



Association of
Former International
Civil Servants of
the United Nations (Kenya)

Challenges, Risks and Prospects of the Street Food Sector in Kenya

KEY MESSAGES

- The street food sector is an important source of food, employment and income for many low-income urban dwellers. However, it operates without formal recognition in the policy and legislative arena, at both the national and county levels.
- Street food vendors are often harassed and penalized for providing an otherwise essential service to many low-income wage earners.
- Relevant public institutions, street food vendors, non-state actors and civil society organizations should be involved in establishing efficient, effective and inclusive management systems for street food vending as well as self-regulation.
- Increased investment is required in requisite public infrastructure (e.g., water, toilets, security) to promote the growth of the street food sector.
- Capacity-building in training, public hygiene, food safety and consumer awareness is required to enhance the economic and social contribution of the street food sector.
- Waste management is critical to maintain food safety and minimize associated health risks.
- It is important to quantify the economic and social contribution of the street food sector in order to enhance its visibility and proper positioning in urban planning.

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1. Introduction

Street food is a growing service sector in many countries around the world. It is estimated that 2.5 billion people world-wide consume street food on a daily basis, mainly because it is relatively more affordable and accessible. It is also a major source of informal employment. In India, approximately 3 million people are directly involved in the street food sector. In Brazil and Mexico, the sector employs about one million people (Fellows and Hilmi, 2012). Street food is a major source of food, income, and employment in many cities in sub-Saharan Africa (van 't Riet *et al.*, 2001).

This Policy Brief explores the common characteristics and risk factors of the street food trade in Kenya and discusses some possible interventions that would streamline and strengthen its growth in foreseeable future.

2. Background

Street food can be defined as "ready-to-eat" foods and beverages, processed or fresh, which are sold on the streets as opposed to in stores and licensed establishments, and which are sold at stationary locations or by mobile vendors; they are not restricted to snack-like items (FAO, 2009; WHO, 2006; van 't Riet *et al.*, 2001). In many urban areas of Kenya,

street food is an increasingly important source of food and employment, particularly in low-income residential areas, informal settlements, offices, and on construction sites and street corners, etc. An increasing number of working people commute daily from residential areas to work and have to eat outside the home. Even in their residences, many households in Nairobi (more than 40 per cent) in lower-income areas eat street food. Many do not have sufficient resources and time to prepare their food at home (Oyunga-Ogubi *et al.*, 2009).

Common street foods in most of Kenya's urban towns are rich energy sources (e.g., *chapati*, *ugali* and *mandazi*). It is also common to observe street foods with mixed nutrients (e.g., *githeri*, *mokimo* and *Kienyeji (irio)*, which are variants of boiled/fried maize and beans). Other common foods include mutura (contains various types of meat), sausages, fish, chips, roasted maize, fruits and fruit salads (Muinde and Kuria, 2005).

For a long time, urban authorities and police have considered street vending as illegal. Street vendors are treated like criminals and are harassed by the municipal authorities. They are considered a public nuisance and all sorts of street vice (e.g., mugging, waste disposal) are attributed to them, except during periods of electioneering. They are

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often harassed and usually forced to pay informal penalties or fines to local authorities or police. This has discouraged or hindered organized growth of the street food sector. It is time that policy makers and law enforcement agencies reviewed the existing policy and administrative mechanisms in order to recognize and mainstream the street food sector.

The street food sector provides jobs to and supports entrepreneurial activity among many poor urban dwellers in a growing urban population. The sector also provides reasonably nutritious food to many low-income wage earners, often casual workers in such places as construction sites or offices, and in informal settlements, etc. Most of the street food is relatively inexpensive and easily accessible. Therefore, street food alleviates major social and economic problems through the provision of ready-made meals at relatively affordable prices. Indeed, many urban centres in both developed and developing countries have experienced an increasing growth in the importance of street food as a source of food, nutrients, income, and employment for urban residents (Muleta and Ashenafi, 2001; van't Riet *et al.*, 2001). Affordability, accessibility and convenience of street food enable many city dwellers to eat out of their residences. It has significantly contributed to improved nutrition and food security in many urban areas.

In low-income households in Kenya, families cook only once a day and buy some ready-to-eat food from street food vendors. These households argue that street food is more economical than home cooking and is readily available with a large number of vendors at their doorsteps. Street food provides economic opportunities for low and middle-income people, especially for women. This becomes true especially in periods of economic recession or hardship where people become street food vendors in addition to other jobs they may have. This gender-based employment creates a dual benefit in that women have access to income as well as regular access to food for their families.

In many countries, street food is a source of attractive and varied food for tourists and the economically advantaged. To this extent, many countries have made conscious efforts to strengthen the street food sector to improve the "food experience" of visitors and tourists to their cities.

There are other hidden contributions of the street food sector to society that are not directly appreciated in national public life. For example, the time saved by households from cooking would be devoted to other economic or leisure activities or attending to their children. There is a considerable amount of energy and water that is saved in households which would otherwise be used for cooking and cleaning. There are also reduced incidences of such risks as fire or explosion of gas cylinders or stoves, which is beneficial to the greater society in terms of cost and trauma. Moreover, there is improved waste management (less garbage from households). Not least of all are the invaluable benefits of socialization when eating out by fostering better human relations.

3. Challenges in the Street Food Sector

A number of studies have been conducted in Nairobi (e.g., Dandora, Kangemi, and Kayole), other towns in Kenya and other developing countries on the street food sector (Cardoso *et al.*, 2016; Oyunga-Ogubi *et al.*, 2009; FAO (2009, 1997 & 1986); WHO, 2006; Muinde and Kuria, 2005; van't Riet *et al.*, 2001), which provide useful insights into the challenges that many street food vendors / hawkers commonly experience.

3.1 Common Vendors Characteristics

- 1) **Informal Nature of the Street Food Sector:** Street food vendors operate without any official recognition and any policy governing the sector. They operate according to informal rules agreed with their suppliers and customers. Most street vendors are vulnerable to exploitation from regulatory agencies through such penalties as petty fines for operating what is considered as illegal business. They are also vulnerable to loss of their merchandise (and equipment) during unfortunate events such as street riots or similar chaos. Many do not have access to insurance or any form of compensation.
- 2) **Limited Access to Financial Capital:** Most street food vendors do not have any access to formal finance and depend largely on their own savings and/or support from friends and relatives.
- 3) **Limited Entrepreneurial Skills:** Most vendors do not have specific food preparation and associated business skills other than through observation, skills learned from their parents or being self-taught (trial and error).
- 4) **Long Working Hours:** Most street food vendors work for long (12–15) hours daily. They wake up early to purchase raw ingredients; prepare and sell the food before retiring to their homes to attend to other domestic chores including attending to their children. They have to work tirelessly in order to feed and educate their children.
- 5) **Limited Supervision:** Most street food hawkers operate haphazardly without any monitoring of what food they prepare and how they do it. In some towns, some hawkers have been accused and jailed for vending meat from illegal sources (e.g., dogs, cats, wild game).

3.2 Significant Business Challenges

- 1) **Limited Policy and Legislative Guidelines:** The economic and social importance of the street food sector is not documented and appreciated due to its informal nature and the lack of recorded data on the volume and value of the food traded. Neither is

the number of employees nor their wages reliably recorded in official national or county statistics.

- 2) **Weak Regulatory Framework:** Because of lack of specific policies and regulations to govern the street food sector, regulators work within a weak organizational context of poor resources (human, financial and logistics), a situation which affects their effectiveness as well as their motivation. In the end, regulators are left to exhort bribes from street food hawkers. This further provides huge room for rather unwholesome practices.
- 3) **Inappropriate Work Places:** Most street food vendors target high human traffic areas for display and sale of their products. Street food vending is mostly concentrated in such areas as street corners, industrial/construction sites, bus/train terminals, public places and school compounds. The vending units are either mobile or stationary, using open or protected crude structures such as push carts, display wooden tables, aluminum trays or chop bars. These are not appropriate structures for food preservation and protection from contamination.
- 4) **Lack of Running Water:** Most businesses operate without running clean water. Water is never enough for proper dish washing, food preparation and for customers. It is usually bought from doubtful sources or carried from home. Water is used repeatedly before being replaced. In short, vendors work under considerably unsanitary conditions.
- 5) **Lack of Affordable Clean Energy:** Most vendors use charcoal and wood for cooking and electricity and gas are least used due to cost implications on profitability.
- 6) **Lack of Toilets:** Most street vending premises do not have toilets. Vendors often use bathrooms in nearby government buildings, department stores or religious places for free or pay-and-use toilets (often run by street children).

3.3 Major Sources of Health Risks

In order to address the major sources of potential health risks in the street food sector, it is useful to fully examine what happens from procurement of raw ingredients, transportation, storage, preparation/cooking, selling/serving food and waste disposal (Cortese *et al.*, 2016; Rane, 2011). There are standard global guidelines on the management of the street food sector that can be adapted to specific local conditions in any country (FAO, 2009; WHO, 2006; Dawson and Canet, 1991). However, most agencies have predominantly concentrated on inadequate sanitary conditions in street food venues (Hanashiro *et al.*, 2005).

1. **Inadequate Washing of Utensils and Cutlery:** The majority of street vendors use non-disposable plates, cups and cutlery for serving food. While some vendors change the washing-up and rinsing liquids twice in a day, others use the same liquids unchanged for the whole day. Use of the same set of cutlery (not properly cleaned after each use by different consumers) can result in cross-contamination and transmission of infectious diseases among unsuspecting consumers.
2. **Poor Food Preparation and Handling Practices:** Major contamination of street foods occurs at vending sites during cutting and chopping. For example, it is common for red meats (e.g., beef, mutton) and white meats (e.g., chicken, pork) to be cut and chopped with the same knife on the same cutting surface/board without cleaning in-between. Vendors often exchange knives without cleaning thereby increasing the chances of cross contamination. In some cases, vendors frequently re-use cooking oil and even for preparing different food types (fish, chips, mandazi and sausages). In addition, food preparation surfaces/boards are not washed regularly and thoroughly.
3. **Unsanitary and Open Vending Environments:** Street foods are prepared, vended and consumed in sites susceptible to cross-contamination and re-contamination from such pollutants as dust, exhaust discharges from vehicles and industrial engines, burning fumes, offensive smell from accumulated waste, effluents from industrial discharge, flies, rodents and even wild animals (cats, dogs, birds). Cooked foods are usually stored at ambient temperature in cupboards, plastic bowls, jugs and buckets and are often left in the open, uncovered and are exposed to contamination.
4. **Unsatisfactory Personal Hygiene:** Personal hygiene is not thoroughly and regularly observed, as many vendors do not cover their heads, handle money and food at the same time, do not wear coats over their clothes or overalls or aprons and, sometimes, handle food with their bare hands. It is speculated that many street food vendors are not aware of the necessary hygienic and sanitary practices.
5. **Lack of or Inadequate Sanitation Facilities:** Most vending sites commonly lack basic facilities such as toilets, hand-washing facilities, potable water, good drainage and waste disposal systems. Lack of such facilities increase the risk of incidence of food-borne illnesses and transmission of diseases.
6. **Limited Consumer Awareness and Public Education:** Convenience and economic factors are major reasons why most vendors do not implement their knowledge of food safety practices. Consumer attitudes and perception of hazards in street foods

is also largely influenced by their level of education, income, knowledge of food safety, age and gender, and exposure to information, amongst other considerations.

7. **Re-Use of Food Leftovers:** Some street food vendors use perishable food leftovers as raw materials for next day's preparation. Poorly stored and processed foods could result in considerable risk to unsuspecting consumers, because even when they feel unwell, they make not seek immediate medical attention.
8. **Other Inadequate Food Handling Practices:** Other key factors in street food contamination include: (i) poor conditions of storage of raw materials and finished products (exposure to dust, insects, pests, etc.); (ii) insufficient cleaning of ingredients and utensils before cooking, and of tableware used by customers; (iii) use of utensils (such as saucepans and containers) likely to release toxic or dangerous substances into the food; (iv) inappropriate handling of ingredients, of food during preparation and of finished products; and (v) prolonged keeping of prepared food at inappropriate temperatures.

4. Recommendations

Like it or not, street food vendors add colour and vibrancy to urban life. There is also no doubt that street food is important to the achievement of food and nutritional security in urban areas, especially for low-income consumers. Street vending provides employment to low-skilled workers who would otherwise remain underemployed or become a social burden. Street food vending can also supply a foundation stone for hawkers and street vendors to accumulate capital to invest in other businesses such as a regular shop. However, the informal and unregulated nature of street food production, sale and consumption creates considerable room for unwholesome activities which could pose serious hazards to the health and safety of the hawkers, vendors of cooked food and consumers of the street food (Alimi and Workneh, 2016; Cardoso et al., 2016). Therefore, mechanisms must be explored to incorporate street vendors in urban planning for purposes of better economic governance and inclusive urban management.

4.1 Policy and Legislative Interventions

The street food trade deserves recognition by national and county authorities in order to improve the opportunities of vendors to secure their livelihoods and to facilitate the availability of cheap, safe and nutritious food for low-income consumers. This will, in turn, help to feed the increasing number of working low-income populations with quality foods.

- a) **Policy and Legislative Recognition:** There is need for a thorough understanding of the motivating factors that brings both vendors and consumers to the table. Urban policy regimes and legislative approaches should incorporate the role of street foods in addressing the food and nutrition security of growing urban populations, food safety, regulatory vs. incentive-based approaches, hygienic and sanitary conditions, insecurity of street food vendors (especially women) and the need for coordinated institutional interventions.
- b) **Integrated Action Plans for the Street Food Sector:** As a constitutional requirement, public participation and active collaboration of all key stakeholders is necessary for the proper and organized functioning of the street food sector. This should address various nebulous challenges in the entire street food sector (e.g., food safety, inadequate sanitation, congestion, disturbances to human traffic, waste management, and environmental pollution).
- c) **Review of Public Health Guidelines for the Street Food Sector:** Public health and municipal authorities should match administrative interventions with the level of potential risk in the street food sector. Rigorous application of codes and enforcement of regulations is perhaps more suited to larger and permanent food service establishments (such as hotels and restaurants) and not the street food sector. In retrospect, rigorous and draconian application of codes and regulations may result in the disappearance of the street trade sector (or make it riskier) with consequent aggravation of hunger and malnutrition in urban areas. Engagement of professionals in food- and health-related disciplines to draw up guidelines for the management of street food practices would be important.

4.2 Provision of Requisite Public Infrastructure

- a) **Provision of Necessary Utilities:** Utilities necessary to creating an environment conducive to the provision of safe street food to consumers include running water, adequate lighting, public bathrooms, drainage and solid/water disposal and adequate security. These utilities improve the working environment of street vendors and the quality of the services that they provide. This will also provide a good setting for the relevant authorities to collect relevant and accurate information, provide education and training programmes for vendors and consumers.
- b) **School Programmes for Child Vendors:** It is important to promote a better future for child vendors by making appropriate interventions for their rehabilitation and schooling.

- c) **Innovative Food Storage and Selling Techniques:** More proactive measures such as identifying suitable sites for street food vending and developing innovative containers for holding and selling street food, including proper and suitable preservation materials, would improve and expand the street food trade.

4.3 Training and Public Education

Interventions are required that would significantly ameliorate the problems experienced in the trading and consumption of street food.

- a. **Training and Certification on Personal Hygiene:** Any food handlers who observe other forms of hygiene but not personal hygiene will definitely contaminate food. Training should be conducted for the street food vendors on various aspects of personal hygiene.
- b. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Raising the awareness on the risks of unwholesome practices in street food preparation and trading is recommended through the dissemination of information in the mass media and participatory audience programmes. These would involve the active participation of all major stakeholders in the street food trade, such as government agencies, street food vendors, consumer associations and civil society groups.
- c. **Capacity-Building and Empowerment:** Many street vendors operate under difficult conditions and have limited educational backgrounds. Provision of capacity-building and empowerment in areas such as financial, business advisory, healthcare, insurance, childcare and legal services will go a long way to improving their human capital and enhancing their productive contribution to economic development and social progress.
- d. **Promoting Self-Regulation and Traceability:** To maintain social harmony and promote inclusiveness, it is best to keep the management of street food trading as simple and realistic as possible (with, for example, simple registration processes). It is easier for vendors to govern and regulate themselves. For example, introduction of designated vending zones and vendor identification badges would help enhance traceability in cases of food poisoning. This has

happened in many other informal businesses such as meat and milk distribution, with substantial gains in marketing efficiency, reduction in potential health risks and traceability. To help street food vendors to change their behavior and practices, policy makers and enforcement agencies should understand that behaviour change is a gradual, long-term process of learning and building interpersonal relationships of trust and credibility.

- e. **Branding Street Food:** In many cities around the world (e.g., Accra, Bangkok, Durban, Kampala, Sao Paulo), consuming indigenous street foods is part of the visitor experience. Improving food safety and public hygiene would go a long way in making street food a matter of national pride and brand image. Both the government and private sector should seize the opportunity to mainstream the street food sector.

5. Conclusions

This policy brief has reviewed and highlighted the significance of street-vended foods as (i) a source of inexpensive, convenient and often nutritious food for the urban and rural poor; (ii) a source of attractive and varied food for tourists and the economically advantaged; (iii) a major source of income for a vast number of persons, particularly women; and (iv) a chance for self-employment and the opportunity to develop business skills with low capital investment.

The production and consumption of street foods is increasing in many urban areas due to easier accessibility, convenience and affordability. Like elsewhere in the world, street food contributes to food and nutritional security especially for low-income people in Kenya. However, there are policy and administrative challenges associated with street food including ensuring hygienic conditions and food safety.

There is a need for national and county authorities to institute appropriate and inclusive policies that will ensure that street food is safe, hygienic and wholesome for human consumption. This would include ensuring a safe and secure environment for trading, and enforcement of food safety. Strategies for improving the growth and functioning of the street food sector should consider: policy, regulation, registration and licenses; infrastructure, services and vending unit design and construction; training of food handlers; and capacity-building and education of consumers.

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