



**Global
Forum**
on Food Security
and Nutrition

Street foods: the way forward for better food safety and nutrition

Summary of discussion no. 73
From 26 September to 21 October 2011



Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition

About the Document

This online discussion took place from September 26th to October 21st and attracted 58 contributions from 22 countries.

The following summary is aimed at providing readers with a general overview of the discussion, including the list of all references shared.

For a complete record, please refer to the proceedings document (http://typo3.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fsn/docs/Street_Foods/PROCEEDINGS_Street_foods.doc), in which the full contributions are included.

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I. Introduction

The topic was raised by Giorgia Nicolò from the FAO Regional Office for Africa with contributions by Lalita Bhattacharjee, Mohammad Abdul Mannan and Flavio Bellomi who are working with FAO in Bangladesh on the National Food Policy Capacity Strengthening Programme.

Street food vendors are a common sight in many parts of the world. They are present in virtually every larger city in the global south and play an integral role in the daily life of millions of people.

Street foods come with many advantages, they are usually cheap, are easily available at odd times and places 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 comes with many challenges. Unsanitary conditions, bad food quality and pollution are just some of the negative aspects of street foods that emerged during this discussion. 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.

However big these challenges, there seems to be little doubt among the participants to this discussion however, that street foods are part of urban life and that this thriving sector and those active in it are well worth being protected and supported. As one of the major means for accessing food for the urban population, street food should get more attention by governments and development agents in order to improve their status and their impact on food security, food safety and nutrition.

II. Street Foods, available and pro poor

Street foods constitute an important source of nutrition for many city dwellers and their preparation and sale provides the hawkers with a precious basis of income. With the continuing growth and expansion of many cities this sector will most likely continue to gain importance and its potential for ensuring proper nutrition for the many urban poor will hence be enormous. With their ubiquitous presence and their availability round the clock street food vendors can be an answer to the access problems of poor people to food in urban scenarios. These small, mostly individually or family run businesses are very flexible and can readily adapt to changing circumstances and many vendors do display a high level of entrepreneurship by innovating and occupying niches. This adaptability and the low investment necessary to set up a business make them a very accessible sector for poor rural dwellers causing the sector to grow quickly and widespread.

- Let's face the situation as it really is: [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*)
- Street foods provide an easy answer to "accessibility to food" - to the people around the world, particularly in the overpopulated areas of the developing and the underdeveloped parts. [...] Street foods ensure both availability and economy i.e. with no much pinch on the purse (*Sajan Kurien*)



Street Foods in Dhaka

A study in 2007 -2008 on institutionalization of the street food sector in Dhaka, carried out by the Consumers Association of Bangladesh and Dhaka University, identified institutionalizing safe and hygienic street food vending systems and all food establishments in urban areas as one of the medium/long term actions in the National Food Policy Plan of Action 2008 -2015.

According to the Dhaka City Corporation, there are as many as 200,000 street food vendors in Dhaka city which is increasing due to the demand of an urban population growing at a rate of 5% each year. With increasing number of people coming from rural areas in quest of employment every year, there is overcrowding and inadequate sanitary and other infrastructure which create challenges to the street food systems and their management.

Foods have a total microbial and coli load between medium to high as they are often stored and sold on open trays and germs from waste collected on the streets are easily transmitted. There is need for enhancing public awareness and media advocacy on the safety and nutritional aspects of street foods as a priority.

On regulation and legislation issues, street food vendors need to be registered with the local government authorities with provisions for renewal of regular registration. License and identity cards need to be given to the vendors for public display on registration, which would allow them to carry out their business, abiding by these impositions, without any undue harassment from any agency. Transparency in the application of the laws on street food vending is an absolute necessity as this affects a large number of poor people and is also intricately related with urban development.

III. Street Foods a nuisance and public health risk?

However big the potentially positive role of street food vendors, the informal nature of the sector carries a number of risks and makes it susceptible to dynamics that can be potentially dangerous for both the society at large and for the vendors themselves.

Street food vendors mostly operate in a grey area without licenses, with improvised equipment and often occupying public space. Apart from causing disruption of other urban activities and being a major source of urban pollution, this characteristic also makes them target of harassment and extortion by government authorities such as police and organized crime as they often lack any form of legal recognition and thus protection.

Street foods vendors forming part of the shadow economy 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 and the unsanitary conditions many vendors operate in exacerbate the problem. 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.

- Currently the central business areas of big cities in these [developing] countries are all flooded with vendors who cause traffic, cleaning problems and contribute to urban blight. *(Hamid Ahmad)*
- Although more than 40% of Nairobi's lower-income groups consume street foods, inadequate information exists on the contribution or potential contribution to micronutrient intake. *(Mary Oyunga- Ogubi)*
- In many countries the street food industry is merely tolerated. Because the industry is spread over a myriad of locations and is not systematically coordinated in any way, it is common for clusters of vendors to be considered impediments to urban planning and hazards to public health. *(A.K.M. Mostafa Anower)*
- Also some vendors are selling poor dairy products (like Qulfi, ice cream ect), with poor and unhealthy colors and flavors. Such products are unhealthy, even dangerous and sometimes carcinogenic, especially when synthetic colors and flavors are added. *(Raziq Abdul)*
- Most of the food rots and is thrown away as garbage due to lack of good storage and preservation methods. There is mass food waste near such makeshift markets or along the streets. *(Joyce Khaita Lambuli)*

IV. A way towards safe, healthy and nutritious street foods

The quality and safety of street foods is determined by numerous factors such as the organisation of the business, regulatory aspects, technical aspects related to the preparation, preservation and display of food sold in the streets, the consumer perspective and educational programs.

In order to improve the conditions of street food vendors and to make sure that the food sold does not jeopardize public health and respects certain quality standards there is first and foremost the necessity to build the awareness that food should be of a certain quality. In many areas where street foods are sold food safety issues are not taken into consideration neither on the producer nor on the consumer side. Consumers tend to look mostly at the price and might be already accustomed to the taste of unhealthy meals. Vendors on the other hand have a very small margin for profit and are incentivized to keep expenses low by utilizing low quality ingredients and disregarding costly hygienic practices.

To break this vicious cycle, governments need to embrace street food vendors and the dynamic economic sector they constitute. With their adaptability to the frenetic life in the global south's cities, street food vendors have a huge potential to quickly fill niches, greatly improving urban access to food. While excessive regulation of the sector carries the risk of suffocating this adaptability and would just shift the problem to a new informal sector consisting of those dodging the regulation, certain minimum standards, especially related to food quality, need to be enforced. Vendors should be given some basic training on how to safely prepare and store food and businesses should be certified accordingly.

While some proposed the application of HACCP standards, others argued against it stressing the need for much simpler guidelines such as the "five keys to safer food".

In addition, municipalities should provide vendors with appropriate infrastructure like access to clean water and sewage systems. Street food vendors should be encouraged to partake in awareness raising programmes and given access to microcredit.

In order to improve the vendors' standing, strengthening their overall position vis-à-vis authorities, promoting their organization into cooperatives has been identified as a path to follow. 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.

In general however, interventions and programmes 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 of the urban population. It is important not to forget that the street foods constitute a very heterogeneous sector and that interventions need to be carefully planned keeping aspects such as gender, secondary audience and local customs into consideration. It is also necessary to differentiate between vendors selling food freshly prepared on the spot or hawking dishes prepared earlier at home, with the second practice being much more risky. Needless to say, general education levels also play a big role in ensuring safe street foods. The more both vendors and patrons will be educated and the more they will know about issues such as nutrition and food safety, the more they will be interested in having the business as clean and the products as healthy as possible.

In short, in the words of our Member Sabrina Aguiari, street foods are a delicate sector that if it becomes the target of development programmes might not necessarily improve its level of quality and the well being of those who relate to it, unless a clear option to keep it in existence and accessible as an 'income generating activities' for many independent and not wealthy individuals - included women - is made.



Harare, Zimbabwe

In Harare, Zimbabwe, many urban women are involved in cooking "mealie meal" commonly known as "sadza". This activity was and still remains very special in the minds of urban workers including the rich. In order to properly formalize this activity women groups of about 10-20 have been mobilized into a cooperative. This cooperative is registered with the council and is required to observe the rules of the council particularly as regards the environment and food safety. They also pay taxes and thus making the activity traceable. *(Edward Mutandwa)*

- One of the ways forward to be considered is to see the possibility of organizing food vendors into a group or an organization that can be easily identified with so that issues such as training on hygienic preparation of the food can be effectively monitored and evaluated routinely *(Falana Adetunji Olajide)*
- We should keep in mind that street food is important for food security and addressing issues arising from this activity needs a multidisciplinary approach which takes into account the interests of all the stakeholders and that focusing only on the quality and safety of the street food itself cannot solve the problem. [However] the quality and safety of street food can be used as a tool to verify the level or the progress of the measures and actions implemented by all the stakeholders to change the situation. *(Salma Akter)*

- There is need to establish proper areas for example market stalls where different types of activities can be carried out. In my view, 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)*
- Governments/relevant ministries need to formally announce their support of the sector so as to give the public faith in this food sector. *(Angela Kimani)*
- Free but compulsory enrolment of vendors in food safety and hygiene training schemes; appointing street wardens/peer groups who will be responsible for monitoring all vendors operating in the same street / area and making improvements to infrastructural facilities (public toilets, access to safe water, cheap fuel etc) *(Sabiha Lageard)*
- The problem with these regulations and guideline is their enforcement which is usually done by the local authorities who may not be adequately trained and capacity build to carry out their mandates. *(Andrew Kwonyike)*
- We found that around 40-50% of the food sold in the street by vendors had been prepared at home. So the family - especially women at household level - also need to be well informed about the importance of food safety and good personal hygiene to prevent food contamination and foodborne illness. *(Frances Ann Warnock)*

V. References

Disclaimer: *the following list is a compilation of references shared by the participants in their contributions. All positions and views expressed therein do not necessarily reflect the views of FAO.*

AVAILABLE ONLINE

- Improving the Nutritional Quality of Street Foods to Better Meet the Micronutrient Needs of Schoolchildren in Urban Areas (http://typo3.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fsn/docs/Street_Foods/StreetFoodsTanzania.pdf)
- Street foods in Nairobi, Kenya: their role as a source of micronutrients in low income groups (http://typo3.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fsn/docs/Street_Foods/Street_Foods_Kenya_Oyunga-Ogubi.pdf)
- Relationship between street food, food safety and food security, recommendations and conclusion (http://typo3.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fsn/docs/Street_Foods/Strengthening_food_security_and_street_foods_safety_S._Zombou.pdf)
- Estudo sobre Alimentação na rua em Cabo Verde (http://typo3.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fsn/docs/Street_Foods/Relatorio_Alimentação_de_Rua_Cabo_Verde1.docx)
- Good hygienic practices in the preparation and sale of street food in Africa (http://typo3.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fsn/docs/Street_Foods/FAO_street_foods.pdf)
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PHOTOS OF STREET FOODS

- http://typo3.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fsn/docs/Street_Foods/Photos_Street_Foods.pdf