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FEATURE ARTICLE

### **Fiji's School Canteen Policy**

As the lunch bell rings across schools in Fiji, students flock to the canteen, eager to grab a quick bite before heading back to their classrooms. For many years, school canteens have been filled with the enticing aroma of fried snacks, sugary drinks, and sweets—a convenience for children, but a growing concern for health experts. In Fiji, where non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and other lifestyle-related illnesses are at an all-time high, the food choices offered in school canteens are coming under scrutiny.

NCDs have become a critical health challenge in Fiji, accounting for the majority of hospital admissions and deaths. Alarming, these diseases are increasingly affecting younger people, a trend that experts link to unhealthy eating habits picked up during childhood. What children consume in their formative years often shapes their dietary patterns as adults, creating a cycle that perpetuates poor health outcomes across generations. In this context, the humble school canteen is more than just a place to grab a snack—it is a critical battleground in the fight to improve the nation's health.

Traditionally, school canteens in Fiji have been known for selling highly processed and unhealthy foods. Sugary drinks, deep-fried snacks, and brightly colored sweets have long dominated the menus, offering students convenient but nutritionally poor choices. To bring about change, the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health and Medical Services introduced the School Canteen Policy, a set of standards designed to transform these canteens into sources of nourishment rather than harm.

#### **A Brief History of the School Canteen Policy**

Efforts to improve the nutritional landscape of Fiji's school canteens began in 2005 with the publication of the School Canteen Guidelines by the National Food and Nutrition Centre under the Ministry of Health, supported by UNICEF and the Pacific Community (SPC). This landmark document provided a framework for promoting healthier food choices in schools and was grounded in the latest research on children's nutritional needs and the practical realities of canteen operations.

Over the years, the guidelines have evolved alongside national health and education initiatives. Subsequent revisions, supported by a collaboration between the Ministry of Health and the

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Ministry of Education, aligned the guidelines with other key policies such as the Fiji Food and Nutrition Policy (2008), the Food and Health Guidelines for Fiji (2009), and the National Food and Nutrition Policy for Schools (2009). These efforts were further bolstered by the Food Safety Act (2004) and the Health Promoting Schools Initiative, formalized through a memorandum of understanding between the two ministries in 2009.

The most significant update came in 2017 with the release of the third edition of the guidelines, now known as the Policy on Food and Canteen. This transformed the guidelines into a piece of subsidiary legislation, elevating its status from a voluntary handbook to an enforceable policy. This shift signaled a stronger commitment to addressing the growing burden of non-communicable diseases in Fiji by making schools a focal point for healthier eating habits.

### **Understanding the School Canteen Policy**

The guidelines, first introduced in 2005 and currently being revised, outline clear instructions for school canteens. They prohibit the sale of unhealthy foods and beverages such as deep-fried snacks, fizzy drinks, and confectioneries while encouraging the inclusion of nutritious alternatives like fresh fruits, vegetables, and milk. This initiative aligns with broader health policies, including the National Food and Nutrition Policy for Schools and the Health Promoting Schools Program.

To ensure compliance, the Council has committed to stringent market surveillance as schools prepare for the new academic term. As per the 2017 guideline, when in violation, a written warning given on the first instance, and then termination if continued to repeat retailing junk food items after a 30-day notice. Additionally, certain canteens are required to obtain operational approval from the Ministry of Health, emphasizing the importance of maintaining high standards.

### **Key Provisions of Fiji's School Canteen Policy**

The Policy on Food and Canteen sets clear guidelines to ensure that school canteens play an active role in promoting the health and wellbeing of students. By fostering collaboration and accountability, the policy ensures that schools become environments where healthy eating is the norm rather than the exception.

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**Collaborative Efforts for a Healthy Food Environment:** One of the core principles of the policy is the collaborative engagement of all stakeholders, including canteen operators, school management and school heads. These groups should work together to create and sustain a healthy food environment. This collective approach would ensure healthier food and beverage options are available in school canteens and would also encourage students to adopt healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime.

**Compliance with Hygiene and Food Safety Standards:** The policy mandates strict adherence to Fiji's Food Safety Act 2003 and the Food Safety Regulations 2009, emphasizing the importance of hygiene and food safety in canteen operations. This ensures that all food and beverages sold or prepared in school canteens are safe for consumption, thereby protecting students from foodborne illnesses and other health risks. Canteen operators must comply with these regulations, prioritizing cleanliness in food preparation, storage, and handling.

**Establishment of a Functional Canteen Committee:** The policy requires every school to have an active and functional canteen committee. This committee is tasked with overseeing canteen operations, ensuring compliance with the policy's provisions, and supporting the broader goal of promoting healthy eating. The involvement of multiple stakeholders within the committee ensures transparency, accountability, and effective implementation of the policy.

**Legislative and Health Compliance:** School canteen services must fully comply with all relevant legislation and health requirements. This includes adhering to standards for food preparation, storage, and safety as stipulated in national laws. By aligning canteen services with these legal and health mandates, the policy ensures consistency and reinforces the broader national objectives of improving public health and combating the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases.

## List of Prohibited and Approved Items in School Canteens

Approved
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- Boiled or baked: root crops (cassava, dalo, kumala), vudi, breadfruit; and cereals such as whole meal bread, rice, and roti.
- Stir-fried or boiled vegetables (bele, cabbage, rourou, chauraiya, bean, pumpkin, tomatoes, carrot, corn); fresh salads including lettuce, cucumber, tomatoes, capsicum, and carrots.
- Fruits in season and widely available (banana, orange, mango, pineapple, mandarine, pawpaw, guava, apple, watermelon).
- Legumes like split peas and toor dhal.
- Meat (with skin and visible fat removed) and poultry, fish, and eggs.
- Nuts in season (vutu, ivi, peanut), bean, and popcorn.
- Milk
- Water
- Sugar-free drinks

#### Prohibited Items

- Deep-fried foods like bhajia, bara, gulgula, and doughnuts.
- Pastry-based items (e.g., sausage rolls or crumbed/battered hot foods like fish and chips).
- Savoury snack foods - crisps, chips, biscuits.
- Ice-creams and ice confections - chocolate-coated, ice-creams, ice blocks, and sun pops.
- Cakes, muffins, sweet pastries, and slices.
- Sweets (lollies, chocolates, jelly beans) or any other form of confectionery.
- Homemade sweets such as barfi, jalebi, gulab jamun, toffee, fudge.
- Tamarine lolly and tamarine chutney with peas (fried or boiled).
- Chinese lollies and skins, mango skin powder.
- Processed salted and cheese snacks.
- Uncooked noodles - all noodles sold in canteens should be cooked prior to being sold.

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- Sugar-sweetened drinks, including fruit-flavoured drinks, sports drinks, and cordials.
- Biscuits
- All fizzy drinks
- Chewing gum except sugar-free gum

### **Conclusion**

While Fiji’s school canteen policy is comprehensive and well-structured, its success depends on effective enforcement, which has historically been weak. Despite over 15 years of having these policies, many students still encounter unhealthy options like sugary drinks, fried snacks, and confectionery in their school canteens, undermining the initiative’s purpose and exposing children to poor dietary habits with long-term health implications. To bridge the gap between policy and practice, schools and stakeholders must work together to ensure successful implementation of the policy. Transforming school canteens is about more than changing what is sold—it is about reshaping young people’s relationship with food and committing to their health and potential.

For more information or to report non-compliance, contact the Consumer Council of Fiji at 155 or email [complaints@consumersfiji.org](mailto:complaints@consumersfiji.org).

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