

***food-vendors.org* Briefing Papers**



Briefing Paper #1: Who are Food Vendors?

Saul S. Morris

February, 2026

This Briefing Paper is intended to help programme managers wanting to develop comprehensive interventions to strengthen local food systems. It is also for researchers wanting to analyse the realities of food vendors using data from representative surveys.

All humans need to acquire food, and this food can be sourced in four different ways: from a household's own production; by harvesting wild foods; as a gift, or from a market-based source (1). In High-Income Countries, the overwhelming majority of food is acquired from market-based sources; in Low-Income Countries (LICs) and Lower-Middle Income Countries (LMICs), on the other hand, all four means of sourcing food are commonly observed. In recent decades, however, there has been a profound transformation of local **food environments** and, even in rural areas of Africa, purchases consistently make up the majority of household food consumption (2).

Acquisition of food via the market requires both a customer and a seller. Sellers may be differentiated by the **type of product** that they sell (for example, ready-to-eat meals or snacks *versus* minimally processed foods *versus* unprocessed food ingredients) or by the **characteristics of their business**. A readily observable aspect of the seller's set-up is the physical point of sale, which can vary from a large, multi-item store such as a modern supermarket, through a more basic fixed sales point in a market or kiosk, through to sales from home or even the complete absence of a fixed sales point (the itinerant salesperson). A recent addition to this set of options is the sale of food via digital platforms (3). Closely correlated to the physical set-up is the degree of formality of the vendor's business, including the extent to which they possess necessary licenses to handle food, their use of contracts, and their integration into other organised structures.

Food vendors are not a homogenous group, though they are commonly educated to no more than a basic level and dominated by the middle age groups. The gender composition of food vendors varies greatly by geography and product sold.

A recent study explored the realities of informal food vendors in **Zambia** (4). The study focused on those selling fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and meat products, and milled maize, in seven markets in two Zambian cities. The author found important differences between those operating inside designated market facilities and others operate outside of built market structures. The traders were overwhelmingly females, owned their own business, and were generally the sole employee. They had predominantly primary (Lusaka) or secondary (Kitwe) education. The businesses tend to be well established, selling both directly to customers and to other businesses.

Another recent study focused on street food vendors in Dhaka, **Bangladesh** (5). The authors surveyed 10 different locations known for their concentration of street vendors. The vendors were overwhelmingly male and had been in business for an

average of seven years. Most had not completed primary education. They sold foods prepared at home and sold on the streets without any further preparation.

A study conducted in La Paz, **Bolivia** (6) focuses on the cooks/vendors who work in market dining areas in two of the city's 42 retail markets. Nearly all of the stalls surveyed are run by women, with an average of 16 years of experience. They have mostly primary or no education, although some are educated to secondary level. Many of the women are helped by their children or other family members.

Food vendors in official statistics

In an attempt to standardise the categorisation of occupations around the world, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (Statistics Division) publishes a standard industrial classification of all economic activities (ISIC). This classification is now in its fourth revision (7). The relevant granular codes for food vendors are found in Sections G (*wholesale and retail trade*) and I (*accommodation and food service activities*):

ISIC 4-digit code ("class"):	Description
4721	Retail sale of food, beverages, and tobacco in specialised stores
4711	Retail sale in non-specialised stores , with food, beverages or tobacco predominating
4781	Retail sale, via stalls and markets , of food, beverages and tobacco
5610	Provision of food services to customers (restaurants, take-out, and deliveries, including mobile food carts)

Focusing on these four ISIC classes limits the scope of food vending as follows:

Included:

- Those whose primary economic activity is the **sale** of food
- Food **retail**
- **General stores** with food, beverages or tobacco predominating
- **Supermarkets** with food, beverages or tobacco predominating
- Salespeople in both **formal** and **informal** food businesses
- **Employers, employees, and own account workers**
- Sales of **prepared food** from restaurants, take-out, mobile carts, or market stalls

Excluded:

- Primary economic activity is food **production** or **processing** (even if they also sell)
- Food **wholesalers** and **aggregators**
- **General stores** with *other* product sales predominating
- **Supermarkets** with *other* product sales predominating
- Food business **management** structured as a separate business entity/department
- —No exclusions—
- **Catering** and food service contractors

References

1. Turner C, Aggarwal A, Walls H, Herforth A, Drewnowski A, Coates J, et al. Concepts and critical perspectives for food environment research: A global framework with implications for action in low- and middle-income countries. *Glob Food Secur.* 2018 Sep;18:93–101.
2. Dzanku FM, Liverpool-Tasie LSO, Reardon T. The importance and determinants of purchases in rural food consumption in Africa: Implications for food security strategies. *Glob Food Secur.* 2024 Mar;40:100739.
3. Reardon T, Belton B, Liverpool-Tasie LSO, Lu L, Nuthalapati CSR, Tasie O, et al. E- commerce's fast-tracking diffusion and adaptation in developing countries. *Appl Econ Perspect Policy.* 2021 Dec;43(4):1243–59.
4. Mwango M, Kaliba M, Chirwa M, Guarín A. Informal food markets in Zambia: perspectives from vendors, consumers and policymakers in Lusaka and Kitwe. London: International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED; 2019).
5. Muzaffar AT, Huq I, Mallik BA. Entrepreneurs of the Streets: an Analytical Work on the Street Food Vendors of Dhaka City. *Int J Bus Manag.* 2009 Feb 18;4(2):p80.
6. Garcia JV, Collao M, Guarín A. The voices of women cooks in food markets in La Paz [Internet]. Hivos/IIED; 2020 [cited 2026 Feb 9]. Available from: <https://www.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/migrate/16672IIED.pdf>
7. United Nations. International Standard industrial classification of all economic activities (ISIC). Rev. 4. New York: United Nations; 2008. 291 p. (Statistical papers. Series M).