



New directions for tackling food safety risks in the informal sector of developing countries

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Key messages

- Despite ongoing structural changes, small-scale processors, grocers, market vendors and food service operators dominate the food systems of most low- and lower middle-income countries.
- Unsafe food is widespread in informal food distribution channels, having national public health implications.
- Very few countries have coherent strategies for tackling food safety risks in the informal sector.
- Most of the policy attention and resources now devoted to domestic food safety in the developing world focuses on strengthening centralized systems for 'food control'.
- Doing more of the same things is not going to deliver safer food in the informal sector.

Introduction

This brief is based on the report 'New directions for tackling food safety risks in the informal sector of developing countries' that was commissioned by ILRI and the CGIAR Initiative on One Health. It presents a summary of findings from the synthesis of food safety research done in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and outlines the way forward for the more effective and sustainable improvement of food safety management in LMICs with a focus on interventions.

Findings

Despite ongoing structural changes, the food systems of most low- and lower middle-income countries still feature a preponderance of very small-scale processors, grocers, market vendors and food service operators. These players and their informal distribution channels are especially

important in the domestic markets for fish, meat, fruits and vegetables; all high-nutrient foods which are also leading vectors of foodborne disease. For a variety of reasons, related to demography, economic geography, poverty, and income and opportunity inequality, food market fragmentation and informality will remain a prominent fixture of developing-country food systems for the foreseeable future.

Unsafe food is a widespread issue in informal food distribution channels, having national public health implications.

The evidence for this comes from studies in many locations. The high incidence of microbiological, chemical, or other forms of food contamination within these channels stems from a combination of factors, both internal and external to the pertinent food businesses. These include inadequate food safety awareness, poor hygienic and/or food storage and preparation practices, and deficient infrastructure and environmental conditions. In many instances, both the incentives and the capacities to provide safer food are weak. This is a societal and economic problem and not a trivial or transitional issue. We estimate that the traditional/informal food

sector accounts for a large majority of the public health burden of foodborne disease in low and lower middle-income countries.

Very few countries have coherent strategies for tackling food safety risks in the informal sector.

Often, the operative approach involves periodic attempts to disrupt small-scale food operators, in the hope of hastening their business demise and ushering something more consistent with the official vision of a 'modern' food system and 'orderly' cities. This exclusion model does not make food safer, and it harms the ability of many consumers to access and afford nutritional and convenient foods. It also erodes the livelihood of poor informal business operators. Many low- and lower middle-income countries (and development assistance projects therein) have targeted informal players with food safety awareness-raising and low-cost technology uptake interventions. These have tended to bring short-term benefits but have generally not been scalable nor brought sustainable results when not paired with other interventions impacting infrastructure and/or the prevailing incentives facing food operators.



Most of the policy attention and resources now devoted to domestic food safety in the developing world focuses on strengthening centralized systems for 'food control'.

This has involved passage of a modern food law, and investments in testing laboratories, food company inspection units, and national agency capacities for food hazard and foodborne disease surveillance. Resource limitations have led incipient food safety agencies to focus on oversight and other interactions with medium and larger food enterprises and the 'modern' dimensions of food retail and food service. Many national food safety agencies have little or no contact with informal food operators and businesses. This is unlikely to change anytime soon. And, there do not appear to be appreciable spillovers to the domestic informal sector from investments in enhanced food safety management in export-oriented value chains.

Doing more of the same things is not going to deliver safer food in the informal sector.

A very different approach needs to be operationalized and tested. This would involve adjustments in institutional mandates, the locus and thematic clustering of interventions, and the approach towards regulatory delivery vis-à-vis this sector. In this modified approach, emphasis would be placed on:

- **Local action, centrally guided.** The bulk of interventions, both regulatory and facilitative, need to come at the municipal level and the drive for safer food in the informal sector should be embedded in strategies for healthy, sustainable, and resilient cities. National agencies would still have important roles, mobilizing resources and providing guidelines and technical backstopping. At the local level, multistakeholder (i.e. consumer, community, business association, and government) platforms should be further nurtured and utilized. In many instances, effective action by municipal governments will require a mindset change which recognizes the important role played by the informal sector not only in terms of livelihoods but also in urban food and nutritional security.
- **Multisectoral action.** Stand-alone food safety interventions may not be the best option. Rather, improving the safety of food in the informal sector can be better achieved and better resourced when bundled with interventions to improve nutrition, increase access to potable water/improved sanitation, improve environmental management, upgrade urban infrastructure, and/or others. This also implies the need firmly to mainstream food safety into urban planning and into approaches to deliver improved municipal services.

- **Rebalancing the use of sticks and carrots.** Strict enforcement of regulatory provisions is unlikely to be effective vis-à-vis most informal sector food operators. Rather, gradual, and continuous enhancements in practices and/or facilities should be sought. Where feasible, greater effort should go into engaging and enabling the informal market operators to strengthen both their incentives and capacities to carry out their businesses in ways which result in safer food. It would be beneficial for cities (or local branches of ministries) to employ as many food hygiene/food business advisors as they do (regulatory) inspectors.
- **Differentiating local strategies and priorities.** This is not a field where 'one size fits all'. The risk profile for different types of informal food operators varies as does the likely scope for interventions targeting them. And the settings for actions vary a lot, not only between low-, lower middle- and upper middle-income countries, but also within individual countries. Operationalizing this decentralized and multisectoral approach will need to be tailored, pragmatically, to prevailing circumstances in terms of specific coalitions for action and how interventions are sequenced or integrated with one another. This is common practice in the evolving field of urban food policy and governance, yet there are fewer applications of this for food safety.

Elements of this approach are already being applied in some situations and their implementation should be closely monitored, and emerging lessons shared. For example, a variant of this approach is currently being implemented through the Eat Right India program and complementary initiatives where efforts are pursuing a combination of healthy eating, safer food, and environmental sustainability goals through state- and municipal-level interventions, guided by a central government agency. The societal roles of informal food distribution channels are formally recognized in this program and a variety of approaches are being used to engage informal food business operators, individually, in clustered locations and through representative associations.





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