

Street food and urban and periurban agriculture and horticulture: perspectives for a strategic coalition towards food security

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Dear FSN Forum members,

I am very glad to be the facilitator of this second online discussion¹ about street food vending.

My name is Stefano Marras. I am currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Business Administration, Finance, Management and Law, and at the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy.

The aim of this discussion is to share perspectives on actual and potential links between street food vending and urban and periurban agriculture and horticulture (UPA), analyzing if and in which way such links may represent the basis for possible strategies to enhance food security in urban areas.

This discussion will be an opportunity to expand and strengthen the network of specialists involved in street food trade and governance worldwide.

Introduction

Urban food security depends on food availability, access, and quality over time. With the rapid growth of the urban population and the low nutritional levels of the urban and peri-urban poor, there is tremendous scope for increasing supply of accessible, safe and nutritious food, while ensuring its sustainable production. Academics, FAO, WHO, all recognized street food – i.e. ready-to-eat foods and beverages prepared and/or sold by vendors or hawkers, in the street and similar locations – and urban and peri-urban agriculture and horticulture (UPA) – the growing of plants and the raising of animals within and around cities – as having the potential to help achieve food security in urban areas.

¹ A first online discussion on street foods with the title “[Street foods: the way forward for better food safety and nutrition](#)” was held on the FSN Forum in 2011.

Street foods account for a significant proportion of daily urban food consumption for millions of low- and middle-income consumers in urban areas, representing the least expensive and most accessible means of obtaining a nutritionally balanced meal outside the home (provided that the consumer is informed and able to choose an appropriate combination of foods). In addition, the preparation and sale of street food provides a regular source of income for millions of men and women with limited financial, social, and cultural capital, since the start-up investment and the overheads are relatively low, and cooking requires little or no formal training.

Within this framework, UPA can provide street food vendors fresh, nutritious, less expensive ingredients. Although in most cities in developing countries an important part of urban agricultural production is for self-consumption, the importance of the market-oriented urban agriculture, both in volume and economic value, should not be underestimated. Research has shown that market-oriented, small-scale urban agriculture is often more profitable than small-scale agricultural production in rural areas and generates incomes above formal minimum wage level. A comparative advantage for the urban producers is their close proximity to the urban consumers. Urban vegetable growers spend less on transport, packaging and storage, and can sell directly through street food stands and market stalls. The urban grower can capture as much as 50-75 percent of the retail price, depending on the marketing system, whereas the rural farmer may receive more typically 15-40 percent.

Local food production can be an important source of supply of fresh vegetables for street food preparation. Since locally produced food requires less transportation and refrigeration, it can supply nearby markets with fresher and more nutritious products at competitive prices. Food growing in cities, thus, can and does help improve the quality of people's diets by providing a greater choice of fresh fruits and vegetables at better prices, particularly to people in the low-income bracket. More common street foods, in most countries, are based on animal-source ingredients often derived from animals kept in cities, there where the commercial peri-urban production of livestock is an extremely fast-growing sector, representing 34 percent of total meat production and nearly 70 percent of egg production worldwide). Nonetheless, fresh salad preparations have increasingly become an integral component of street food sold in cities like Accra, Ghana, and Santiago, Chile. Some urban and peri-urban farmers are even moving towards intensive production of high value-added produce, rather than basic food stuffs; such activities can become major sources of income for more sophisticated members of the population who have investment capacity.

In Bogota, Colombia we can see another trend in direct marketing, wherein the farmers-producer and retailer sit on the board of the corporation and jointly decide what will be produced when. This trend and others are also supported by new communications systems.

Nonetheless, both, street food vending and urban agriculture are still largely debated and opposed or rather ignored by planners and both street food vendors and UPA farmers often operate without permits. Since it is officially "invisible", the sector receives no public assistance or oversight in many cities. For this reason, UPA carries health and environmental risks – potential use of contaminated land and water smells and noise pollution, and inappropriate use of pesticides and of raw organic manure that can leak into water sources. Food production, processing, and vending in the peri-urban zones, while providing employment, do raise issues related to pollution and food safety.

Authorities in many countries have responded to this problem with weak and erratic implementation of legislation on street food and urban agriculture. As formal and informal standards grow, there is a real risk that the poor will be excluded from markets.

Governments should recognize the role played by UPA and street food in making food available to poor families in urban areas and in generating income; they must face and cope with the prevailing problems and accept urban livelihood grassroots strategies including urban farming and street vending, as well as realize the benefits and opportunities created through productive use of green open spaces in cities, both, in terms of nutrition and environmental development.

FAO supports the transformation of UPA and street vending into a recognized urban land use and economic activity in their own right, integrated into national and local agricultural development strategies, food and nutrition programmes, and urban planning. FAO helps national and regional governments and city administrations optimize their policies and support services for urban and peri-urban agriculture, and improve production, processing and marketing systems. Over time the image of urban and peri-urban agriculture may evolve into that of accepted and needed activities which will supersede the temporary and crisis-oriented image of the past.

Questions

In light of this, I would like to raise the following questions /reflections to be discussed:

1. Are you aware of actual direct links between street food vendors and local urban farmers?
2. Are there examples of concrete measures promoted by local authorities to recognize and increase such kind of link?
3. If so, how have these actions influenced consumers' choices towards street food?
4. Have similar initiatives been prompted directly by street food vendors associations? How?
5. I believe that creating a system of incentives (e.g permits to sell in areas where there are more potential customers, such as near schools, hospitals, transportation hubs; vouchers or some sort of recognition mechanism for good practices) is required for motivating the street vendors to use locally-sourced, fresh produce. Do you think that such incentives could be successful, and why? What other types of incentives might be, and why?
6. What new mechanisms can be put in place to raise peoples' awareness on the consequences of their street eating habits? Do you know any advertising methods which have been proven effective?

I wish a fruitful exchange and I thank you in advance for your inputs which will help refine future interventions on the ground.

Many thanks,
Stefano Marras