

IMPROVING FOOD SAFETY IN ETHIOPIA'S TRADITIONAL MARKETS:

A path to greater access to affordable safe food

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February 2025

KEY MESSAGES

- Traditional markets in Ethiopia are a major source of food for a large segment of the population.
- Food safety in these markets remains a significant public health challenge. Poor infrastructure, inconsistent hygiene practices, and limited regulatory oversight expose consumers to foodborne illnesses and other health risks.
- Addressing the challenges of food safety in Ethiopia's traditional markets requires a multisectoral approach, involving infrastructure improvements, customized regulatory approaches and capacity building initiatives.



INTRODUCTION

Foodborne illnesses represent a significant health challenge worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO)¹, there are over 91 million cases of foodborne diseases in Africa annually, leading to 137,000 deaths. Ethiopia's burden, as part of this region, is estimated to be high. In a study looking at diseases that cause premature death in Ethiopia, diarrheal diseases were found to have the second highest burden². Unsafe food handling practices in traditional markets could increase the risk of contamination of food with agents that can cause illness, such as toxins or microorganisms.

Traditional markets, which are located across Ethiopia, are important for supplying consumers with fresh produce and other varieties of produce at relatively affordable prices.

The food supply chain in Ethiopia is dominated by the informal sector, with vendors from this sector handling much of the food that people eat. This includes fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy products, meat and fish and other perishable produce. However, these markets are predominantly traditional, with minimal infrastructure to ensure food safety. Many vendors operate with no or inadequate awareness on food safety, and food is often sold in open-air stalls where hygiene practices are not in place.³

This policy brief highlights the key food safety risks associated with traditional markets in Ethiopia and proposes recommendations to improve food safety practices. Addressing these concerns is essential to protect public health, reduce foodborne illnesses, and ensure consumer confidence in traditional markets.

1 World Health Organization. (2015). Global estimates and regional comparisons of the burden of foodborne disease in 2010. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241565165>

2 Misganaw, A., Melaku, Y. A., Tessema, G. A., Deribew, A., Deribe, K., Abera, S. F., ... & Naghavi, M. (2017). National disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) for 257 diseases and injuries in Ethiopia, 1990–2015: Findings from the global burden of disease study 2015. *Population Health Metrics*, 15(28). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12963-017-0146-0>

3 Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition. (2023). EatSafe in Ethiopia baseline assessment. A USAID EatSafe Project Report. https://www.gainhealth.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/EatSafe_in_Ethiopia_Baseline_Assessment.pdf

THE TRADITIONAL MARKET CONTEXT

Ethiopian traditional markets are part of the country's cultural heritage. These markets have been important social and economic hubs of Ethiopian society for centuries, as spaces where people from different communities come together to trade, exchanging food, other goods, ideas, and cultures.

A traditional Ethiopian market stands out from its surroundings, with stalls made of wood, straw, or plastic materials. Goods are often displayed on the ground or on makeshift tables.

Most informal open markets do not have a permanent structure, but they may have temporary shades occupying space on the side of the pavement or municipal open area. They are sometimes mobile, with vendors moving from place to place carrying the food they are selling on push carts or in baskets.

Unfortunately, raw and ready-to-eat foods prepared and sold to the public in these traditional markets can be a major public health threat. The poor environmental conditions and the unhygienic practices of the vendors and other market operators contribute to this.⁴ Food is left out in the sun, exposed to dust, wind, smoke, and flies. It may be placed on dirty surfaces, which are often contaminated with microorganisms and other vectors known to cause ill health. Most informal markets have no facilities like running water, toilets, drainage, garbage disposal and clean storage areas, making it difficult to properly clean and disinfect surfaces.



UNSAFE FOOD IS A MAJOR CONCERN



Consumption of unsafe food causes more than 200 diseases, ranging from diarrhea to cancer and death. Low levels of food safety represent a significant health challenge, leading to a high prevalence of food-borne diseases (FBDs). The most common pathogens that cause foodborne illness that are reported in Ethiopia include *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Campylobacter spp.*, *Escherichia coli*, *Salmonella*, and *Shigella*.⁵

Efforts to implement and enforce safer food systems in Ethiopia have been very limited. Work has tended to focus on food safety implementation in formal, medium and large-scale food processing – mainly for export. Traditional markets, dominated by informal, small and medium-sized businesses, are typically given little to no attention. Thus, although the majority of Ethiopia's population depends on traditional markets for daily

4 Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). (2023). EatSafe learnings from formative research in Ethiopia. <https://www.gainhealth.org/resources/reports-and-publications/eatsafe-learnings-formative-research-ethiopia>

5 Belina, D., Hailu, Y., Gobena, T., Hald, T., & Njage, P. M. K. (2021). Prevalence and epidemiological distribution of selected foodborne pathogens in human and different environmental samples in Ethiopia: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *One Health Outlook*, 3, Article 19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42522-021-00048-5>

supplies, especially of fresh food, food safety remains a big issue. Studies indicate that food sourced through informal markets accounts for 80% of cases of food-borne disease in low-income countries.⁶ According to some studies in Ethiopia, a high level of parasitic contamination in fruits and vegetables sold in local markets are identified.⁷

Many vendors and marketers operate in settings without access to necessary infrastructure including a lack of access to electricity, clean water or appropriate sanitation practices. This increases the risk of foodborne diseases and in turn contributes to micronutrient deficiencies.

The key challenges include:

Poor Sanitation Infrastructure and Hygiene

Many traditional markets lack proper sanitation facilities, including clean water, waste disposal systems, handwashing stations, and toilets. This can lead to contamination of food products and the spread of diseases.



Lack of Storage Facilities

Without adequate storage facilities and refrigeration, perishable goods including fresh vegetables, fish, and dairy are often stored at unsafe temperatures, increasing the risk of bacterial growth and food spoilage.

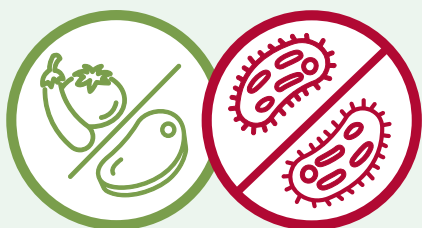
Limited Vendor Knowledge

Food safety practices are not commonly known to many vendors resulting in the improper handling of foods.



Inadequate Food Safety Regulations

There is an absence of customized regulatory schemes in place to enforce food safety requirements in traditional markets. Food safety remains compromised without regulations and enforcement, with unsafe practices like improper food handling, cross-contamination, and the sale of unsafe products able to continue. This contributes to foodborne illnesses, undermines consumer trust, and poses significant public health risks.



Ethiopia is working to embed food safety within its food system transformation through various ways. For example, food safety is identified as one of the game-changing solutions in the food system pathways, as is development of food safety strategies and initiatives. Furthermore, food safety for traditional market guidelines have been established. These guidelines offer advice on food safety and hygienic handling activities to all stakeholders relevant to traditional markets for food where raw, prepared and/or ready-to-eat foods are sold.

6 Henson, S., Jaffee, S. and Wang, S. 2023. New directions for tackling food safety risks in the informal sector of developing countries. Nairobi, Kenya: ILRI.)

7 Gazu, L., Alonso, S., Mutua, F., Roesel, K., Lindahl, J. F., Amenu, K., Maximiano Sousa, F., Ulrich, P., Guadu, T., Dione, M., Ilboudo, G., Knight-Jones, T., & Grace, D. (2023). Foodborne disease hazards and burden in Ethiopia: A systematic literature review, 1990–2019. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 7, Article 1058977. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2023.1058977>

CALL TO ACTION

Three key actions can be taken to begin to address the problems described.

1) Public and private investment in market infrastructure

Food safety requires facilities such as sanitation facilities, clean water sources, drainage systems, waste disposal systems, storage units and stalls, as well as shade in traditional markets. All of these features are required to reduce contamination and ensure food safety.



2) Establish a scheme for inspection and regulation

Currently in Ethiopia, a guideline or standard for food safety in traditional market has been developed by the Institute of Ethiopian Standards. This guideline should be used to create a customized regulatory scheme that includes a set of minimum standards to be adhered to by the vendors, and an inspection system to ensure compliance and prompt necessary actions for improvement. This should include disincentives for non-compliance and incentives for conforming to the food safety requirements.



3) Provide training for vendors

The public sector should educate vendors on the importance of food safety and safe food handling, including personal hygiene, temperature control, waste management, and other requirements that ensure the safety of food.



CONCLUSION

Action is now required to recognize the important role of traditional markets by investing in interventions and key infrastructure that helps to address the challenges in these markets. These include developing customized food safety regulations, capacitating relevant institutes, and synergizing efforts across different stakeholders such as the regulatory bodies, vendors and institutions working on capacity developments to improve enforcement of regulations and invest in market infrastructure.



Healthier Diets. For all.

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