

## **Synopsis: The enabling environment for informal food traders in Nigeria’s secondary cities**

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### **RESEARCH OVERVIEW**

Informal vendors are a critical source of food security in African cities and play a key role in food system transformation. However, the livelihoods of these traders and the governance constraints they encounter are not well-understood outside of primate cities. This study focuses on two distinct secondary cities in Nigeria – Calabar in the South-South geopolitical zone and Minna in the Middle Belt region. Local and state officials in each city were interviewed on the legal, institutional, and oversight functions they provide within the informal food sector. This was complemented with a survey of 1,097 traders across the two cities.<sup>1</sup>

The analysis highlights two main findings:

1. Informal traders report less harassment by government actors than has been observed in larger Nigerian cities. However, the enabling environment is characterized by benign neglect. Government-mandated oversight functions are not comprehensively implemented, and service delivery gaps hinder food safety.
2. There are differences in the needs of traders across cities. Policies focused on food safety and the livelihoods of food traders need to be properly nuanced at subnational level.

### **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

The informal economy constitutes approximately 80 percent of Nigeria’s workforce. Retail employs around 40 percent of these workers. Food retail represents a major sub-sector within informal trade and includes both stationary traders within open-air markets and itinerant hawkers who operate from various locations. As in many developing countries, traders in Nigeria work in high risk

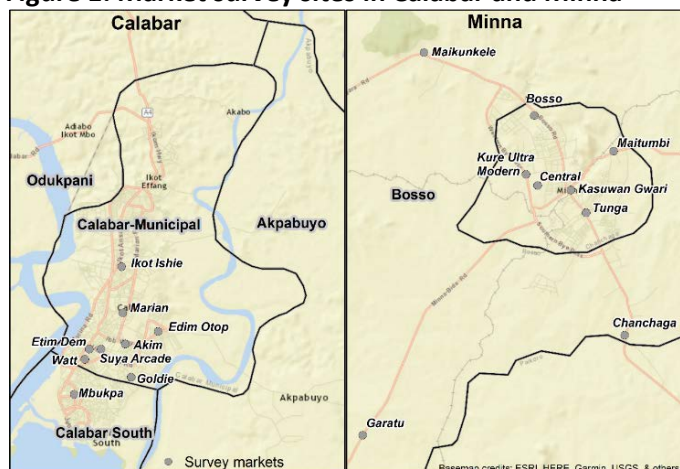
and unfavorable conditions in which they are frequently exposed to hazardous working environments. In turn, this has negative implications for the safety of the food they sell.

Most research on informal food trade and food safety in Nigeria focuses on Lagos, the country’s primate city. However, this study expands our understanding by focusing on two secondary cities that play significant roles in regional economies: Calabar and Minna. The two cities vary by geopolitical location, ethnic and religious composition, and the regulatory framework for informal trade. An array of officials with distinct responsibilities at both state and local government levels regulate informal food trade through hygiene training, licensing, and other oversight.

### **METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS**

Two forms of primary data collection were used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two dozen state and local government area officials involved in regulatory and oversight activities relevant to informal food trade in each city.

**Figure 1: Market survey sites in Calabar and Minna**



Source: Compiled by Mekamu Kedir, IFPRI

<sup>1</sup> A detailed discussion of this research can be found in NSSP Working Paper 59, *The Enabling Environment for Informal Food Traders in Nigeria’s Secondary Cities*: <https://www.ifpri.org/publication/enabling-environment-informal-food-traders-nigerias-secondary-cities>

Secondly, a survey of informal food sellers in nine markets within each city was conducted – 530 respondents in Calabar and 567 in Minna (Figure 1). The sample was stratified between those vendors located within markets and those trading on the pavement or roads outside markets, since the latter theoretically are more vulnerable to harassment while those inside can provide a better assessment of market infrastructure.

Over half of the traders sell fresh foods (e.g. fruits, vegetables, fish, meats), about one-third sell manufactured packaged goods, and the remainder prepared snacks and meals. Women are the major traders in Calabar, while men predominate in the more heavily Muslim Minna. More than half finished secondary school or completed post-secondary schooling. Almost 80 percent of traders had at least one parent who also was a trader, suggesting such trade is a family tradition for many.

In addition, the survey revealed that harassment by officials, either through forced relocations or confiscation of merchandise, is not perceived by traders to be a major challenge. Only 12 and 3 percent in Calabar and Minna, respectively, reported ever experiencing such harassment. However, in contrast to statements by officials in both cities regarding their responsibilities in regulating informal food trade, less than one percent of the sampled vendors realized that they needed a license to sell food, and 78 percent had never had an inspection of their food handling or food quality by a health officer in the previous six months. There is a large gap between the de-jure roles of local bureaucrats in regulating traders and actual oversight. Overall, traders reported little interaction with officials on food safety.

Traders' efforts to vend safe food are further undermined by the poor service environment in which they operate (Table 1). Few have access to clean running water, safe storage, or health facilities. Toilet access is a concern in Minna and inadequate drainage in Calabar. The lack of access

**Table 1: Access to key services within the market, percent of surveyed traders inside markets reporting**

Service	Calabar	Minna
Trash collection	43.1	44.5
Toilets	62.1	36.2
Electricity	40.2	66.1
Clean, running water	16.7	8.9
Safe storage facilities for merchandise	28.3	37.6
Shelter during bad weather	28.3	55.2
Fire extinguishers	2.2	1.1
Security	74.3	82.5
Health facilities	1.9	2.9
Proper drainage	15.2	53.7
<i>Total observations</i>	<i>269</i>	<i>348</i>

Source: Authors' compilation from survey data.

Note: Since access to services was limited to those who worked inside a market, the number of observations is smaller than for the entire sample of informal traders.

to major services is even more pronounced for itinerant vendors, who often are not entitled to use the services within the markets.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the recognized importance of traders to urban food security, very little is known about this relatively heterogeneous constituency. We found that, instead of the draconian treatment witnessed in megacities such as Lagos, informal vendors in Calabar and Minna operate in a situation of benign neglect by the government. Regular sensitization of traders to food preparation practices is critical, as is the investment by local governments of collected revenues into relevant infrastructure that will enable proper food safety practices.

Recognizing the subnational variation among food vendors is critical to ensure that policy responses for food safety, gender inclusion, taxation, market siting, and other issues are supportive of traders' livelihoods and of food safety for the public. More importantly, as urbanization proceeds apace in Nigeria and informal food trade continues to be essential to the food security of the urban poor, the subnational bureaucratic institutions that regulate the safety of informal food trade need to be provided sufficient fiscal and human resources to exercise their oversight functions.

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