The informal food trade

The rapid growth of the urban population has been accompanied with growth in poverty. The informal food trade has fast emerged as a livelihood strategy and source of inexpensive food for many poor households. There is an urgent need for supportive policies and interventions that link food safety improvements with efforts to alleviate poverty among small-scale enterprises and street food vendors.

Street foods and poverty alleviation

Urbanization has been coupled with increasing urban poverty. Between one-fourth and one-third of all urban households in the world live in absolute poverty.

Urban poverty rates are reported to be 90% in Latin America, 45% in Asia and 40% in Africa. Although in statistical terms, Africa presents the lowest rates of urban poverty and of urbanization worldwide, it is also the region where the pace and scope of urban poverty growth is the highest.

The street food trade has evolved to be an important source of employment, particularly for women who are quite often the victims of poverty.

Street food is a source of livelihood for people who would otherwise be unable to establish a business for want of capital. In Cotonou in the early 1990s it was estimated that the early turnover of the street food trade was about US$ 20 million.

A mini-census and a survey by the National Resources Institute of 334 street vendors in Accra, Ghana indicated that the street food sector employs over 60,000 people and has an estimated annual turnover of over US$100 million.

3 Codjia. FAO. Technical Support for Improvements within the Street Food Sector. June 2000.
Prevalence of Street foods

Overall, consumer spending on street foods represents a significant proportion of the household budget. In Abidjan, 20% of meals are taken outside of the home and most of these are purchased from street vendors. 3

In Ghana, reports indicate that almost 40% of the total food budget goes to purchasing street foods in the lowest expenditure quintile, and 2% in high-income households. 4

Street foods and food safety

Despite the implications of street foods to food security and local economies, several outbreaks of foodborne diseases have been traced to consumption of contaminated street foods.

Numerous studies have been documented on the potential contamination of street foods by pathogenic microorganisms. A study on the microbial quality of street foods in Accra, Ghana found evidence of *Shigella sonnei*, enteroaggregative *Escherichia coli* and *Salmonella arizonae* in some of the food samples. 5

Food stalls often lack the necessary storage, refrigeration and cooking facilities to prevent contamination by bacteria. Limited access to clean water and waste disposal increases the risk of contamination being passed on to customers.

Addressing the challenges of the Informal food trade

Government intervention is clearly important in ensuring that the general public has access to wholesome, safe and nutritious food.

Strategies for improving street food safety may include consideration of: 6

- Policy, regulation, registration and licenses;
- Infrastructure, services and vending unit design and construction;
- Training of food handlers; and
- Education of consumers.

In responding to this challenge, it is essential to bear in mind the strategic links between efforts to improve food safety and poverty reduction.

WHO has long recognized the importance of street foods to local communities and as a potential source of foodborne illness.

The Regional Office has initiated a number of programmes to improve the safety of street vended foods. This has included among others the development of training materials and guidance for the informal food sector, promotion of education campaigns to increase consumer awareness about the safety of street vended foods.

The Healthy Food Market concept continues to be promoted as one of the viable settings for the enhancement and education of food safety in food markets. Countries are supported to take local action and the greater use of participatory approaches to food safety efforts.

Recognizing the overall implications of street and market food vending to poverty alleviation, there is further need to link such local action in relation to healthy marketplaces with poverty reduction. Sustainable poverty reduction would be a necessary contributor to any significant improvement in food safety within the region.

For More Information on Food Safety and Nutrition please contact Division of Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases (DNC). B.P. 6 Congo, Brazzaville.

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6 WHO/FNU/FOS/96.7