

# DELICIOUS, DISGUSTING, DANGEROUS

## Eating in a Time of Food Price Volatility

*Year 3 findings from the Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility Study*



Sachets of flavouring, Cochabamba, Bolivia. Credit: Alexandra Wanjiku Kelbert 2014

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### About this publication:

This is a Summary of the third year results of the study [Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility](#), which uncover the realities of what people on low and precarious incomes are eating. For the consumer, there are undeniable benefits from the integration of world food trade: more stable supply, wider choice. Changes in food habits mean people are finding new ways to enjoy food and new foods to enjoy, often with greater convenience and ease. There is much to savour in the eating landscape as new markets for purchased and prepared foods open up. But the loss of control this brings has detrimental impacts on wellbeing. Most people feel they understand little about how new foods affect their health and nutrition; knowledge that they had accrued over generations and longer with respect to their customary cuisines. People have real worries about a new culture of fast food and fake food; they worry about additives, nourishment and food hygiene, and they feel that governments do too little to protect them from the risks.

[Download the full synthesis report](#)

### About the project:

#### Box 1: Project overview

Spanning the period 2012–15, *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility* aims to study how price changes affect the everyday lives of people on low or precarious in-comes, looking at what is happening with paid work, unpaid care work or family responsibilities, how relationships are affected and the resources with which people cope. The collective of researchers works in ten urban/peri-urban and 13 rural locations across ten low- to middle-income countries.

Each year a synthesis report has outlined the learning across these ten countries.

For further information and reports from previous years about this project are available at: [www.ids.ac.uk/lifeinatime](http://www.ids.ac.uk/lifeinatime) / [www.oxfam.org.uk/foodprices](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/foodprices)

Figure 1: Research locations



# SUMMARY

Each year, the [Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility research project](#) tracks global, national and local food prices and their effects on everyday life, and selects a special topic for focused research.

Earlier rounds of the research, we came across

- talk of novel, strange and foreign foods
- visible signs that packaged and processed foods were fast-replacing customary items
- fears about the health and nutrition effects of 'bad' and convenience foods

[Delicious, Disgusting, Dangerous: Eating in a Time of Food Price Volatility](#) is the third synthesis report (on which this summary is based), and this year it turns the spotlight on to changes in diet. We ask about what people on low and precarious incomes are eating now and how they are responding to the increasing commodification of food. We explore how these changes are linked to adjustments in work, residence and home life. What do they like and dislike about the changes they have made? What worries them and what are they doing to protect themselves from the risks they think they are facing in their new diets? And, finally, what are governments and other authorities doing to protect people from the risks of food that may be delicious, but possibly dangerous or disgusting?

We know that food system changes are taking place within a wider global nutrition transition away from cereal and plant-based foods towards fatter, sugary, 'Western'-style diets; while many people are still under-nourished, others are in the same communities and even households are now overweight.<sup>1</sup> These changes also signal the globalization and industrialization of the world food system in places where food was until recently a local matter.

Since our research is situated in a 'Time of Food Price Volatility' and has as its premise that relative changes in food prices matter greatly for human wellbeing, we wanted to understand whether sharp changes in food prices since 2007 influenced the pace or nature of this transition, and what people were doing to adjust to it.

Food price movements in the ten countries during 2014 generally displayed lower levels of volatility than in recent years, but there continue to be often quite marked seasonal changes, largely linked with the level of national food availability. The generally downward trend in international cereal prices was not uniformly mirrored in each of the countries, although some countries, for example Bolivia, Burkina Faso and Vietnam, did mostly experience falling prices.

In all countries for which data were available, however, annual food inflation and general inflation continue at levels (commonly between 6–8 per cent) that create hardship for market-dependent low-income households. In all countries, the cost of the minimum food basket continues to be well above the five-year average, which reinforces the view that the struggle to cope with high food prices is a long-term reality, which has not diminished just because food price increases have recently been less dramatic. The need for effective action to enhance resilience and reduce the negative effects of food price changes is as pressing as ever.

There has been a marked change in what people are eating, directly and indirectly influenced by the effects of food price volatility. Even in places where malnourishment is common we find considerations of time, convenience, novelty, taste, safety and status competing with objective assessments of nourishment in shaping what food people choose to buy.

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<sup>1</sup> Raj Patel's *Stuffed and Starved* analyzes how the global food system causes both hunger and obesity with the industrialization and financialization of food production and distribution, led by multinational corporations (Patel 2012). Barry Popkin's explains the nutrition transition as: '[m]ajor dietary change [that] includes a large increase in the consumption of fat and added sugar in the diet, often a marked increase in animal food products contrasted with a fall in total cereal intake and fiber ... an inexorable shift to the higher fat Western diet' (Popkin 2001, 871S) [emphasis added].

Increasingly people evaluate their consumption choices in terms of value and that value may have many dimensions that are not just about the nutritional quality of food.

While people generally perceive wider availability of different foodstuffs as a positive sign of their community's economic development and social progress, fears about nutritional and health consequences of changing diets are widespread. As food preparation and consumption increasingly occurs outside the household, concerns about dubious ingredients and unsanitary conditions abound.

People are feeling a loss of control over what they are eating. Concerns about the content of foods available on the market are widespread. With this in mind, governments and donors need to consider three courses of action:

1. Preserving and promoting customary food cultures and providing trustworthy information about new food choices;
2. Building public health regimes that promote nutrition and question fortification when it is a poor substitute for better quality food;
3. Upgrading food safety regimes so they are seen to tackle issues of unhygienic and dangerous foods.

## Anxious consumers

Two broad findings stand out: food is increasingly a consumer good, even in low-income communities that sometimes face the stress of empty bellies, and people are increasingly anxious about food. This is all familiar to the average eater in developed countries, for whom considerations of cost, ecology, status and quality are equally (and similarly) the source of anxieties and pathologies about that most natural act – eating. In the developing country communities involved in this research, food is no longer just essential nourishment, but also a matter of choice and sensation, through which people try to save time, effort and cost, and create status and identity. That people make 'choices' that does not make them powerful influences on food markets: prices and supply tightly constrain those choices; industrialization makes traditional foods relatively costly in time and cash; advertising of fast foods and sugared drinks to children 'constrains' their choices with impunity, and habits of calorie-dense fatty food are easy to acquire and hard to break, just like any addiction.

Food habits are not changing noticeably everywhere: the Zambian communities had not noticed much change, largely because they could not afford to eat new foods, and in Indonesia and Viet Nam, people had been eating out and processed foods for years. Changing food habits are generally a source of anxiety and a barometer of social change, good and bad. People take pleasure in new foods, but are anxious it seems in part about the loss of traditional food cultures. They are justified in that the knowledge of how different diets affect people builds up gradually over time, the accumulated knowledge of generations.

By contrast, changes in the food available are rapid, substantial and generally unregulated, beyond a limited focus on hygiene and safety. Ambivalence about changing food cultures reflects the growing distance between people and the food they eat (Clapp 2012a).

## Changing Food Cultures

Cuisines can take centuries to emerge, as societies gather and institutionalize knowledge about how to produce, process and prepare the foods suited to their ecological, economic and cultural settings. In many places facing rapid economic and social change people see **traditional foods in decline**. One trend was towards homogenization in staples – regional diversity in grains eaten in Ethiopia were disappearing, and *enjera* (bread made from *teff* flour) was being replaced with *dabo*, or wheat flour bread. In Bolivia, people found *quinoa* to be in short supply. In Burkina Faso, millet and sorghum were

being replaced with rice. Traditional favourites like Ethiopia's dairy-rich foods like *chechebsa* were becoming more expensive, and old Guatemalan favourites like *hilachas*, *revolcado* (tomato/tomatillo-based beef stew dishes) and beef and calves' broth are rare, but burgers and tacos are cheap and available.

Picture 1: The Karibuni Hilton restaurant in Lango Baya, Coastal Province, Kenya.



Credit: Naomi Hossain 2012

Despite nostalgia about 'the way we used to eat' cuisines are not fixed in time or place, and people enjoy the **novelty and pleasure of foreign foods**. People are cautious about new foods - biological instincts are powerful sources of disgust and fear<sup>2</sup> - but there are unexpected international influences, such as Aji-no-moto® (an 'umami seasoning') used from Bolivia, to Bangladesh and across Indonesia (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Customary meals might use imported onions or vegetables, or oils pressed or fish sauces produced far from home. Everyday eating is already a fairly cosmopolitan matter.

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<sup>2</sup> (Rozin 2002).

Picture 2: A bowl of mie bakso or beef meatball and noodle soup, Indonesia



Credit:

Naomi Hossain 2014

Strong drivers of change in food cultures historically have been economic development and global market integration, imperial and colonial rule, episodes of major conflict, and major food crises. Wheat was introduced into the staunchly rice-eating regions of Bengal as famine relief, and deliberate attempts were made to change food cultures and create new markets in southern Africa by introducing genetically-modified grains during the 2002 food crisis (Zerbe 2004) (Clapp 2012b). It seems likely that this recent global food price crisis may have similarly pushed food habits towards consuming more industrially-produced, homogenous food items.

## Who Eats What, Where, When, With Whom and Why?

Despite the great variety of contexts and reasons for taking up new food habits, a clear pattern of class, gendered and generational change emerges from across the 23 sites. **Class and the cost of food** are major factors in who eats what: cheaper cuts of meat tend to be of dubious origin, cheap-and-cheerful street foods serve people who cannot afford to ask how things are grown or prepared, and only the wealthy go to restaurants visited by the food inspectors. Within families and communities, we see that **gender and generation** are clear dividing lines in how food habits are changing: **men are eating out more**, partly if they are travelling more or do strenuous work that builds up an appetite. If they have cash in their pockets, and street stalls have sprung up to relieve them of it – true even in rural Ethiopia and Bangladesh – men find it convenient and tempting to eat out, particularly if they can eat items like meat that they cannot afford as a family. Single men often have no choice as many have no kitchen. Githeri, a maize-&-bean concoction, is a common street food in Mukuru, in Nairobi: one vendor was said to have increased sales five-fold in the past year.



The big global brands of packaged and processed food and beverages as well as local brands of drinks, chocolates and sweets, chips and fried preparations are universally popular with children. Television advertising and marketing at children are factors. In communities where processed and purchased foods are relatively new, advertising to children can be very powerful. In many of these settings, giving children snacks is understandably seen as a sign of indulgence and affection.

In several sites, we found that **family and care** considerations shaped changing food habits. Few processed foods and fast or street foods are cheaper than equivalent home cooked foods, but they are easier.

Women are increasingly in paid work and find themselves squeezing in unpaid care: it is a relief to cook less, or to be able to use part-processed ingredients that speed up preparation time. But women also worry about what it is doing to family and to nutrition and health, and about the loss of respect for the skills and knowledge they had brought to this aspect of care.

## Bad food

Even as they enjoy new tastes, people worry about bad food – the safety, health and the effect of the new food cultures.

Picture 6: Branded and unbranded goods in Kaya, Burkina Faso



Credit: Alexandra Wanjiku Kelbert 2014

**Table 1 The Most Disgusting and Dangerous Foods**

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <b>Bolivia</b>      | Sausages made from donkey or dog meat or whatever, and loads of condiments<br>Pork has trichina disease<br>Street foods cooked in old or burned oil<br>Serving 'dead chickens' – i.e. carcasses of animals that died of unknown causes<br>Washing chickens with bleach<br>Extra fat to make the chicken <i>caldo</i> taste good<br>Bought chicken that was raw inside, burned outside |
| <b>Guatemala</b>    | consommé is dangerous – too much salt<br>Fried chicken and potatoes cooked in old oil<br>Bad tamales<br>Tinned food gives you lead poisoning  |
| <b>Burkina Faso</b> | Beans (cooked with carbide)<br>Things cooked in bad old oil<br>Chemicals in sauces, including fake tomato<br>Maggi @ cubes <sup>3</sup> in the Soubala cooking process<br>Wheat pancakes cooked without hygiene<br>Canned sardines – don't know the process, what kind of fish  |
| <b>Ethiopia</b>     | potatoes chips, biscuits and samosa cooked in old oil<br>packaged juices – don't know what goes into them<br>old (bad) lentils in samosas   |
| <b>Kenya</b>        | Mixing old food with fresh food<br>Touching food with dirty hands<br>Samosas made of cats (many cats in the area)<br>cockroach and rat's tails in the samosas<br>Sweating and wiping hands into chapatti dough<br>Uncooked chicken neck sold as cooked<br>Chicken legs come in different colours<br>Hairs in food   |
| <b>Zambia</b>       | Goat and pork slaughtered unhygienically<br><i>dagaa</i> (sardines) are cheap but bad for the health, sandy, smelly and bitter<br>pesticide on the vegetables - not tasty and get diarrhoea<br>Pies and samosas kept overnight and go off   |
| <b>Bangladesh</b>   | Food left uncovered, open to the dust and street filth<br>Stale sweets left uncovered, covered in flies<br>Food cooked in burned oil<br>Unhygienically prepared tea on street stalls, and fake condensed milk<br>Well-known restaurants use 'dead chickens'<br>Commercial (not food) dyes   |
| <b>Indonesia</b>    | 'If the color is weird, I am afraid.... If ... shrimp paste is bright red, it is weird, isn't it?'<br>Tofu looks healthy, but we do not know if it contains formalin or not<br>Fried snacks from vendors are also not clean, cooking oil used 2 or 3 times<br>Meatballs made with formalin, and children's snacks using non-food coloring   |
| <b>Pakistan</b>     | Long-dead animals cooked with tasty spices<br>Finger of a human being in food in a Karachi restaurant<br>Milk seller strains the milk for flies   |
| <b>Viet Nam</b>     | Pesticides on veg, pork from too young pigs<br>Poisoning from cooked rice next to mosquito sprayers<br>Meat of animals reared using growth stimulants often stinks  |

Source: this is an extract from a longer table published in the full report of which this is a summary

<sup>3</sup> See the full report for a footnote discussion of marketing and the nutritional value of Maggi cubes.  
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People worry a great deal about how their **food is produced**; many have a sense that the food was richer and more real in the past; a fairly universal concern is about pesticide use; in Bolivia and Zambia there were worries about hormones in meat, while in Burkina Faso people living near a mining area worried their livestock were drinking from cyanide polluted water sources. People widely worry about unknown **adulterants and additives**. In Bangladesh, Indonesia and Viet Nam there are media reports of formalin (to preserve vegetables, fruit and fish) or borax (forbidden additive to noodles and rice). People wish that their food was not dyed, bleached and preserved, but mostly they continue to eat it. Many urban respondents feel obliged to use modern flavour enhancers in the kitchen to compete with tasty processed foods. And **food hygiene and health and nutrition** concerns were also common (see table 1). Food stalls were visibly filthy in many instances, but more worrying were the longer term effects of children getting the wrong kind of nutrition. In Indonesia and Bangladesh parents explained that children become addicted to fast foods and hard to control. In Ethiopia parents worried about how their children's strength seemed to be reducing, even as they seemed to be eating more meals. In Guatemala one father worried that eating snacks might impair his children's intellectual development, while in Pakistan older women pointed out that younger women had less strength in childbirth than they once had. In many societies, there were fears that the changing food habits were **changing family relationships**, weakening family bonds and changing social networks, incurring a loss of food heritage, socialization through family discipline and good behavior, and control over consumption. Changes to how people eat change the social as well as the physical body.

People find it hard to **protect against bad food**. The pressures on children to eat unhealthy snack foods can be immense, and parents find them difficult to resist, so parents limit pocket money or to rely on teachers to prevent the worst. People try to use consumer power by complaining to unhygienic stallowners; avoiding too perfect or brightly coloured foods; or buying reputable brands. People listen to information about food and nutrition and there is ample government, NGO and UN agency information on the issues that concern people most, including nutrition, safe farming (Vietnam), adulteration and safe storage (Burkina Faso) and cooking (Indonesia). The level and form of information provision varies, from detailed in Indonesia, to alarmist in Bangladesh, to moral and holistic in Bolivia, where there is teacher training on ancestral foods and traditional food fairs.

**Governmental attention and responsibility** to protection against bad food was highly variable. In all countries there are food inspectors, but in some places they are decorative, in other bribeable, and in other still, not always competent. Even where regulation breaches are identified, people in most countries believe enforcement is very weak; the exceptions were Viet Nam and Indonesia, where labelling and licensing practices were thought to have a good effect. In some countries, like Indonesia, Ethiopia and Guatemala, school principals try to they monitor and control snack vendors, but schools can be part of the problem, as in Bolivia, where a Government school-feeding programmes supplies sugary drinking yoghourts and fortified candy to children. Overall there is still a strong sense that governments do not do much to control the spread of fake foods, to educate or to protect.

Most people would like **more reliable information** to allow them to evaluate scare stories and to make good decisions about their own and their family's food. Food safety, nutrition and cooking could be a school subject. Stronger action could be taken to ban dangerous imported foods and flavour enhancers, and to regulate streetside food sales. But most people believed they had to protect themselves from the negative effects of fast foods and fake foods. They had little faith that governments would do enough and that corporations and business people would not try to evade the rules.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations centre on the insight that loss of control over what people eat is an important aspect of the illbeing they face with fast-changing food cultures. A principle of food and nutrition security policies in developing countries should be to restore or shore up that control; any intervention with the potential to reduce or weaken people's control over their food will disempower them further. People cannot be secure regarding the food they eat, nor can they achieve good nutrition levels if they fear they are unable to protect their families from food that may be unsafe or of no nutritional benefit.

With this in mind, governments and donors need to consider three courses of action:

- 1) **Feeding' consumer knowledge** by preserving and promoting customary food cultures and providing trustworthy information about new food choices. National and local governments should treat food culture as they do tangible culture – as precious, worth documenting, protecting and investing in. This means not only *haute cuisine*, but local everyday specialities. Young people's nutrition will benefit if these are valued aspects of their own culture. Ministries of trade and food may be better equipped to resist the homogenizing effects of global food trade if traditional grains and cuisines enjoy cultural status. Tourism would benefit from the protection of distinctive cultural forms, of which local foods are often an important and neglected part.
- 2) Protecting knowledge of traditional foods will be pointless unless people can make genuinely informed choices based on true assessments of the health and social costs and benefits – the real value – of the foods increasingly available to them. People need information to be able to make their food choices properly, and this information cannot come solely from private sector advertising. This is why it is essential **to build public health regimes that promote nutrition**. As parents pointed out, certain newly available foods can be literally addictive for small children, with lifelong effects on health. A second recommendation for national governments is therefore to review and reconsider their regulations on food and drink advertising, with specific emphasis on restricting advertising likely to appeal to children. This is easier said than done, as most of the growth in profits in the Big Food industry is now in developing countries (Stuckler and Nestle 2012). But this is where some of the new and emerging crises of food lie. They should also take strong action against marketing on the basis of health and nutrition benefits in processed and packaged foods – a widespread ploy which is now protected against to some extent in developed countries. Fortification has become a quick-fix solution to chronic and acute problems of under-nutrition we think it is necessary to question fortification when it is a poor and temporary substitute for better quality food.
- 3) We think that **food safety can be enhanced through stronger local control**. A key principle here is that these are public health issues, and the public needs to have trust in its system of regulation. One way they can gain trust is through better knowledge of the food safety regime. We see that in some communities trust is being gained through active efforts to tackle harmful food production or preparation processes. The mass media plays a vital role in reporting on food safety violations, and in creating pressures on governments to act (although food safety scares are also excellent news stories, so the incentives to scare-monger are strong). Active consumer groups such as the Stop Poisoning Us campaign in Bangladesh<sup>4</sup> keep people informed, ensure food safety matters remain high on the public agenda, and have pushed for legal and programmatic reforms. If donors are keen to support food safety issues they could sensibly support investigative journalism and the popular communication of scientific studies on food safety, as well as spaces in which consumer safety groups can build their campaigns, from the local levels right up to the global. There is a strong and growing appetite for food that is delicious, without being disgusting or possibly dangerous.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/STOP-Poisoning-Us/687778964618933?fref=ts>.  
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