Highlight 3: Research Informs Design of $13 Million Investment in Improving Food Safety

Food safety is a relatively new focus for international agricultural research, and food safety in informal food markets has long been a neglected area of research. Over the past decade, research carried out by the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), an A4NH Managing Partner, with partners has filled evidence gaps on the food safety burden and management in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In 2018, ILRI evidence was used by two investors, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), to shape their $13 million research-for-development investment in food safety.

Recommendations from ILRI’s work on investing more in local, informal markets to improve domestic health outcomes, instead of investing in export markets, were at the core of BMGF and DFID’s first call on food safety. According to the investors, the interplay between good nutrition and food safety is striking: “We know nutritious and varied diets are essential to achieving nutritional outcomes, yet it is in fact some of the most nutritious foods, like fresh fruits, vegetables and animal source foods, which are the most at risk of contamination by biological hazards. As incomes rise in LMICs, and more people are able to access a varied diet, it is critical that we invest in food safety.”

Their statements echo ILRI’s evidence-based messages, visible in work carried out under A4NH’s Food Safety flagship, which is led by ILRI. Nearly half of the references in the request for applications cited ILRI research—research that showed, through risk-based approaches, that all value chain actors from farm to fork are risk managers, and that training informal value chain actors who receive business benefits from training has been more successful than training primary producers alone.

The call cited a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) commissioned report that synthesizes work on research gaps and opportunities in food safety and informal markets, and a BMGF commissioned paper for Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Nigeria that summarizes evidence on questions such as: Which sectors should be targeted to ensure food safety investments have the greatest impact? Which food safety hazards should be prioritized? Which foods and value chains to invest in? Which investments are most likely to succeed?

In response to the call, six grants were awarded. Evidence-based interventions will be tested at a large scale, potentially reducing foodborne disease risks for millions of consumers in six countries in Africa—Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Tanzania—and one state in India.

We would like to thank the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the UK Department for International Development, and the US Agency for International Development for their support of this research. We also would like to thank all funders who supported this research through their contributions to the CGIAR Trust Fund.