



CGIAR

BETTER DIETS  
AND NUTRITION

# Vendors Outside of Markets in Viet Nam

Research Note

Alan de Brauw,<sup>1</sup> Dao The Anh,<sup>2</sup> and Pham Tho<sup>3</sup>

*<sup>1</sup>International Food Policy Research Institute, <sup>2</sup>Viet Nam Academy of Agricultural Sciences, <sup>3</sup>Center for Agrarian Systems Research and Development*

November 2025



## Introduction

The food environment represents the place in which demand for food meets supply: consumers purchase foods in the food environment, and food retailers market and sell their products. In many countries, the food environment is undergoing rapid changes as economies grow and populations urbanize, with the consequence that a larger share of food consumed is purchased by the end consumer, rather than being self produced (de Bruin and Holleman 2023). Viet Nam is no different: over time, the country's growing and urbanizing economy has led to shifts in its food environment.

This note focuses on one type of retailer in Viet Nam's food environment: food vendors that exist outside of formal markets. These vendors typically sell their goods in a fixed location, unlike mobile vendors, and do business on a daily or near-daily basis from that location. This definition includes vendors in "toad markets," which are vendors who set up right outside of official markets, and other vendors who work in a fixed location but lack a storefront. All such vendors are clearly part of the informal sector. These vendors play a small but important role in Viet Nam's food environment, and almost all of them sell at least one component of a sustainable healthy diet. As a result, these vendors can help to improve the diets of Viet Nam's population.

This note uses two data sets to examine small vendors outside markets. The first is a listing exercise that enumerates all businesses selling food in the sampled wards of three districts: Dong Da, in urban Hanoi; Dong Anh, in peri-urban Hanoi; and Moc Chau, a rural district northwest of Hanoi. This survey was used as a sample frame for the second survey; the second one was designed to examine the constraints and opportunities faced by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) as they consider selling more healthy foods (Ceballos et al. 2023). Vendors outside of markets are one type of MSME in the food environment.

## Findings on vendors outside markets

Analysis of the listing exercise and the sample of vendors followed in the MSME survey examined the number of vendors surveyed in each location, whether these vendors sold prepared foods, and whether they sold healthy foods (Table 1). To assess sales of healthy foods, the 16 healthy food groups of the Global Diet Quality Score (GDQS) were simplified into seven categories: fruits, vegetables, lean meat and fish, dairy and eggs, legumes, nuts and seeds, and edible oils (whole grains were omitted, as their consumption is rare in Viet Nam).

Dong Da was an outlier for several reasons. First, there were far more vendors outside markets in urban Dong Da than in peri-urban Dong Anh or rural Moc Chau. Second, almost one-third of these vendors sold some type of prepared food, whereas only 17 percent of the same type of vendors sold prepared foods in Dong Anh and 10 percent in Moc Chau. Vendors in Dong Da were less likely to sell any type of healthy foods, as compared to vendors in the other two districts. Only half of vendors in Dong Da sold healthy foods, while three-quarters of vendors did in the other districts.

Table 1. Number of vendors and types of food sold, by district

District	Number of vendors	Percent selling prepared foods	Percent selling at least one type of healthy food	Number of healthy food types sold
Dong Da	515	32.2	50.9	1.40
Dong Anh	129	17.1	75.2	1.27
Moc Chau	102	10.8	75.5	1.51

Source: MSME Survey and Listing Survey (2023).

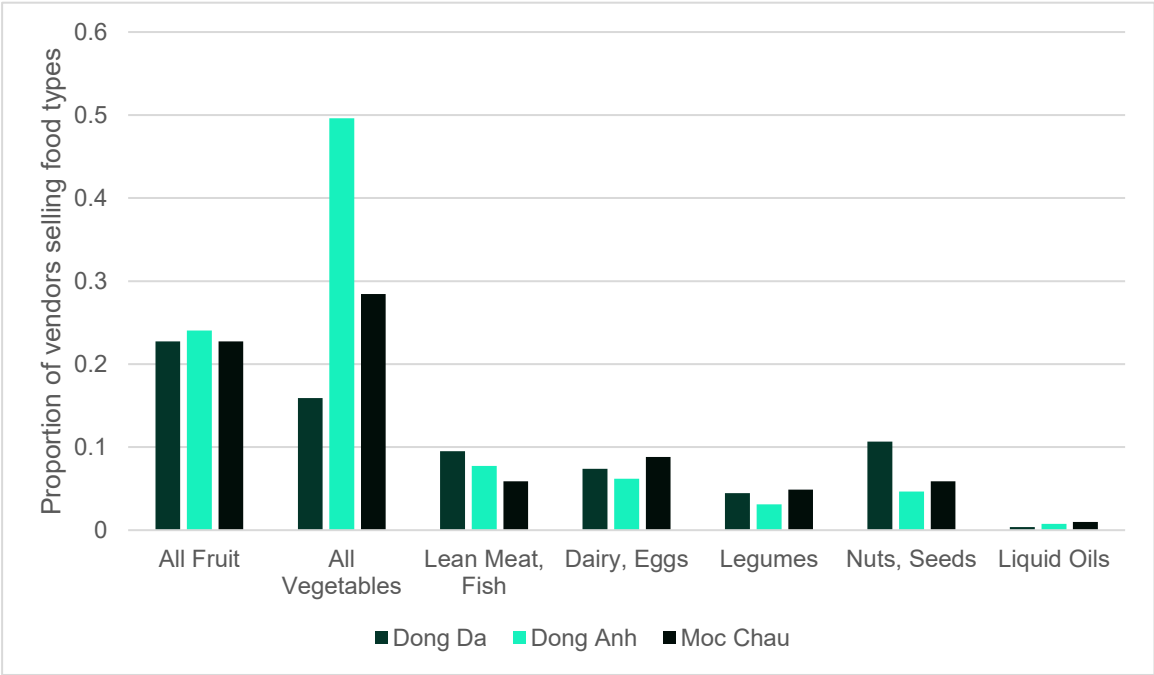
Note: Healthy food categories follow a simplified version of the Global Diet Quality Score “Plus” categories (Bromage et al. 2021). They include fruits, vegetables, lean meats or fish, dairy or eggs, legumes, nuts or seeds, and oils. Column 4 is conditional on selling at least one healthy food.

Across all three study districts, businesses that sold healthy foods tended to sell only one or two types, rather than a wide range of these foods. On average, between 1.27 and 1.51 types of healthy foods were sold, conditional on selling at least one.

### Sale of healthy food types

Vendors outside of markets sold very different types of healthy foods across the three districts (Figure 1). In Dong Anh, about 50 percent of these vendors sold some type of vegetable, while in the other two locations, a smaller proportion of vendors sold vegetables. In all three locations, nearly 25 percent of vendors sold fruit. Given that only half of vendors in Dong Da sold any healthy foods, this figure implies that fruit was sold by about half of vendors selling healthy foods. Almost none of the vendors sold liquid oils. The other four categories of healthy foods were rarely sold, except for nuts and seeds. In Dong Da, about 10 percent of all vendors outside markets sold nuts and seeds.

Figure 1. Prevalence of healthy foods sold by vendors outside markets, by food category and location

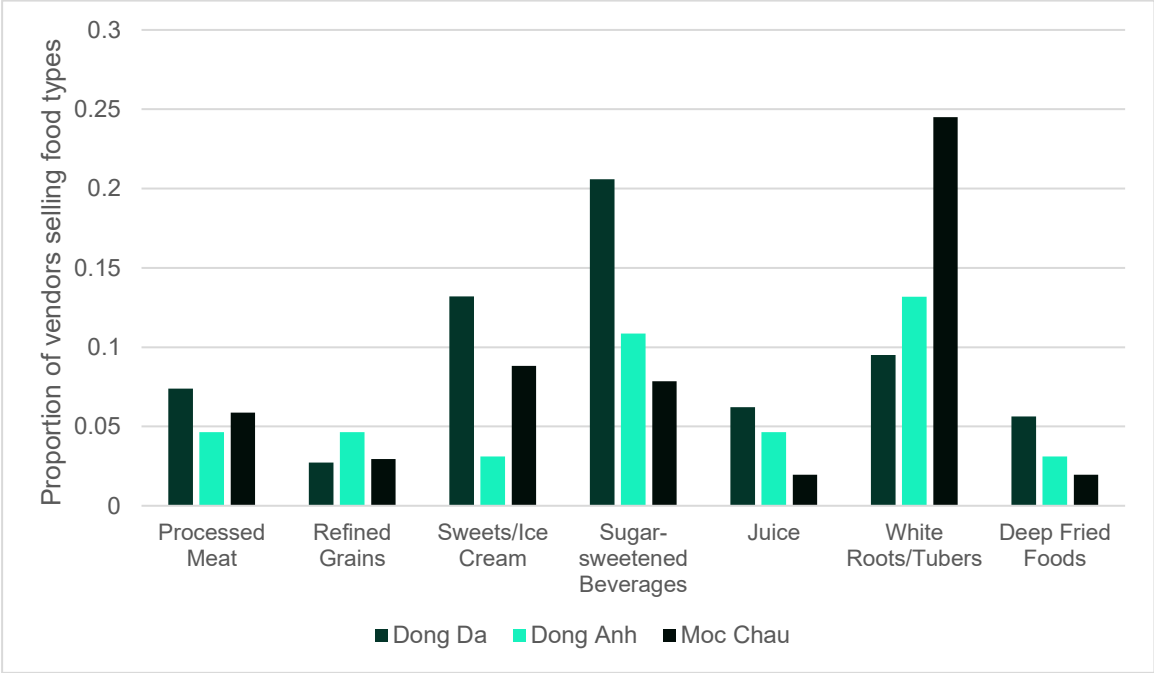


Source: Viet Nam MSME Survey (2023).

The analysis also examined the prevalence of unhealthy foods for sale, as measured by the GDQS (Source: Viet Nam MSME Listing data (2023)).

). In Dong Da, sugar-sweetened beverages were the most prevalent unhealthy food; these were available from 20 percent of vendors outside markets. These beverages were less prevalent among vendors in Dong Anh and Moc Chau. In Moc Chau, the most prevalent unhealthy foods were white roots and tubers, with almost a quarter of vendors selling them. These vendors were also likely to sell other vegetables. While some vendors sold other types of unhealthy foods, sales of these foods were low, except for sweets or ice cream sold by vendors in Dong Da.

Figure 2. Prevalence of unhealthy foods sold by vendors outside markets, by food category and location



Source: Viet Nam MSME Listing data (2023).

Note: In contrast to the healthy food categories, these food groups are considered unhealthy according to the GDQS.

### Purchase of healthy foods

The analysis also explored the types of healthy foods that consumers reported purchasing from vendors (Table 2). Unfortunately, the survey did not differentiate between vendors selling in official (regulated) markets and vendors outside of official markets. The figures in Table 2 include vendors within markets; however, almost all vendors at toad market stalls and mobile vendors are outside official markets, and more than half of vendors in food stalls are outside official markets as well. Thus, these figures likely reflect purchases from vendors outside markets as well.

Except for unsweetened milk and liquid oils, most foods were purchased from vendors in Dong Anh and Moc Chau. For example, in Dong Anh, among those making at least one purchase, more than 90 percent of households purchased all types of fruits, vegetables, poultry, and fish or shellfish from vendors. The share of households in Moc Chau that purchased from vendors was somewhat lower but remained between 70 and 90 percent. Clearly, vendors are a key source of healthy foods in both peri-urban and rural locations. The share of purchasing households in Dong Da was much lower than in the other two study districts: for example, only 37 percent of households purchasing citrus bought it from vendors, relative to 93 percent in Dong Anh and 71 percent in Moc Chau. There is a wider variety of food outlets in Dong Da than the other districts, which likely led households to purchase from a wider range of outlets.

Table 2. Proportion of households who purchased food from vendors outside markets when purchasing any food, by food category and district

Food Category	Dong Da	Dong Anh	Moc Chau
Legumes	0.452	0.881	0.798
Nuts, seeds	0.147	0.564	0.645
Deep orange fruits	0.341	0.961	0.760
Citrus fruits	0.371	0.931	0.714
Other fruits	0.524	0.967	0.842
Liquid oil	0.054	0.069	0.033
Fish, shellfish	0.612	0.961	0.830
Poultry, lean meat	0.508	0.911	0.796
Healthier milk	0.075	0	0
Eggs	0.143	0.727	0.731
Cruciferous vegetables	0.332	0.928	0.801
Deep orange vegetables	0.472	0.959	0.806
Other vegetables	0.529	0.961	0.853

**Source:** Viet Nam Consumption Survey Data (2023).

**Note:** For each food category, survey respondents were asked whether they purchased products from vendors outside markets. Answering “yes” meant that a household purchased at least one specific food within a category from these vendors. The questionnaire did not ask about low-fat milk, so we define “healthier milk” as unsweetened milk.

## Ownership, employment, and credit access

The analysis also explored the human and physical capital that contributes to these businesses. Seventy percent of these businesses were owned by women, and another 24 percent were jointly owned by a man and woman. Very few businesses were only owned by men. Twenty-three percent of businesses employed any staff members in addition to the business owner; among those, 75 percent had only one employee. Youth employment was not very common, either: 25 percent of businesses with employees had an employee between the ages of 16 and 25, with the majority of them working part-time.

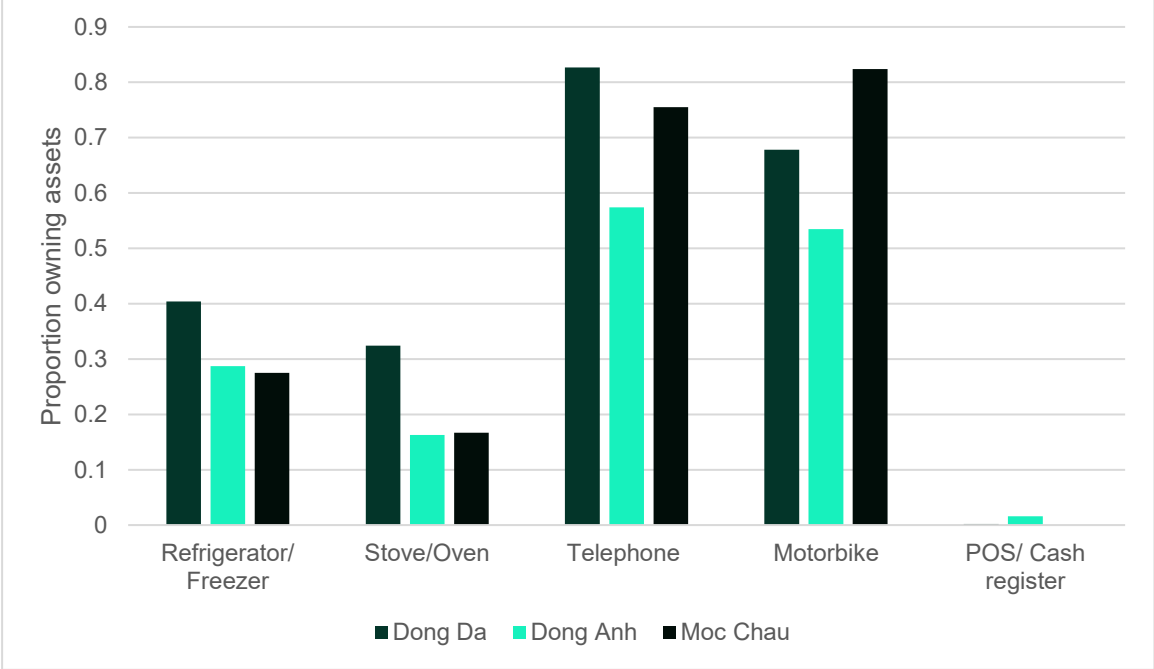
Most vendors outside markets were informal workers, and very few had access to credit. Only 4 percent of businesses stated that they were registered, and only 3.5 percent had any outstanding credit. Registration may not be a completely accurate reflection of formality, as about one-quarter of all vendors outside markets reported paying some government fees or taxes. That means, however, that 75 percent of vendors were unregistered and did not pay fees.

## Asset ownership

Vendors outside markets had heterogeneous asset holdings, largely depending on location (Figure 3). Relative to other businesses (Ceballos et al. 2023), vendors outside markets were far less likely to have refrigerators or freezers: only 37 percent of all vendors had either of these appliances, and the percentage was lower in Dong Anh and Moc Chau. A relatively high share of vendors in Dong Da (32 percent) had a stove or cooktop; this finding is not surprising, given the relatively large proportion of vendors who sold some type of cooked food. This proportion was lower in Dong Anh and Moc Chau (16 percent). Vendors in Dong Da and Moc Chau were more likely to report owning a telephone for the business or a motorbike than those in Dong Anh. Either of these assets could be used for personal reasons as well.

Figure 3 shows the share of businesses that had a point-of-sale (POS) machine or cash register to process payments securely. Hardly any businesses indicated owning one. Without a way to delineate business income, it can be difficult to know how much money the business is making.

Figure 3. Ownership of assets by vendors outside markets, by location

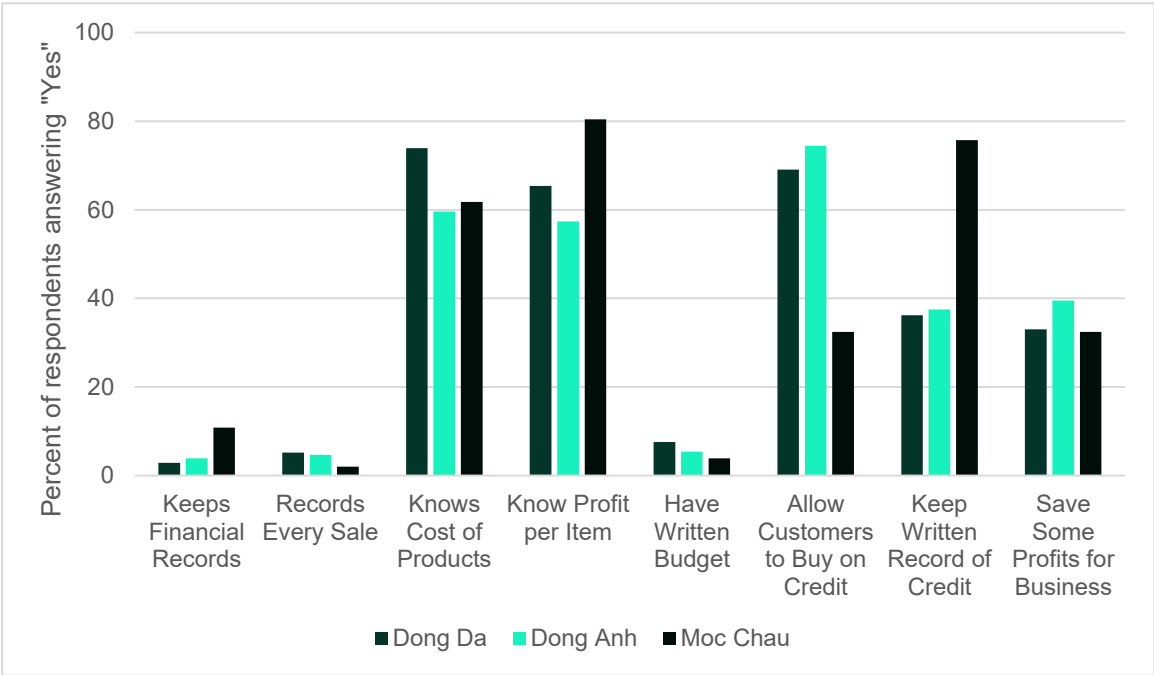


Source: Viet Nam MSME Survey (2023).

**Business skills**

Vendors were also asked questions about their business skills (Figure 4). Consistent with the lack of POS machines or cash registers, very few vendors kept financial records, recorded every sale, or had a written budget. However, they reported regularly knowing the cost of products or the profit per item. Between 30 and 40 percent of vendors reported saving some of their profits to invest in their businesses.

Figure 4. Business techniques used by vendors outside markets, by location



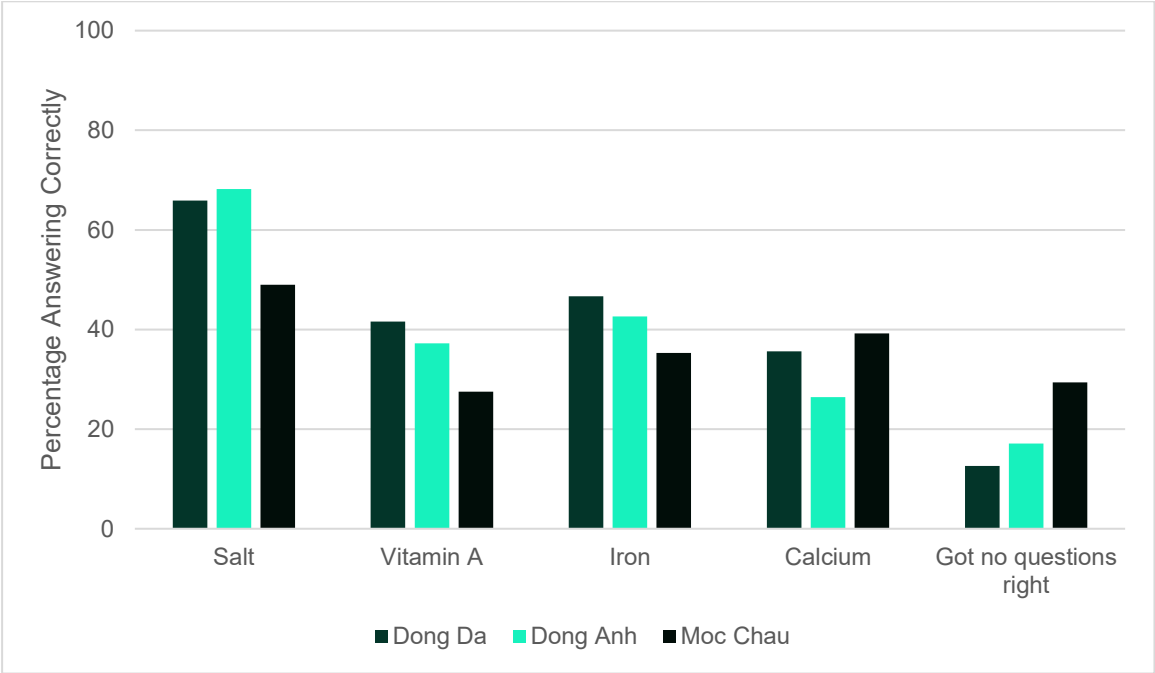
Source: Viet Nam MSME Survey (2023).

Notably, in Dong Da and Dong Anh, a large proportion of vendors allowed customers to buy on credit (69 percent and 74 percent, respectively), even though the vendors themselves did not have access to credit. The proportion of vendors allowing credit use was much lower in Moc Chau (32 percent). In both Dong Da and Dong Anh, nearly two thirds of vendors did not keep a written record of credit use and instead relied on their memory. In Moc Chau, three-quarters kept track of credit use on paper, though far fewer businesses allowed customers to buy on credit. Because keeping written records of credit debts is associated with higher monthly revenue, recording these transactions would help businesses increase revenues and profits.

### Healthy food knowledge

In the survey, respondents were asked to select from four choices to identify foods high in a specific nutrient (salt, iron, Vitamin A, calcium). In general, knowledge of micronutrients among vendors was relatively poor, and it was worse in Moc Chau than in Dong Da and Dong Anh (Figure 5). In Dong Da and Dong Anh, more than 60 percent of respondents identified the product high in salt (potato chips), but that was the only question answered correctly by 50 percent of respondents. Except for identifying the high-calcium food, knowledge among respondents in Moc Chau lagged behind Dong Da and Dong Anh. About 30 percent of vendors in Moc Chau did not answer a single question correctly, indicating a serious need for knowledge about the nutrient content of foods sold by vendors.

Figure 5. Nutrition knowledge among vendors outside markets, by location



Source: Viet Nam MSME Survey (2023).

Note: The figure indicates the share of survey respondents (by percentage) correctly answering questions about which foods contained each of the four nutrients (salt, Vitamin A, iron, and calcium).

### Conclusion

This note describes vendors that work outside of markets, as enumerated in a survey of MSMEs conducted in 2023 in three locations in northern Viet Nam: Dong Da, an urban district of Hanoi; Dong Anh, a peri-urban district; and Moc Chau, a rural district in the northwest. Analysis of the survey data identified four main findings. First, these vendors sell a wide range of food types, particularly in Dong Da, where most of the vendors outside markets were found. A fairly large percentage sell prepared foods. Vendors that sell healthy foods tend to sell only one type, such as fruits or vegetables. Thus, some of these vendors may have potential to increase sales of healthy foods. Second, vendors are a key source of healthy foods in peri-urban and rural areas: the vast majority of households purchasing fruits and vegetables in the past seven days did so from some type of vendor. However, the share of households purchasing from vendors is much smaller in Dong Da. Third, these vendors have few assets, lack access to finance, and lack business skills. Addressing these issues could help vendors to sell more healthy foods but targeting is important, as many do not sell healthy foods. Fourth, improving basic nutrition knowledge among these vendors would improve their knowledge of healthy products and could motivate them to promote such foods, potentially increasing their availability.



CGIAR

BETTER DIETS  
AND NUTRITION

## AUTHORS

Alan de Brauw ([a.debrauw@cgiar.org](mailto:a.debrauw@cgiar.org)) is a Senior Research Fellow, International Food Policy Research Institute, based in Washington, DC, USA.

Dao The Anh ([daotheanh@gmail.com](mailto:daotheanh@gmail.com)) is Vice President, Viet Nam Academy of Agricultural Sciences, based in Hanoi, Viet Nam.

Pham Tho ([thoduypham@yahoo.com](mailto:thoduypham@yahoo.com)) is Vice Director, Center for Agrarian Systems Research and Development, based in Hanoi, Viet Nam.

## REFERENCES

Bromage, S., C. Batis, S. Bhupathiraju, W. Fawzi, T. Fung, Y. Li, M. Deitchler, et al. 2021. "Development and Validation of a Novel Food-Based Global Diet Quality Score (GDQS)." *Journal of Nutrition* 151: 75S–92S. [10.1093/jn/nxab244](https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/nxab244)

Ceballos, F., A. de Brauw, L. Le, and P. Soneja. 2023. "Description of MSME Survey in Viet Nam." SHiFT Project Note. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute. <https://doi.org/10.2499/p15738coll2.137029>

De Bruin, S., and C. Holleman. 2023. "Urbanization is Transforming Agrifood Systems across the Rural-Urban Continuum Creating Challenges and Opportunities to Access Affordable Healthy Diet." Background Paper for The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023. FAO Agricultural Development Economics Working Paper 23–08. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc8094en>

## About BDN

The CGIAR Science Program on Better Diets and Nutrition (BDN) identifies, co-designs and tests consumer-oriented solutions to ensure sustainable healthy diets for all while enhancing livelihoods, social equity, and environmental sustainability. Through evidence-based research and collaboration, BDN supports country-led food system transformation in low- and middle-income countries. To learn more about BDN, please visit <https://www.cgiar.org/cgiar-research-portfolio-2025-2030/better-diets-and-nutrition/>.

## Disclaimer

This publication has been prepared as an output of BDN and has not been independently peer reviewed. Any opinion(s) expressed here belong to the author(s) and are not necessarily representative of or endorsed by CGIAR.

We would like to thank all funders who support this research through their contributions to the CGIAR Trust Fund: [www.cgiar.org/funders](http://www.cgiar.org/funders).

© 2025 IFPRI. This publication is licensed for use under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). To view this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>.