



Promoting the consumption of green leafy vegetables with street food vendors in Benin



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Introduction: urban consumers in Benin do not consume enough fruits and vegetables

In Benin, noncommunicable diseases are the main cause leading to about 53% of the deaths (OMS-Benin, 2020). These are chronic diseases – such as malnutrition, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, heart attacks and cardiovascular diseases. They are more prevalent in urban areas than in rural areas. The main causes of these diseases are linked to the quality of diet. According to Delisle et al. (2012), urban consumers have a poorer diet quality in micronutrients than consumers in rural and peri-urban areas. Urban people in Benin do not reach the recommended daily intake of vitamins B (B1, B2, B3, and B5), iron, calcium, and zinc. According to the OMS-Benin report (2020), about 93% of urban consumers did not consume the recommended daily five portions of vegetables and fruit. Thus, increasing fruit and vegetable consumption is a potential remedy for the prevention of these diseases. Among the vegetables available in Benin, green leafy vegetables are the richest in Vitamin A but are less consumed by urban consumers in Benin (Snoek et al., 2022). From a survey conducted among urban consumers, it was concluded that 72% of the surveyed people frequently buy their meals from street food vendors, mobile street food vendors, and small informal restaurants (Snoek et al, 2023). To address the low consumption levels of fruits and vegetables, the SafeVeg Programme carried out pilot interventions to promote the consumption of green leafy vegetables among customers of street food vendors in Cotonou and Parakou.



The importance of street food vendors

SafeVeg surveyed street food vendors in Cotonou and Parakou to understand more about who they are and what they do. More than 80% of street food vendors in both cities were women. Street food vendors run different food vending outlets, including cafeterias, small formal or informal restaurants, canteens, food shops, and mobile street vendors. They employ on average eight people.

Customers of street food vendors are mainly students, pupils, craftsmen, and civil servants. Between 30–40% of the street food vendors include green leafy vegetables in their menus while almost all sellers use tomatoes. Leafy vegetables are mostly sold in restaurants but rarely sold in canteens and by itinerant vendors. The leafy vegetables sold are cabbage, lettuce, moringa, amaranth, great nightshade, cassava leaf, baobab leaf, Basilic africana (Tchiayo), Vernonia, etc. Around 60% of the sellers interviewed in Cotonou and Parakou showed interest in integrating leafy vegetables into their food portfolios.

The SafeVeg Programme aims to make safe vegetables available and affordable for West African consumers and is funded by European Union and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.



Results of the interventions

The pilot intervention took place in Cotonou and Parakou and involved 12 street food vendors in each city. The vegetables to be promoted were selected together with the vendors: Tchiayo in Cotonou and Amarante in Parakou. The vegetables selected were prepared by the vendors and offered to consumers in addition to the common meals. This included verbal promotion by the vendors, but also posters presented to highlight the benefits of green leafy vegetable consumption. The extra vegetables were offered to consumers for a market conform price of 100 FCFA.

The pilot intervention in Cotonou highlights that more than half (53%) of the customers ordered the additional vegetables, while in Parakou 36% ordered the extra portion. The motives for choosing the additional vegetables are their taste, health benefits high micronutrient content, and their contribution to faster digestion.

In short, our pilot interventions in Cotonou and Parakou show that vegetable consumption among urban consumers can be effectively promoted via street food vendors. Consumers are willing to pay for the vegetables and besides the health benefits also contribute to extra income for street food vendors. In addition, the interventions prove to provide an additional income for the street food vendors from the additional vegetables sold.

Going to scale

The pilot interventions showcase that street food vendors in Benin can promote vegetable consumption among urban consumers. But how do to scale, mainstream the share of green leafy vegetables in the menus of street food vendors, and reach a large number of urban consumers? These challenges will require the involvement of multiple actors having a stake in the promotion of healthy diets in Benin. Involving large numbers of street food vendors will require government and non-government organizations to reach out to these key actors, offering them training and promotion materials. The SafeVeg Programme will support these outreach activities through 'light-touch' assistance, by offering access to expertise and know-how, monitoring, and evaluation.



Policy recommendations

Considering these results and challenges, we recommend the following policy measures:

- ▶ For urban consumers street food is an important channel for accessing their daily meals. Including informal vendors in food security and nutrition programs is therefore recommended.
- ▶ Awareness raising and capacity building among street food vendors on preparing healthy meals including sufficient vegetables are needed. In addition, it is recommended to enhance the know-how of street food vendors in good cooking and hygiene practices
- ▶ Overall sensitization of urban consumers through various (social) media on the importance of vegetable consumption is needed. For example, a dedicated poster campaign on the effects of eating vegetables in cooperation with vendors is effective.

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