

Eating away from home in Vietnam and Burkina Faso: navigating a changing food environment in emerging countries

1- Context

As urbanization unfolds and incomes increase, eating away from home (EAFH) is a growing phenomenon worldwide. However, while the practice of eating out has been much studied in industrialized countries, it has been less investigated in the global South. This paper investigates the determinants and modalities of EAFH in low and middle-income countries (LMICs).



Ceremonial meal in Vietnam

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2- Methods



Middle-range restaurant in Hanoi (Vietnam)



“Kiosque” in Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso)

- We explore EAFH in LMICs through a thematic literature review of articles published in social science, food studies and nutrition studies journals (initial number of articles = 234; n = 53 after narrowing down). The review highlights common features on the drivers, modalities and impacts of EAFH.
- We then revisit and discuss those highlights with empirical data collected in Burkina Faso and Vietnam. In each country, 30 interviews were conducted about individuals' EAFH practices in urban, periurban and rural settings, as well as 15 interviews with restaurants managers. The sample was structured to cover a diversity of wealth levels in the 3 settings considered. The responses were then analysed following a thematic analysis centred on reasons for eating out, time-space frameworks, food intakes, social relations, market and non-market transactions, food safety and values associated with EAFH.

3- Results

The literature review shows that EAFH in LMICs is usually addressed through 3 main approaches:

- the factors influencing the practices (n = 17), through a narrative of urbanization, migration to cities, diet transition and industrialization of the food environment;
- the characterization of the practice of EAFH *per se* and the socio-cultural representations attached to it (n = 33): EAFH is frequently associated with an individualisation and a westernisation of diets;
- the impact of EAFH (n = 32): most articles focus on health impacts (n = 24), with a concern for food (un)safety and the increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases. Impacts on the environment (n = 7) or on customers mobility (n = 1) are also identified.

Empirical results:

- the influence of wealth, place of living, gender and age as described in the literature is also observed here;
- food environments are centred on people's homes and workplaces and determine the mobility patterns related to EAFH;
- findings tend to nuance some of the literature's arguments:
 - practices of EAFH are highly socialized (embedded in kin and work relationships);
 - EAFH does not necessarily imply a substitution of “traditional” diets by globalised fast foods;
 - EAFH is imbued with moral values and health concerns about what a proper meal should be;
 - eaters acknowledge and negotiate health hazards through specific strategies of evaluation, selection and avoidance.

4- Discussion and conclusion

- Two fallacies frequently associated with the literature on transitions: an “over-socialised” approach in which structural factors mechanically determine people's practices, and an “under-socialised” approach whereby FAFH embodies social anomy and individualism.
- Practice of EAFH is multifaceted and heavily segmented, fraught with ambiguities, characterised at the same time by necessity, an obedience to social rules, and a quest for convenience or gustatory pleasure.
- Methodological and conceptual need for a relational approach that focuses on specific situations of EAFH where people's routines and preferences interact with their build environment and their social relations.