

3.3.5 The Food System of Dhaka Between Global Trends and Local Dynamics

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Food is a basic human need, but megacities research has hardly touched upon it, as a functioning food system is largely taken for granted. The projects 'The mega-urban food system of Dhaka' and 'Multiple modernities in the megacity: Economic and spatial restructuring of food markets' recognised that economic globalisation, environmental change, rural-urban migration, and political ruptures are the main drivers that shape the contemporary structures of Dhaka's food system. This chapter focuses on the role of wholesale traders and street vendors in the urban food system, on the food security of the urban poor, and on the transformation of food shopping practices through emerging supermarkets.

Dhaka's food bazaars play a crucial role for the mega-urban food system. 4,400 food wholesale traders run their businesses in 87 food wholesale markets (in 2010) in Dhaka City (DCC). They supply more than 9,000 tons of food daily – an achievement that is regularly put at risk. Producers are hindered in delivering goods due to harvest losses, freight is damaged during transportation, or delivery is delayed due to traffic jams and accidents. Food traders need to be prepared for such instances. Their business networks were found to be of special importance in this context. Fish traders, for instance, are typically engaged in a relationship of mutual dependency with their suppliers. Each season, the suppliers obtain loans from Dhaka's wholesalers. In turn, the suppliers provide the wholesalers with deliveries which are only paid for after the goods are sold. This constellation leads to the emergence of strong personal relationships that imply mutual moral commitments between the businessmen in times of crisis. The suppliers provide fresh food to 'their' wholesalers on as many days as possible, while the wholesale traders in Dhaka take fish from 'their' suppliers

even if they could make a more lucrative deal with others. This moral economy, one can summarise, is the key to the stability of Dhaka's contemporary food provision system (Keck et al. 2012, Keck 2012, Keck/Etzold 2013, Keck 2016).

Food is not only sold in markets, but also on Dhaka's streets, on footpaths, at transport nodes and on every other corner. Almost 100,000 vendors sell rice dishes, light snacks, fruits, beverages or other prepared food items. Because it is cheap, readily available and nutritious, every second person buys some street food every day. The urban poor particularly rely on it. Street food vending is thus a significant element of the food system and contributes crucially to urban food security. In the eyes of the law enforcing agencies, however, the vendors' encroachment of public space is illegal. The authorities and urban elites see it as obsolete, unhygienic, disorderly, and 'in the way'. The vendors are therefore regularly evicted from the vending sites. Nonetheless, at most places in the megacity, street vendors are tolerated. This situation poses a dilemma that lies at the heart of the 'everyday politics' of street food. On the one hand, hawkers appropriate public



Fruit market in Dhaka

Photo: Frauke Kraas

space illegally, which calls for state action and their eviction. On the other hand, street vending is tolerated because the hawkers are protected by local 'patrons' and the informal rules that govern the street. Manoeuvring through delicate local governance regimes, street vendors actively take their 'right to the city' in order to feed the city and to sustain their livelihoods (Etzold et al. 2009, Etzold 2013, 2014a, 2014b, Keck/Etzold 2013).

The megacity of Dhaka is well supplied with food, as the availability of the two staples of rice and fish is clearly above the national average. Food security, however, is far from being guaranteed for vulnerable population groups. More than a quarter of Dhaka's population still lives in a situation of severe poverty and undernourishment. The poor struggle for livelihoods and food security on a daily basis. During times of crisis, such as the global food price hike in 2008/09, the urban poor's coping and adaptive capacities are stretched to the very limits. Given the malfunctioning of public food security schemes, in particular in urban areas, it is questionable whether the government gives them adequate support in order to enhance their resilience, or

whether it refuses to do so (Bohle et al. 2009, Zingel et al. 2011, Keck/Etzold 2013).

In recent years, Bangladesh entered the supermarket era, when the first 'modern' retail outlet opened in Dhaka in 2000. Since then, there has been remarkable growth in this sector. Nevertheless, a comparably small customer base, the lack of skilled workforce on the management level and inappropriate structural policies (e.g. on the import of food and machinery) pose significant challenges for further expansion. The Bangladesh Supermarket Owners' Association (BSOA) tries to overcome these obstacles by lobbying government and authorities and by involving the media to create a positive image of supermarkets. At present, the impact of supermarkets on Dhaka's food system is still marginal. So far, their estimated market share in food retail is under five percent – a share too small to encourage 'kitchen market' vendors to adapt to or even to resist the new food players. Competition occurs only with regard to high-income customers and some staples, where supermarkets have an advantage due to economies of scale in procurement. Consequently, kitchen markets and supermarkets co-exist. The further



Landing of vegetables in Dhaka

Photo: Harald Sterly

expansion of supermarkets and their impact on 'traditional' food system actors will depend on the owners' success in overcoming current obstacles. As in many developing countries, 'supermarketisation' might speed up significantly as soon as more powerful transnational supermarket chains enter the market (Hobelsberger 2013).

Supermarkets have started to transform food shopping practices in Dhaka, in particular those of middle-class women. Qualitative interviews showed that the major motive of women during food shopping was their concern to reduce the risk of ill-health of their family members, and to promote their good health by purchasing safe and nutritious food. Supermarket owners seek to exploit this rationale and advocate a public discourse that divides Dhaka's food retail into a dual system of 'traditional' bazaars and 'modern' superstores. While bazaars are portrayed as chaotic, insecure, dirty and pathogenic sites, supermarkets are presented as the remedy to a food system that is considered to be in severe crisis. This narrative has its consequences. Interviewees stated that a hygienic environment

and proper handling are not the only things that matter in terms of keeping food fresh and clean. Of similar importance from the perspective of the women interviewed is to keep the masses of workers and street people, the uneducated and the poor away. By shopping in supermarkets, the urban middle class thus demarcates a clear-cut boundary between themselves and lower income groups. While bazaars are classically places of variety and encounter, Dhaka's supermarkets are becoming exclusive locations that further boost Dhaka's fragmentation (Keck 2015a, Keck 2015b).

Bangladesh's food system is the second biggest field of employment after the ready-made garments industry. Approximately 1.9 million people work in the production, processing, trade, transport and preparation of food in Dhaka and its immediate peri-urban space (in 2010). While supermarkets have been a major focal point in research and policy in recent years, traditional domestic supply chains widely lack this attention. Given the fact that 95 per cent of Dhaka's consumers get their food through traditional channels, this imbalance in the literature clearly calls for readjustment (Etzold 2013, Keck 2016).

