FLAGSHIP 1 | Food Systems for Healthier Diets

Highlight 2: Exploring the Unique Challenges of Urban Food Systems

As urban populations continue to grow, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, so too does the complexity of the food systems that support them. Urban consumers face great constraints on their time, which affects how much time they can devote to food preparation. These urban consumers rely heavily on formal and informal markets to meet their dietary needs, rather than producing their own food.

Through A4NH’s Food Systems for Healthier Diets (FSHD) Flagship, researchers are working to understand the choices that urban consumers are making in order to identify policies, innovations, and interventions that could lead to healthier eating. In Nigeria, researchers from Wageningen University and Research (WUR) are taking vegetables into focus. A quantitative survey of 1,200 urban households identified vegetables as a standard component of meals, but with limited variety (mainly tomato, onion, and pepper) and mainly eaten cooked, such as in stews. In search of the drivers of vegetable purchases, the consumer researchers are adapting a Food Choice Questionnaire—a tool long used to uncover the choices and motivations of consumers in high-income countries but rarely tailored to capture considerations particular to low- and middle-income countries.

Through 24 group discussions with 170 participants and interviews with people from different socioeconomic backgrounds in cities across Nigeria, WUR researchers delved into the various motivations underlying consumer food choices, particularly around vegetable consumption, including health, convenience, affordability, and familiarity. Health was found to be the biggest factor overall in motivating food choice, while the importance of others such as price and mood varied among different socioeconomic classes. The research is unpacking motives into a broad concept that includes associations to the nutritional, functional, and medicinal aspects of health.

These findings will be used in future research to test and validate interventions and innovations in food systems aimed at increasing vegetable consumption, a high and challenging priority in most urban areas. Lessons and case studies from Nigeria can inform similar work being carried out by A4NH in its other focus countries and by other partners in urban areas across Africa and around the world.

Because they are transforming so quickly, urban food systems in low- and middle-income countries are of particular interest to researchers. Hanoi, Viet Nam, for example, is facing multi-faceted challenges related to diet quality: undernutrition, overnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and food safety concerns. In 2017, researchers embarked on a two-year project in Viet Nam to understand how the organization of daily life influences the food choices people make. The official partners of this project are Fresh Studio, Bioversity International, and WUR. It is funded by the University of South Carolina, within the Drivers of Food Choice Competitive Grant Program funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and UK Aid.

In the past, Viet Nam’s urban poor purchased fresh foods from traditional wet markets and informal street markets, often on a daily basis. As the food system has changed, however, modern retail outlets such as supermarkets have become more prevalent. Consumers of all income levels are suddenly faced with a host of concerns and trade-offs. While questions have arisen related to food safety in traditional markets, new retail outlets pose a different set of challenges, including access, cost, and exposure to ultraprocessed foods high in fat and low in micronutrients.

In this context, researchers are exploring how the urban poor are dealing with the changing food environment, by looking at where they source their foods based on their physical distance from supermarkets and traditional wet markets. They are conducting interviews with women to explore how decisions are made based on their knowledge, perception, and priorities regarding nutrition, food safety, and convenience, and gathering data on what household members are eating. They are also working to understand how decisions are being made across generations. Tracking how consumer choices are evolving will help determine important policy considerations for the future.