In countries with ancestral cultures as in Africa, Asia, Latin America, there is a local knowledge in the food elaboration, which is thousands of years old, and which has and will continue to produce its foods. The problem is that introducing new foods and abandoning traditional food and its processes have distorted the nutritional and sanitary aspects of traditional food. The new nutritional mixture (products and processes) must be regulated locally and not with the external parameters, except for the case of the agro-exports.

Sánchez Narvaez, cited in Macchi, 2006: 5

The social ramifications *of the informal food sector*

Health and safety issues for consumers

Various participants in the e-mail conference on the IFS organized by FAO and the University of Bologna in May 2006 observed that many health and safety concerns for producers and consumers have not been adequately addressed in the sector (e.g. WHO, 2001),[2] from production to consumption. In unregulated urban agriculture, for example, urban waterways are often highly polluted, leading to contamination of produce (Binns and Lynch, 1998: 782; FAO and WHO, 2004). Poor quality foods and resulting diseases can have negative consequences on commerce and tourism because consumers lose confidence in the quality of the goods sold. For the vendors, this can result in economic loss and even unemployment (FAO, 1998). These problems are especially difficult to manage in countries where informal activities are discouraged and thus hidden from the view of health inspectors.

Risks of bacterial and chemical contamination during food processing, transport and marketing may be poorly controlled in the IFS in some circumstances. Wholesale and retail markets often have inadequate infrastructure, including waste disposal and water supply. Storage is a problem since vendors in many countries do not have access to electricity and refrigeration. Further, improving market infrastructure is not sufficient to eliminate these risks. Since food is often processed at home, efforts must also be made to improve urban housing, including sanitation and access to water and electricity.

Health and food safety concerns are important issues where street foods become important to urban consumers (FAO, 1997; Tinker 2003). In a study of seven African and Asian cities, however, Tinker found that food cooked and sold on the street or in markets is generally safe if consumed shortly after cooking. Food contamination comes largely from unclean hands and plates, as well as from dust (Tinker, 1987: 65). Studies in Latin America shows health risks under these conditions: food is prepared without access to clean water; minimal practices of hygiene and adequate food preparation are not respected; raw foods are not carefully selected; and environmental contamination is not taken into consideration (FAO, 1996).

Pune, India — case study

A project conducted by IRDC on the informal street food vendors in the city of Pune, India, revealed that food samples collected from street food vendors were often tainted with bacteriological contamination. Interestingly, the study also revealed that meals prepared by women in their own homes for sale on the street were of superior quality to other street food. The project thus recommended the legitimization of street food activities and municipal provision of vending sites and adequate facilities (for washing, storage of bulk items and food preparation) in order to reduce possible food contamination due to unhygienic working conditions. Research activities resulted in a plan for regulating, assisting and facilitating street food vending in Pune. It also resulted in improved sanitation and working conditions of street food vendors, and more communication between vendors and authorities (IDRC, 2002).

[2] Several participants in the e-mail conference pointed out that one should not equate the IFS with poor quality food: even international hotels can have problems with sanitation and food processing.

Vendors may also misuse food additives and even utilize substances with some colours and preservatives not approved for use in foods, thus further adding health risks.

In East Asian countries with a large IFS, consumers are well aware of food safety issues. Vendors must thus provide a hygienic environment if they wish to stay in business. This illustrates that education of consumers is an important element in creating a safe IFS.

Who tends the fire?
Gender issues

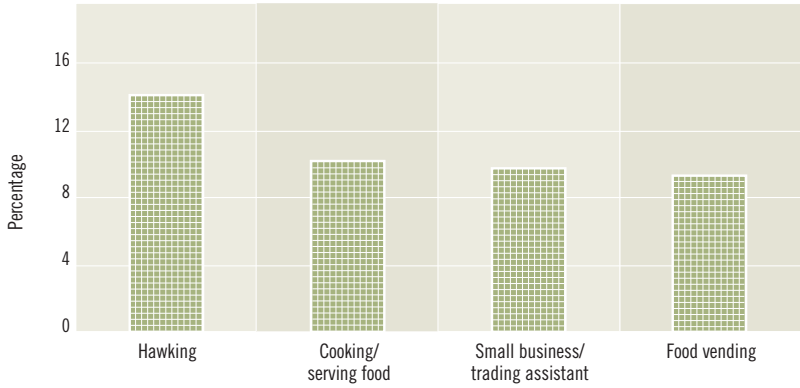
It is well known that women are more likely to be employed in the informal sector than men for a combination of factors, including greater household responsibility, unrecognized or low levels of skills and education, decreasing household incomes, and occasionally, their desire for greater autonomy and flexibility (Scott, 1994). In general, women in the sector earn less than men and are concentrated in market niches considered to be "feminine," especially food production and service (FAO, 1995). In some countries, however, they may earn more than workers in formal employment such as construction or masonry (Tinker, 1987: 59). In fact, some women may earn more than their husbands. There is great local variation in the impact of participation in the sector on women's livelihoods. In order to improve the general conditions of women in the IFS, it is important to recognize that their activities in the sector are not just temporary and/or complementary to their husbands' work, but may be regular and permanent (FAO, 1995).

The cultural context of women's participation in the IFS should be considered within the wider relations of kinship, alliances and patronage (Kanté, 2002). They often use their income to support their families rather than to expand their businesses (Tinker, 1994), or gain social prestige and social solidarity from such work. Further, they consider this sector more flexible than formal employment, and can more easily combine income-generating employment with other household responsibilities such as childcare (Simon, 2003). These values should be considered in policy-making on the sector since women are not necessarily interested in expanding their businesses or leaving the sector for formal employment (Roubaud, 1994; Hansen and Vaa, 2004). Most importantly, women should be empowered through the sector to make decisions on their own lives.

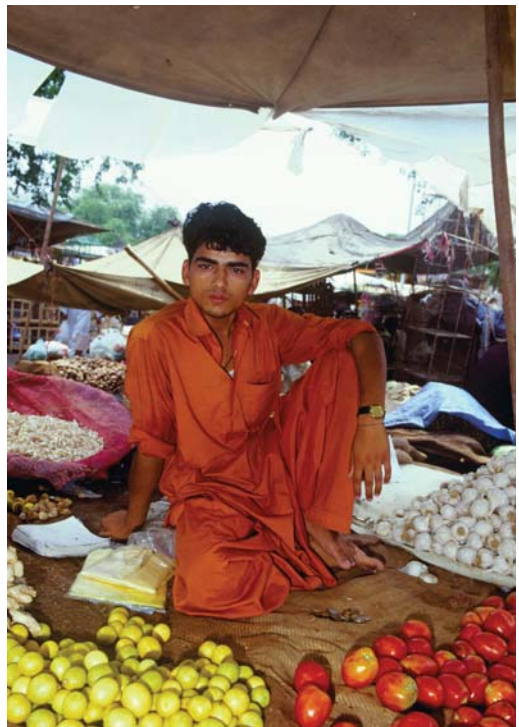
Who helps out?
Children in the informal food sector

Because child labour is illegal in most countries, children tend to work in the IFS in situations ranging from stark exploitation to merely helping out their parents after school (Figure 3). According to ILO, there are 246 million children in the world working, mostly in the informal sector without legal protection (ILO, 2005: 1). Children preparing and selling food in the streets of metropolitan areas represent one of the main and the most evident groups of child labourers (ILO, 2003b). They may work as part of a family or other informal enterprise or association, or they may be self-employed (ILO, 2003b: 1). Children living

Figure 3 ~ Main type of work done by children aged 5-17, Uganda



Source: ILO, 2004



Competition between the formal and the informal food sectors

In the e-mail conference, some participants pointed out that supermarkets may threaten the sustainability of informal food markets. In African capital cities, for example, supermarkets have reached a middle- and upperclass market with an attractive shopping atmosphere, providing access to global products and even entertainment. It is still unknown if these supermarkets will threaten informal markets and local food production, or if the two sectors will co-exist by attracting different clients. Many Tanzanian consumers still prefer traditional markets because they consider supermarket food less fresh. Similarly, traditional markets continue to thrive in even the wealthiest Asian countries because many consumers believe the food is of better quality and better priced. They also prefer to purchase locally produced goods. This topic merits further research.

at home usually work to help their families, while those who live on the street work to survival (ibid). Schooling of children in general has been adversely affected by poverty and their need to survive (Joshi, 1997: 35). Because of their widespread involvement in IFS, their needs should be considered in research and policy-making on the sector.

Are street foods nutritious?

There is some concern that street foods may contain unhealthy amounts of saturated fats, sugar and salt, thus contributing to obesity and related diseases. Street foods are often prepared using the least expensive ingredients, including highly refined grains and hydrogenated edible oils.

Yet, street foods provide an opportunity for improving the nutritional quality of the diet for the low-income sector of the population. In 2005, a study of sixth grade primary school children in Dar es Salaam, United Republic of Tanzania found that 67 percent of students purchased street food everyday and another 17 percent purchased street food two to three times a week. Street food was often the only food consumed by the children during school hours (Sokoine University and FAO, 2005: 16). The nutritional quality of street foods is needs more attention. As some participants in the e-mail conference argued, education on health and nutrition should be provided to students, who are already important consumers of street food and may eventually become street vendors themselves. FAO has been working on nutrition education and has drawn attention to the health and nutritional aspects of street