

Research Report for the India China Institute

Analyzing Food Access in Cities of the Global South: Learning from Indian Research

by Belen Fodde, PhD Candidate in Public and Urban Policy, The New School

Introduction

Cities in the Global South face a wide variety of common challenges like poverty, inequality, and informality. Food security, or the sustained access to healthy food, is one of them. India and Argentina are examples of developing countries whose production and export of food products have significant relevance in global supply, while also maintaining strong social protection systems and welfare programs. However, their cities share the challenge of guaranteeing equitable access to food for their urban population.

As a PhD candidate in Public and Urban Policy, I am researching the impact that food governance – through its several actors and programs – has on food security levels for low-income households living in an informal settlement in Buenos Aires, Argentina. To learn from Indian research strategies and findings to enrich my analysis as well as improve my methods, I aimed at exploring the question of how food is accessed and governed in Indian cities, focusing on the realities of low-income, working-class households. To answer this, I had the opportunity to visit several urban areas and to share experiences with Indian researchers working on the ground.

Food Governance and Food Security

Food security is defined as “access to nutritious and sufficient food for all”¹ and is considered a human right, a determinant of health and one of the main challenges facing urban governance in this century. Sustained access to healthy and affordable food does not depend only on the production of food, but also on its governance, considering that food governance “encompass(es)

¹ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO. 2019. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019. Safeguarding against economic slowdowns and downturns. Rome: FAO.

the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities”² related to food. As part of my dissertation research, and in relation to my research work in India, I focused on the idea that to ensure food security there is a need to measure its levels, while understanding how different governance actors involved in the distribution of food interact and operate. In the case of low-income households, frequently living in informal or underserved areas of cities, the reliance on non-governmental actors or the private sector is very relevant to ensure access to food. This is the case with social and political organizations, for example. Because of the experience with my research, I was looking forward to exploring the mechanisms and the actors involved in the distribution of food to low-income, working-class households in Indian cities.

Research in India

I visited India for a period of five weeks between July and August 2023. In Bangalore and Delhi, I met with researchers from the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) working on food security, governance, informal economy, and peri-urban agriculture and sustainability. I shared some of the findings of my dissertation fieldwork, mainly related to the survey conducted applying the Food Insecurity Experiential Survey (FIES) questionnaire as well as my analysis of government and non-state actors’ food assistance before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The FIES questionnaire had been previously conducted by the IIHS research team in neighborhoods of Bangalore as part of the Hungry Cities Partnership initiative.³ Sharing experiences with the researchers in charge was significant to reflect on the analytical categories I used, as well as to receive feedback and suggestions on strategies to improve the understanding of the data. For example, they suggested I try to interpret findings while working with the research assistants who helped me collect the data. Besides sharing their research on food security, I was also introduced to research done on informal food vending, which shares

² UN Food Systems Summit 2021. 2021. Food Systems – Definition, Concept and Application for the UN Food Systems Summit. UN Food Systems Summit. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/food_systems_concept_paper_scientific_group_-_draft_oct_26.pdf.

³ Anand, S., K. Jagadeesh, C. Adelina, and J. Koduganti. 2019. "Urban food insecurity and its determinants: a baseline study of Bengaluru." *Environment & Urbanization* 31 (2): 421-442.

aspects with my research in terms of products sold and the location and labor conditions of vendors.⁴

In addition, IIHS analysis of state and non-state actors' assistance during the pandemic had significant similarities with my findings in Buenos Aires, which shows that urban dynamics in the Global South are comparable, while preserving their unique characteristics. While in Delhi, my discussions were mostly related to the support provided during the COVID-19 pandemic which, in India, impacted both public health and migration patterns. I was introduced to compelling research developed by the IIHS team analyzing the assistance provided by state and non-state actors. With regard to the state, they focused on the analysis of the social protection relief provided,⁵ particularly in relation to food, cash transfers, and labor protection. This required studying the eligibility of beneficiaries and the criteria utilized to identify them, a topic very much related to my research mainly because a lot of databases used to define social policy are outdated, inaccurate, or do not match with the criteria defined for this purpose. In relation to this, they also focused on the impact that the Public Distribution System (PDS) had during the pandemic, and how this exposed the limitations of vulnerability and poverty assessments. In particular, they shared the research they developed in relation to the existent gap in the beneficiaries' identification with me, and that was identified by the assistance requested during the pandemic through the issuance of e-coupons.⁶

As part of this research, the IIHS team also analyzed the assistance provided by non-state actors such as civic organizations and unions in relation to food, travel, health and housing. Particularly, these actors focused on including or providing assistance to people in need that were not considered by government programs or the PDS.⁷ Besides these findings, I could also see some of the work done by non-state actors such as temples and churches in the distribution of

⁴ Shankar Honasoge, K., K. Jagadeesh, V. Kalloor, and S. Anand. 2020. Inclusive growth and the informal food sector in Bangalore, India. Cape Town and Waterloo: Hungry Cities Partnership.
Anand, S., and K. Jagadeesh. 2022. "Neighborhoods and their impacts on the informal food economy of Bengaluru." *Cities* 126: 1-5.

⁵ Bhan, G; Chowdhury, A; Margosa, N; Sampat, K and Sohane, N. 2020. Lessons for Social Protection from the COVID-19 Lockdowns Report 1 of 2: State Relief. Indian Institute for Human Settlements: Bengaluru/Delhi. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24943/LSPCL11.2020>

⁶ Bhan, G., H. Chakraborty, and Parushya. 2022. "Spatialising Urban Vulnerability Perspectives from COVID-19 Food Relief in Delhi." *Perspectives* 57 (29): 35-41.

⁷ Bhan, G; Dsouza, P; Gajjar, H; Margosa, N; Mehra, R; Krishna Priya and, Sai Rashmi, C. 2022. Lessons for Social Protection from the COVID-19 Lockdowns. Report 2 of 2: Non-State Actors. Indian Institute for Human Settlements: Bengaluru/Delhi. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24943/LSPCL07.2022>

food, as in the case of the Iskcon temple in Bangalore. All in all, the research developed by IIHS helped me as well to find and reflect on other academic papers assessing the PDS and its main challenges such as poor targeting and the effects of having the ration card linked to the beneficiaries' residence.⁸

Besides the sharing of research, I was able to join an IIHS researcher on a visit to a village in Delhi called Old Village Usmanpur. This community was severely affected by the floods that took place in July 2023, when many families lost belongings and even their animals. Assistance from the government has been notoriously poor, and IIHS is working on collecting data that can show the needs as well as the assistance provided to this community. In this context, I had the opportunity of being part of a data collection day while visiting the village. I could find a lot of similarities with previous research projects I've participated in, as well as with the data collection process during my dissertation fieldwork.

In addition, I also had the opportunity to visit the IIHS Kengeri Campus during my stay in Bangalore. Currently under construction, the campus will host IIHS activities and academic programs. The visit allowed me to see the initiatives that the IIHS team is developing, particularly in relation to sustainability. The extensive campus hosts buildings and plots where activities related to the growth of crops and food, composting, lab testing, testing of fertilizers, among others, take place. Even though my research doesn't focus specifically on food production or sustainability in itself, this initiative also allowed me to think about the governance of these spaces. IIHS works closely with the community surrounding the campus to share their developments and research findings – for example, with small farmers in Kengeri, as well as their composting program. As an academic and practitioner from the Global South, I am very interested in policies that tackle adaptation and sustainability from its governance perspective, and having the IIHS campus as a laboratory where to test and learn to then share findings is something I find very admirable and promising.

Finally, while in Mumbai I had a meeting with Vinodkumar Rao, researcher from SPARC (Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers), an organization that works with the urban poor to address challenges such as evictions and access to housing. Some of the challenges faced

⁸ George, N., and F. McKay. 2019. "The Public Distribution System and Food Security." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14: 1-14.

by Indian slum dwellers are very similar to the ones encountered by the communities I work with, particularly in relation to public health and the impact that limited income has on food acquisition, and that is why learning from the projects they work on enriches my own research.

Contribution to research and literature

Beyond the previously stated contributions to my research, the exchange with Indian researchers and my visit helped me rethink and reshape some aspects of my current research project. While discussing my experience conducting the FIES survey, I reconfirmed the relevance of reflecting on the way of measuring food security in informal areas of the Global South. This means that this should go beyond applying and conducting standardized surveys. Research like this should also include a qualitative approach to understand what motivates people's purchases and their experiences with government programs and assistance from non-state actors. It is my hope that after having my own research experience and sharing with other researchers involved in the collection of this type of data, my work will contribute to a discussion about how these data should be collected and how results should be interpreted in different developing countries and their cities.

This experience gave me the opportunity as well to explore similarities between Argentina and India, as examples of urban areas of the Global South. Research and exchange with Indian researchers gave me the opportunity to have a better understanding of government programs of food assistance and distribution and use that knowledge to reflect on the programs that are implemented in my country. For example, programs as the Indira Canteens in the state of Karnataka do not exist in the same way in the context my research focuses on, and they can be a plausible policy recommendation to include. Some other programs, such as Hopcoms, exist in a similar capacity, but the details of these initiatives are always helpful to learn from. Knowing about programs being implemented in other countries and cities is extremely relevant and it was one of the highlights from my research and my visit to India as my dissertation project aims at diagnosing the level of food insecurity and identifying the actors and policies involved in food distribution, while making solid and feasible policy recommendations that could be implemented to improve the current state of food access. Having more information about these types of programs, as well as the functioning of the Public Distribution System, was very significant.

All the knowledge and first-hand experience I had were extremely significant when trying to respond to my original research question. While this was a broad inquiry, my experiences allowed me to see some of the spaces where people can access food at affordable prices, while getting information about the functioning of government and non-state interventions on food assistance.

General balance of the fellowship and conclusion

The ICI research award gave me the opportunity to have first-hand experience with Indian urban dynamics, getting to see how cities in one of the most populated countries in the world function and distribute resources. It allowed me to connect with researchers interested in the experiences of other Global South cities in relation to governance, food access, informality, and economic activities, which resulted in significant contributions to the methodology and findings from my dissertation research. Learning from their experiences was one of the highlights of my trip, and I hope those learnings can contribute to a meaningful analysis.