The food environment, or where consumers interact with the food system to choose the foods they will eat, comprises a critical component of the food system, including informal and formal markets. Through food availability and access, advertising and promotion, and considerations about convenience, preparation, and time, the food environment has significant impacts on diet and nutrition outcomes, yet research in this area is often lacking. With its demand-driven perspective on food systems transformation, the food environment has long been of interest to researchers in the Food Systems for Healthier Diets (FSHD) flagship. In 2020, FSHD researchers worked to fill the evidence and knowledge gaps on the food environment and consumer behavior, releasing a series of studies that examine the issue from a variety of perspectives.

One such study was conducted by researchers from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and Wageningen University & Research (WUR), in collaboration with Viet Nam’s National Institute of Nutrition, and involved a cluster-randomized trial in 12 schools in peri-urban areas. Schools are often considered as entry points to improve children’s diets, and through them, those of adults. The study set out to see if school-based interventions increased knowledge about healthy diets among children and parents, as well as children’s consumption of healthy food. Results showed increased daily fruit consumption, but found challenges in child-to-parent communication about healthy eating.

A study conducted by A4NH researchers from WUR and the Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI) actively engaged the voices of adolescents in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, by giving them cameras and asking them to answer questions on challenges to and opportunities for healthy eating by taking photographs of the world around them. Insights gained from this innovative outreach effort included the role of parental influence; tradeoffs between price, safety, and health; hygiene issues in food outlets; and why packaged foods can be an attractive choice. The researchers note that the insights can help parents, policymakers, and others understand barriers to healthy eating at this critical stage in life, and target improvements in food environments or education accordingly.

Researchers from FSHD also collaborated with colleagues in A4NH’s flagship on Supporting Policies, Programs, and Enabling Action through Research (SPEAR) to learn about eating choices and obesogenic behaviors among girls and women. With overweight and obesity rates on the rise globally, and particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), understanding the choices and challenges facing this group is particularly important given the increased nutritional requirements of adolescent girls and young women. The study revealed challenges ranging from lack of knowledge about the importance of exercise and diet for health to issues in the school environment to challenges of accessibility and mobility in urban areas.

Studies such as these provide information urgently needed by policymakers and other stakeholders, and A4NH serves an important function in synthesizing such information in a way that makes it easily understood and taken up. In 2020, FSHD researchers and colleagues authored a strategic brief on supporting consumer choices toward healthy, sustainable, and safe diets in LMICs, designed to provide a point of entry to the particular challenges of the food environment for those in position to develop policies and programs to overcome these challenges.

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