



Webinar Report

Exploring the Question of Street Food and Food Security in COVID-19



About SPRF

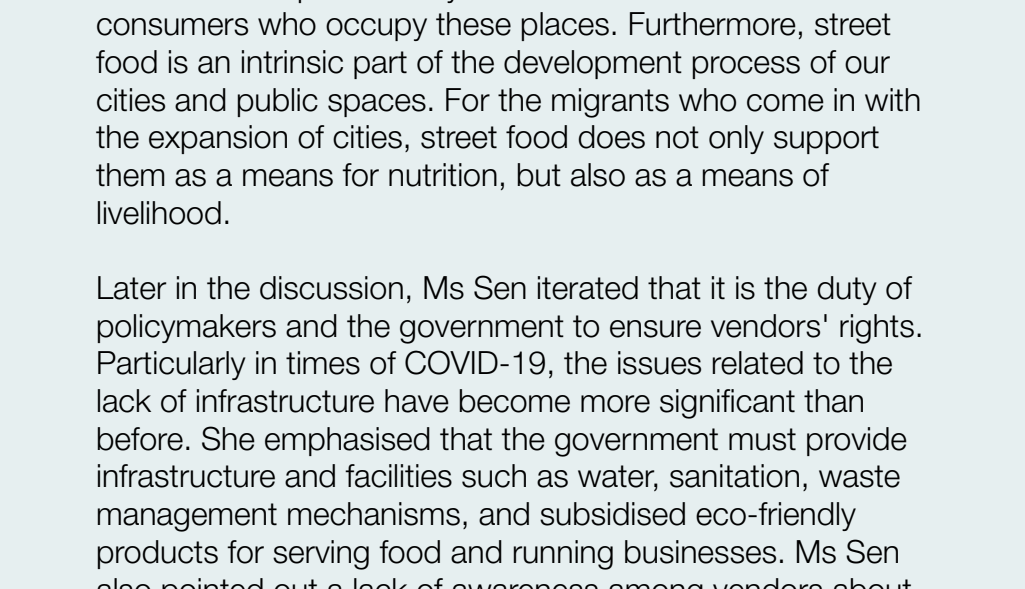
The Social and Political Research Foundation works to bring into focus evidence-based, non-partisan, and accessible policy research. As a young and dynamic think-tank, we work through our research, outreach, and events to deliberate and discuss the idea of an India where public policy is strengthened by fact and not steered by opinion. Our work uses technology and big data analytics to inform and influence India's ever-evolving policy landscape. The voices we create and curate in the democratic space reflect the aspirations of a country where more than half the population is under the age of 25.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goal 2 'Zero Hunger' aims at ending all forms of hunger and malnutrition by 2030. Hence, in tandem with the UN mandate, India has worked towards promoting sustainable agriculture, supporting small-scale farmers, and ensuring equal access to land, technology, and markets. While the union government has initiated schemes to aid the provision of ration under the Public Distribution System, the pandemic seems to have worsened the chasm between the urban rich and the urban poor vis-a-vis access to food and nutrition.

Street food has brought the urban poor and low-wage workers closer to food security. Given street food's wide range and easy availability in metropolitan settings, it serves a vital role in meeting the nutritional needs of the poor. Furthermore, for the urban poor, the street food industry is a significant source of employment. Since cooking is typically regarded as a "woman's profession" because of the gendered division of labour, the street food industry has the potential to be utilised as a weapon for their economic upliftment.

SPRF, through its first webinar, attempted to address the multiple cracks in India's food security framework by engaging more holistically with the urban street food sector. The webinar explored the etymology, economy, and sociology of street food, along with a possible place street food can hold in the policy ethos of food security.



From the Speakers



Ms. Pritha Sen

Food Researcher I
Development Consultant

Ms Pritha Sen is a noted food historian and development consultant. A culinary expert and former journalist, she writes regularly for national and international publications.

Ms Sen began by stating that one will find street food vendors wherever cities grow. This is because these vendors do not merely provide a space for recreation but also offer cheap and easily accessible nutrition for consumers who occupy these places. Furthermore, street food is an intrinsic part of the development process of our cities and public spaces. For the migrants who come in with the expansion of cities, street food does not only support them as a means for nutrition, but also as a means of livelihood.

Later in the discussion, Ms Sen iterated that it is the duty of policymakers and the government to ensure vendors' rights. Particularly in times of COVID-19, the issues related to the lack of infrastructure have become more significant than before. She emphasised that the government must provide infrastructure and facilities such as water, sanitation, waste management mechanisms, and subsidised eco-friendly products for serving food and running businesses. Ms Sen also pointed out a lack of awareness among vendors about the various existing policies and schemes. However, the burden of information dissemination is also on the government to ensure that the target population is able to avail these benefits.



Ms. Shweta Sharma

Doctoral Researcher at
University of Sheffield

Ms Shweta Sharma is a Doctoral Researcher at University of Sheffield and a former Assistant Professor at the School of Planning and Architecture. She has published extensive research on the theoretical and practical aspects of street vending in Delhi, Chennai, and Vijayawada.

Ms Sharma acknowledged the immense contribution of street food vendors in safeguarding urban food security. She echoed the sentiment that street food helps the poorer population meet their nutritional needs by providing a variety of choices. In addition, since the sector provides work to migrants, it also acts as a source of livelihood.

Ms Sharma discussed the infrastructural gap, poor hygiene, and mismanagement that the sector suffers from. She then pointed out that, in context of the pandemic, all such factors deterred consumers from buying street food, thereby crippling the street food economy. She also noted that the reverse-migration following the lockdowns led to huge losses for the vendors. Most prominent one was the loss of connection with the customer base that vendors had built over years.

Ms Sharma talked about several insightful findings from her own work on the gendered division of labour in the street food sector. She highlighted how there exist two categories of women in the sector. There are women who are pushed into the sector due to social and economic insecurity as a result of being in abusive household conditions. The second category of women, however, are not bound by the marital contract and might be widowed, divorced, or abandoned. Given such women's low levels of education, limited access to capital, and keeping in mind their socio-political standing, the street food sector is easiest to access.

Ms Sharma noted that literacy did not make a significant difference in women's choice in working in the street food sector but age as a parameter had more impact. Women below the age of 20 years, often negotiate with their families to allow them to go to school. In turn, they participate in the family food stall business. Nevertheless, women's agency to negotiate their participation in the family business was never transferred.

The government of India recently launched the PM Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi). Upon the host's question around the efficacy of such a scheme, Ms Sharma went back to the question on licensing and reasserted that unless the government comes up with ways to register more street food vendors, access to social security will be limited. In this context, she believes the town vending committees can play a crucial role in ensuring participation of stakeholders and providing guidelines to the government.



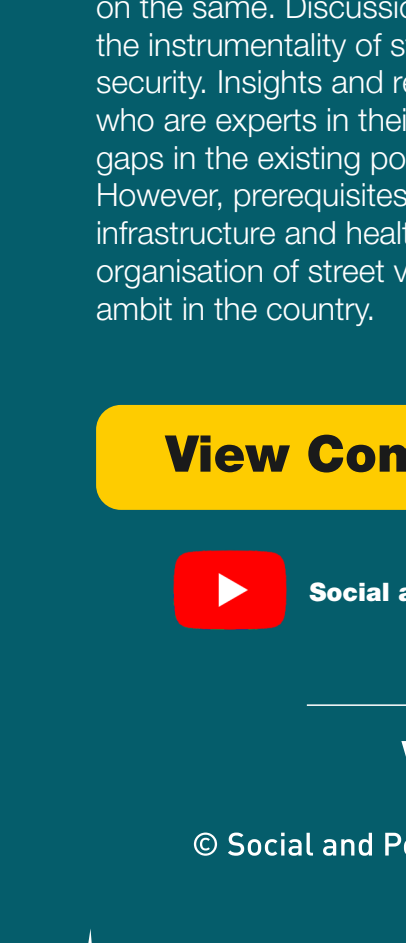
Dr. Kirit Patel

Associate Professor at
Menno Simons College,
The University of
Winnipeg

Dr. Kirit Patel is an Associate Professor at Menno Simons College, University of Winnipeg. His work focuses on the socio-cultural and ecological aspects of climate change on small-scale agriculture and indigenous communities in the Global South.

Dr. Patel called the issue of corruption and bribes critical. He pointed out that there exist bribes in both cash and kind. Another major problem, in his opinion, was the lack of agency among women. He added that in the ready-to-eat sector, even when women are not leading the businesses on the street, they work during the process of food preparation. However, despite their contribution, women are often disadvantaged due to the lack of access to education, banking, and finances. This exacerbates the gender divide in the sector.

Talking about safety and hygiene, Dr. Patel shared his experience at a training workshop at Vizag where vendors were educated about hygiene practices at a 5 star hotel. While talking to the attendees, he inferred that inability to afford measures of hygiene was a bigger problem than the lack of knowledge. Considering the heavy participation of vulnerable workers and women in the sector, Dr. Patel asserted that as we move ahead as a nation, we must address the issues of the street food sector.



Mr. Manjit Gill

Former Corporate Chef
at ITC Hotels I
Former President, IFCA

Mr Manjit Gill is a former corporate chef at ITC Hotels. He also served as the former President of Indian Federation of Culinary Associations (IFCA).

Mr Gill highlighted that the holistic idea of street food shows our culture and diversity and also takes care of food and nutritional security. He asserted that street food is not only for the poor but for everyone since it is often associated with memory. Therefore, it becomes important to understand cultural practices while discussing the issue of hygiene. We need to stop forcing western ideas of hygiene on our street food vendors. This is particularly important considering the burden of added cost on the vendors to maintain these western standards.

Mr Gill reiterated that food vendors are quite educated on how to properly utilise food and reduce waste. Furthermore, he put forth creative approaches to maintain hygiene using readily available products. For instance, lemon juice can be used as a sanitiser without imposing massive costs. Mr Gill mentioned that governments across countries are investing in street food, particularly for promoting tourism. There are several international conferences coming up on street food as well. Given the potential of the sector in representing a diverse food palette of India, it is important for us to hold on to our practices and promote them.

Conclusion

Throughout the discussion, various policy recommendations were made. These centred around infrastructure support, government schemes, and culture preservation. Some of these recommendations are listed below:

- Street vendors should be provided proper infrastructure. The administration must ensure facilities such as water, sanitation, drainage, access to washrooms, waste management mechanisms, and subsidised eco-friendly products for serving food.
- Street food represents our diversity and culture. Keeping that in mind, we must stop forcing western standards of hygiene on our street food vendors and promote cost effective and indigenous hygiene practices for the sustainable growth of the sector.
- There should be greater awareness about the existing schemes and policies. Civil Society Organisations and the government must ensure that the target population is able to avail existing social security benefits through proper dissemination of information.
- Moving forward, attempts should be made to include more street vendors under the ambit of the various existing policies and ensure proper social security.

Having closely looked at the microcosm that is the street food sector, it becomes apparent that the sector holds much potential to help navigate the urban population towards food security. The webinar set upon itself the aim of addressing the lacuna in research on food security. It probed into the economy of street food and the impact of Covid-19 on the same. Discussions by the panelists brought to light the instrumentality of street food in achieving urban food security. Insights and recommendations from the speakers, who are experts in their own fields, can be used to fill in the gaps in the existing policy frameworks for food security. However, prerequisites to that are provision of better infrastructure and health facilities to the vendor as well as organisation of street vendors into the larger policy making ambit in the country.

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