



Food safety and urban food markets in Vietnam: The need for flexible and customized retail modernization policies



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ABSTRACT

Access to safe and healthy food is a crucial element of food security. In Vietnam the safety of daily vegetables is of great concern to both consumers and policymakers. To mitigate food safety risks, the Vietnamese government enforces rules and regulations and relies strongly on a single approach for organizing food provision; being modernizing retail by replacing wet markets with supermarkets. In general, reorganizing food provision in this way is increasingly considered to be a guarantee for food safety, especially in urban settings with growing populations. To assess the effectiveness of this induced retail modernization of the fresh vegetables market in Vietnam's capital Hanoi, this paper examines for whom and under which conditions does this approach deliver the desired outcomes. The survey data and interviews show that ongoing retail modernization in Hanoi reaches only a minor segment of the population and drives a large group of shoppers into informal vending structures. On the basis of five case studies, this paper demonstrates how similar supermarket interventions can yield contrasting outcomes when they do not accommodate for differences in shopper population and do not adapt to variations in the urban conditions. To reduce exposure to unsafe food, particularly for poorer segments of the population, we conclude that developing a flexible portfolio of retail modernization pathways and adopting a reflexive policy approach provide better impact and leverage, as opposed to the current trend of promoting supermarkets as a single, ideal-type form of food shopping.

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Supermarkets at the core of food retail policy in Vietnam

Recurring incidents with pesticide residues in food products and regular breaches in food hygiene have placed food safety high on the policy agenda in Southeast Asia (SEA). Ensuring the safety of daily food purchases is particularly important in the case of fresh foods. In urban food markets in Vietnam, the focus of this study, the safety of fresh vegetables is a key concern, frequently reported in the media as well as in policy development and public discussions (Figuié, 2004; Van Hoi et al., 2009). Vegetables are a daily staple in the Vietnamese diet and are preferably consumed with every meal. The per capita vegetable consumption in Hanoi, 290 g per day (Wertheim-Heck et al., 2014b), is among the highest in the world. The prominence of vegetables in the Vietnamese diet mandates the investigation of how food safety policy interventions relate to the shopping practices of different consumer groups.

Strategies to mitigate food safety risks often build on approaches to sourcing, retailing and purchasing structures developed in Western settings (Henson and Caswell, 1999). As a result, policies aimed at improving food safety increasingly entail the reliance on process control through public-private co-regulation in the context of modern supermarkets (Martinez et al., 2007; Yamaguchi, 2014). In the rapidly developing economies of Southeast Asia, food safety concerns resulting from industrialization, urbanization and increasing distance between producer and consumer are addressed in a similar way (Reardon et al., 2007). Goal-oriented policymakers conflate modernization with Westernization, expecting that aspirations for modern lifestyles and concerns about food safety motivate the adoption of supermarket shopping habits by individual consumers.

Public policy in SEA tends to place supermarket development at the core of strategies aiming to ensure access to safe food. Supermarkets are considered instrumental for realizing food safety improvements by implementing private food safety management systems and maintaining food hygiene standards (Reardon, 2005). This preferred model implies the restructuring of existing modes of food provision and the construction of new retailing structures from scratch.

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Especially in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, with a socialist-oriented market economy, the government plays a powerful interventionist role in the modernization of food markets by promoting 'supermarketization' as a generic path and replicable model suitable for all consumers. In various policy documents and media statements, the Vietnamese government presents supermarkets as important instruments and drivers for the transformation of the country into a modern society (MoIT, 2004, 2009; Table 3). Retail modernization policies aim at stimulating supermarket expansion along with the reorganization and reduction of traditional markets. The dominant policy model not only sets out to reorganize food markets, but also is expected to induce a shift in shopping practices on the consumer side (see Section 'Which policy? Food safety regulation and retail modernization in Hanoi' for a detailed policy review). Supermarketization seeks to substitute daily visits to wet markets¹ with weekly shopping at supermarkets (Dries et al., 2013).

However, the typical modern retail formats are still a niche phenomenon, with supermarkets in Hanoi contributing just 2% of total vegetable consumption (Wertheim-Heck et al., 2014b). This is partly explained by patterns in supermarket diffusion (Reardon et al., 2003) and has stirred discussions on the need for global retail corporations to embed their retailing models in local consumption cultures, sourcing systems and urban planning (Coe and Lee, 2013; Reardon et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2014; Wrigley et al., 2005). The importance of embedding novel retail formats in local shopping practices is also reflected in recent entry strategies of transnational corporations (TNCs) in Vietnam.²

In the discussions on the 'waves' of supermarket development and the ways in which TNCs enter and penetrate developing food retail markets, supermarketization in itself is not questioned. Indeed, there is a gradual expansion of supermarkets in Vietnam's urban centers since the country opened up its market to fully foreign-owned corporations in 2009 (Nguyen et al., 2013).³ Yet, supermarkets, especially when compared to the persistent practices of shopping at wet markets (Humphrey, 2007; Wertheim-Heck et al., 2014a), are a relatively small channel for securing fresh vegetables for daily meals. Persistent consumer habits are challenging the policymakers' exclusive focus on supermarkets in food safety policies. Retail modernization policies lead to the marginalization of existing wet markets, where traders and consumers have already developed often long-standing relationships and shopping routines, which are important for coping with food safety risks (Wertheim-Heck et al., 2014a). As an unintended consequence, an increasing number of consumers started shopping at uncontrolled and unhygienic street markets (Wertheim-Heck et al., 2014b). Moreover, recent studies in Thailand indicate that a decrease in wet markets, which provide affordable healthy foods, puts healthy diets at risk (Banwell et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2014). Therefore, food safety policies that exclusively promote the supermarket retail format may actually be counterproductive.

The aim of this paper is to assess the effects of supermarketization on consumers in urban areas in Vietnam: who benefits, who is excluded, and what are the consequences. Our approach combines

quantitative survey research with qualitative interviews. In addition, we documented case studies of different shopping locations and practices to illustrate the emerging and ongoing process of market transformation. By searching for intermediate outcomes (Ton et al., 2011), which are observable in daily consumer practices in emerging novel food markets or in more gradual modifications of the arrangements between consumers and food sellers, this research provides insights into the processes moving toward the long-term policy goals as set by Vietnamese policymakers. As a form of 'ex ante policy impact assessment' our results inform future policy design (Ton, 2012) and contribute to the discussion on alternative retail modernization models in Southeast Asia.

The paper has four main sections. Section 'A process approach to policy evaluation' briefly reviews the academic literature on the topic, underpinning the rational choice models dominant in policy development, and combines literature on practices theory approaches with methodological insights from realist evaluations, which enable the assessment of the viability of supermarket development within different contexts. Section 'Methods' details the design and administration of the field research. The empirical findings in Section 'Results: retail modernization policy in practice' describe the dominant policy model in Hanoi and deliver a taxonomy of consumers, exploring the questions who has adopted supermarket shopping in everyday vegetable shopping practice and under which conditions. Section 'Results: retail modernization policy in practice' presents case studies of processes wherein concrete policy interventions transform traditional markets. The paper concludes with a discussion about the added value of a broader portfolio of policy interventions compared to the ongoing promotion of the ideal-type, Western-style supermarketization for delivering social betterment. Therein we highlight the need for policies that are adjustable and responsive to different circumstances.

A process approach to policy evaluation

In Vietnam, retail modernization in the form of stimulating supermarket and hypermarket development is seen as cost-effective and better capable of delivering food safety guarantees, compared to corrective and restrictive regulations and legislation. Policymakers heavily rely on rational choice models (which are critically examined by Shove, 2010; Whitford, 2002; Warde and Southerton, 2012). These models expect consumers to shift to more 'civilized' and guaranteed safe shopping outlets, once readily available, driven by food safety concerns and aspirations for modern lifestyles. Policies based on this model, however, do not necessarily deliver the intended results (Evans et al., 2012; Shove, 2010). Although traditional food supply systems are not sufficient for ensuring food safety and meeting the demand for modernization (Pingali, 2006), shoppers do not automatically integrate supermarkets into their daily practice, especially for fresh foods (Goldman et al., 2002; Traill, 2006; Humphrey, 2007).

The resilience of local cultural traditions and routines (Cox, 2007; Jackson, 2004), urges the development of more flexible and diverse modernization policies, better attuned to the daily lives of consumers. As put forward by Shove (2010) and Evans et al. (2012), the complexity and dynamics of social life should not be ignored simply because they are too difficult to grasp within current policy frameworks. The role of agency in change processes is visible in the everyday practice of selling and buying vegetables at specific retailing sites. It is therefore important to study the practices of ordinary consumers at various retailing sites (Spaargaren, 2011). Accordingly, research needs to include (1) the context where the practices take place, (2) the practitioners involved in the practices and (3) the temporal and spatial dimensions of the practices, addressing interventions as active and embedded.

¹ Wet markets are fresh food markets, commonly found in Asian countries, in which wet refers to the wet floors due to the abundant use of water.

² In January 2015 Japanese Retail Corporation Aeon Co. has taken a 30 percent stake in Vietnam state-owned FiviMart Co., which operates 20 stores in Hanoi, with the aim to increase its understanding of local business: <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/01/28/business/corporate-business/aeon-announces-tie-up-with-major-vietnamese-retailers/#.VMj67mSUFY1> (last accessed 08.12.2015).

³ Compared to other Southeast Asian countries supermarket development in Vietnam started rather late, first in Hanoi around the turn of the century, initially with domestic, state-owned enterprises. Since Vietnam's entrance into the WTO in 2007 and accompanying acceptance of wholly foreign-owned transnational corporations in 2009, supermarket development has been accelerating.

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