

Food Insecurity and Livelihood Vulnerability in Informal Urban Settlements: A Review

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Abstract

Rapid urbanization in developing countries has reshaped the geography of poverty and hunger. Informal urban settlements, commonly referred to as slums, have become critical sites of livelihood vulnerability where households depend almost entirely on market purchases for food. This paper reviews the relationship between food insecurity and livelihood precarity in informal urban settlements with reference to India. Drawing upon global food security assessments, the High-Level Panel of Experts report on urban food systems, and empirical research conducted in Indian slums, the study argues that urban food insecurity is primarily a problem of economic access rather than food availability. Irregular employment, unstable income, high living costs, absence of productive assets and exclusion from welfare systems significantly constrain dietary access and quality. Evidence from Indian cities shows high prevalence of food insecurity, compromised dietary diversity and widespread child malnutrition among slum populations. Women and adolescents are particularly vulnerable due to gendered access to resources and caregiving responsibilities. The paper further shows that nutrition programmes and subsidized food distribution improve access but remain limited by settlement informality and administrative exclusion. It concludes that food insecurity in slums reflects structural inequality embedded in urban labour markets and governance systems. Addressing the problem requires strengthening livelihood security, social protection, and institutional inclusion rather than focusing solely on food production.

Keywords

Urban food insecurity; informal settlements; livelihood vulnerability; urban poverty; nutrition; malnutrition; slums

Introduction

Urbanization has long been considered synonymous with modernization and improved living standards. However, contemporary research increasingly demonstrates that urban growth in developing countries has not eliminated poverty but has redistributed it spatially. Instead of rural concentration, poverty now appears in dense informal settlements located within cities. These settlements emerge because migrants move to urban centres in search of employment but lack access to affordable housing and basic services.

Food insecurity, historically associated with rural scarcity, is therefore becoming an urban issue. Global food security assessments emphasize that hunger is primarily driven by poverty and inequality rather than inadequate food production (FAO et al., 2020). Even when food is

available in urban markets, households without purchasing power cannot access adequate diets. The High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security similarly stresses that urban food systems must be understood through social and economic processes that shape access rather than mere availability (HLPE, 2020).

In India, rapid urbanization has been accompanied by the proliferation of slums. These settlements are characterized by insecure tenure, overcrowded housing, inadequate sanitation and irregular employment. Slum households rely on purchased food because they lack agricultural land or storage capacity. As a result, food access fluctuates with income stability. Urban food insecurity thus reflects a livelihood crisis rather than a production shortage.

This paper reviews the relationship between food insecurity and livelihood vulnerability in informal urban settlements, focusing particularly on India. It argues that hunger in slums is a structural outcome of precarious labour markets, rising living costs and institutional exclusion.

1. Urban Poverty and the Changing Geography of Hunger

The concept of food security refers to a condition in which all people have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food necessary for an active and healthy life. While the definition incorporates both availability and access, the balance between these dimensions varies across contexts. In rural areas, food insecurity is often linked to agricultural production, climatic variability and land access. In urban settings, however, the economic dimension becomes decisive because households depend almost entirely on purchased food. Urbanization therefore fundamentally alters the nature of food insecurity. Even when markets are well supplied, food security depends on purchasing power rather than proximity to food sources.

Global assessments reinforce this shift. The Food and Agriculture Organization reports that hundreds of millions of people worldwide remain undernourished despite adequate global food production (FAO et al., 2020). The persistence of hunger in conditions of sufficient supply demonstrates that poverty and inequality, rather than food shortages, are the principal constraints on access to adequate diets. Urban residents often live near shops, markets and food vendors, yet low and irregular incomes prevent them from acquiring nutritious food. Consequently, food insecurity in cities reflects economic exclusion rather than physical scarcity.

Urban poverty is concentrated in informal settlements that have expanded alongside rapid urban growth. These settlements frequently lack secure housing, sanitation, water services and formal recognition by municipal authorities. Because of their informal status, residents often remain outside welfare systems and social protection programmes. The High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security notes that urban food insecurity is closely linked to income inequality, insecure employment and inadequate social protection rather than agricultural productivity (HLPE, 2020). Livelihood instability thus becomes a central determinant of access to food.

In India, census-based and public health research consistently shows that slum populations experience poorer living conditions and higher vulnerability than non-slum residents. Although

cities contain abundant food markets, spatial proximity does not ensure access because consumption depends on household income. The growth of informal settlements has therefore transformed the spatial distribution of deprivation. Poverty is no longer confined to rural regions but embedded within urban economies. As a result, the urbanization of poverty has produced a corresponding urbanization of hunger, where food insecurity persists not because food is unavailable but because significant sections of the population lack the economic means to obtain it.

FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO. (2020). *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020: Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE). (2020). *Food security and nutrition: Building a global narrative towards 2030 – Strengthening urban and peri-urban food systems to achieve food security and nutrition*. Rome: Committee on World Food Security.

2. Livelihoods and Economic Access to Food

Food insecurity in slums is fundamentally linked to livelihoods and patterns of income generation. Unlike rural households, which may cultivate crops, rear livestock or store grain for future consumption, residents of informal urban settlements depend almost entirely on cash income to purchase food. Their access to food is therefore mediated by labour markets rather than agricultural production. Most slum households buy food in small quantities on a daily basis because they lack both storage space and financial capacity for bulk purchases. As a result, food consumption fluctuates closely with employment opportunities, and even minor changes in earnings immediately affect the quantity and quality of food consumed.

Empirical research strongly supports this relationship. A study examining food security conditions in urban slums demonstrated that household income and employment stability are among the most significant predictors of food security (Kimani-Murage et al., 2014). Households dependent on casual labour, temporary work or daily wages experienced inconsistent access to food, frequently reducing meal frequency or shifting to cheaper and less nutritious diets during periods of unemployment. The absence of savings, insurance or productive assets further intensified vulnerability because families lacked the capacity to smooth consumption during economic shocks. In such contexts, food insecurity emerges not from lack of food availability in markets but from the precarious nature of livelihoods.

Evidence from Indian cities confirms these patterns. Research conducted among adolescent girls living in urban slums in Varanasi documented substantial household food insecurity and identified clear associations with health outcomes (Rani et al., 2018). The study found that households facing unstable income conditions reported reduced dietary diversity, meal skipping and anxiety related to food shortages. Adolescents living in food-insecure households showed poorer mental health indicators, suggesting that inadequate access to food has psychological as well as nutritional consequences. These findings demonstrate that food insecurity is embedded in broader livelihood insecurity affecting overall wellbeing.

The dependence on daily earnings also exposes slum households to immediate risk during illness, injury or seasonal unemployment. Without paid leave or social security, a worker's inability to work for even a few days can reduce household food intake. In contrast to middle-income households that may draw on savings or stored food, slum residents must adjust consumption immediately when income declines. This often involves reducing meal size, substituting cheaper foods with lower nutritional value, or relying on informal borrowing networks.

Consequently, urban hunger reflects unstable livelihoods rather than insufficient food supply. Markets in cities generally contain adequate food, but access is conditional upon the ability to pay. Food insecurity in informal settlements is therefore best understood as a manifestation of economic vulnerability rooted in precarious labour markets and absence of social protection. Stabilizing incomes and improving livelihood security are thus central to improving food access in urban slum contexts.

3. Informal Employment and Labour Precarity

Informal settlements are structurally intertwined with the informal economy. A substantial proportion of slum residents depend on casual, unregulated and low-paid work such as construction labour, domestic service, street vending, rickshaw pulling and waste picking. These occupations are characterized by absence of written contracts, lack of minimum wage enforcement and minimal or no access to social security protections. The International Labour Organization has consistently documented that informal employment constitutes a dominant share of total employment in developing countries, particularly in urban areas, where workers lack job stability and income security (ILO, 2018). Informality therefore shapes the economic foundations of life in slums.

Income derived from informal employment is often irregular and unpredictable. Earnings may fluctuate daily depending on availability of work, seasonal demand or local economic conditions. Such volatility directly affects household consumption patterns. Because food expenditure accounts for a significant proportion of total income among low-income urban households, any reduction in earnings immediately constrains food access. The Food and Agriculture Organization notes that affordability remains the principal barrier to healthy diets for low-income populations worldwide (FAO et al., 2020). When wages decline or employment opportunities shrink, households respond by reducing meal frequency, lowering dietary diversity or substituting cheaper, calorie-dense foods for more nutritious alternatives.

Economic precarity thus translates into nutritional precarity. Research conducted in urban slum settings shows that unstable employment is strongly associated with higher levels of food insecurity and compromised dietary intake (Kimani-Murage et al., 2014). The absence of savings, insurance or asset buffers further intensifies this vulnerability. Without mechanisms to smooth consumption during income shocks, households must immediately adjust food expenditure downward.

The vulnerability of the urban poor is compounded by their dependence on markets. Unlike rural households that may cultivate staple crops or rely on subsistence production, slum

residents are almost entirely dependent on purchased food. Their integration into urban labour markets occurs without corresponding economic protection. Informal workers contribute significantly to urban economies, yet remain excluded from stable employment structures and social security systems. In this context, food insecurity is not accidental but structurally embedded in labour informality. As long as employment remains precarious and unprotected, access to adequate and nutritious food will continue to fluctuate with the uncertainties of the informal economy.

4. 4. Social and Institutional Determinants

Food insecurity in informal settlements is intensified by a range of social and institutional factors that shape both household resources and access to public support systems. One important factor is the structure of urban expenditure. Slum households must allocate a substantial share of their income to rent, transportation, water and basic utilities. Because incomes are already low and irregular, these fixed costs significantly reduce the proportion of income available for food consumption. The Food and Agriculture Organization notes that low-income urban households often spend a large share of their earnings on non-food essentials, making them particularly vulnerable to inadequate diets when incomes fluctuate (FAO et al., 2020). In addition, migrant households frequently lack proof of residence or formal identification documents, which restricts access to subsidized food distribution systems and other welfare benefits.

Household characteristics further influence vulnerability to food insecurity. Larger families must distribute limited income among more members, increasing pressure on food expenditure and dietary adequacy. Empirical studies of urban slums indicate that household size and dependency ratios are significant predictors of food insecurity (Kimani-Murage et al., 2014). Education also plays a critical role. Lower educational attainment restricts access to stable employment and reduces awareness of nutrition and health practices, thereby contributing to poorer dietary outcomes. Households headed by individuals with limited schooling are more likely to experience both income instability and inadequate food consumption.

Gender inequality constitutes another central determinant. Women are primarily responsible for food preparation and household care but often have limited decision-making power over financial resources. Global food security assessments show that food insecurity tends to be higher among women than men, reflecting unequal access to income and assets (FAO et al., 2020). In slum contexts, women frequently prioritize the nutritional needs of children and other family members, sometimes reducing their own food intake during shortages. Consequently, women's nutritional status is closely linked to broader socio-economic conditions and intra-household allocation patterns.

Institutional exclusion further deepens vulnerability. Many informal settlements lack legal recognition, and residents therefore receive limited public services such as sanitation, health care and welfare support. The High Level Panel of Experts emphasizes that urban food insecurity is strongly associated with inadequate social protection and weak institutional inclusion (HLPE, 2020). Without access to safety nets or subsidized food programmes, households must rely solely on unstable earnings to meet basic nutritional needs. Social

marginalization thus reinforces economic deprivation, creating persistent food insecurity that is structurally embedded within patterns of urban governance and inequality.

5. Nutritional Outcomes and Health Implications

Food insecurity in informal urban settlements often manifests less as overt starvation and more as compromised diet quality and nutritional imbalance. Because low-income households must prioritize affordability, they frequently shift toward inexpensive, energy-dense foods that are high in carbohydrates and fats but low in essential micronutrients. Consumption of protein-rich foods, fresh fruits and vegetables is reduced due to higher cost and limited purchasing power. The Food and Agriculture Organization emphasizes that unaffordability of healthy diets is a major global concern and contributes significantly to micronutrient deficiencies and diet-related health risks among low-income populations (FAO et al., 2020). In slum contexts, this dietary compromise results in both undernutrition and “hidden hunger,” characterized by deficiencies in iron, vitamin A and other essential nutrients.

Indian slum-based research clearly illustrates these nutritional consequences. A cross-sectional study conducted in urban slums of Bareilly reported high prevalence of underweight, stunting and wasting among school-age children, indicating chronic nutritional deprivation (Srivastava, 2012). Children living in these settlements demonstrated compromised growth indicators linked to inadequate and unstable dietary intake. Such findings confirm that food insecurity in slums has measurable physiological impacts on child development.

Food insecurity also extends beyond physical growth outcomes to affect psychological wellbeing. Research conducted among adolescent girls in Varanasi slums found that those from food-insecure households were more likely to experience poorer mental health outcomes, including stress and emotional distress related to food shortages (Rani et al., 2018). Nutritional insecurity thus influences both physical and mental health, particularly among vulnerable age groups.

These patterns underscore that urban hunger is not merely a matter of insufficient calories. It involves dietary inadequacy, micronutrient deficiencies and long-term developmental consequences. In informal settlements, compromised nutrition reflects structural livelihood insecurity, with lasting implications for health, education and overall human development.

6. Coping Strategies and Policy Responses

Households living in informal settlements employ a range of coping strategies to manage periodic food shortages. Because income flows are irregular, families frequently adjust consumption patterns to match available earnings. Common responses include reducing portion sizes, skipping meals, substituting cheaper foods and borrowing food or money from neighbours and relatives. In many cases, households increase labour participation by taking multiple informal jobs or sending additional members, including adolescents, into the workforce. While these strategies help households survive immediate shortages, they often undermine long-term wellbeing. Reduced dietary diversity and inadequate intake of essential

nutrients weaken immunity and physical development, particularly among children and women. The Food and Agriculture Organization observes that vulnerable households facing economic constraints often adopt negative coping mechanisms that compromise nutrition and health outcomes (FAO et al., 2020).

Social networks play an important role in mitigating short-term deprivation. Informal borrowing and reciprocal food sharing function as community-based safety nets. However, these mechanisms are limited because neighbours typically face similar economic hardships. When entire communities experience employment disruptions, collective coping capacity declines. Consequently, household food security remains precarious and dependent on broader economic conditions rather than individual effort alone.

Public policy interventions attempt to address these vulnerabilities through food assistance and nutrition programmes. In India, subsidized food grain distribution and supplementary nutrition schemes are intended to reduce price barriers and improve dietary intake among low-income households. School feeding programmes encourage child nutrition and school attendance, while maternal and child nutrition services provide supplementary food and health support. Evidence from nutrition policy studies indicates that such programmes can improve calorie intake and protect vulnerable populations from extreme hunger, particularly during periods of economic stress.

Despite these efforts, significant gaps remain. Access to benefits often depends on formal documentation and recognized residence, which many slum residents lack due to migration and settlement informality. Administrative exclusion therefore limits the effectiveness of food security interventions in urban areas. The High Level Panel of Experts emphasizes that sustainable improvements in food security require strengthening social protection systems and livelihood stability rather than relying solely on food supply measures (HLPE, 2020). Urban food insecurity is thus a governance challenge as much as an economic one. Policies that integrate employment security, welfare inclusion and recognition of informal settlements are essential to reduce chronic food insecurity in cities.

Conclusion

The review demonstrates that food insecurity in informal urban settlements is a livelihood-mediated outcome embedded within the broader processes of urbanization and structural inequality. Rapid urban growth has concentrated poverty in informal settlements where households depend almost entirely on purchased food. Because employment is largely informal and income is unstable, access to food fluctuates with labour opportunities. In this context, hunger is not the result of food scarcity but of limited purchasing power.

The analysis shows that labour precarity, high living costs, lack of assets and exclusion from welfare systems together create chronic vulnerability. Social and institutional factors, including insecure housing, lack of documentation and gender inequality, further restrict access to food and nutrition. Evidence from Indian slum studies indicates that these conditions produce reduced dietary diversity, child malnutrition and adverse health and psychological outcomes.

Households adopt coping strategies such as reducing meal size and dietary quality, but these responses often undermine long-term wellbeing and human development.

The persistence of food insecurity in cities therefore reflects not only economic poverty but also governance gaps. Existing nutrition and food distribution programmes provide partial protection but remain limited by administrative exclusion and settlement informality. Addressing urban hunger requires shifting policy attention from food availability alone toward livelihood security, inclusive social protection, and integration of informal settlements into urban planning and welfare systems. Without improving employment stability and institutional inclusion, urbanization will continue to generate cities where economic growth coexists with chronic food insecurity.

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