

THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTHY AND HYGIENIC FOOD STREETS IN INDIA

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KEY MESSAGES

- India's vibrant street food scene is an important economic and cultural phenomenon, but improving and maintaining food safety at the street level poses major challenges.
- Critical health and hygiene issues faced by India's street food vendors are being addressed through the national Healthy and Hygienic Food Streets (HHFS) programme, planned for roll-out in 100 locations across the country.
- The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) supports this movement and is investigating ways to help expand the sustainability and impact of the HHFS programme.



INTRODUCTION

Access to safe, nutritious food is crucial for health. Unsafe food exacerbates malnutrition and illness, especially impacting vulnerable populations.



Globally, unsafe food leads to an estimated **600 million** illnesses and **420,000** deaths a year¹.



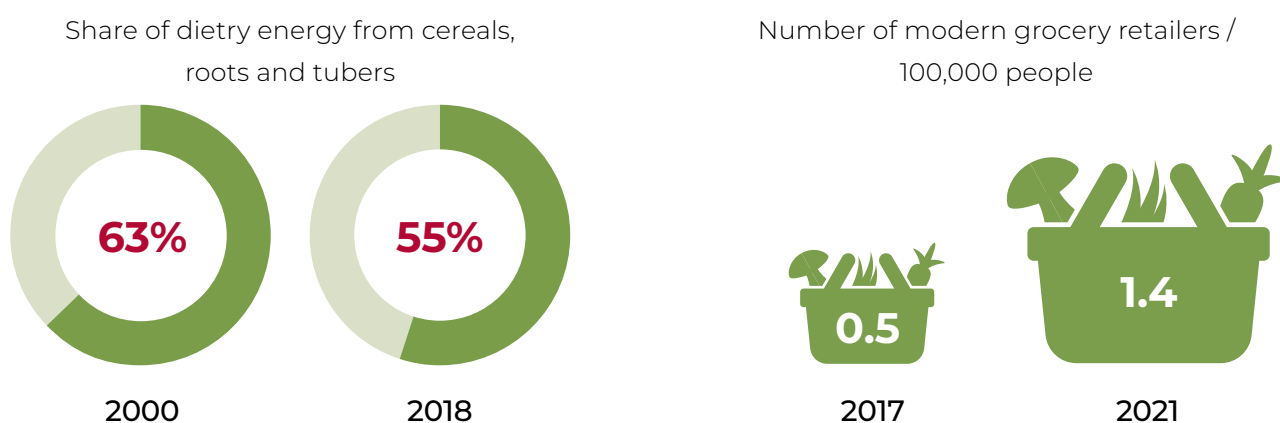
The food-based disease burden in India is conservatively assessed at about **100 million** cases annually, or **one in 12** people falling ill².



Rapid economic growth, rising incomes, and urbanization have heightened demand for diverse and safe food options across India (e.g. **Figure 1**). Practical challenges of reducing risks posed by unsafe food include poor hygiene, inadequate regulations, high production volumes, and the scale of demand. With a population exceeding 1.42 billion and a rich and varied culinary heritage, ensuring food quality for all can be a daunting task. It is the role of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to help meet the population's food safety needs, but people's confidence in the government's ability to ensure safe food, while relatively average for the region (**Figure 2**), could be higher.

This brief describes a Government of India initiative – the Healthy and Hygienic Food Streets (HHFS) programme that aims to make the country's street food safer. It shares some of GAIN's recent contributions to these efforts and provides some implications for national and state government to consider.

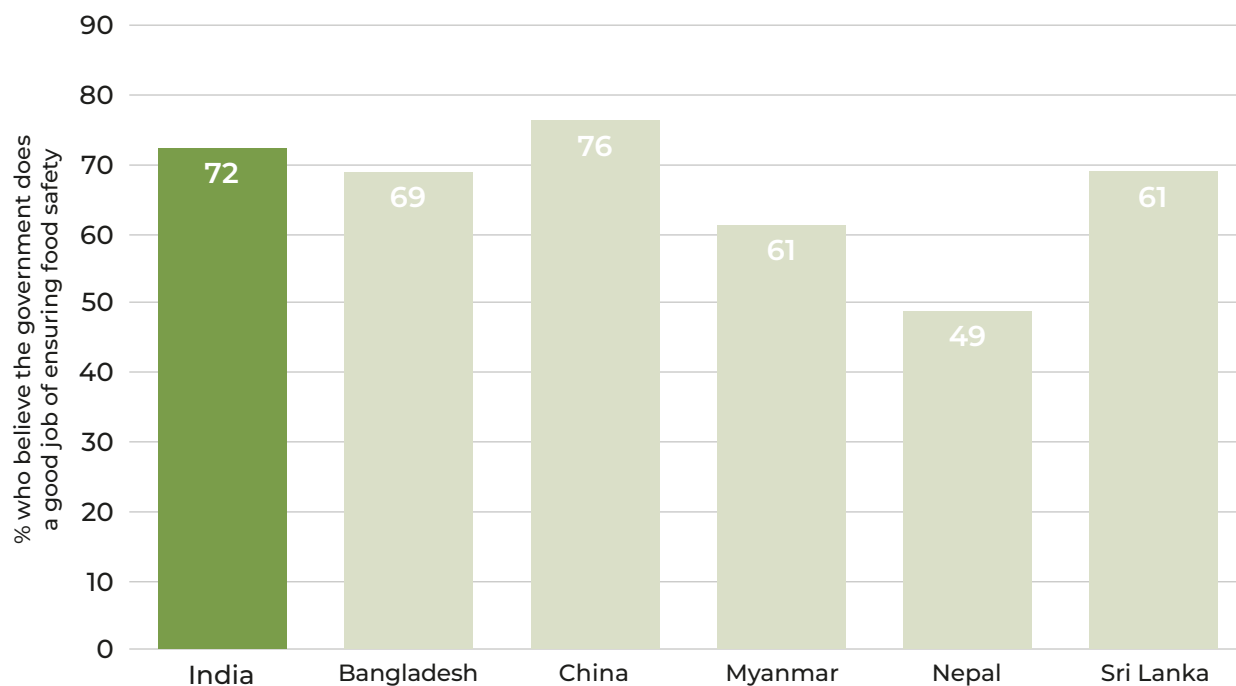
Figure 1: India's rapidly changing food environments



1 World Health Organisation. Food Safety Key Facts. 2022 <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/food-safety>

2 Smeets Kristkova, Z., Grace, D., & Kuiper, M. (2017). The economics of food safety in India : a rapid assessment. Wageningen University & Research. <https://edepot.wur.nl/431795>

Figure 2: People's confidence in government handling of food safety: India and five neighbouring countries



STREET FOOD IN INDIA

The safety of street food is an important component of the India's overall food safety challenge. Indian street food vendors are a vital source of employment, with around 1.2 million households depending on this sector. They employ approximately 6 million people in major cities and cater to a significant portion of urban India's food needs, selling both cooked meals and fresh produce³.

Despite their substantial contributions to culture and the economy, vendors face numerous challenges including difficulties maintaining food hygiene, lack of government protection of street vendors, and instability in employment. Even if knowledge of proper food hygiene behaviours exist, food hygiene cannot always be practiced due to the absence of basic facilities, such as clean water, toilets, and waste disposal facilities. Additionally, street vendors tend to be forced to set up in public spaces, which can cause traffic congestion among issues of hygiene and waste disposal. Street vendors constitute a vulnerable population in the sense that they are not protected by government, NGOs or many Membership Based Organisations such as trade unions, cooperatives, workers' committees, savings and credit groups like Self Help Groups (SHGs), and producer groups). Vendors can form unions or local associations to sustain their economic activities. These organizations primarily negotiate with local authorities, including municipal officials and police, to protect vendors from threats. There remains, however, an insufficient number of unions or associations, and some that do exist are inactive.

Street vending is characterised by insecure and irregular employment, driven by for example seasonality or financial and other constraints facing micro-enterprises. Frequently classed as self-employed workers in the informal sector, street vendors operate in tough competition, with financial struggles exacerbated by fluctuations in market prices and sales, and their incomes tend to be low⁴.

³ National Association of Street Vendors of India NASVI, 2021. Indian Street Vendor Market : The Sunrise Sector of Food Tech. Online at: <https://nasvinet.org/indian-street-vendor-market-the-sunrise-sector-of-food-tech/>

⁴ See for example: Saha, Debdulal. (2010). Collective Bargaining for Street Vendors in Mumbai: Toward Promotion of Social Dialogue. *Journal of Workplace Rights*. 15. 445-460. 10.2190/WR.15.3-4.n. and Jaishankar, V., and L. Sujatha, 2016. A Study on Problems Faced by the Street Vendors in Tiruchirappalli City. *SSRG International Journal of Economics and Management Studies (SSRG - IJEMS)* – Volume 3 Issue 9 Sep 2016. Online at: <https://www.internationaljournalssrg.org/IJEMS/2016/Volume3-Issue9/IJEMS-V3I5P119.pdf>

The many faces of street food

Indian street food is a vivid reflection of the country's diverse cultural heritage, with each region boasting its own specialties influenced by local traditions and ingredients. From the spicy flavours of North Indian Street food to the delicate dishes of South India, street food showcases India's rich culinary tapestry. Street food in India is about much more than taste: it's a cultural phenomenon. With millions of people consuming it daily, it's a cornerstone of everyday meals, especially for the urban poor and migrants³. Several purposes of street food are catalogued in **Figure 3**.

Figure 3: Five key functions of street food in India



HEALTHY AND HYGIENIC FOOD STREETS (HHFS) INITIATIVE TO HELP TACKLE CHALLENGES OF UNSAFE FOOD

Aware of the importance of street food, culturally, economically, and in recognition of its potential to be made safer, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) in collaboration with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), has requested States and Union Territories (UTs) to modernise existing food streets in 100 districts across the country. This initiative is being taken up as a pilot project to create examples of good food safety and hygiene practice in street food markets.

“Healthy and Hygienic Food Streets” in India refer to designated areas or streets where food vendors, stalls, or eateries offer a wide variety of wholesome and safe food options. They focus on providing food items that are prepared and served in a manner that adheres to high standards of hygiene, ensuring the safety and well-being of the consumers.



Initiatives like the Healthy and Hygienic Food Streets initiative not only promote food culture but also increase local food consumption, highlight traditional values, and boost tourism. By emphasizing food safety, these initiatives can bring about behavioural change, raising awareness of health issues and reducing instances of foodborne illnesses in communities⁶.

Role of GAIN in supporting this critical food safety initiative

GAIN is a key technical partner for the HHFS project, undertaking a Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) role. Major contributions of GAIN up to the first half of 2024 include:

1. HHFS toolkit developed to guide all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the initiative. The toolkit has been shared with relevant government actors in all States and Union Territories (UTs) across India.
2. Tools for M&E have been developed. Using these tools, interviews with government officials of National Health Mission (NHM), Municipal Corporation (MC) and Food Safety Officers (FSOs) are underway in selected states.
3. HHFS locations have been visited to assess their conditions before and after the programme interventions. Vendors at these hubs are being informally interviewed about the awareness of HHFS work and ongoing changes in the current street food.

A report will be developed in the first quarter of 2025 that analyses the qualitative data from the interviews conducted with various stakeholders including documentation of the learnings, best practices, challenges, and way forward for the programme. Data has been collected from HHFS in six locations across five cities and three states⁵. The process is ongoing in eight further states/UTs.

Figure 4 shares examples of some of the locations being monitored.

⁵ In **Madhya Pradesh** (Shahpura HHFS in the city of Bhopal, and Mahaakal HHFS in the city of Ujjain); in **Odisha** (two HHFSs in the city of Khorda, one HHFS in the city of Cuttack); and in **Tripura** (Ujjyanta Palace HHFS in the city of Agartala).

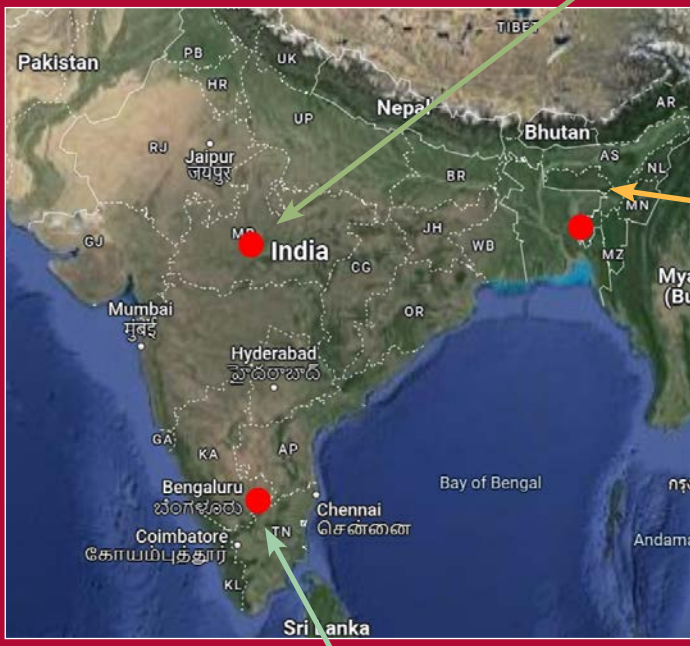
⁶ **Bangalore** and **Chennai** in the South; **Gujarat**, **Mumbai**, **Goa**, and **Daman & Diu** in the West; and **Uttar Pradesh** in the North.



Figure 4: Examples of Healthy and Hygienic Food Streets



Shahpura in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh (August 2023)



Anekal urban district, in Bangalore (October 2023)

Every vendor GAIN visited in this district was wearing gloves and head gear. Temporary hand-washing stations had also been installed.



Ujjayanta in Agartala, Tripura (January 2024)

One of the unique features noted in Tripura was the covered food cart. Most of the existing vendors had their food carts covered with glass at all sides, to protect food from dust, flies, and other contaminants. There was a small window through which food was being served to the customers, avoiding direct contact between vendors and customers.



Source: Google Maps and GAIN Staff, photos taken in 2023 and 2024

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While it is early in the process to comment on the formal M&E assessment, useful observations can be made about this ongoing pilot project. The HHFS programme has already created examples of how to improve hygiene and safe food practices in street settings, for example, through appropriate use of personal protective equipment, installation of handwashing facilities, and design of food carts. It already seems clear that replication of the HHFS model elsewhere within participating and non-participating states should be a feature of medium-term plans to improve street food safety across India.

After the successful launch of HHSF in 100 cities, expected in the first quarter of 2025, GAIN will be sharing a report including in-depth recommendations to government agencies seeking to scale up and improve the sustainability of this intervention across the country.

This report will discuss recommendations including how to improve coordination between different government departments involved in the process, how to publicise the improved food streets, and how to reconsider the budget required to fully implement the vision of HHFS.

On the sustainability side, it may be necessary to give periodic refreshers of the Food Safety Training and Certification (FoSTaC) being offered to street food vendors at the state level, both to remind people who have already been trained, and to train new vendors as they become established. It is also already evident that displaying information materials translated into the local language on fortification, maintaining health and hygiene, avoiding use of plastic, garbage disposal, etc would be worthwhile at each food street hub. Finally, digitization efforts could provide stability, especially during crises like the pandemic, while driving substantial gains for both vendors and the wider food-tech sector⁵.

CONCLUSION

The HHFS has so far shown to be a promising initiative. GAIN continues to work with government partners in support of its important goals. While progress is ongoing, it is clear that further reforms may be necessary to unlock the full potential of India's healthy food streets. Organizing, educating, and dignifying street vendors is essential for their development and wellbeing. Such work could also catalyse significant growth in the food-tech industry.

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