play a role in competition policy and improving commercial relationships across food value chains.

Policy coordination mechanisms do already exist, but are patchy across the food system. For example, Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ) is supported by meetings between food ministers⁵, which helps to achieve coherent food safety regulation across Australia’s commonwealth and state governments, and the

² Nilsson, M., Zamparutti, T., Petersen, J. E., Nykvist, B., Rudberg, P. & McGuinn, J. 2012. Understanding Policy Coherence: Analytical Framework and Examples of Sector–Environment Policy Interactions in the EU. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 22, 395-423.

³ Parsons, K. & Hawkes, C. 2019. Brief 5: Policy Coherence in Food Systems. *Rethinking Food Policy: A Fresh Approach to Policy and Practice*. London: Centre for Food Policy, University of London.

⁴ Fairclough, I. & Fairclough, N. 2012. *Political discourse analysis: A method for advanced students*, London, Routledge.

⁵ The Food Minister’s Meeting is a group of ministers in Australia and New Zealand who oversee food regulation and approve overarching food policy and standards. <https://www.foodregulation.gov.au/activities-committees/food-ministers-meeting>

government of New Zealand. Food is also considered as part of emergency management responses. Less formal coordination mechanisms exist between policy advisors working on food policy across other portfolios.

Policy coherence is more than coordination. Coordination is useful for managing complicated interactions between portfolios, or within portfolios over time. This is especially necessary because we've used specialisation to create efficient governance processes for component portfolios of the food system (figure 3).

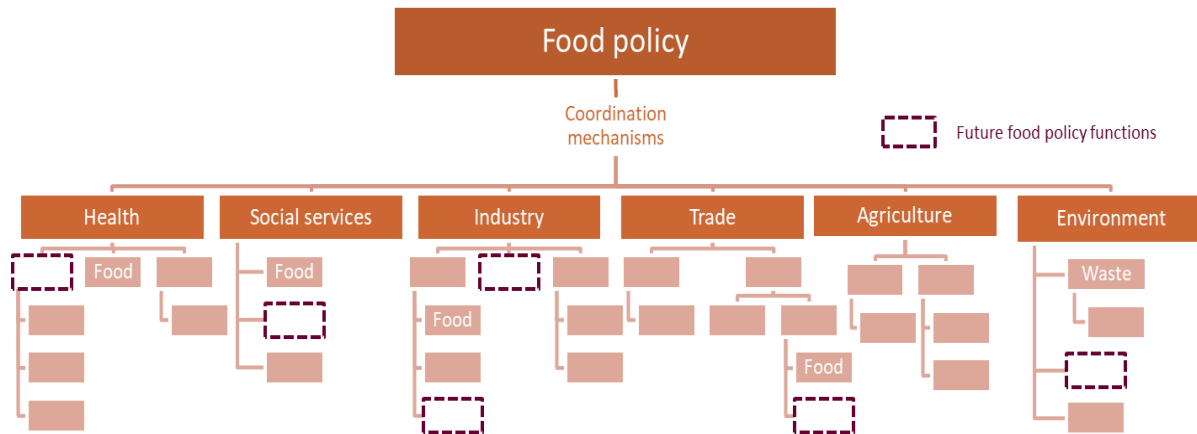


Figure 3 Portfolio-based governance of food system components

But policy coherence is also about anticipating and managing the surprising 'emergent' interactions from the food system. These deeply uncertain and often unforeseen consequences of interactions across the food system are only revealed by viewing the system more holistically (figure 1). Insights can be drawn from food policy areas with strong coherence including the coordination mechanisms that underpin them, and applied to other areas of food systems where greater coherence is needed.

Next steps

CSIRO and the University of Queensland – through Food System Horizons – are working with policy colleagues to map food-related policy interactions and explore opportunities to improve policy coherence. The results will support policy insights for food-related ministers and contribute to evidence-based evaluation of more holistic approaches to food governance, such as possible future food portfolios and national food strategies.

Food System Horizons – Catalysing a sustainable, nutritious, and equitable food system future foodsystemhorizons.org
 Food System Horizons is a collaborative initiative between The University of Queensland and CSIRO.
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