

How safe is the food you buy and sell?

Using behavioral science to empower consumers in Nigeria and Ethiopia to demand for and prioritise safe, nutritious foods in informal markets while enabling vendors to be receptive to the consumers' demand for safe food.

project facts

Key words

Consumers, Food Safety, Food System Resilience, Traditional Markets, Vendors

Behavioral themes

Nigeria: Gain and Loss Framing; Salience, Sociocultural norms

Risk perception, Self efficacy.

Ethiopia: Loss aversion, Descriptive & Injunctive Norms, The Contrast Effect Bias, Availability Bias & Salience

Research design

Qualitative formative research and Quantitative testing of interventions through Lab experiments, and Mini-RCTs

Scope

Start date: July 2019

End date: February 2024

Location

Nigeria: Kebbi and Sokoto States

Ethiopia: Hawassa

Partner

EatSafe was implemented by a consortium led by Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), Pierce Mill Entertainment and Education LLC (PME), International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), and Busara Center for Behavioral Economics (Busara).

Ethics approval

Nigeria: National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC).

Ethiopia: Sidama National Regional State Health Bureau Public Health Institute.

Background: Working with vendors and consumers to improve food safety in Nigeria and Ethiopia

Food safety is a pressing concern in both Nigeria and Ethiopia with estimates suggesting that 60% to 80% of illnesses in Ethiopia are caused by pathogens spread via the food supply (Temesgen, 2015). Traditional markets – or “informal” food marketplaces – have become critical to food security, nutrition, and livelihoods for millions of Ethiopians. However, with a lack of regulations, compliance, and training for vendors, food safety practices are often limited in aforementioned markets. We used behavioral science to empower consumers to demand for and prioritise safe, nutritious foods in informal markets while enabling vendors to be receptive to the consumers' demand for safe food.

Conducting the research

In the formative phase, we conducted behavior science literature review and an in-market targeted behavioral research in the form of qualitative interviews. This was achieved through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with vendors and consumers across both countries.

We then organized co-design workshops in each country to rapidly produce ideas for interventions. Later, these intervention ideas were further evaluated using a matrix that took into account potential for efficacy, enabling environment, frugality and resource requirements, fair and equitable, incentive, innovation, cultural feasibility and acceptability, and ability to increase capacity. This was followed by a workshop with stakeholders from consumers, vendors, local government, the health sector, the private sector, research organizations, and academicians from universities to validate the intervention ideas and gather input for enhancing and modifying the interventions. The Abinci Fes-Fes program, launched in October 2022 in Kebbi and Sokoto States, Nigeria, aims to improve food safety practices. It trains vendors on hygiene and safe food handling while providing branded materials to create a distinct identity for safer food options, supported by a consumer-focused awareness campaign.

» **Vendor Insights – Nigeria:**

Trained vendors to improve hygiene, increasing trust and sales. Key challenges included high waste disposal costs and poor infrastructure. Personal hygiene (bathing, nail trimming, aprons) was easier to maintain, improving customer retention.

» **Consumer Insights – Nigeria**

Branded, hygienic vendors were preferred for food purchases despite queues and slightly higher prices. Social norms reinforced this choice.

» **Insights from Ethiopia:**

Hygienic vendors saw quick financial returns. Messages linking food safety to family care, delivered via frequency radio shows and posters, resonated with consumers.

Implications

For market authorities:

- They should ensure the provision of water and waste disposal sites in the market.
- There should be continuous training and monitoring of vendors with incentives for increased adoption of food safety practices.
- Provide mentorship programs through model vendors and encourage unbranded vendors to join through success stories and testimonials to sustain the training intervention.

For vendors:

Having the right information is the first step in changing any behavior. In this regard, the food safety training elevated vendors' knowledge regarding food safety and cleanliness; vendors'

belief in their ability to carry out food safety tasks was substantially boosted by the practical, hands-on training and the food safety supplies provided.

Recommendations for future research

Future research and interventions should consider the rationale behind the use of food sanitation measures and questions such as:

- What are longer-term effects of providing food safety tools to vendors? In particular, could this create a new social expectation for all vendors to take similar measures?
- If public goods such as running water and communal waste disposal were available to vendors, would they use and maintain them?
- What are the community relationships within vendors and between vendors and the local authorities that could be leveraged to enforce better food safety standards?

Further reading

Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition. 2022. Evaluation of Consumer and Vendor Behaviors in a Traditional Food Market in Hawassa, Ethiopia A USAID EatSafe Project Report.

Temesgen, Melese. (2015). Ensuring the quality and safety of food in Ethiopia. Public Policy and Administration Research. Vol.5.

Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition. 2022. EatSafe in Ethiopia Municipal Roundtable Discussion on Developing Safe Markets for Nutritious Food in Hawassa. A USAID program report.

Study team

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