Key points

• In one or two generations, fridge-freezers have become normal appliances in virtually all households in urban Bangkok and Hanoi. This is one of the reasons for increasing household energy demand.

• The ‘need’ for a fridge-freezer and the energy consumption that follows is related to the dynamics of urbanisation and diversification in food provisioning, but this is not a simple or predictable relationship.

• Households define quality, fresh and safe food in very different ways: some use supermarkets and favour a ‘Western’ diet; others avoid mass-produced food and rely upon local suppliers. In both situations fridge-freezers are essential appliances, but for very different reasons.

Introduction

Electric appliances make up an increasing share of domestic energy demand, particularly in emerging economies in Asia. Fridge-freezers have become nearly ubiquitous in Thailand and Vietnam. In 2012, 49% of Vietnamese households owned a fridge as did 91% of Thai households in 2014. Our study focused on the practices of consumption and provision that lie behind recent increases in the ownership and use of fridge-freezers in urban Bangkok and Hanoi. The study consisted of 52 interviews with ‘middle class’ households living in these two cities. We asked about present and past routines and practices of shopping, keeping food and drinks cool, and cooking. Most interviewees also showed us around their home and allowed us to photograph the contents of their fridge-freezers.

Questions

• How has the ownership and use of fridges and fridge-freezers in Bangkok and Hanoi developed over the last twenty years?

• How are fridge-freezers used: what do people keep in them today?

Findings

The people with whom we spoke in Bangkok and Hanoi keep a similar, albeit expanding, range of foods – e.g. vegetables, fruits, drinks, eggs, condiments, milk, meat, ice and cooked food – in their fridge-freezers. However, there were some important differences. For example, Mai’s fridge, in Bangkok has packs of eggs bought from the nearby supermarket and laid by imported chickens. Duc’s fridge, in Hanoi, also contains eggs, but in his case, there is an entire crate of unpackaged eggs ‘imported’ to the city from his home village by bus. In Hanoi specifically, many respondents were anxious about the safety of food bought in supermarkets or from ‘unknown’ suppliers. This story of the eggs illustrates the diversification of food sources and different methods of responding to urban food chains.

While some people, like Mai, opt for a more ‘Western’ diet, based on what they find in supermarkets that are now popping up everywhere, others, like Duc, maintain or return...
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