A large part of the urban population in Bangladesh, particularly from the lower income groups, meets a substantial part of its dietary and nutritional needs through meals and beverages offered by outdoor vendors. Such “street foods” are often contaminated with bacteria and other germs, making them dangerous for the health of consumers. Regulating the street food sector and training vendors on how to hygienically prepare and store food can significantly improve food safety.

Growing demand
The urban population in Bangladesh is increasing rapidly. In the last decade, the number of people living in the country’s capital Dhaka almost doubled from 5.3 to 9.3 million. This development has led to an increase in the demand for relatively inexpensive and ready-to-eat foods as many urban residents spend most of the day outside of the house and have little time and money to spend on food. Rapid urbanization also turned street-food vending into an important business; in Dhaka alone, around 200,000 people earn their living by selling street foods.

In Bangladesh, street foods include chola boot (chickpeas), bhel puri (puffed rice with potatoes) and samucha (deep-fried dough stuffed with vegetables and/or meat) as well as drinks like sugar-cane juice and lassi (yoghurt and water). Other popular snacks are ghugni (boiled and mashed white peas with spices), singara (flour wraps stuffed with vegetables, spices and occasionally liver) and different types of cakes.

Food safety concerns
Recent evidence suggests that street foods in Bangladesh are highly contaminated with germs that can cause diseases and illnesses such as typhoid fever, hepatitis, gastroenteritis, dysentery, and related infections. An analysis of street foods sold in Dhaka, for example, showed high levels of coliform bacteria, which may be an indication of fecal contamination (Figure 1).
Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) on the “Institutionalization of Street Food Vending” pointed to the potential benefits of such a strategy. Foods prepared by trained vendors contained fewer bacteria which were within acceptable standards of microbiological criteria for foods and food ingredients set by the World Health Organization. Enhancing public awareness and media advocacy on the safety and nutritional aspects of street foods would be an important complement to such measures.

Improvements are possible through the right policy mix. Experiences from Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand highlight the necessary components of a comprehensive reform package that addresses improvements of street food regulation, the choice of adequate enforcement mechanisms, and the development of necessary infrastructure such as street food vending equipment, training tools and clean water facilities. Bangladesh should use lessons learnt in neighboring countries to reform the street foods sector effectively.

Contamination is the result of a combination of factors, including the unhygienic environment in which foods are prepared and stored, and improper handling and preparation practices. Vendors generally prepare the food with their bare hands, passing on germs to what they have on offer.

The water used to prepare foods and to clean cooking and eating utensils – and sometimes even the swab cloths used for drying – are another source of contamination. Finally, since foods are often stored and sold on open trays, germs from waste collected on the streets are easily transmitted.

### Setting standards and building capacities

Several measures could address the food safety concerns of the street food sector in Bangladesh. The Government should formulate realistic laws, rules and regulations on street-food vending, establish adequate infrastructure facilities and develop plans of action for implementation of street food vending. Currently, food laws and regulations do not provide any specific standards with which vendors need to comply to carry out their activity.

But rules and regulations alone are not enough. Food safety and quality control measures need to be strengthened, for example through regular inspections. There is also a need to train street food vendors on proper food handling and preparation, protective display and safe storage. Personal hygiene and health of the vendors is one of the keys to safe street food vending. Results of a study by the

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