

Retail Diversity for Dietary Diversity: Preventing Nutrition Deserts for the Urban Poor Within the Transforming Food Retail Environment in Vietnam

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Key Takeaways

- Traditional food outlets (e.g., wet markets) are the predominant food source among the urban poor of Hanoi, Vietnam.
- In an effort to improve food safety, policies encouraging construction of modern retail outlets (e.g., supermarkets, convenience stores) simultaneously close and/or replace traditional markets, which threaten the food and nutrition security of the urban poor by reducing the accessibility and affordability of fruits and vegetables and increasing access to ultra-processed foods. Where wet markets are unavailable, the urban poor opted to shop at informal street markets, which lack hygiene.
- Nearly 90% of households preferred shopping at traditional markets over modern retail outlets due to diversity and perceived freshness of produce, convenience of location, operating hours, modality of shopping, enjoyment of open-air market shopping, affordability, and higher trust in the safety of the produce.
- Traditional market shopping also played a role in maintaining key social and cultural traditions by facilitating interactions with friends and neighbors, supporting local businesses and livelihoods, and providing ingredients for local and traditional dishes.
- Supermarkets were approximately 35% more expensive than traditional markets, and over three-fourths of households (85%) felt that the food-safety certified supermarket products were either unaffordable or didn't offer value for money since the supposed better quality, food safety and freshness, was questioned.
- Qualitative multi-generational interviews revealed that shifts toward Westernized diets are increasingly happening as parents, who once noticed many in their generation succumb to malnutrition, cave to children's desires for foods high in refined carbohydrates, saturated fats, and sodium, which has led to rises in childhood obesity.

Objectives

The overall project objective was to provide insights into how, why, in what ways and to what extent transformations in the food retail environment in Hanoi, Vietnam impact how the urban poor interact with their local food system, and the implications for their dietary intake. The study also sought to provide policy recommendations which could be incorporated into urban planning for food retail to ensure that safe and nutritious foods are in reach of all socioeconomic groups within the population.

Background

Retail modernization policies have altered food environments and subsequently, food choices of the urban poor, who normally shop at traditional “wet” markets. Vietnam’s retail modernization policies (called

“supermarketization”) seek to scale up supermarket development and reduce proliferation of wet markets. These policies were implemented due to pressure from consumers at all income levels who were concerned about the safety of fresh produce. However, Hanoi’s urban poor greatly depend on traditional outlets to supply their households with fresh and nutritious foods at affordable prices, so retail modernization policies may not be as beneficial as they are made to believe.

Methods

This study took place in two inner-city districts of Hanoi. 40% of the city’s population is classified as “urban poor” – those earning an average daily income of ~\$3.84 USD— and spend ~41% of their household income on food. Quantitative methods were used to capture the physical

food retail environment (including retail formats, food availability, diversity and price, and the provision of food safety information) and assess participants' diets, shopping habits, and nutrition knowledge and attitudes. Data was derived from a retail census, GPS mapping, a 24-hour dietary recall, and a household survey. Qualitative methods were used to understand participants' perceptions of how food habits have changed over time and the positive and negative consequences of these dietary transitions. Data was derived from combined household interviews and shopping visits as well as multigenerational in-depth interviews. The team also filmed participants as part of data collection and used this footage to develop a short documentary voicing the urban poor's perspectives. The documentary was utilized as evidence of practices in a multi-stakeholder policy workshop in developing more inclusive strategies for improving the accessibility of food safe and nutritious foods.

Results

Hanoi's urban poor preferred shopping at traditional markets over modern retail outlets, even if the latter was located close to their home. In instances where traditional markets were located farther away, the urban poor would shop at informal street markets, which are unregulated and unhygienic, over supermarkets. Consumers were aware

of the importance of good food, but still had low dietary diversity. Some of the main drivers of traditional market shopping were perceived freshness and safety of products offered, diversity of food selection, convenient locations and hours, enjoyment and culture of the open-air market shopping experience, and affordability. Supermarkets were considered inconvenient; taking too much time for shopping and opening too late in the morning. Besides supermarkets were not trusted to offer better food safety and freshness than the traditional markets and thus, with an average price premium of 35% over markets, offering no better value for money.

Over 40% of a household's income was spent on in-home food consumption. Children appear to influence the food choices of the household, with the introduction of fast-food style western food (e.g. fried chicken) requested for preparation at home. Older generations believed that if children can choose what they want to eat, they will eat more and grow better. Daughters and daughters-in-law felt that supermarkets were not convenient because they can be time or cost prohibitive, and they felt more comfortable with their relationships with traditional market vendors. Their parents and grandparents, however, saw value in supermarkets, yet they themselves would rarely visit them, and if so, mostly as a recreational activity.

More Information

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- Wertheim-Heck S, Raneri J. (2017) "Food safety and Nutrition for the urban poor." Documentary produced within the project Retail diversity for dietary diversity - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZiZ2xSvffY>
- **Open Access Data** - <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/RetailDiversity4DietDiversity>
- **Project Page** - <https://driversoffoodchoice.org/research/project-descriptions/preventing-nutrition-deserts/>

This research has been funded by the Drivers of Food Choice (DFC) Competitive Grants Program, which is funded by the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and managed by the University of South Carolina, Arnold School of Public Health, USA; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

