

# 16 The way forward for better food safety and nutrition

An online discussion

*Max Blanck, Renata Mirulla and  
Mauricio Rosales*

## **Abstract**

An online discussion on *Street Foods* was hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum) in September/October 2011. This was part of a study carried out by FAO's Regional Office for Africa on possible incentives to improve the safety, quality, and nutritional value of street foods. Members of the FSN Forum network shared views on the role of street foods, on what can be done to increase the vendors' food hygiene knowledge and practice, how to make sure their role is properly recognized by local authorities, and provided examples and best practices from their countries. There was a sense among participants that street vendors, who are mostly part of the informal sector, require careful analysis before large-scale interventions are attempted. This includes a thorough understanding of the motivating factors that bring both vendors and consumers to the table or the stall. Special attention was paid to women vendors. The online discussion also touched on the role of street foods in addressing food and nutrition security among growing urban populations, safety issues, regulatory approaches versus more incentive-based approaches, and the need for coordinated institutional interventions. This article offers an overview of the issues that arose from the discussion amongst FSN Forum participants.<sup>1</sup>

*Keywords:* Street Foods, Informal Sector, Incentives, Urbanization, Online Discussion, Online Forum, Online Network, FAO.

## **Introduction**

The socio-economic importance of the informal street food sector has been recognized by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) since the 1980s. The fast pace of urbanization and related challenges to the food and nutrition security of growing populations have focused attention on food produced and sold on the streets. This represents a significant part of urban food consumption for millions of low- and middle-income consumers. FAO's programs include assistance to national and municipal authorities in ensuring the quality and

safety of street food, training and education to improve vendors' knowledge about sanitation, food hygiene, and the nutritional value of foods, and research on the socio-economic impact and legislative framework of the street food sector.

The interest in sharing experiences with street foods, as raised by FAO country offices dealing with these issues, prompted the FSN Forum to organize an online discussion. In particular, it focused on how to create incentives for motivating street vendors to improve food safety and quality. The FAO Bangladesh country office and FAO Regional Office for Africa, in collaboration with the Food for Cities multidisciplinary initiative, were the sponsors of this initiative.

## **Methodology**

The online discussion "Street foods: the way forward for better food safety and nutrition" was promoted by FAO's Regional Office for Africa (RAF) and launched on the FSN Forum in late 2011. It was up for three weeks. The FSN Forum is an online network of development practitioners and experts who share knowledge and discussion on a wide range of topics related to food and nutrition security. The diverse membership of the forum allows discussions to benefit from a wide range of perspectives and professional points of view. Therefore, topics can be raised with the aim of shaping and gathering inputs on research projects, design of programs, and policy processes.

Topics for online discussions are proposed by FAO divisions and country offices and by members of the network. Online discussions are convened by an expert and are open for three to four weeks. At the end of the discussion, the facilitation team summarizes the outcomes, and shares them with the network. Discussions are run in English, French, and Spanish. Occasionally, other languages are included, to allow for the widest participation.

Giorgia Nicolò from FAO RAF was the convenor of the Street Foods online discussion. She invited FSN Forum members to share experiences and views on specific approaches for improving the safety, quality, and nutritional value of street foods. The aim was to gather feedback from a wide range of stakeholders to incorporate into FAO's regional strategy on improving food safety and nutrition in Africa. In particular, input was needed for a specific study on street food vendors' incentives. With strong participation from Africa and South Asia, where street foods are particularly common, contributions to the discussion reflected a range of diverse viewpoints and areas of expertise.

## **Benefits and challenges of street foods**

Participants described the many advantages of street foods; they are usually cheap, are easily available, and are often the only business catering to the working poor urban population. However, and notwithstanding their doubtless positive character, the dominant role that street foods play in the nutrition of

many urban dwellers is accompanied by serious challenges. Unsanitary conditions of the points of sale, bad food quality, and pollution are some of the negative aspects that, according to participants, often undermine the quality and safety of street food trade in many parts of the world. Moreover, the informal nature of the sector and the resulting lack of legal recognition present a hazard to those involved in the sale and preparation of street foods.

In many developing countries, street food vendors mostly operate in a grey area without licenses, with improvised equipment. They often occupy public space. This makes them a target for harassment and extortion by government authorities, such as the police and organized crime, as they often lack any form of legal recognition and protection. Further, by occupying sidewalks and contributing to traffic congestion, street vendors are often a source of disruption for other urban activities. They are also a major source of urban pollution, as they contribute to waste accumulation in the streets and congestion of waste water drains.

Street foods vendors form part of the shadow economy, which also means that they escape regulation and control. This gives rise to a series of health concerns. There is no control of the origin, preparation, and storage of foods sold. The unsanitary conditions many vendors operate in exacerbate the problem.

Vendors have a very small margin for profit and are incentivized to keep expenses low by utilizing low quality ingredients and disregarding costly hygienic practices. The sale of nutritionally poor foods is a further problem, as lack of awareness on both the producer and the consumer side prevents many vendors from selling healthy and nutritious dishes. In many areas where street foods are sold, food safety issues are not taken into consideration on either the producer or the consumer side. Consumers tend to look mostly at the price and might be already accustomed to the taste of unhealthy meals.

However big these challenges, there was little doubt among the participants in this discussion that street foods are part of urban life, that this sector is thriving, and those active in it are well worth protecting and supporting. To break the vicious cycle, governments need to embrace street food vendors and the dynamic economic sector they constitute. Addressing each one of these challenges, participants recommended possible interventions and solutions to enhance the safety and productivity of the sector.

### ***Balancing training, control, and flexibility***

As one of the major means for accessing food for the urban population, street foods should get more attention from governments and development agencies, in order to improve their status and their impact on food security, food safety, and nutrition. To use the words of one participant, “Street foods are a solution to feed millions of people every day that needs to be supported, not eliminated, so that it can fulfil the task it has already, but in an efficient manner” (Moisés Gómez Porchini, Centro Estatal de Capacitación UAT, Mexico).

Vendors should be given some basic training on how to safely prepare and store food, and businesses should be certified accordingly. Some participants proposed the application of the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) standards. HACCP is a systematic, preventive approach to food safety and allergenic, chemical, and biological hazards in production processes that can cause the finished product to be unsafe. It designs measurements to reduce these risks to a safe level. In this manner, HACCP is focused on the prevention of hazards rather than finished product inspection. The HACCP system can be used at all stages of a food chain, from food production and preparation processes including packaging, distribution, etc.

Other participants argued against HACCP. They stressed the need for much simpler guidelines, such as the WHO's *Five Keys to Safer Food*. These are basic principles that each individual all over the world should know to ensure safe food handling practices and prevent food-borne diseases. The five keys are: a) keep clean; b) separate raw and cooked; c) cook thoroughly; d) keep food at safe temperatures; e) use safe water and raw materials.<sup>2</sup>

When addressing the questions of how to improve the conditions of street food vendors and ensure that the food sold does not jeopardize public health and respects quality standards, participants emphasized the need to build the awareness of both vendors and consumers that food should be of a certain quality. Participants felt that interventions and programs can only be successful if they do not focus on one aspect alone. Tackling only food quality, for instance, cannot ensure that street food vendors play the most positive role possible in realizing food security for the urban population. It is important not to forget that street foods constitute a very heterogeneous sector and that interventions need to be carefully planned. For instance, municipalities should provide vendors with appropriate infrastructure such as access to clean water and sewage systems.

Other participants stressed the need to give access to microcredit to protect these "income-generating activities" on which many independent and not wealthy individuals rely. Needless to say, general education levels also play a big role in ensuring safe street foods. The more both vendors and patrons are educated, and the more they will know about issues such as nutrition and food safety, the more they will be interested in keeping their businesses as clean and the products as healthy as possible. Regulations must also take into account differences that are inherent in such a complex and heterogeneous sector. It is necessary, for instance, to differentiate between vendors selling food freshly prepared on the spot and those hawking dishes prepared earlier at home, as the latter practice is riskier due to possible unsafe conservation and storage methods.

Moreover, aspects such as gender and local and cultural customs must be taken into consideration. There is the need for a cautious approach when looking at institutionalized paths. The gender dimension should be specifically included when considering enforcement of food safety regulations. Enforcement risks marginalizing the most vulnerable entrepreneurs, notably women, who are often unable to access the credit and assets needed to conform to the regulations.

Finally, with their adaptability to the frenetic life of the global south's cities, street food vendors have a huge potential to quickly fill niches, greatly improving urban access to food. Excessive regulation of the sector carries the risk of suffocating this adaptability. This would merely shift the problem to a new informal sector consisting of those dodging the regulation. Despite this, certain minimum standards, especially related to food quality, need to be enforced. Rather than a top-down regulatory system, bottom-up organization of the sector seems to be a viable compromise. In order to improve the vendors' standing and strengthen their overall position vis-à-vis the authorities, street food vendors should not only be encouraged to partake in awareness-raising programs, but also to promote their organizations into cooperatives. In addition to helping vendors run their business in a more efficient and safe manner, cooperatives would also ease the authorities' work in enforcing hygienic and business standards. As another participant puts it: "There is need to formalize street vending by ensuring that vendors are organized into viable groups, for example cooperatives, and then register their activities. When registered, these groups can have access to loans and training on their specific lines of activity" (Edward Mutandwa, Rwanda Development Agency, Rwanda).

### **Summary, conclusions, and open questions**

The online discussion disclosed a community of professionals with a heterogeneous set of expertise working on street food vending. There were nutritionists, agronomists, urban planners, economists, microbiologists, and professionals working in the private sector. All highlighted the need for a multidisciplinary approach to tackling street food issues. Participants mainly concentrated on the hygienic and regulatory aspects of the problem, focusing particularly on the relationship between vendors and authorities. Other ways to prompt a durable change in street food safety and quality conditions remained unanswered.

Many issues remain unresolved. It is hoped that future discussion can tackle the following questions:

- How to create concrete incentives and innovative methods of raising consumers' awareness?
- Is there a role for social marketing?
- Are there innovative policy approaches that can be implemented by local authorities in support of improved street foods?
- How do we make sure the most vulnerable street food vendors are not marginalized when implementing improvements in quality, safety, and the nutritional value of street foods?

For full records of contributions to this discussion, please refer to the proceedings: [www.fao.org/fsnforum/sites/default/files/files/73\\_street\\_foods/PROCEEDINGS\\_Streetfoods.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fsnforum/sites/default/files/files/73_street_foods/PROCEEDINGS_Streetfoods.pdf) [accessed March 17, 2014].

## **Notes**

- 1 For the topic and full contributions please refer to the FSN Forum webpage: [www.fao.org/fsnforum/forum/discussions/street-foods](http://www.fao.org/fsnforum/forum/discussions/street-foods) [accessed March 17, 2014].
- 2 [www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/consumer/manual\\_keys.pdf](http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/consumer/manual_keys.pdf) [accessed March 17, 2014].