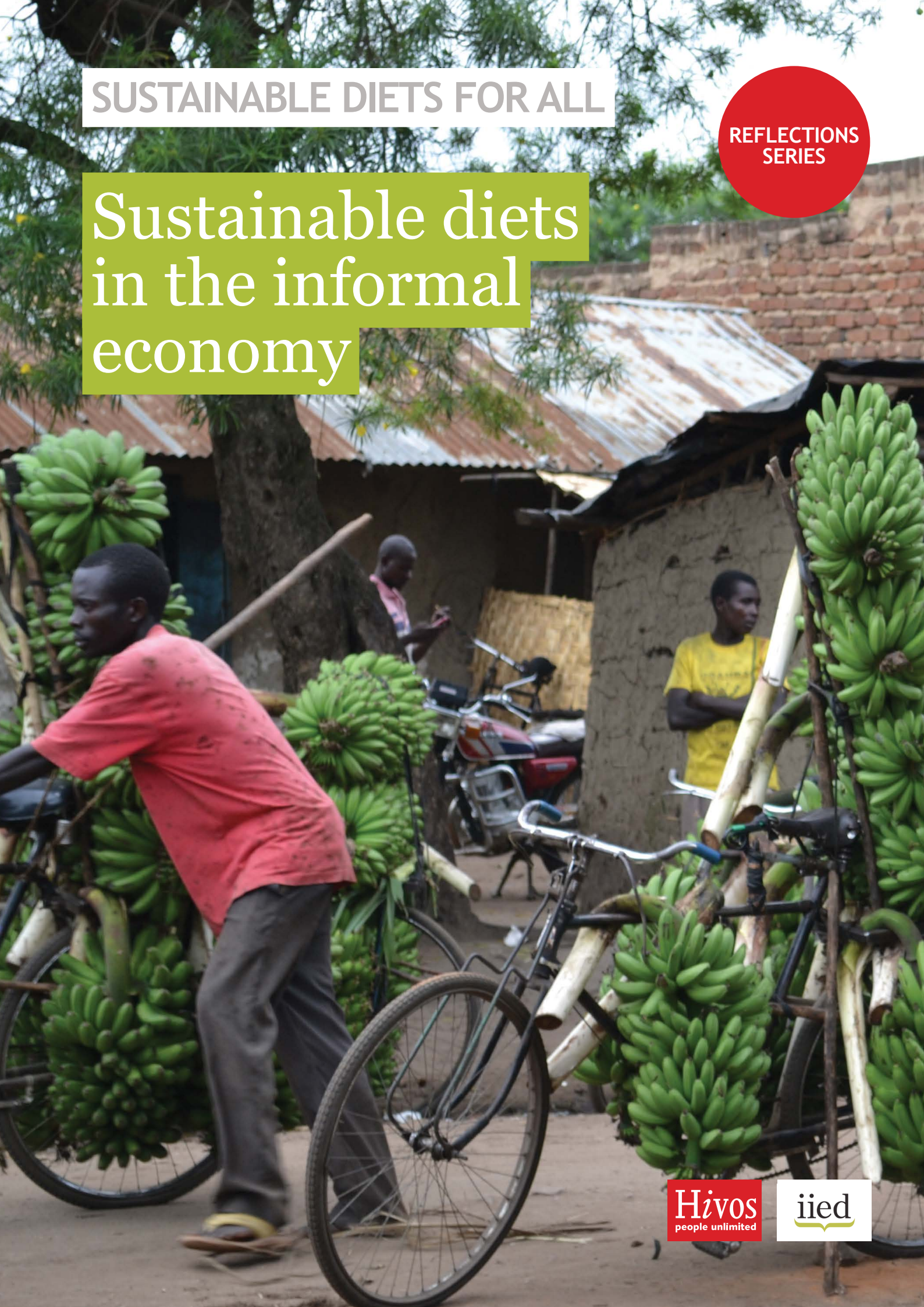


SUSTAINABLE DIETS FOR ALL

REFLECTIONS
SERIES

Sustainable diets in the informal economy



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CONTENTS

Summary	4
1. Introduction and objectives	5
2. Informality and the food systems of the majority poor	6
2.1 What do we mean by ‘informality’?	6
2.2 The informal ‘hidden middle’ between rural and urban	6
2.3 How do informal food systems perform in comparison with the formal food economy?	8
3. Implementing an informality agenda in SD4All: approaches and outcomes	11
3.1 Zambia: market actors and their concerns	11
3.2 Indonesia: street vendors and low-income workers in Bandung	13
3.3 Bolivia: generating evidence with market vendors	15
3.4 Uganda: working with a street vendors association in Fort Portal	16
4. Lessons and recommendations for action	17
4.1 Rethink: ground sustainable diets in people’s realities	17
4.2 Recognise: planning for the informal food economy to be part of the solution	18
4.3 Support: interventions as common cause with informal food systems	18
References	22

SUMMARY

The concept of ‘sustainable diets’ brings together global priorities around food and nutrition security, environmental protection and economic affordability, and is increasingly used to advocate for global food systems transformation. However, while its goals are universally applicable, the concept of sustainable diets itself has been built around the formal food systems of industrialised countries. This raises urgent questions about how the sustainable diets agenda can be implemented in countries in the global South, where the majority of people access food through the informal economy. In this paper, we consider the function and performance of informal food systems in achieving sustainable diets, drawing on learnings from the Sustainable Diets for All programme jointly run by Hivos, IIED and partners in Bolivia, Indonesia, Kenya, Uganda and Zambia.

Informal food systems contribute to the food and nutrition security of hundreds of millions of people around the world, particularly in the global South. They are often the main or only source of nutrient-rich foods for those on low incomes, and are also a significant source of livelihoods, including for women and youth who may have few other viable options for income generation. However, success in delivering affordable and often nutritious food is being achieved by informal food systems despite rather than because of policy. Assumptions about informal markets being inefficient and unsafe are rife, both among policy makers but also within the international development community. Informal food systems are therefore often misunderstood by those who seek to ‘improve’ them, leading to a mismatch in policy, planning and development.

This paper reviews the experiences of bringing together conversations around informality and sustainable diets as part of the SD4All programme. For each country, we consider the broader context of the informal food system, and reflect on the programme’s activities and their outcomes, focusing on the relationship between evidence, agency and advocacy.

In Zambia, evidence generated by the programme on informal markets’ contribution to sustainable diets was used by local partners to convene multi-stakeholder conversations, including with government. In Indonesia, similar evidence around the informal food system’s performance was produced, but in this case it did not lead to an effective advocacy agenda, in part due to a lack of clear ownership over the data. Informal market actors exercised considerable agency in evidence-generation activities in Bolivia, but despite the existence of both of these elements, advocacy did not follow on automatically. And in Uganda, local partners used evidence about informal street food vendors to lobby for greater recognition by the government, and foster collective agency through the development of a workers’ association. However, questions around the locus of informal food actors’ agency mean the long-term success of advocacy activities is uncertain.

Finally, the paper offers some recommendations for donors, policymakers, NGOs and CSOs on how to work with informal food systems to achieve sustainable diets for all. We argue that a transition to sustainable diets that works for people and planet should build on rather than criminalise or replace functioning informal food systems. First, we call for international organisations to **rethink** the framing of sustainable diets beyond the definitions and tools of formal food systems, such as certification and labelling, to one which is adaptable to local realities, and inclusive of informal food systems. Second, we recommend that decision makers at all levels consider informal food systems and their actors as allies, not enemies, for achieving sustainable diets, through **recognising** what they are already achieving for sustainable diets, and building on their strengths. Finally, we call for greater **support** for informal economy actors, but suggest that donors need to first understand the needs and priorities of those they aim to help, while CSOs should aim to play a supporting, rather than a leading role, when generating evidence with and for informal food actors.

1. INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Universal access to healthy, diverse, nutritious and safe food, that is produced in an environmentally sustainable way, has become an important global ambition. The concept of ‘sustainable diets’ has been developed to describe food systems that support both human and planetary health. Sustainable diets are “protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimising natural and human resources” (FAO and Biodiversity, 2010). The transformation of food systems to sustainable systems is enshrined in the second [UN Sustainable Development Goal](#), and in a number of landmark publications such as the Food and Land Use Coalition’s global report (FOLU, 2019).

The EAT-Lancet commission has recently raised concern about the environmental and health effects of a diet that is heavy in meat, animal-derived proteins, fats, refined carbohydrates and processed food, and low in fresh fruits and vegetables (Willett et al., 2019). Crucially, the concept of sustainable diets demands profound changes to the current dominance of large-scale agro-industrial production, processing and marketing within the global food system. The Covid-19 crisis has exposed some of the vulnerabilities of this system and made the need for changes starker.

The goal of sustainable diets has global relevance and applicability, but the concept has largely been constructed around the formal food systems of industrialised countries. Implementing sustainable diets in the food systems of low-income countries is complicated by the fact that much of the food system operates within the informal economy. This raises big questions about how the concept relates to the realities and priorities of low-income citizens, and about the leverage points that are available to achieve change. For example, the planet- and people-friendly diet proposed by the EAT-Lancet commission has been shown to be unaffordable for most of the world’s poor consumers (Hirvonen et al., 2020). Moreover, the interventions that can work in a formal food system such as tax incentives, standards and third-party certification, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) are likely to be of little use in an informal economy.

These questions of delivering sustainable diets in an informal world have challenged the Sustainable Diets for All (SD4All)

programme, which is managed by Hivos, IIED and national partners (see box). In this paper we describe that challenge: how informality distinguishes the food systems of the poor, and the implications for achieving sustainable diets for low-income citizens. First, we draw from the global literature to uncover how the informal food economy functions, assess its strengths and weaknesses, and its performance including across the dimensions of sustainable diets – nutrition, safety, and sustainability. We then turn to the SD4All programme activities to discuss how informality was approached in SD4All country programmes, and with what outcomes, drawing on experiences and conversations with Hivos and partners.

We end the paper with the following key lessons and recommendations: First, we must **rethink the notion of sustainable diets** so that it is grounded in the realities of low-income consumers in the global South and captures the importance of the informal food sector as a source of livelihoods and affordable nutrition. Second, we call on governments and donors to **reconsider the informal food economy as an ally**, not an obstacle, in achieving sustainable diets in the global South. Finally, we should **support actors in the informal food economy** – from producers to traders and consumers – being respectful of their needs and priorities, and creating common cause with them to change (when needed) and to protect (when relevant) their food system.

About the Sustainable Diets for All (SD4All) programme

SD4All is an advocacy programme which aimed to make more sustainable, diverse, healthy and nutritious food available to low-income citizens in Bolivia, Zambia, Uganda, Indonesia and Kenya. The programme set out to do this by strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) to influence governments, market actors and international organisations in pursuit of sustainable diets. SD4All was jointly run by Hivos, IIED and local partners, and is one of four programmes being implemented as part of the Dutch government’s Dialogue and Dissent initiative.

2. INFORMALITY AND THE FOOD SYSTEMS OF THE MAJORITY POOR

In this section we unpack the context and concepts of informality as found in the published literature. We assess informal food systems against the tenets of sustainable diets including nutrition, safety, sustainability and resilience, and discuss some of the key challenges faced by informal actors, including their organisation. It is important to note from the outset that informal food systems are less well understood than the food systems that supply higher income consumers. This is because a) the modernisation paradigm dominates policy and public debate; b) they are harder to study and to collect data on because they are fragmented and atomised, sometimes operate in the shadows, and are geographically dispersed; and c) their main constituents (the poor) are less powerful, have less of a voice, and less influence over setting research and policy agendas.

2.1 What do we mean by ‘informality’?

The concept of informality has evolved since Keith Hart and the International Labour Organization (ILO) applied the term to an unregulated entrepreneurial sector of cities in the global South in the early 1970s (Hart, 1973; ILO, 2013). The ‘informal sector’ they described was primarily urban and comprised a workforce of poor working women and men who were not recognised, recorded, protected or regulated by public authorities.

By the 1990s it had become clear that informality was not a distinct or temporary economic sector, but a structural feature of the whole economy, and the economic reality of most low-income citizens in the global South (Chen, 2007; ILO, 2013).

The ILO recognised the limits of a sectoral definition, and in 2002 published a description of the ‘informal economy’ (ILO, 2013), with a set of criteria to aid international comparability. By these measures, informal employment represents from around 50% to up to 80% of non-agricultural employment in developing countries and 60% of the world’s working population. If agriculture is included, the

informal economy is estimated to provide 85–90% of all employment in the West African region (Hitimana et al., 2011) and account for around two-thirds of GDP across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Charmes, 2012), and a similar proportion in Bolivia and Peru (Schneider et al., 2010). However, these numbers can mask the fact that there are shades of informality and blurred boundaries between the informal and formal economy, and multiple interactions between them.

Our understanding of informality has continued to evolve. A growing number of researchers look at informality beyond employment, to more broadly describe practices used by citizens to negotiate life and survival, and get things done (Roy, 2005; Watson, 2009; Neuwirth, 2011; Kamete, 2013; Ledeneva, 2018). By applying an ‘informal logic’, people can meet basic needs that might otherwise not be met if they stick to the rules of the formal economy. Some of those practices and activities fall into the category of ‘weapons of the weak’: small acts of non-cooperation, resistance and retaliation by disenfranchised people (Scott, 1985). Others are more straightforward evasions of norms and regulations. In this paper we will use the terms ‘informal food economy’ and ‘informal food systems’ to refer to domestic and regional markets that serve and employ low-income citizens.

2.2 The informal ‘hidden middle’ between rural and urban

The emergence of a large informal food economy is associated especially with the urban transition. The informal food economy has a pivotal role in food and nutrition security for the majority poor in much of the global South through linking rural with urban, and production with consumption.

Most of the analysis and commentary on the informal economy focuses on the urban end of this story. But it is in the value chains that link rural areas to growing urban centres where there is dynamic growth in actors interacting



Lunch in La Paz, Bolivia (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

according to logics of informality (Roy, 2005; OECD/SWAC, 2012). The geographic locations that produce food for a particular city, called urban ‘foodsheds’, can reach across long distances and sometimes across borders. They can operate at scale to meet growing demand in domestic wholesale and retail sectors with which they are closely connected (Haggblade et al., 2012; Wegerif and Wiskerke, 2017). This is achieved with little or no state support or coordination and without large corporate structures (Wegerif and Wiskerke, 2017).

Smallholder farming households’ link to the market will often be informal traders, who offer farmers a number of comparative advantages. They pay cash and buy produce of all qualities, which for cash-strapped households could mean being able to keep food on the table and children in school (Vorley et al., 2015). The next step in the chain could be trading hubs, which are often in emerging urban centres within agricultural regions and are key to the organisation of domestic food markets (World Bank, 2009; Allen et al., 2011; Floquet, 2012). They are part of the so-called ‘hidden middle’ of food systems which assemble, store, exchange, distribute and sometimes process food and which provide around a quarter of rural employment in Africa and lower-income Asia (IFPRI, 2020). These hubs have aided the reorientation of markets in SSA towards domestic and regional provision, and away from exports (Allen

and Heinrigs, 2016). Trading hubs can contribute to the diversification of urban diets and improved nutrition, as has been the case in the cowpea trade from Sahelian countries like Burkina Faso and Mali to coastal cities such as Accra in Ghana and Cotonou in Togo (Hollinger and Staatz, 2015).

Wholesale markets, where food is brought in from rural areas and re-sold for retail, are the next key link between the rural and urban economies. These markets operate along a spectrum of informalities, from ‘wet’ markets selling perishable foods such as fresh meat, fruit and vegetables (Mwango et al., 2019), which may be recognised or even owned by the municipality, to the large outdoor wholesale markets like Makola in Accra, which, despite their position in the unregistered informal economy, “are a collective force to be reckoned with” (den Broeder, 2018). Informality in the midstream/wholesale market may persist even when the retail end is ‘modern’. In fact, supply chains may move between informal and formal economies several times between production and consumption.

At the retail end, the ‘supermarket revolution’ has yet to reshape the food systems of the poor, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, and there is little suggestion that other retail forms are on their way out (Crush and Frayne 2011; Skinner 2016), because of their compatibility with the consumption strategies of the poorest households. Small-scale street traders of fresh and prepared foods may be the bane of

municipal authorities, but nevertheless fulfil a crucial role in urban food security, as we discuss in the next section.

2.3 How do informal food systems perform in comparison with the formal food economy?

The informal food economy has a widespread reputation for inefficient chain operations and for trading in unsafe and unhealthy food. Indeed, many development projects start from this premise of poor performance when they set out to upgrade or transform food systems (Vorley, 2020). The closure of informal food markets at the start of the Covid-19 crisis also exposed a clear bias against informality on the grounds of health and safety, given that open-air food markets are thought to pose a lower risk of person-to-person transmission (FAO 2020).

Evidence from the literature across the global South, echoed in the experiences of the SD4All programme (Section 3), suggests that these assumptions are often just that. If we want sustainable diets to be *for all* – that is, not a luxury of the rich but something affordable and accessible for the poor – then it is important to understand how these mostly informal food systems are delivering on sustainability and nutrition, and how they could do better.

Food and nutrition security

Food and nutrition security (FNS) is achieved when all individuals have reliable access to sufficient quantities of affordable, nutritious food to lead a healthy life. If we look at the four elements of FNS – accessibility, affordability, nutrition and health – there are indications in the literature that informal food systems do not always live up to their poor reputation.

The accessibility and affordability of informally traded food can be seen in the widespread reliance of low-income households on informal retail outlets in the global South. An important comparative survey of over 6,000 households in low-income neighbourhoods of 11 southern African cities found that 70% of households regularly purchased their foods from the informal food economy (Frayne et al., 2010; Crush and Frayne, 2014). Reliance on informal food systems may increase rapidly in times of economic crisis (Tawodzera et al., 2016).

Traditional and informal outlets are more convenient for the poorest consumers. Small shops, street sellers, and informal markets are often closer to low-income housing (Resnick, 2017), and vendors may sell on credit, which is important for people on irregular incomes (Peyton et al., 2015; Resnick, 2017; Riley et al., 2018). The practice of selling food in small quantities also increases the affordability of food for low-income consumers with limited storage and no refrigeration. Cooking facilities may also be very limited, so prepared foods from street vendors are vital for achieving food security. Available evidence on prices is mixed, but overall it seems that traditional outlets tend to sell cheaper fresh food, while processed goods are cheaper in supermarkets (eg Skinner 2016).

Prepared food sold via the informal sector ('street food') plays an increasingly important role in urban diets, where space, time, cash limitations and absence of refrigeration can constrain food preparation at home. Daily purchasing is necessitated by unpredictable daily income and a lack of accumulated funds. There is evidence from SSA, Haiti, India and Trinidad that consumption of prepared foods outside the home may be rising (Steyn et al., 2013). More than half of Nairobi's two million slum dwellers buy ready-made food rather than cooking in their homes (Tacoli, 2016).

The contribution of informal food systems to nutrition outcomes is less clear. Food sourced from informal street vendors contributes significantly to the energy and protein intake of people in developing countries (Steyn et al., 2013). Informal food markets are often the main way in which poor people obtain protein-rich foods, including meat, milk, eggs and fish (Grace et al., 2014) and fresh vegetables (eg Ahmed et al., 2015). However, not all food accessible through the informal sector is healthy. Many informal retailers sell industrially processed food and drinks, and street-cooked food ranges from healthy convenience snacks to energy-dense processed foods and fast foods (Boatemaa et al., 2018). Likewise, informal channels also bring highly processed foods into rural areas and drive rapid changes in consumption that mirror urban areas (FAO, 2017; Reardon et al., 2014). Low-income people may be largely aware of what comprises healthy food and the importance of fresh foods, but price is a critical factor in not applying that knowledge (eg Boatemaa et al., 2018).

Food safety

Local authorities and governments tend to perceive informal food markets as unhygienic and unhealthy. However, studies on the microbiological quality of street foods show a mixed picture of the safety of informally marketed street foods, with some studies showing high levels of bacterial contamination (eg Addo et al., 2010) and pesticide residues (eg Kapeleka et al., 2020) and others showing low or acceptable bacterial counts (Skinner, 2016; Grace et al., 2014). Many risks are managed by traders and retailers (eg Dittrich, 2017), as well as by consumers through cooking. Moreover, risks are often associated with the environment in which food is sold rather than the food itself, including a lack of public provision of clean water and waste management (Etzold et al., 2013). Crucially, informal food markets have often been found to present no greater risks than those found in the formal market (Grace et al., 2014).

Employment, inclusion, and gender

Employment in the informal food economy is an important source of livelihoods and income (and hence food security), but evidence of its size and contribution is lacking (Skinner 2016). Globally, it is estimated that 93.6% of employment in agriculture is informal (ILO, 2018). Informal street food vending is one of the most significant sources of employment within the food system, employing more than 60,000 people in Ghana and 9,000 in Harare, Zimbabwe (Roesel & Grace



Lusaka City market (Salim Dawood/Hivos)

2015). And while entry barriers are often low, often this translates into poor quality of employment and pay.

It is the inclusive nature of the informal food economy, namely its low barriers to entry, that explains its resilience, and its importance as a target of SD4All. Low income consumers – including the billion global citizens living in informal slum settlements – can find staples, fresh food, animal products, processed or prepared food.

The informal food economy is also an important source of livelihoods for women and youth, who have been excluded from formal employment (WOW, 2019). When agricultural value chains formalise, women’s labour and contributions – particularly in processing – are frequently un- or under-compensated relative to men’s (FAO, IFAD & ILO, 2010). This is also due to the often ‘hidden’ nature of women’s work, especially that which takes place in the home rather than in public spaces. Women are over-represented in other parts of the informal food economy. For example, they account for 80% of street food vendors in Harare, Zimbabwe (Roesel and Grace 2015), and up to 70% and 42% of informal cross-border trade in agricultural goods in Liberia and Cameroon respectively (Koroma et al., 2017). Youth also benefit from low barriers to entry into the informal food economy, though based on a recent survey of

two Nigerian secondary cities, Resnick et al. (2018) call for nuance; traders between 18 and 24 years of age comprised less than 10% of food traders compared to a third between 25 and 34 years of age.

Efficiency and waste

Traditional and informal trading networks that link rural areas with urban centres are often labelled as inefficient or predatory. But they are very efficient at aligning the needs of small-scale farmers with outlets to their products, and the demands of low-income consumers with affordability. Traders perform a critical role by collecting products from distant, poorly connected farmland and providing credit and inputs for farmers. The trading costs in this ‘hidden middle’ also appear to be shrinking. Better infrastructure has reduced transport costs, the growing number of traders has increased competition, and ownership of mobile phones has improved market coordination. In rare empirical studies of post-harvest losses along informal chains, wastage appears to have been wildly overstated (Minten et al., 2016; Minten et al., 2020). However, the absence of refrigeration in informal retail outlets can lead to increased spoilage, particularly among street vendors selling perishable foods (Battersby et al., 2016).

Environmental protection and sustainability

The environmental impact of informal food systems is not well documented, and existing evidence presents a mixed picture. Much informally traded food originating from smallholders has been produced with few external inputs. But this does not always mean it has been produced through sustainable practices in terms of management of soils and nutrients, watersheds, or biodiversity. Informal networks do not carry demands for sustainable production up the chain to farmers. This may be changing, since urbanisation and informal market linkages are providing economic incentives for smallholders to invest in their farms, incentives which until recently have been absent from much of sub-Saharan Africa (Reardon et al., 2014).

Resilience

The relative flexibility of informal food systems when compared to those of formal markets may enhance their resilience to crises caused by climate change, political instability or pandemics, insofar as they are decentralised and comprised of millions of small-scale actors, and able to adapt more quickly. Bohle et al. (2009) and Keck and Etzold (2013) describe how wholesale traders, with their diverse supply networks, and street vendors, with their buffering

capacity, managed to keep the megacity of Dhaka in Bangladesh fed during the food crisis of 2007–8, despite the government’s eviction campaigns against food hawkers and without acknowledgement or support from the state. There is also some evidence that informal food systems bounce back after disease outbreaks, as was the case with Ebola in West Africa (Alpha and Figuié, 2016), but overall evidence of adaptive capacities is limited, and systematic comparison with other systems is lacking.

Public health outbreaks in Africa have often been followed by government crackdowns on informal food markets, as happened following the cholera outbreak in Lusaka, Zambia in 2018 (Resnick, 2020). Evidence is emerging of the effects of and responses to Covid-19; for example, in Kenya there have been reports of authorities using the virus as a cover for evicting traders from markets (Oudia, 2020). The partial or complete closure of open-air food and livestock markets has thrown millions of informal actors into further precarity, with knock-on effects on the food security of low-income groups (WFP 2020a,b). However, there is also evidence of informal supply chains adapting to restrictions on travel and trade by linking consumers directly with producers, from Korea to East Africa (FAO, 2020a,b; Meeme, 2020).

3. IMPLEMENTING AN INFORMALITY AGENDA IN SD4ALL: APPROACHES AND OUTCOMES

Section 2 presented evidence to show that across much of the global South, the informal food economy is doing the heavy lifting on livelihoods and food and nutrition security for low-income citizens. Despite policy neglect and widely held assumptions the informal food economy can provide the building blocks for delivering sustainable diets.

In Sustainable Diets for All, the ‘for all’ framing put low-income consumers at the centre of the programme from the start. We realised that the way in which sustainable diets are achieved may be different within the food systems that serve the poor. The classic routes of influencing and sensitising conscious consumers, or promoting certified ‘sustainable’ foods, would not achieve the SD4All objective of making more sustainable, diverse, healthy and nutritious food available to low-income citizens, when those citizens rely on the informal food economy. We saw that successful **advocacy** for sustainable diets will require **agency** of people within the informal food economy, emphasising the capacity of people to act on their own priorities and to influence decisions that shape their food systems. And it will require **evidence** to challenge the assumptions and prejudice that deter policymakers from engaging with the informal food economy.

Informality was not initially emphasised by civil society partners selected for the SD4All programme in 2016. The first workplans, as well as the theories of change, reflected the partners’ diverse range of interests and experience. Midway through the programme the focus on informality increased. The programme also adopted citizen agency as a framing principle (Vorley et al., 2020). Agreement was reached with four countries for at least one piece of work with an explicit ‘citizen agency’ way of working, preferably

in the informal food economy. An advocacy toolkit (de Toma, 2018) and country workshops supported implementation of these initiatives. We sought to identify ‘hotspots’ of dynamism in civil society and work with informal actors and their allies, helping them develop capacity to generate evidence and advocate for change in their food systems.

In this section we reflect on our experience with informal food systems in the four countries using the agency–evidence–advocacy framework. For each country, we provide the context within which informality exists, a brief summary of the programme’s approach and activities, a reflection on the contribution of informality to sustainable diets, and a discussion of the main advocacy and other outcomes of our approach.

3.1 Zambia: market actors and their concerns Context

The informal sector employs nine out of ten Zambians (CSO, 2015), and within it food commercialisation is one of the biggest sources of jobs and livelihoods (Skinner, 2019). Informal food markets are the main outlets for the commercialisation of food in the country, and crucial access points for food, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, for the urban poor (Mulenga, 2013). In research commissioned by SD4All on informal food vendors, women accounted for almost 90% of vendors in the capital Lusaka and more than 60% of vendors in Kitwe, the second largest city (Mwango et al., 2019).

In view of the vast size of Zambia’s informal sector, the government’s priority has been to promote formalisation as a way to raise labour standards, improve efficiency, and increase government revenue. This policy stance has led to



Women market sellers, Lusaka, Zambia (Salim Dawood/Hivos)

a confrontational approach towards the predominant type of economic activity: informal actors such as street vendors are often subject to harassment and persecution, and are sidelined from policy debates. Moreover, even though employment generation in the informal sector dwarfs that in the formal sector (both private and public), the government has little interest and few tools to deal with the informal part of the economy.

Actions

The engagement of SD4All with informal food markets in Zambia started with evidence generation. Our partner, the Centre for Trade, Policy and Development (CTPD), identified a lack of current information about the legal and policy situation of informal markets, as well as limited knowledge about marketeers and consumers. With support from CTPD and the Alliance for Zambian Informal Economy Associations (AZIEA), a team of researchers surveyed vendors and consumers in Lusaka and Kitwe, and interviewed government officials at municipal and national levels. Due to the confrontational relationship between authorities and street vendors, the process of evidence gathering was politicised, sometimes leading to harassment of researchers themselves.

The evidence generated in Zambia provided important insights about the contribution of informal markets to sustainable diets. The household surveys confirmed that informal markets are the key sources of fresh fruits and vegetables and meat for all consumers, but especially those in low-income neighbourhoods. Consumers see these outlets as affordable, convenient and safe. Our work highlights the fact that, while informal markets don't exclusively sell healthy food, for many people they are the only source of it.

The study also showed that informal markets offer important livelihood opportunities, particularly for women, young people and those with less formal education. The survey showed that food moves swiftly through the market, with most vendors provisioning their businesses daily. This may account for the low rates of reported food-related health problems, and low rates of spoilage, even despite the stated lack of storage and refrigeration facilities.

Outcomes

Initially the evidence generation didn't have a clear advocacy objective. But the lobbying potential of the data quickly became apparent, and attracted the interest of AZIEA, market actors and even government officials. Hivos and local partners, including the Consumer Unity and Trust Society (CUTS), later used this data to engage with the local governments of Kitwe and Lusaka to put the issue of informality on the table.

Moving from evidence generation to advocacy presented two challenges. First, the study confirmed that informal markets are not part of the government discourse on food security or sustainability, at least at the national level. While government officials acknowledged the size and significance of informal food markets in the country, they generally fell back to formalisation, including business registration and paying taxes, as their default position. But there were promising openings with the local governments. Representatives of the governments of Lusaka and Kitwe attended the launch of the report, and spoke of the informal food market and its actors as allies rather than foes. The newly available evidence and engagement with informal sector actors lent support to establishing food security councils – multi-stakeholder platforms for food governance – in Lusaka and Kitwe. Food vendors, under AZIEA in Kitwe and with support from CUTS in Lusaka, are now actively involved in the councils.

The second challenge was that the work started out as a factfinding mission without a specific policy ask. It was a rather open-ended process which the partners, especially AZIEA, used to support several ongoing efforts, including demands for better storage facilities at the markets and campaigning against corruption in market governance. The evidence was used by partners including AZIEA to convene a range of discussions with the government, other organisations, and even their own membership.

The move from evidence to advocacy also put the issue of agency into focus. The study was initially proposed and designed by the programme; in other words, the initiative was external to the informal market actors. Engaging with AZIEA at the early stages made it possible to involve vendors, but as the study developed, AZIEA became more active in steering the process, facilitating several discussions to validate the findings, and leading the development of an agenda for engaging with local government. In the agency–evidence–advocacy model that we described above, evidence generation kicked things off, and agency and advocacy came a bit later. The survey revealed a level of distrust by vendors of traders’ organisations, which they perceive to be overly politicised. However, we observed many examples of collective action, and the willingness to participate through AZIEA suggests that marketeers are an active group with strong potential for collective agency.

Through our partners AZIEA, CTPD and CUTS we worked mostly with the more formal end of informal vending: vendors who have access to a market stall and pay government fees to operate. Their advocacy agenda focused on infrastructure improvements and fighting corruption. But if we had worked with street vendors, who are most vulnerable to harassment and persecution, the agenda might have centred on recognition and basic rights.

3.2 Indonesia: street vendors and low-income workers in Bandung

Context

As in many rapidly growing cities, the role of street vendors, food stallholders and other informal food providers in Bandung – Indonesia’s fourth most populous city – is contested. The number of street vendors grew rapidly after the economic crisis of the late 1990s – a trend that was not reversed even as the economy recovered. Policies to deal with the ‘street vendor problem’ often fail to recognise the social and economic value of these informal food providers.

Attempts to regulate informal food providers are politically sensitive in Indonesia and across Southeast Asia. Research that sheds light on the food system of the working poor can show city authorities the real value of informal trading. Policies can then be adjusted accordingly.

Official government policy towards street vending has swung between repression and permissiveness. The initial approach in 2005 focused squarely on disincentives, including the banning of street vendors from seven city locations, and of setting up a stall and selling on a footway, park or green space. The policy had little success and most of the vendors quickly returned to the street.

More recently, policy has become more nuanced. City regulations in 2011 recognised the sector and supported its formalisation through annual permits and relocation into designated vendor centres. Zoning still restricts vendors from operating on certain streets, with fines for both vendors and their customers if caught flouting the law in these ‘red zones’. A Street Vendor Forum at sub-district level has the objective of reconciling the differing interests of street vendors, government and the community. Street food has been incorporated into the city’s promotion of culinary tourism.

But the push to formalise the sector is far from complete, and the cat and mouse relationship between authorities and vendors continues. City officials attempt to sweep vendors from roads and pavements but cleared areas are soon reoccupied. These ongoing tensions are stirred up by regular reports in the press about congestion and litter.

Action

A study led by a team from Bandung’s Padjadjaran University, in collaboration with IIED and Hivos as part of SD4All, raised some important questions about whether policymakers have overlooked the central role that street food plays in the food security of low-income workers, who underpin the city’s economy. An exploratory survey found two quite distinct categories of street food consumers. The first is the ‘recreational’ consumers. They purchase food from street vendors once or twice a week and spend quite a large amount per visit. The second is the ‘subsistence’ consumers, which includes the working poor. They rely on vendors and use them two to three times per day, spending



Street vendors in a 'red zone', Bandung Indonesia (Bill Vorley)

less than a dollar per visit. Street food comprises 50-80% of total food intake.

The research team was able to lift the lid on this second group through a study conducted with 300 women textile factory workers in the Gempol Sari area close to the large Kahatex textile factory at the western edge of Bandung. Community members mapped the food vendors in the area around the factory and the lodgings, and the types of food available. The women themselves gathered the data using 'food diaries', recording the type and source of each of their meals. The young workers are mainly migrants from outside Bandung and live in lodgings near the factory. With limited cooking facilities and low wages, they rely heavily on prepared street food.

Between shifts, the street and pavements in front of the Kahatex factory are crowded with vendors and workers. In 2012, part of the road close to the factory was designated as a red zone, where street vending is prohibited at all hours, but the regulation is yet to be enforced. The study showed that fixed food stalls (*warung*) were the most important food source for the women factory workers. Mobile carts were more dominant sources in the morning and evening. The food is nutritious and affordable; on average, employees could buy a main meal for around US\$0.50. Running the data through an FAO tool assessing women's dietary diversity

showed that the informal food system was providing these factory workers with a diverse as well as affordable diet (Natawidjaja et al., 2019).

Outcomes

While the city has privileged street food as a tourist attraction, the evidence generated by SD4All shows that street vendors are strategically important for the food and nutrition security of the working poor. However, despite its direct relevance to planning and policy debates in Bandung, the evidence we produced has not generated a concrete advocacy agenda. There are several reasons for this: the research was carried out before the official start of SD4All; the issue of street food vending was not a core concern of the civil society partners ultimately selected for the programme; the Padjadjaran University team did not have time and resources to undertake the critical steps of feeding back the results to the workers and vendors, and involving them in interpretation and advocacy; and finally, changes in Bandung's municipal government meant that the window of opportunity for influencing the city's planning policies had been closed. Supporting the capacity development of the vendors and workers could have facilitated ownership and a meaningful uptake of the research results. In sum, the Indonesia case shows that evidence without agency is unlikely to result in effective advocacy.

3.3 Bolivia: generating evidence with market vendors

Context

Bolivia has urbanised rapidly in the last three decades and, while still one of the poorest countries in Latin America, has seen its income increase substantially over the last 20 years. These changes have been accompanied by dietary shifts. Traditional staples have been slowly replaced by convenience food. More and more people are eating prepared food on the streets. Food vendors therefore play a significant role in citizen health. Despite these changes, tradition still plays a crucial role in the food system. Food trade, in particular, is still overwhelmingly organised around traditional networks and markets. In La Paz, for example, traditional markets – rather than supermarkets or modern supply chains – bring food from the rural hinterland to urban consumers through a network of wholesale and retail outlets.

In addition to fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, and processed goods, most of the retail markets have stalls selling cooked food. For many low-income workers, the food offered here is an affordable alternative to the ubiquitous fast food outlets that have cropped up all over the city. In addition to providing affordable and nutritious food, these market stalls are important repositories of traditional Bolivian gastronomy and ingredients. Most of these businesses combine some formal and informal traits: they have to pay licence fees to the government to operate their stalls, but labour is family-rather than contract-based, transactions are in cash, and compliance with official sanitary standards is patchy.

The government's stance with regard to informality is mixed. On the one hand, informal and traditional market actors had much greater recognition and political clout under the Morales government (of 2006-19). On the other hand, official policy continues to favour formal enterprises for job creation and income generation. The drive to get businesses to register formally has been strongly opposed by most in the informal sector.

Actions

The approach of SD4All in Bolivia was to listen to the voices of market cooks – most of whom are women and typically under the radar of policy discussions and the public eye. The idea was to generate evidence with and for the women cooks in a process largely guided by their priorities and concerns.

In 2018 Hivos and SD4All partner MIGA (*Movimiento de Integración Gastronómico Boliviano*) started the lengthy process of engaging with women cooks in two of La Paz's markets around the theme of improved diets and culinary heritage. A major challenge was the initial reluctance of the women to engage with the team, likely due to distrust of the establishment and those outside their circle. Communicating with and through the women's elected leaders (*Maestras*) was an essential part of developing mutual trust.

Initial discussions suggested that the top concern for the women was less about diets and more about the increasing competition from food businesses selling fast foods outside the market. The cooks wanted to know more about their customers and their preferences with a view to improving their businesses. The SD4All team worked with the cooks to design a customer survey, which was implemented by the cooks themselves. The team then facilitated a number of workshops to discuss the findings and how to use them.

Outcomes

The evidence generated through engagement with the cooks in La Paz provides two rather different insights about the contribution of these informal actors to sustainable diets. First, customers confirmed that the lunches sold in market stalls are varied, nutritious and more reasonably priced than nearby fast food outlets. At the same time, the businesses do face an existential threat from nearby competition, and cannot easily adapt, because they can't reduce their prices further.

The approach taken by SD4All in Bolivia has a strong emphasis on agency. As it was developed after the work in Zambia and Indonesia described above, we were able to learn from earlier experiences, and explicitly encouraged the project to be driven by the priorities and concerns of the market actors. We were largely successful at producing good evidence, coupled with strong agency and ownership; but the path to advocacy was more difficult than expected. As business owners, the women cooks were first and foremost concerned with running their stalls. Their interest in engaging with the SD4All team was not the advancement of a policy agenda, but rather to gather intelligence on their customers to protect their place in the market.

Some of the emerging evidence, such as customer suggestions, were useful for immediate action. But others, such as the improvement of market infrastructure, required a level of engagement with the government that the cooks were mostly uninterested in or unwilling to pursue. The results from research have therefore not translated into specific demands for action or change.

The Bolivia case suggests that agency and evidence by themselves do not guarantee the development of an advocacy agenda. This outcome was unexpected – but should it have been? If people have the willingness and ability to act (agency), and they are armed with information they have gathered (evidence), advocacy directed at public policy is only one of the possible ways forward. And in some cases, where collective action is difficult, or when the cost of social mobilisation seems too high relative to the benefits, it is unsurprising that advocacy is not the obvious choice.

3.4 Uganda: working with a street vendors association in Fort Portal

Context

Kabarole District in western Uganda is an important agricultural region. At its centre is Fort Portal, a small but rapidly growing city and regional trading hub, connecting farmers to other parts of Uganda and neighbouring countries including South Sudan. Like other expanding cities, Fort Portal faces the challenge of meeting the food and nutrition needs of its growing population. Paradoxically, amid the increased agricultural production, the city has seen a rise in food insecurity and malnutrition.

In this context, informal street food vendors provide crucial access to food to low-income consumers, many of whom cannot afford fuel, have no time for cooking, or lack storage or cooking facilities. Vending of prepared food, which is a recent phenomenon in the country, also provides livelihoods for low-income residents, particularly women. In a 2020 study of food vendors in Fort Portal by Kabarole Research and Resource Centre (KRC), a CSO partner of SD4All, to understand the impacts of Covid-19, the majority of respondents were women, many of them single mothers (Businge and Mohammed, 2020). Despite its role in feeding some of the most vulnerable communities, street food vending faces various challenges: some perceive the food to be unhealthy and unsafe; vendors are poorly organised; and they are often harassed by authorities because, according to the law, they occupy public space illegally.

Action

In 2015, before SD4All started, KRC partnered with Hivos and IIED to carry out a study to better understand the dynamics and challenges of street food vending in Fort Portal. Qualitative interviews with vendors and consumers were used to understand the different types of vendors and the food they offered, and the buying patterns and preferences of their customers.

Under the SD4All programme, the Uganda Food Change Lab (Boerwinkel et al., 2018) was set up in 2014 to promote dialogue and advocacy for a better food system in Fort Portal municipality and its hinterland, particularly Kabarole, Bunyangabu and Kyenjojo districts. It brought together street vendors, civil society, and local authorities. As part of the Lab, KRC continued to work closely with a group of street vendors, providing support for the development of a food vendors' association. In addition, KRC facilitated a 'coalition of the willing' to raise awareness and jointly advocate for a sustainable food system in Kabarole district. The coalition convenes on a regular basis for meetings and special events, and is involved in a weekly radio programme.

The initial research showed that street vendors sell a variety of food. While some of it was fast food, such as fried snacks or chapatis, which was high in energy but relatively low in nutritional quality, there were also more nutritious

traditional foods, like bean stews and matooke (Vorley and Boerwinkel, 2016). The healthier meals tended to be offered exclusively by women. Consumers were especially driven by price and accessibility. The study found that some of the healthier, traditional meals were in fact cheaper than the fried and salty snacks, suggesting that street food can be an important source of affordable nutrition for the urban poor.

Outcomes

The evidence generation that preceded SD4All, and KRC's continued engagement with street vendors as part of the Food Change Lab resulted in a number of advocacy and policy outcomes. A street vendors' association was formed and registered with the municipality, with the association's chairperson taking a seat on the District Nutrition Coordination Committee. Around three quarters of the vendors in town are part of the association. As a result of advocacy and lobbying efforts by street vendors, with support from KRC and SD4All, the municipality fulfilled its commitment to install more street lighting and water points in parts of the city where street vendors work. The Fort Portal municipality also designated several sites for food vending, providing infrastructure and services as part of a public-private partnership. Finally, street food vending was recognised for its role in the nutrition security of low-income groups, and was included in a 2019 Production and Environment Ordinance. At the national level, MPs also committed to amending the 1935 Public Health Act that outlaws street food vending. However, KRC's capacity to effectively follow up on these commitments was impeded by the organisation's physical distance from national policymakers in Kampala, as well as the fact that the MP who had committed to championing the amendments in Parliament lost his seat.

The work with food vendors in Fort Portal was clearly driven by KRC, which invested in facilitation, evidence generation and coordination. The municipal government also enabled the positive outcomes, because it first encouraged the formation of the street vendors' association and was also willing to enact changes. Evidence was an important input to the process, and the advocacy resulted in significant outcomes. But what about agency? It is unclear how much of the drive to engage around evidence and advocacy came from the vendors themselves. KRC has long-standing ties to the community, and its credibility and legitimacy surely played an important role in bringing the vendors on board. It is possible that without KRC's support and efforts none of this would have happened. This poses an interesting question about the sustainability of the results: how will the vendors' association (and the coalition of the willing) fare beyond KRC and local political change? Here the issue of agency, and particularly the ability of the vendors to act and organise around their own priorities and concerns, will be put to the test.

4. LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The preceding sections demonstrate clearly why successful interventions to shape the supply of food to low-income citizens require an understanding of informality and its current performance in delivering sustainable diets. Informal food systems are the norm for hundreds of millions of low-income people around the world, and central to their food and nutrition security. They reach into informal settlements that are home to a quarter of the world's urban population. They provide employment in rural and urban areas, in trading, processing, retail, including for women and youth who may have few other viable options for income generation in countries where formal jobs are scarce.

Informal food systems are delivering affordable and often nutritious food despite rather than because of policy. A transition to sustainable diets that works for people and planet should build on rather than criminalise or replace functioning informal food systems. We call on donors, policymakers, NGOs and CSOs to **rethink** the framing of sustainable diets, to **recognise** the informal food economy as an ally in achieving them, and to **support** those who work in, and benefit from, the informal food system.

4.1 Rethink: ground sustainable diets in people's realities

The case studies in Section 3, set in the wider context in Section 2, laid bare the disconnect between the international framings of sustainable diets and the informal food economy. Sustainable diets look different from the perspective of informal food systems. This is part of a wider mismatch with the green economy and sustainable consumption agendas (Benson et al., 2014) as well as with concepts of 'inclusive business' and 'base of the pyramid' – both of which have been largely driven by the corporate sector.

The prevailing discourse of sustainable food systems that favours short supply chains and the 'local' in general is a poor fit for many informal supply networks that extend far beyond administrative boundaries. The certification systems that define 'sustainable' food put the price of that food beyond the means of low-income households. The high costs of verification, the lack of market premiums, and the diffuse nature of informal supply networks mean that these tools for demarcating sustainability are a poor fit for the realities of mainstream informal markets. More fundamental is the dilemma that the 'sustainability' toolkit in markets is comprised of tools for formalisation. To be sustainable is to be formal, if sustainability is defined by standards, certification and labelling.

Much food traded in the informal economy, while it will not be branded as 'sustainable', complies with the definition of sustainable diets in the Introduction. The diversity, freshness and nutritiousness of food traded in the informal sector may well outperform the formal food system of supermarkets, chain convenience stores and fast food outlets. The food sold by women cooks in the markets of La Paz, Bolivia and streets of Fort Portal, Uganda is an extension of a local tradition of healthy diets, but no-one would term it 'sustainable'. The dynamic and entrepreneurial nature of informal food systems does mean however that some vendors will respond to a westernisation of tastes by selling food that contributes to obesity, mal- and under-nutrition (Mayer et al., 2019).

Clearly a more flexible approach to sustainable diets is required to those developed in formal food systems. The approach needs to account for differences in local context and cultures, and build on calls to "meet people where they are" (Vorley et al., 2020). Local concepts of sustainable

food systems grounded in the realities and priorities of the informal food systems of the poor may differ fundamentally from dominant discourse (Béné et al., 2019). For example, a sustainable food system which serves the majority poor would also include the livelihoods of people employed in the food system, in addition to the needs of sustainable diets.

The problems of unsustainable practices in informal food systems need to be addressed, while tackling the irony that sustainability has been an instrument of formalisation. There is no reason why the informal world should be situated outside of the sustainable world.

Our first recommendation is aimed at international organisations to rethink sustainable diets in the informal economy:

Recommendation 1

International organisations should reframe the concept of sustainable diets so that it is adaptable to local realities and operational by local people in transformations of informal food systems. More effort should be made to understand and recognise what is already at play in the informal food systems of the poor that will fit within a sustainability and sustainable diets agenda, and build from there. Informal employment and contribution to livelihoods should be part of the definition and promotion of sustainable diets.

4.2 Recognise: planning for the informal food economy to be part of the solution

The informal food economy is here to stay for the foreseeable future. A failure to recognise informal food systems and the marginalisation of informal actors is associated with two types of mismatch in policy and planning. The first is a mismatch in perception of informal food systems, which leads to poor understanding and assumptions about their importance and performance. For example, in Bandung, street food vending was seen by the government as an activity to enhance the city's credentials as a tourist gastronomic destination, but its essential role of providing affordable nutrition to migrant workers was overlooked. The second is a mismatch in policy design, in which plans, policies, investments and interventions are poorly adapted to the reality of the informal food economy. For example, national and municipal governments typically emphasise formalisation and public space restrictions as panaceas to the 'problem' of informality (Crossa, 2009). Few of these regulatory initiatives turn out to be durable, as vendors are either replaced by others (Taylor and Song, 2016) or simply regroup nearby (Hüwelmeier, 2018). Rarely do the struggles between informal vendors and authorities acknowledge the contribution of informal actors to the food security of the majority poor.

A more sustainable approach requires 'a willingness to embrace informality as a representation of itself "instead of treating ... [it] as an unwanted peculiarity constantly out of place"' (Kamete, 2020). It requires investment rather than displacement, working to build on its strengths – recognising and defending what's working for sustainable diets – and addressing its weaknesses. Improvements to informal markets may have a much larger and longer-lasting impact on the diets of the poor than attempts to set up new projects. And by doing so, the livelihoods of thousands of traders and vendors can be protected and supported.

Even international NGOs who are working to secure food and nutrition for the poor may fail to recognise and engage with informality. International agendas on sustainable consumption and food systems transformation face the same dilemma. In SD4All we have brought our experiences and recognition of the informal sector in food systems transformation to the global level, especially during the second conference of the Sustainable Food Systems Programme in Costa Rica in 2019. In a call to action (One Planet Network, 2019), the programme members recognised the role of informal market actors in a transition towards healthier and more sustainable diets.

Our next recommendation, on recognition, is therefore aimed at all levels of decision making, from municipal authorities to national governments, donors and international bodies:

Recommendation 2

Decision makers should consider informal food systems as allies, not enemies, for achieving sustainable diets. Finding common cause with actors in the informal food system can enhance the potential of these partnerships while respecting their priorities and concerns.

4.3 Support: interventions as common cause with informal food systems

If we rethink the meaning of sustainable diets so that they are grounded in the reality of the informal world, and we recognise the importance and potential of informal food systems as vehicles for health, nutrition and sustainability, a third possible course of action is to support those who are part of, and benefit from, informal food systems. One of the main lessons from SD4All is that the nature of that support, and even the need for it, will be very different depending on the circumstances of different actors. Below we reflect on what our work on **agency, evidence, and advocacy** in SD4All teaches us about supporting the informal food economy.

The first step in supporting the informal food system is a recognition of people's **agency**. This entails understanding that their interest, need or desire to be supported varies greatly. It also means being open to the possibility that some may not want – or may actively want to avoid – support.



Juice stall, La Paz, Bolivia (Mauricio Panozo/Hivos)

Our experience in SD4All highlighted some of the challenges faced by a programme which, being external to the world of informality, had as one of its key objectives to engage with and strengthen informal food systems. One of the main challenges was distrust – which may be completely justified – on the part of informal food market actors, not just of government, but also of NGOs and large CSOs and their projects, who have historically not engaged with or invested in the informal sector. Another challenge was dealing with the organisations of informal actors – or the lack thereof. In Zambia, for example, vendors tend to distrust the existing market associations that speak on behalf of vendors, so getting a sense of what the traders want was not a straightforward enterprise. This type of distrust is not exceptional: a study in Hyderabad, India, suggested that only a fifth of vendors were organised (Dittrich, 2017). At the other end of the spectrum, in Bolivia, market vendors are organised in a very strict, hierarchical organisation. Engagement with the ‘outside world’ – including our programme – is tightly controlled by the elected leaders. Finding common cause – ie understanding where the agendas of external organisations and of informal sector actors overlap – is critical to developing trust and to establishing a mutually respectful relationship.

The programme had some success in supporting the agency of informal food vendors through strengthening food vendors’ associations, as was the case in Fort Portal. But in some cases, most notably in Bolivia, informal food actors did not necessarily want or need to be more visible. It may be naïve to expect a readiness of informal actors to collaborate through formal channels when they spend their life operating below the radar or in a legal grey area. At the same time, engaging with the informal sector tends not to be a priority among most development actors. In some ways the experiences of SD4All reflected the broader biases of governments, international donors and even many CSOs against working with the informal food sector and recognising the contributions of informal actors. We worked to change this, for example, by trying to ensure sustained participation from informal actors in multi-stakeholder platforms in Fort Portal and Lusaka, but with uneven success.

The **advocacy** agenda of informal actors within SD4All was very broad. The challenges faced by the informal food economy include short-term, practical issues such as lack of food storage or refrigeration, no access to water and sanitation, or poor infrastructure. Other long-term issues include lack of social protection, policy neglect (Brown

and McGranahan, 2016), harassment and rent extraction by organised crime and, sometimes, the state (Assheuer and Keck, 2019), exclusion from the banking system, or the capture of markets by political parties or cadres (Etzold, 2013). The agenda of low-income consumers – crucial stakeholders in the informal food system – involves concerns about affordability, safety, and nutrition. Supporting the informal food economy through advocacy thus involves considering a wide variety of actors, motivations and needs.

Donors, international organisations and civil society organisations can support this agenda in multiple ways, but must always be mindful of the agency of informal sector actors and operate according to the idea of common cause. Donors may find it easier to work with large, formal businesses or organisations, but the path to sustainable diets for all runs through the – admittedly harder to engage – informal sector. One type of support that was effective in SD4All was strengthening the capacities of civil society organisations in lobbying and advocacy (see Lartey & Nicolini, 2020) or evidence generation (see below). Donors and international organisations can also use their privilege to open platforms of dialogue with governments and other decision makers, as we tried to do via Food Change Labs. Finally, donors can provide direct financial support for infrastructure and other interventions conducive to improved health, safety and working conditions.

Our next recommendation is also directed to all levels of decision making in local and national governments, donors and international bodies:

Recommendation 3

Support for actors in the informal economy – including workers, traders, vendors, consumers and their organisations – must start with a clear understanding of their own needs and priorities, as well as their ongoing initiatives and actions; this will help identify the type of support, if any, that they could benefit from. When needed, the support to informal food system actors can range from strengthening their lobby and advocacy capacities, opening opportunities for dialogue with decision makers, and improving infrastructure.

We have shown how generating **evidence** can help close the wide gaps in information on informal food systems, draw in policymakers, challenge perceptions, and highlight the mismatch between existing policies and the realities of the food systems of the poor. Evidence can also be an insurance against presumption of intervention and food system transformation. Evidence can show what the food system is doing well already, what can be improved, and what needs to be defended rather than ‘transformed’.

Generating and using evidence is not a top priority for most informal actors. But our experiences of generating evidence with street food vendors, cooks, and their customers showed that evidence generation with and by informal food sector actors can be both possible and beneficial. Generating evidence can build confidence in organisations that they are on the right track, and give them opportunities for engagement with decision makers using facts and figures. This was clear in our work with informal food vendors in Zambia, where AZIEA used the launch of our joint report (Mwango et al., 2019) to step up the conversation with municipal authorities in Lusaka and Kitwe.

In addition to the work with market actors, the evidence generated in the SD4All countries discussed in this paper revealed how informal markets are crucial links in agri-food chains and access points for low-income consumers to achieve sustainable diets. For example, in Bandung evidence from food diaries showed high dietary diversity among female textile workers who subsist largely on street food (Natawidjaja et al., 2019). In Zambia, household interviews showed that informal markets were the main, and often only, source of fresh fruits and vegetables for consumers in low-income neighbourhoods (Mwango et al., 2019). At the same time, the research could not ignore the fact that many informal markets – like supermarkets and mini-marts in the formal sector – are sources of less nutritious, energy-dense foods, which needs to be taken into account when assessing their relative contribution to the diets and health of low-income citizens (Mayer et al., 2019).

The SD4All programme’s evidence generation focused on affordability, nutrition and livelihoods. The programme was less successful in exploring the link between informality and aspects of sustainability related to the environment, such as supporting regenerative forms of agriculture, or reducing postharvest food losses. Our work on Zambia showed the importance of informal markets for the marketing of agro-biodiverse production (Mwanamwenge and Cook, 2019); dietary diversity could provide a ‘pull’ for diversity in production and could counterbalance the widespread promotion of western diets and ultra-processed food. However, the shortage of evidence on links between informality and environment represents a large knowledge gap.

Building the capacity of informal actors, their organisations, CSOs and research partners to generate evidence is critical for evidence-based advocacy and policy. It is important, however, to recognise that the quest for scientific process and rigour can keep experts and consultants in the driving seat, and keep evidence locked in a language that is foreign to people.

In SD4All moving from the production of evidence to advocacy proved to be a challenge. It revealed a tension between the immediate needs of informal market actors and broader societal needs. This shows the utmost importance of addressing basic needs and challenges faced by actors in the informal food economy while also addressing sustainable diets. Relationship-building with actors in the informal sector (including consumers and workers) is best achieved not by arriving with a pre-set agenda, but by creating space and openness to understand what evidence and interventions will be of use. It requires a revised role for CSOs, one where they facilitate links between informal actors and policymakers rather than occupy that space and claim to ‘represent the voice’ of the informal food economy.

Our fourth and final recommendation is aimed at CSOs, research institutions and other evidence-generating organisations:

Recommendation 4

In initiatives to generate evidence within the informal food economy, experts should play a supporting rather than leading role in the design, analysis and interpretation of data. We should also acknowledge that the constraint to action may not be a lack of evidence, but a failure to use available evidence.

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