

Research paper

Regulatory Frameworks for Street Food Vendors in Osun State: Local Enforcement and Public Health Implications

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ABSTRACT

Street food vending is a vital component of Nigeria's informal economy, providing affordable meals and employment opportunities for millions of low-income households. However, the sector poses significant public health risks due to weak regulation, poor hygiene practices, and fragmented enforcement mechanisms. This study explores the regulatory frameworks governing street food vending in Osun State, Nigeria, with particular attention to the role of local government environmental health departments and the Water and Environmental Sanitation Department (WEST). The multistage method was adopted in selecting study participants. Osun State has three Senatorial districts, namely Osun West, Osun Central and Osun East. From each Senatorial District, a major city was purposively selected due to its commercial nature as well as being the headquarters of its respective Senatorial District. The data were collected using the Key Informant Interview (KII). The Heads of the Department overseeing the activities of Street Food Vending were identified. The findings reveal that vendors are subjected to house-to-house inspections, training on hygiene, and medical fitness tests, with enforcement measures including warning notices, food seizure, and condemnation certificates. However, enforcement is hindered by political interference, inadequate logistics, language barriers, and poor compliance among vendors. Comparison with existing literature highlights the gap between grassroots regulation and national food safety policies, such as those overseen by the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) and the Standard Organisation of Nigeria (SON). The study concludes that effective food safety governance requires stronger institutional support, full adoption of national regulations, and improved public orientation to safeguard consumer health while sustaining livelihoods.

Keywords: street food vending, food safety regulation, public health enforcement, informal economy, hygiene training

Street food vending has become an indispensable part of Nigeria's urban food system, providing affordable meals to millions of people while serving as a critical source of livelihood for economically vulnerable populations. According to Euromonitor International, Nigeria's consumer foodservice industry recorded total sales of \$13.5 billion in 2022, with street stalls and kiosks contributing \$3.0 billion, representing a 20% increase from 2021. This growth reflects the impact of rising inflation and unemployment, which have pushed many Nigerians into informal food vending as a survival strategy. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) show that unemployment

rose from 11.6 million in 2016 to 23.2 million in 2020, with young people (ages 15–34) disproportionately affected (FAO. (2026).

In Osun State, street food vending is particularly significant. A recent survey of 219 mobile street food vendors revealed that over 75% were female, most of whom were married adults with dependents (Asa et. al., 2026). Daily sales turnover ranged between \$0.67 and \$3.33, while monthly profits remained modest. Importantly, 96.8% of vendors reported no interaction with government authorities, underscoring the weak regulatory oversight in the sector. These findings highlight both the economic importance and vulnerability of street food vendors, who often operate outside formal frameworks and face occupational health risks such as prolonged standing, exposure to heat, and traffic-related hazards (Federal Ministry of Health, 2025).

Food safety concerns are central to this discussion. Nigeria launched its National Policy on Food Safety and Quality (NPFSQIP) in 2024, aiming to strengthen hygiene and sanitary inspection systems, including those targeting street food vending establishments. The Federal Ministry of Health (FMH) has also emphasized science-based regulation, introducing guidelines for food handlers' medical tests and sodium reduction⁽³⁾. However, implementation remains uneven, particularly at the grassroots level where local government environmental health departments and agencies such as the Water and Environmental Sanitation Department (WEST) are responsible for monitoring vendors.

Recent evidence reinforces the importance of moving beyond food-safety knowledge and individual vendor behaviour to examine the regulatory systems that shape compliance. A systematic review and meta-analysis of street food vendors in low- and middle-income countries found that although 62% of vendors had good food-safety knowledge and 66% demonstrated positive attitudes, only 51% demonstrated good food-safety practices. The authors identified food-safety training, education, income, and food-handling knowledge as important factors associated with safer practices, suggesting that effective food-safety governance requires a combination of regulatory oversight, education, training, and supportive interventions (Desye et al., 2023).

Evidence from Nigeria further demonstrates the potential importance of institutional engagement. In a 2024 study of food vendors participating in Nigeria's Home-Grown School Feeding Programme, access to information from food-inspection institutions, as well as other information sources, was associated with improved food-safety knowledge and attitudes. The findings suggest that regulatory institutions can contribute not only through inspection and enforcement but also through communication, education, and information provision to food vendors (Barnabas et al., 2024).

Alawode and Tabit (2025), examined enforcement and compliance with food-safety regulations at 600 street-food vending sites across Oyo State, Southwestern Nigeria. They reported that 75.7% of vending sites had low compliance with food-safety regulations, while 85.7% had not been inspected by relevant authorities. The authors concluded that inadequate enforcement and limited regulatory resources compromised sanitary conditions and food-safety practices at street-food vending sites. These findings are particularly significant for Osun State because they demonstrate that regulatory requirements may have limited public-health impact when inspection, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms are weak.

National regulatory bodies such as the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) and the Standards Organisation of Nigeria (SON) primarily oversee industrial food production, labeling, and marketing. Street food vending, however, falls substantially within local and subnational regulatory structures, creating a potentially fragmented system in which grassroots enforcement may be constrained by inadequate personnel, logistics, institutional coordination, and vendor compliance. The recent evidence from Oyo State illustrates the consequences of such implementation gaps and strengthens the need to investigate not only whether regulations exist, but also how they are communicated, monitored, enforced, and experienced by vendors at the local level (Alawode & Tabit, 2025).

This disconnect between national policy, and local practice has significant implications for consumer health, particularly within a context of continuing food insecurity. According to the October 2025 Cadre Harmonisé analysis, 27.2 million people in Nigeria were estimated to be facing food insecurity, with the number projected to rise to 34.7 million during the June–August 2026 lean season if timely interventions are not implemented. In such a context, street food occupies an important position at the intersection of food access, livelihoods, and food safety: consumers depend on affordable prepared foods, while weak regulatory oversight may increase exposure to foodborne hazards. Consequently, regulatory interventions need to balance public-health protection with the economic realities of informal food vending rather than relying solely on punitive enforcement.

Despite increasing evidence on food-safety practices among Nigerian food vendors, important gaps remain concerning the operation of local regulatory frameworks and the effectiveness of enforcement in Osun State. Existing studies have largely examined vendors' knowledge, attitudes, hygiene practices, or specific food-safety outcomes, while less attention has been given to the institutional processes through which regulations are implemented at the local level. In particular, limited evidence exists on the interaction between street-food vendors

and local regulatory agencies, the frequency and nature of inspections, enforcement constraints, vendor awareness of regulatory requirements, and the implications of these processes for public health in Osun State.

This study therefore examines the regulatory frameworks governing street food vending in Osun State, Nigeria. It explores the roles of local government agencies, the challenges they face in enforcement, and the effectiveness of existing measures in ensuring food safety. By examining regulation as an institutional process rather than focusing solely on vendor behaviour, the study seeks to identify the gaps between policy, enforcement, and compliance and to generate evidence for strengthening registration, inspection, health education, inter-agency coordination, and locally appropriate enforcement strategies. By situating these findings within national and global literature, the study contributes to understanding how grassroots regulation interacts with broader food safety governance, and what reforms are necessary to safeguard public health while supporting livelihoods. The literature increasingly demonstrates that food-safety outcomes among street-food vendors depend not only on individual knowledge and practices but also on institutional inspection, communication, monitoring, and enforcement. However, evidence remains limited on how these regulatory mechanisms operate at the local level in Osun State.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Osun State using the qualitative approach. The data was collected using the Key Informant Interview (KII). The multistage method was adopted in selecting study participants. The state has three Senatorial districts namely Osun West, Osun Central and Osun East. From each Senatorial District, a major city was purposively selected due to the commercial nature which bring about influx of people irrespective of gender into the city as well as being the headquarter of their respective Senatorial District. The cities selected for the study were Ede from Osun West, Osogbo from Osun Central and Ilesa from Osun East. The Head of the Department overseeing the activities of Street Food Vending was identified in each Local Government housing the major cities selected. Research Assistants were recruited and trained for data collection using KII guide designed for the study. The language of communication was English since participants had the requisite educational level for the exercise. The KII guide contains information which seeks to ascertain their knowledge about regulation and monitoring of street foods as well as identify the different challenges associated with street foods from the perspectives of street vendors in Osun State, Nigeria. The data collected was analysed using content analysis and reports presented under the different sub-themes identified in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the operational management of regulatory bodies overseeing street-vended foods in Osun State, Nigeria, revealing a regulatory environment that is both structured and adaptive, yet constrained by systemic, institutional, and socio-political challenges. The findings demonstrate that regulatory oversight is primarily anchored at the local government level through environmental health departments and the Water and Environmental Sanitation Department (WEST), operating within broader national and state-level policy frameworks, including the National Environmental Health Practice Regulation 2016.

The presence of these frameworks suggests that Nigeria has established foundational mechanisms for ensuring food safety in informal food systems. This aligns with global recommendations by the World Health Organization, which emphasize the need for structured regulatory systems, food handler training, and environmental monitoring as key pillars of food safety governance (WHO, 2015). However, as this study reveals, the existence of regulatory frameworks does not necessarily translate into effective implementation, particularly in informal sectors characterized by fluidity, low entry barriers, and socio-economic vulnerabilities.

Street food vending plays a critical socio-economic role in Nigeria and across many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), serving as a major source of affordable nutrition and employment (Roesel & Grace (2014); FAO, 2017). The rapid expansion of this sector, as observed in the findings, reflects both its economic attractiveness and the limited availability of formal employment opportunities. Consequently, regulatory systems must operate within a delicate balance—ensuring food safety while not undermining livelihoods.

Regulatory frameworks in practice

The study found that regulation of street food vending in Osun State is primarily grassroots, led by local government environmental health officers. These officers conduct house-to-house inspections, issue 24–42hour warning notices, and evaluate vendors through structural and non-structural research. As one respondent explained:

“We inspect premises, detain nuisance and to make sure that their environment is hygienic... we have tools in two-fold, one is meant for 24 hours the other one is meant for 42 hours” (Deputy of WEST, Ilesa).

This system emphasizes immediate corrective action, with closure of premises if compliance is not achieved. Vendors are also required to undergo training and certification, including medical fitness tests. Another respondent noted:

“We request for their sputum and stool samples for test... when they have undergone the training process, we issue them certificate” (Deputy Director of WEST, Osogbo).

These practices align with the 2016 National Environmental Health Practice Regulations, which mandate hygiene training and medical certification for food handlers. However, unlike national agencies such as NAFDAC and SON, which regulate industrial food production, local councils focus on street-level enforcement. Literature confirms this distinction, noting that grassroots regulation often lacks consistency and resources compared to national frameworks (NAFDAC, 2024).

One of the most significant strengths identified in this study is the emphasis on training, certification, and preventive health screening of street food vendors. Vendors are required to undergo structured training programs, during which they receive education on personal hygiene, food safety, and environmental sanitation. In addition, medical screening—such as sputum and stool testing—is conducted to identify communicable diseases before vendors are certified to operate. As noted by a respondent, *“during the training we educate them on personal hygiene... we request for their sputum and stool sample for test”* (Deputy Director of WEST, Osogbo).

This approach reflects a preventive public health model consistent with global best practices, particularly those outlined in the Codex Alimentarius food hygiene guidelines (Codex Alimentarius Commission., 2003). Training food handlers has been widely recognized as an effective intervention for reducing foodborne illnesses (Ehiri & Morris, 1996). By focusing on capacity building and awareness, regulatory agencies aim to address food safety risks at their source.

Moreover, the issuance of certificates and licenses following training serves as both a regulatory requirement and a mechanism for accountability. The establishment of databases to track trained vendors further demonstrates an effort to institutionalize monitoring processes. These measures indicate a structured attempt to formalize aspects of an otherwise informal sector.

Inspection and enforcement mechanisms

Routine and unannounced inspections constitute another critical component of the regulatory framework. These inspections are conducted through house-to-house visits, allowing officers to assess both structural and environmental conditions under which food is prepared and sold. The use of dual inspection approaches—structural and non-structural—reflects an understanding of the multifaceted nature of food safety risks.

Legal provisions, such as Section 34 of public health laws, empower officers to inspect, seize, and destroy food deemed unfit for consumption. The enforcement of these provisions is evident in practices such as food seizure and burial, as well as the issuance of condemnation certificates. These actions serve as deterrents and reinforce compliance. As described in the findings, non-compliant vendors may face escalating penalties, including prosecution.

Such enforcement mechanisms are consistent with regulatory practices observed in other LMICs, where inspection-based approaches are commonly used to manage food safety risks in informal markets (Muzaffar et al. 2009). However, their effectiveness depends largely on the capacity and autonomy of enforcement agencies.

Challenges in enforcement

i) Political Interference and Weak Institutional Autonomy

Despite the presence of structured regulatory mechanisms, enforcement is significantly undermined by political interference. Respondents consistently reported that politicians intervene on behalf of non-compliant vendors, often securing their release and preventing appropriate sanctions. *“The biggest challenge we have is political interference... they will plead on their behalf... and at the end of the day they won’t comply”* (Deputy Director of WEST, Osogbo). This finding underscores the broader governance challenges associated with regulatory enforcement in informal sectors. Political patronage systems and weak institutional autonomy can compromise the effectiveness of public health interventions (Akinbode & Dipeolu, 2014; Skinner, 2016). In such contexts, regulatory agencies may lack the authority to enforce compliance consistently, leading to selective enforcement and reduced deterrence. This undermines regulatory authority and allows non-compliant vendors to continue operations. Similar findings have been reported in Ghana and Kenya, where political patronage weakens enforcement of food safety laws (Resnick, 2017).

ii) Logistical Constraints and Resource Limitations

Logistical challenges represent another major barrier to effective regulation. The study reveals significant gaps in infrastructure, including the lack of official vehicles, inadequate manpower, insufficient funding and language

barriers, particularly with Hausa-speaking vendors who sometimes intimidate inspectors. One respondent explained:

“The one that is difficult is the one that comprises of thugs... language barrier, we can get someone that hear their language like Hausa” (Deputy of WEST, Ilesa).

Officers often rely on commercial transport, limiting their ability to access remote areas and conduct comprehensive inspections.

These constraints are consistent with findings from other studies in sub-Saharan Africa, Tanzania and India, where environmental health systems are often under-resourced and overstretched (Grace, 2015). These findings highlight how cultural and linguistic diversity complicates food safety enforcement (WHO, 2010).

iii) Vendor Non-Compliance and Behavioral Factors

Vendor-related challenges also play a critical role in shaping regulatory outcomes. Uncooperative attitudes, resistance to inspections, and failure to attend training sessions were frequently reported. These behaviors may stem from a combination of factors, including low awareness, economic pressures, and mistrust of authorities.

The informal nature of street food vending further complicates enforcement. As noted by Bhowmik (2005), informal sector activities are characterized by flexibility, mobility, and limited regulation, making them difficult to monitor. The emergence of online vendors, who operate outside traditional regulatory frameworks, adds another layer of complexity.

iv) Socio-Cultural and Communication Barriers

Language barriers and socio-cultural dynamics also affect regulatory processes. Officers reported difficulties in communicating with vendors from diverse linguistic backgrounds, necessitating the use of interpreters. In some cases, enforcement activities are met with hostility, including verbal abuse and physical threats.

These findings highlight the importance of incorporating socio-cultural considerations into regulatory strategies. Community engagement and participatory approaches may help build trust and improve compliance (Roesel & Grace, 2014).

Effectiveness of regulations

An important contribution of this study is the identification of innovative and contextually adapted regulatory practices. Notably, the use of slogans (“SASA–WAWA”) as a tool for identifying trained vendors represents a creative, low-cost solution to the challenge of verifying compliance in the field. As one respondent explained, *“when we utter the slogan, they will respond with WAWA... it’s through the slang that we will know if they have been trained” (Deputy Director of WEST, Osogbo).*

This innovative approach reflects community-based enforcement strategies, similar to participatory monitoring systems documented in informal markets in Latin America (Moustier & Renting, 2015). This practice highlights the adaptability of regulatory actors in resource-constrained environments. It reflects an understanding of local culture and communication methods, enabling quick and informal verification of compliance. While unconventional, such approaches demonstrate the potential for innovation in regulatory systems where formal technological tools are lacking.

Additionally, the issuance of condemnation certificates serves as both punishment and deterrent:

“When it is condemned and buried... we give them condemnation certificate to state their offenses so that other people will not fall into that trap again” (EDE).

Such symbolic enforcement measures are consistent with deterrence theory, which emphasizes visible sanctions to promote compliance (WHO, 20006). By documenting offenses and providing feedback to vendors, these certificates serve not only as sanctions but also as instruments for behavioral change.

Difficulties in implementation

The study highlighted difficulties in enforcing sanitation-related regulations, such as requiring vendors to wear aprons, maintain clean nails, and provide medical fitness certificates. Respondents noted:

“We normally ask them for the state of medical fitness... they should go and know their medical fitness before aligning them into business” (Deputy of WEST, Ilesa).

These requirements align with HACCP principles and WHO recommendations on food safety, but enforcement is weak due to resource constraints (Federal Ministry of Health., 2025). Furthermore, the 2016 National Environmental Health Practice Regulation has not been fully adopted at state level, limiting its operational effectiveness.

A critical issue identified in the study is the incomplete adoption of national regulatory frameworks. While the National Environmental Health Practice Regulation 2016 provides comprehensive guidelines, its implementation remains uneven across states. As one respondent explained, *“the regulation needed to be fully adopted in each state before it can be fully operational”*. This reflects broader challenges in policy implementation within federal systems, where

subnational governments play a key role. Inadequate coordination between national and local authorities can lead to inconsistencies in enforcement and gaps in accountability (Olaoye & Onilude, 2010).

Measures to address food contamination

Training programs emphasize sanitation, quality of food items, and personal hygiene. One respondent explained:

"We make them realize why it's always important to go for the quality food items and not the quantity. The health of the consumer should be their major priority not the profit" (Deputy Director of WEST, Osogbo).

This reflects global best practices, where emphasis on quality over profit is central to food safety education (Moustier & Renting, 2015). Vendors are also trained on careful handling of food, environmental hygiene, and the importance of avoiding contaminated ingredients.

Violations and punishments

Common violations include failure to attend training, use of unfit materials, and unhygienic practices. Respondents emphasized that untrained vendors face confiscation and destruction of food:

"If we discover that they were not trained before vending... the agency will take hold of their food, bury it... and issue a condemnation certificate" (Deputy Director of WEST, Osogbo).

This aligns with Section 34 of the Public Health Law, which empowers officers to condemn unfit food. Literature confirms that confiscation and destruction are common enforcement strategies in informal food systems (Moustier & Renting, 2015).

Role of education and awareness

The findings emphasize the importance of both vendor and consumer education in promoting food safety. Training programs equip vendors with knowledge of hygiene practices, while awareness campaigns influence consumer behavior. For example, respondents noted that some consumers avoid street food due to hygiene concerns, indicating the role of risk perception.

This dual approach aligns with public health models that emphasize both supply-side and demand-side interventions (Alimi, 2016). Educated consumers can drive improvements in food safety by demanding higher standards, thereby incentivizing vendors to comply.

Socio-economic dimensions of street food vending

Street food vending is not only a public health issue but also a socio-economic phenomenon. For many individuals, it represents a primary source of income, particularly in contexts of high unemployment. The increasing number of vendors observed in the study reflects the sector's accessibility and profitability. However, this also creates regulatory challenges. Strict enforcement measures, such as food seizure and business closure, can have significant economic consequences for vendors. This tension between public health and livelihood protection is a recurring theme in the literature on informal economies ⁽²⁴⁾.

Future risks and system sustainability

The study raises concerns about the sustainability of current regulatory approaches. The rapid growth of street food vending, combined with limited regulatory capacity, increases the risk of foodborne disease outbreaks. Respondents expressed concern that the system may become overwhelmed without additional support.

Addressing these risks will require a combination of strategies, including capacity building, technological integration, and policy reform. The adoption of digital tools for vendor registration and monitoring could enhance efficiency and transparency.

Broader implications

The findings highlight a tension between local grassroots regulation and national frameworks. While local councils enforce hygiene through inspections and training, national agencies like NAFDAC and SON focus on industrial food production. This fragmentation creates gaps in Nigeria's food safety system. Comparative studies suggest that integrated, multi-level regulation is essential for effective food safety governance ⁽²⁵⁾.

Limitations and future research

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations.

- The evidence concerning political interference, intimidation and vendor resistance is based primarily on the accounts of environmental health officers. These accounts provide valuable insight into regulatory practice but may not fully capture the perspectives of vendors or political actors. Future studies should therefore use triangulation by interviewing vendors, political representatives, community leaders and senior regulatory officials.
- The study does not quantify the frequency or magnitude of political interference. Future research could examine regulatory records to determine how often enforcement actions are reversed, withdrawn or modified following external intervention.
- The study identifies resource constraints but does not quantify their relationship with inspection coverage or food-safety outcomes. Future quantitative studies should examine whether the number of inspectors, transport availability, budgetary allocations and geographical coverage predict inspection frequency and vendor compliance.
- The emergence of online food vending requires further investigation. Future studies should examine how social-media-based food businesses can be identified, registered and monitored without imposing disproportionate regulatory burdens on small enterprises.
- There is the need for intervention studies to determine whether community-based approaches, multilingual training, vendor-association partnerships and digital registration systems can improve regulatory compliance while reducing conflict between vendors and enforcement officers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations emerged: there is need to strengthen logistics support for inspectors, including vehicles and equipment; reduce political interference by insulating regulatory agencies from patronage; adopt national regulations fully at state level to ensure consistency; enhance public orientation campaigns to improve vendor compliance; support vendor associations to regulate both online and informal vendors and develop gender-sensitive interventions, given that most vendors are women, to improve training and compliance. Strengthening the Nigeria Council of Food Science and Technology (NiCFoST) and proposed Food Vendors Registration Council is urgent so that this could unify regulation nationwide. Increased budgetary allocation for infrastructure support - provision of clean water, protective clothing, and logistics for inspectors will enhance their job performance.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that the major barriers to effective street-food safety regulation in Osun State extend beyond the existence or adequacy of formal regulations. Political interference, weak institutional autonomy, inadequate resources, vendor non-compliance, mobility, language differences and socio-cultural tensions collectively constrain enforcement. The findings are consistent with recent evidence from southwestern Nigeria showing low levels of inspection and food-safety compliance, but they extend that evidence by providing insight into the institutional and interpersonal mechanisms underlying weak enforcement. Effective regulation therefore requires a shift from regulation understood solely as inspection and punishment towards a more comprehensive system that combines institutional autonomy, adequate resources, continuous education, participatory engagement, culturally appropriate communication and consistent enforcement.

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Ethical statement

The Health Research and Ethics Committee of the Institute of Public Health, Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria with the approval number: IPH/OAU/12/2443 reviewed and approved.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study, in the data collection, analyses, or interpretation of data, in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, K.A.T. and T.O.O.; methodology, K.A.T., T.O.O. and S.S.A.; software, FFO, S.S.A.; validation, K.A.T., T.O.O., S.S.A and FFO.; formal analysis, FFO and S.S.A.; data curation, FFO.; writing—draft preparation, FFO, S.S.A. and K.A.T.; writing—review and editing, K.A.T., T.O.O., SSA and FFO; funding acquisition, K.A.T. and T.O.O.; project administration, T.O.O. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study were collected by the authors and are included in this published article.

AI disclosure

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT to reduce the length of the manuscript. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the final content of the published article.

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