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ABSTRACT:
With the world population growing to 9.2 million by 2050 and a rapid pace of urbanisation, urban food security is going to be a major challenge, especially for developing countries. Increasing urbanisation would be accompanied by rising incomes on one hand and rising poverty and gap between the rich and the poor in urban areas on the other hand. This rising poverty would intensify the issue of food insecurity in urban areas. Considering the legal and institutional constraints to practise of urban agriculture and irrelevant supermarkets, street foods seem to be a viable option for ensuring urban food security, especially for the urban poor. It would not only be an important source of insurance for the poor against hunger but would also provide an opportunity for the enhancement of a localised food system which acts in parallel with the more commercially viable linear food system operated by the supermarkets.

Keywords: *Street food, urban, food security, food vendors, food availability, food access*

INTRODUCTION

It was a bright sunny afternoon of my sophomore year, when amidst the anxiety of my science exam the next day I was literally starving. My parents had gone out of town and being the beloved daughter of my parents, I never cared to learn cooking, the result of which was right in front of my eyes. With unkempt hair, shabby clothes and bathroom slippers, I rushed to the gate at the sound of a *panipuri walla's* tinkering bell. That was the first time I realised the importance of street food and was sensitised for street food vendors.

As the statistics suggest, the population of the world would grow to 9.2 billion by 2050 with around 2.5 billion population being concentrated in the developing world's urban areas (UNDESA, 2008). This translates to feeding 9.2 billion people of the world. While the increasing urbanisation would be accompanied by rising incomes on one hand, it would also lead to rising poverty and gap between the rich and the poor in urban areas. This rising poverty would intensify the issue of food insecurity in urban areas. Before we delve deeper into the issue of food security, we need to understand how did the concept of urban food security evolve and its meaning.

EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF FOOD SECURITY

As early as 1948, Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed everyone's right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being of himself and his family, including food. In 1966, the same idea was reaffirmed by International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, when it was advocated that everyone has a right to be free from hunger. Right to food was even accorded the status of a fundamental right. However, it was in the year 1974 that the global concern for food security became grave due to diminishing world food supplies and large scale food shortages. It was realised that food insecurity is a problem in urban areas, especially for the poor not due to mere availability of food rather due to more complex issue of access to food.

Availability of food, access to food, and risks related to either availability or access are the essential determinants of food security (Von Braun et al. 1992). Alternatively, lack of food availability and access to food constitutes insecurity. While ***availability*** is akin to *adequacy and stability* of food availability and is more relevant at the national or community level, the ***access*** to food is more pertinent in case of household or individuals. National food security implies when food is evenly distributed in a country, it should be enough to meet every citizen's food need. An individual or household is considered to be food secure when it has access to food needed for healthy life of himself/ all his members and when it does not have the risk of losing such access (UN ACC/SCN 1991).

Adequacy of food availability means supply of nutritional and safe food to the population which is culturally accepted as well (Oshaug 1994). However, *stability* of food and *access* presuppose environmental, social and economic sustainability, that is, not only judicious management of natural resources but also just income distribution and effective markets with formal and informal safety nets. The concept of food security can be summed up in form of a flowchart mentioned in figure 1.

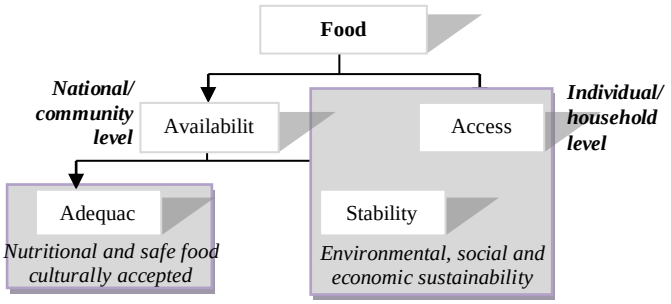

Fig.1. The concept of food security

FOOD SECURITY AND URBAN AREAS

As has already been mentioned that of the 9.2 million people in 2050, 2.5 million people would be residing in developing world urban areas thus rapid urbanization would also pull the balance of poverty into cities. Although higher rates of poverty prevail in rural areas yet rural food insecurity is not higher than that in cities. A study by Ahmed et al (2007) suggests that in 12 of the 18 selected low income developing countries the incidence of food security in urban areas is same or higher than rural areas, even though urban areas have higher incomes. Thus it is quite essential to understand food security issues in urban areas which are quite distinct from rural areas. In terms of access to food, there is a significant difference between urban and rural areas. People in rural areas can often produce their own food, while people in urban areas are more dependent on food purchases. Thus, for the urban poor, it is the dominance of the cash economy over access to such a basic need as food that links urban food systems to poverty and vulnerability to food insecurity. The aspects of food security in urban areas have been described below.

a) *Food availability*: The food consumed in urban areas is primarily produced in rural and peri-urban areas or imported. While agriculture practised in peri-urban areas can complement diets through local production of vegetables, milk and meat, food security in urban areas depends largely on the staple foods produced in distant rural areas. Urban food security is thus increasingly affected by disruptions to food systems in rural areas. Another important dimension of availability of food in urban areas is related to import of food, especially in developing countries. At the peak of food crisis in 2007-2008, undernourishment increased manifold in Africa and Asia (FAO 2008). Availability of food in urban areas is also affected by global changes such as climate related events as floods damaging food transport infrastructure and market spaces, and higher humidity and temperatures increasing spoilage of fresh and staple foods or even national policies in large exporter countries that encourage producers to give preference to production of biofuels over food grains in developing nations or policies restricting export of staple foods as grains to developing nations (Reardon, Timmer et al 2003).

b) *Food Access*: Food insecurity in urban areas is not triggered by absolute food shortages, but by failures of households to be able to access food. Although food is likely to be available in the market in urban areas, it may not necessarily be affordable. Since urban dwellers need to purchase everything including food and other goods and services, thus food security in urban areas depends on individual/ household circumstances as the household operates within a 'purchasing budget' constraint. There is a stark intra-urban inequality in terms of food access and food consumption between income groups in urban areas (FAO 2003, Maxwell 1999). This has been evident through research of Jamal and Weeks (1993), Von Braun et al. (1993), Hulme and McKay (2005) and Montgomery (2004). The high food prices in urban areas make the lives of urban poor miserable. The reasons for high food prices in urban areas are two-fold. First reason is that food supply systems involve complex distribution chain involving wholesalers, intermediate purchasers, distributors and vendors.

While this complex network creates jobs for urban dwellers, it also increases the ultimate price paid by the consumer. The urban poor are particularly vulnerable to high food prices due to limited income and cash reserves. Another reason for high food prices being paid by urban poor is the location of wholesale food markets and discount supermarket chains that are most commonly located in the city outskirts. These far-off locations are not accessible to urban poor due to lack of own transportation, and inadequate public transportation systems. Thus they are forced to purchase food in small neighbourhood shops, which are more expensive than wholesale or supermarket outlets.

STREET FOOD AND URBAN FOOD SECURITY

Most of the urban poor do not have an option to buy and store food as they cannot afford refrigerators and access to reliable electricity is a luxury for very few. Thus the only options left to them are to either borrow food from relatives, borrow money at usurious rate to buy food, or eat the cheaper street food. It is essential to understand the meaning of street food. Street food has been used to define food and beverages sold in public places, intended for immediate or later consumption, which do not require any additional processing (WHO 1996). It ranges from processed, industrialised and manufactured products to dishes rooted in regional and local cuisines (Cardosa et al 2014).

Street foods can be a significant source of food for many urban dwellers, both in terms of energy intake and food expenditure (IFPRI 1998). Also it is agreed that urban dwellers consume a more varied diet than their rural counterparts, have a greater access to processed and packaged foods and are thus dependent on local street food for snacks and meals, given their constraints on time and need to substitute labour-intensive foods for more readily available foods (Austin et al. 1976; Chaudhri and Timmer 1986; Drakakis-Smith 1991; Von Braun et al. 1993; Atkinson 1995; Boughton and Reardon 1997; Randolph 1997; Tinker 1997).

Street foods are cheaper than home-made food, especially when one considers the time spent shopping and cooking and the cost of transport and fuel spent on shopping (Tinker 1997). When food and cooking fuel costs rise, consumption of street foods tends to increase as well since their price goes up more slowly as a result of economies of scale of production.

Moreover the 'daily special' at food stalls can provide a cheap, nutritious meal. Vendors acquire raw materials through family or ethnic networks, or purchase discounted quantities at reduced prices and rely on unpaid (in wages) labour from family members. Even if more expensive per unit than raw foods, purchase of prepared street foods can free-up time for the worker to engage in income-generating activities that have a greater benefit to the household than food preparation, especially in cases where traditional foods require long preparation times (Atkinson 1992).

Since street foods are important to urban dwellers, especially poor, thus providing a cheap, nutritious and easily available source (as well as providing vendor jobs for poor urban women), they play a prominent role in food access strategies of the urban poor. This trend has been more evident in urban areas of Africa and Asia. (Maxwell et al 2000).

It has been observed that persons living in slum areas consume street foods more often than the families living in a low-middle income neighbourhood, the fact that street foods are inexpensive is a major purchasing incentive (H van 't Riet et al 2001). The linkage between street food and urban food security can be understood from figure 2.

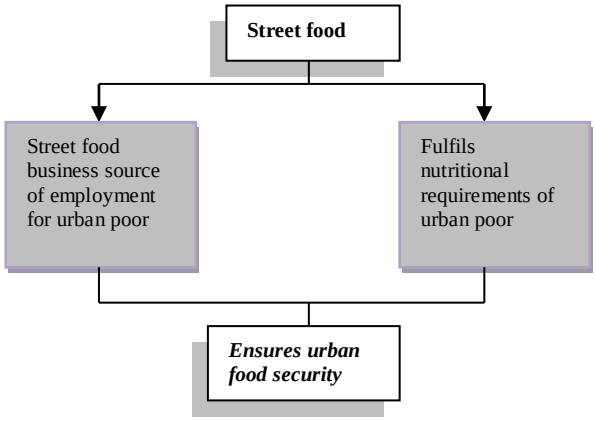

Fig.2. Link between street food and urban food security

The effect of street foods on ensuring food security in urban areas can be understood from two viewpoints. The first viewpoint emphasises the cheap, easy and variety of street foods available in urban areas which ensures that they fulfil the nutritional requirements of urban poor which otherwise would not have been met due to soaring prices of raw vegetable and fruits. Second, people employed in street food business are largely the urban poor. A growing number of urban poor face a daily struggle to feed their families. However, if they are employed in the informal sector of street food vending, then it can solve this particular problem of making their ends meet.

CONCLUSION

Urban agriculture has been considered to be one of the options to ensure food security in urban areas. Although there may be a positive association between urban farming and food access, food consumption, and the nutritional status of children (Maxwell et al 1998 and Maxwell 1995), yet the environmental and health impacts of urban farming are potentially more negative than positive. The intensive use of agricultural chemicals in a densely populated area poses potential dangers to health and nutrition (Birley and Lock 1998; UNDP 1996). Moreover there are legal and institutional constraints in practising urban agriculture. The most critical institutional constraint to urban agriculture particularly is access to land. The practice of urban agriculture is highly dependent on access to land, but the group to whom farming is most important is the least able to gain secure access to land (Maxwell 1996). Thus landowners and farmers are forced to enter into informal agreements without legal framework which give a leeway to private landowners to either not formally lease their land to not lease their land at all. Due to insecure tenure, the farmer also loses the motivation to be efficient, care for land or introduce technological improvements which make urban agriculture an unsustainable practice in the long term.

Either urban agriculture or burgeoning supermarkets are not the solution for urban food insecurity. In urban areas,

where there is a huge poor population, supermarkets may not be of immediate relevance to them. They are unlikely to establish a significant presence in slums or poor neighbourhoods. Moreover, even if they may appear at the periphery of poor settlements, yet they may not be convenient for the poor in terms of accessibility (distance, modes of transport and cash constraints). Thus the reality is that supermarkets may be a wave of the future but street vendors are part of the daily routine.

Considering the ill impacts of urban agriculture and irrelevant supermarkets, street foods seem to be a viable option for ensuring urban food security, especially for the urban poor. Although it is widely believed that a blend of formal and informal food systems within the city may bring resilience to food access for the urban populations yet, this blend itself may not be sustainable (Battersby 2012). Cities need to consider the value of the informal sector for urban residents in future development planning. Street food is an important source of insurance for the poor against hunger. In addition, it provides an opportunity for the enhancement of a localised food system which acts in parallel with the more commercially viable linear food system operated by the supermarkets.
When street food is presented from the perspective of food security and nutrition, the prevalence of unhygienic conditions is considered to be deterrence to wide acceptability of this option in urban areas. The risk of serious food poisoning outbreaks linked to street foods remains a threat in many parts of the world. A lack of knowledge among street food vendors about the causes of food-borne disease is a major risk factor. Thus, given street foods' importance, municipal authorities should give vendors hygiene training, insisting on an adequate and consistent enforcement of local food regulations and improving basic infrastructure so as to ensure hygienic food preparation (Cohen et al., 2008). Recognizing and collaborating with associations of street food vendors can help facilitate compliance with food safety regulations (Maxwell et al., 2000). Such policies can not only assure public health but also enhance food availability for urban poor people.

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