

Food Safety Education

For many growers this will be the first time they will find out about the problem of microbial contamination of fresh produce. This process of providing food safety education to fresh produce growers provides an additional tool to help lift small-scale farmers from the cycle of poverty and disease. In addition to providing safer food for themselves and their family, farmers can learn how to meet the increasingly stringent requirements of buyers and possibly sell their product more widely, bringing even more revenue into their homes.



Real Impacts

Considering the high amounts of fresh produce that is eaten raw in Central America, safe production practices may lead to reduced numbers of illnesses and less death due to foodborne infections. Adoption of safe food production practices results in communities that are healthier and more resilient.

Reaching Farmers Through Social Networks



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL,
AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES



Food Animal Health Research Program
1680 Madison Avenue
Wooster, OH 44691
Phone: 330-263-3744
Fax: 330-263-3677

lejeune.3@osu.edu

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This work is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of the Horticulture Innovation Lab "Delivering food safety extension through social networks" project and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

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A Common Story

Marta wanted to ensure that her children ate healthy, nutritious foods. That was the main reason she worked so hard to keep the garden free from weeds and provided fertilizer.

Indeed the melons grew well. She even had surplus to sell at the local market and bought school supplies for her young girls, Patricia, 10, and Gabriela, 7. Little did she know that the poultry manure side-dressed on the plants that made the foliage so green and resulted in big, sweet melons was the culprit that made Gabi so sick. Although she was very sick, Marta's young daughter recovered from the case of salmonellosis. Others might not be so lucky.

Stories like this are not uncommon. Illnesses attributed to microbes contaminating fruits and vegetables have been frequently recognized around the world. The exact number of foodborne illnesses occurring in Central American countries is not known. For salmonellosis alone, just one of many causes of foodborne disease, it is estimated that there are close to a quarter of a million cases in the region every year. In addition to the high risk of getting sick from contaminated food, in Honduras and other Central American countries the likelihood of dying from a foodborne disease is sixteen times higher than in the US (approximately 16 per 100,000).



Reducing the Risks



It is clear that in order to ensure food security, besides having access to sufficient nutritious foods, it is necessary these foods are safe or free from harmful microbial contaminants. Fortunately there are some simple and low-cost ways to reduce the risks of contamination and enhance the safety of the food supply. For vegetable production, adopting good agricultural practices (GAPs) can reduce the likelihood of contamination. Notwithstanding, one of the biggest challenges to enhancing the safety of fresh produce is promoting awareness of the risks and adoption of mitigation strategies.

Social networks can help

Prior research has demonstrated that farmers are more likely to seek vegetable production information from individuals they trust- their neighbors or educators with which they have established trust-relationships. Thus, instead of attempting to build a communication program from the ground up, the approach used in this project is to leverage the strength of pre-existing in-country networks to provide vegetable safety education to producers. A number of government, academic and non-governmental organizations are working on agricultural development programs in Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala. Although not currently included in their outreach programs, the organizations we have contacted have recognized the value of including food safety information in their current programming. Through the Regional Center of Innovation at Zamorano University in Honduras, this project is filling the food safety information gap by providing technical expertise and training to local educators. Over 40 individuals who attend these train-the-trainer sessions have committed to use the information, including the WHO-validated educational curriculum, to educate the community, including producer groups, youth and women.