

Empowering the informal food sector to deliver healthy, safe, and affordable diets and support livelihoods and income in urban areas

Name of the key gap:

Informal food vendors

What problem is your proposition addressing?

Urban residents in low- and middle-income countries primarily depend on informal vendors for daily food purchases. Informal markets are the key source of fresh foods (fruits and vegetables, blue foods, and animal source foods) for the urban poor. In addition, informal food trading and vending are the primary livelihood source for a large proportion of the urban population and play a particularly important role for women. Despite its importance for diets and income, the informal food sector faces significant challenges. Food in informal markets is often unsafe with high levels of contaminants and pathogens. The presence of hazards in informal markets are just one of the reasons why officials and planners often try to suppress this sector. Informal food vendors regularly face harassment and extortion by law enforcement officials. The challenges faced by vendors are largely due to the erratic governance of this sector.

The informal food sector has enormous potential to contribute to improving the nutrition, health, and livelihoods of the poor, but this potential is yet to be unleashed.

How does your proposition address the problem?

Our solution has two key components. **First, we will engage with and secure commitment from all actors overseeing urban informal vendors**, including relevant ministries as well as metropolitan and municipal governments. Specific actions will, among others, include: consolidate policies and regulations, identify where greater policy coherence is needed, and reform policies and regulations to balance vendors' right to livelihoods, on the one hand, and nutrition, public health, and food safety, on the other; develop transparency mechanisms (such as scorecards) that inform vendors how the operating licenses/fees they pay are used and what share are reinvested into infrastructure; identify market infrastructure deficiencies through scorecards and mapping in order to help municipal governments recognize where they need to target resources or where certain procurement practices (e.g., outsourcing trash collection to a private sector collector) are not working; map market and vendor locations and their accessibility to consumers to inform urban planning departments who oversee market upgrading initiatives; set up memoranda of understanding between municipal governments and street hawkers to allow for trading on certain streets at certain times of the week.

Second, we will support the formation of alliances between associations of informal food vendors, civil society actors, and consumer groups and use these as a platform to improve the healthfulness and safety of foods sold while maintaining affordability. Key areas of action include training, certification, and business and marketing interventions paired with provision of water and sanitation facilities. Vendors will be empowered with new knowledge and skills in business management, food safety, and nutrition and healthy diets; and will be certified when meeting all criteria. Communication training will help traders better articulate their needs/positions to urban governments and to the public via the media. Actions will be gender- and youth-sensitive and will pay particular attention to the challenging position of women and youth in the informal food sector.

Is this a new solution or an existing solution that needs scaling?

New solution

Which organisation/s, institution/s or groups of individuals are associated with the solution?

Submitting organization: International Food Policy Research Institute.

When selected, the game changing solution will be developed further by a consortium of organizations that may include the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (www.gainhealth.org), the World Sustainable Urban Food Centre (cemas.global/en/), the International Livestock Research

Institute (www.ilri.org), and other global initiatives focusing on urban food systems and women employed in the informal sector.

What is the scientific evidence that supports your proposition?

Notwithstanding the trend of supermarket expansion, urban residents in low- and middle-income countries depend heavily on informal vendors for daily food purchases. Key reasons include the accessibility and the greater affordability of foods given that informal vendors often sell in smaller quantities and on credit (1). In African cities up to 70% of households source food and meals from informal markets/vendors (2). In addition to being a key food supplier to the urban poor, the informal food sector is an important source of income, especially for women. Nearly 80% of the female African labor force works in the non-agriculture informal sector (3). Women are the primary sellers of street foods and perishable goods, such as fruits and vegetables (4–6).

Despite its importance for food security, diets, and income, the informal food sector faces several challenges. Partly due to the lack of clean water and sanitation facilities, the food sold in informal markets is often unsafe, containing high levels of contaminants and pathogens (7). Consumption of unsafe foods is responsible for 600 million foodborne illnesses and nearly 500,000 deaths yearly, with 98% of this burden in low- and middle-income countries (8); consuming unsafe foods reduces nutrient bioavailability and thus negatively affects nutritional status, a particular concern for children under 5 who carry 40% of the foodborne disease burden (8–10).

Informal vendors are often accused of violating food safety regulations and threatening public health; they fall victim to extortion and demands for bribes by police officers and other enforcement officials; they face arrests, confiscation of merchandise, demolition of stalls, physical harm, and forced relocation (11–13). Many of the challenges faced by informal food vendors are due to poor governance, which is a consequence of a lack cross-ministerial coordinating mechanisms and poor coordination and competition between oversight authorities at the national and municipal or metropolitan levels.

Efforts to support informal food markets and vendors (many of which are women) and improve the food safety and nutritional value of their products are critically important not only for their livelihoods but also to deliver affordable, safe, and healthy diets for the urban poor.

Is this idea applicable to a particular geography, demography, landscape or other type of setting?

This idea focuses on **informal vendors** in **urban areas** in **low-and middle-income countries**.

Who are the main actors that would put this action into place?

The development and implementation of this idea will require close collaboration and coordinated action from **policy makers**, **cities**, the **private sector**, **civil society organizations**, **public health authorities**, and **consumers**.

Source and process

Jef Leroy, IFPRI, j.leroy@cgiar.org - AT2 Leadership Team member

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