



FAO in Action

Quick, convenient and now safer FAO helps improve quality of street food

Feel a little hungry? Need something quick? Whether in New York, Bangkok, Dakar or any other large city around the world help is near: just take to the street to satisfy your appetite. 'Street food' has become an increasingly important part of our daily diet, especially in many developing countries, because of the faster pace of life and the migration of villagers to the city.

Prepared and sold on the spot, these foods are tasty and convenient. But a quick meal can easily turn into a nasty bout of food poisoning. Food stalls often lack the storage, refrigeration and cooking facilities needed to prevent bacterial contamination with sometimes deadly bugs such as salmonella. And limited access to running water and sanitary services increases the danger of passing the bacterial threats on to customers.

Over the last 15 years, FAO has embarked on a series of actions aimed at improving the quality of street food. The FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission, which sets global food safety standards, has produced regional guidance documents on street foods. And on a more practical level, FAO has carried out research studies and helped officials improve the quality of street food in more than two dozen cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Some examples:

In Peru and Bolivia, FAO offered its technical assistance when a serious cholera outbreak in 1991 was traced partly to certain street foods. Over 600 food inspectors and close to 50,000 food handlers from Mexico to Central and South America were trained and the quality of food improved significantly. Unfortunately, momentum waned after the cholera scare abated, so a new campaign was begun to educate consumers about the need to demand higher quality street foods.

In Bangkok, Thailand, studies consistently found unacceptably high levels of bacteria and other toxins in street food. With support from FAO, a *Code of Practice for Street Foods*, including 10 steps to make street foods healthier, was taught to food inspectors and a public awareness campaign was developed to teach consumers about the importance of improved hygiene.

Many thousands of miles away in Dakar, Senegal, the street food sector is also booming. So too are related problems. Groups of stalls cause traffic jams, waste fouls the streets and sewage systems, and the incidence of food-borne illness is rising. But with help from FAO, Dakar officials have begun an ambitious project to improve the street-food sector. Construction of a new market area is underway where street vendors will have access to fresh water, waste disposal and toilets. In addition, vendors are being taught basic food hygiene rules, for instance, to keep cooked food away from raw food to avoid contamination and to refrain from food preparation when ill with a cold or infection. They are also learning business management skills, since without a healthy business it's hard to devote the time and resources to improving hygiene.

In South Africa, FAO and the Government have created a manual, a video, and training booklets to help vendors, food inspectors and consumers make street food a safer and more profitable enterprise.

"The project has been so successful, we'd like to use it as a model elsewhere in Africa," says Enrico Casadei, nutrition officer in FAO's Food Quality and Standards Service. Plans are underway to organize a conference that will use South Africa's experiences as a starting point for similar programmes.



Facts and figures

About street food and Codex Alimentarius

An FAO study in Calcutta found that street foods may be the least expensive and best method of obtaining a nutritionally balanced meal outside the home. An average 500 gram meal containing 20-30 grams of protein, 12-15 grams of fat, 174-183 grams of carbohydrates and providing approximately 1,000 calories in total could be purchased for only US\$ 0.25 on the street.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, street foods account for 20 to 30 percent of urban household expenditure, and the sector provides a major source of employment.

In Bangkok, 20,000 street vendors provide city residents with 40 percent of their overall energy intake. A year after an FAO-supported campaign to improve the quality of street foods, food vendors in one area of Bangkok announced that sales were up 20 percent.

Women often own street food stalls or are employed as vendors. In certain regions they represent from 70 percent to 90 percent of the vendors.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission has adopted two regional guidance documents on street foods – one for Africa and one for Latin America and the Caribbean. These documents form the basis for regional codes of practice, to be adapted by each country and enforced by local authorities.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission was established in 1962. It is a subsidiary body of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Health Organization, with 165 member countries. It was established to formulate internationally accepted food safety standards to protect consumer health and ensure fair trade practices.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission is the only international forum that brings together scientists, technical experts, government regulators and international consumer and industry organizations.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission has, among other things, succeeded in:

- Setting maximum residue limits in food for over 3,200 pesticides
- Evaluating more than 1,005 food additives
- Defining general principles of food hygiene, protecting the food chain from primary production to the final consumer
- Setting rules for the safe use of food additives and establishing guidelines for proper labelling
- Clarifying the definition of organic food to prevent misleading claims about food quality or production methods
- Establishing internationally recognized standards and guidelines for international food trade, valued at US\$300 billion a year
- Setting up 30 specialized committees – composed of top government health professionals, scientists and representatives of the food and agriculture sectors – to provide the ongoing scientific basis for Codex standards

The Codex texts are used by governments as part of their national food safety requirements. They are also used by commercial partners in specifying the grade and quality of consignments in international trade.

For more information, please contact:

FAO Media-Office

Tel: (+39) 06 5705 3625

Fax: (+39) 06 5705 3699/

Media-Office@fao.org

Or look at the website of the Codex Alimentarius Commission

<http://www.codexalimentarius.net/Default.htm>