

Concentrating sale of vegetables in supermarket no solution for Vietnamese food safety problem

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By forcing the sale of fresh vegetables to move from street markets to the supermarket the Vietnamese government will not achieve the desired effect. This government policy is based on concerns about food safety and better control of the chain, but consumers have their own reasons for buying products from the market. Sigrid Wertheim-Heck studied these

social mechanisms and will be awarded a PhD for this work by Wageningen University on Friday 20 November.

Vietnam is one of the world's largest growth economies. It also consumes a relatively high volume of fresh vegetables. To meet the growing demand for fresh vegetables with a declining farmland acreage, crop protection agents have been increasingly used over the last decades. However, these agents are not always applied in the correct manner and moreover banned substances are sometimes used. The fact that the government is working on clean standards for production and awareness, and carries out checks does not prevent the food safety scandals that are reported every day in the media.

Stimulate supermarkets

In addition, the government is aiming to get rid of the traditional markets and is stimulating private supermarkets. The government believes that supermarkets with their food safety requirements and hygiene standards are a logical alternative to less controlled and unhygienic markets and street selling, says Wertheim-Heck. "We generally expect consumers who are worried about food safety to do their shopping in the supermarket. As it turns out, however, consumers choose informal street selling rather than supermarkets when traditional markets are no longer available."

Social function of the market

In practice only 2% of the vegetables are purchased in supermarkets. Supermarkets are not part of the routine and social network of consumers, according to the Wageningen PhD candidate in her thesis *We have to eat, right?* "Forty per cent of the population earn too little to do their shopping in the supermarket. Also a lot of the people are

socially dependent on their own district, for child care, care of old people and other services. Then you also do your shopping in your 'own' market. It's walking and talking. In addition, there are the people with time constraints, with busy jobs and focussed on their own family, who quickly do their shopping on the way somewhere without getting off their motorbike. The only group that does visit the supermarket is younger consumers who do not yet have a market routine and live close to a shop of this kind."

Own solutions

A lot of Vietnamese people are concerned about [food safety](#), but everyone has his own solution to this, according to Wertheim-Heck. "People buy in their own neighbourhood, or put their trust in sellers they have always used. They buy from a seller who grows the produce himself or is a family member, trust a seasonal product rather than a non-seasonal product, a root or a tuber rather than leaf vegetables, find something with bite marks safer, and trust one production region more than another. They attach less importance to anonymous and objective assurance systems and certificates offered by the supermarket and the controlled chains."

Future

This means that the government must take a less dogmatic view of a single ideal type of supermarket model, says Wertheim-Heck. "Adjustments within existing practices have more chance of success. For example, a drive-in supermarket, or shops with a social function. Just as in Europe and the United States supermarkets and alternative food networks are often presented as opposites and where consumers often choose a middle path and visit both, the Vietnamese are also looking for hybrid solutions."

Provided by Wageningen University

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