

Abstract

Challenges in aligning population agenda with street food management for inclusive and sustainable urbanization: Lesson learned from street food transformation in Thailand

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Population insights are central to urban planning and street food management, which are critical components in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Underpinned by the Multiple Streams Framework, this study employs a qualitative approach to explore the challenges and opportunities in aligning population agendas with street food management. The findings reveal that there was limited data on the informal sector required for manpower planning and estimation of economic contributions of street food. The limited data led to the urban policy design that works in favor of gentrification and eviction of street food vendors from the urban landscape. This study highlights the urgent need for research, especially in labor force projection, urban land use, and manpower planning, to provide insights into the contributions of street food vendors to urban foodscapes, thereby informing more inclusive and effective urban food policies.

Introduction

Inclusive and sustainable urbanization requires demographic data to better inform public policy. Based on civil registration, Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, is a primate city with a population size of 5,471,588 (in contrast to the second largest city, Nakhon Ratchasima, with a population size of 2,625,694) (1, 2). The population size of Bangkok is slightly affected by internal migration (-0.20 net migration rate, with 73,000 emigrants, and 55,000 immigrants, as revealed in the 2022 Migration Survey) (3). However, the population size in Bangkok could fluctuate due to the mobility of the hidden population. Based on the 2023 hidden population survey, the size of the hidden population in Bangkok could be as high as 2,809,300 persons (57,300 from the commuter population and 2,752,000 from the non-registered population) (4). This large population size in the primate city highlights a significant demand for food resources, especially street food.

Despite the availability of data on the population size of Bangkok, the use of demographic data to inform urban planning policy is limited, especially in shaping sustainable and inclusive street food management in urban foodscapes. Street food vendors are an informal food sector that serves the needs of a large portion of the population (5, 6). Underpinned by the Multiple Streams Framework, this study employs a qualitative approach to explore the challenges and opportunities in aligning population agendas with street food management in Bangkok, Thailand. By aligning the population agenda with street food management, policymakers can create more sustainable, equitable, and effective urban food systems, contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) (7).

Data

The data for this study were collected from documentary research and in-depth interviews. The Institutional Review Board, Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University (IPSR-IRB), granted approval to conduct the study. For the documentary research,

the data were sourced from the Civil Law Office and the Department of Health, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, focusing on regulations and enforcement related to street vending. For qualitative research, interviews were conducted with high-level stakeholders in street food management in Thailand, including government officials, policymakers, researchers, and representatives from street vendor associations.

Theoretical Focus

The Multiple Streams Framework explains that the convergence of the three streams – problems, policies, and politics – is mandatory to open a policy window for policy change (8). This study uses the Multiple Streams Framework to explain the effective street food management in Thailand hindered by the limited population insights in the problems stream, resulting in a non-inclusive policy design and exacerbated tensions between street vendors and law enforcement authorities.

Methodology

Data analysis was guided by thematic analysis to gain insights into the themes that emerged across datasets collected from documentary research and qualitative interviews (9). To explore the challenges and opportunities in aligning population agendas with street food management, data were theoretically coded in line with the Multiple Streams Framework using NVivo.

Expected Findings

The expected findings are categorized as follows:

1. Problem stream: limited data on the informal sector

There was limited data on the informal sector required for manpower planning and estimation of economic contributions of street food for inclusive and sustainable street food management. By law, the permission to sell street food is determined largely by the Act on the Maintenance of the Cleanliness and Orderliness of the Country, B.E. 2535 (1992), which prohibits street vending or cooking, unless without the announcement from the competent official and the traffic officer (10). In practice, due to the prohibition of street vending and the large volume of street vendors, the control of street food is exercised on the concession points rather than on the vendors themselves. As street foods are not listed in the Industrial and Business Census, there are discrepancies in reporting the number of street vendors in Thailand. It is reported that street stalls/kiosks in Thailand could be as high as 103,000 shops nationwide in 2015 (11), contributing to 271,355 million Thai Baht per year (12). However, authorities believed that street food vendors in Bangkok alone might be as high as 170,000 shops (13).

2. Policy stream: urban policy design and gentrification

Urban policy design ruled in favor of gentrification. Gentrification refers to sociologically-selective migration where wealthier households move into a devalorized urban areas to speculate the investment growth over time, which potentially causes ‘spatial mismatch’ as residential areas could be farther away from areas with work opportunities (14). Despite a population decline from 5.73 million in 2022 to 5.47 million in 2024, Bangkok experienced a significant increase in housing stock, rising from 1.93 million units in 2002 to 3.26 million in

2024 (15). Out of 3,995,253 housings in Bangkok, 13.41% of the units remained vacant in 2021, indicating potential overbuilding or speculative investment (16). The introduction of mass transit systems was a key driver of gentrification in Bangkok. Land parcels adjacent to transit lines, particularly the MRT Purple Line, exhibited the highest appreciation rates (10.5 %, compared to 3.5% in non-transit areas) (17). Due to the lack of data on potential land use, urban policy design was shaped in favor of gentrification because the areas close to the mass transit system appreciated in value.

3. Politics stream: eviction and tension between law enforcement authorities and vendors

Gentrification did not only have impacts on long-term residents but also on street food vendors. As street food vending was perceived as a violation of pedestrian rights and traffic regulations, street food in the informal food sector might be at risk of eviction without proper relocation. This is evident in the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's stance to reclaim sidewalks and attempts to regulate street food despite the forewarning from other government agencies (18).

Tensions between street vendors and the City Law Enforcement Department and Law Enforcement Section have led to rumors of a potential “street food ban” hype (19, 20). The hype was propagated in the media as a response to the enforcement of the Act on the Maintenance of the Cleanliness and Orderliness of the Country, B.E. 2535. Based on the statistics of the enforcement of the law, the collection of fines reached a noticeable peak around 2019, a sharp decline in 2020 and a gradual increase from 2022 onwards (21).

The expected findings can be summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Challenges in aligning population agenda with street food management: lessons learned from street food transformation in Thailand

Multiple Streams Framework	Challenges in aligning population agenda with street food management
Problem stream	There was limited data on the informal sector required for manpower planning and estimation of economic contributions of street food.
Policy stream	Because of the lack of data on the number of vendors and street food contributions to the economy, street food policy design can only be tailored in favor of gentrification.
Politics stream	Without proper data, street food is at risk of eviction, resulting in tensions between street vendors and City Law Enforcement Department and Law Enforcement Section have led to rumors of a potential "street food ban."

Discussion

This study highlights the urgent need for demographic research, especially in labor force projection, urban land use, and manpower planning, to provide insights into the contributions of street food vendors to the urban foodscapes, thereby informing more inclusive and effective urban food. Labor force projection and manpower planning could be used to encourage the formalization of street vendors to develop their business in line with the country's demand to increase professional Thai food operators. Supporting informal vendors as micro-entrepreneurs by providing access to funding can enable them to transform their

businesses into food trucks, restaurants, or market stalls. In addition, local authorities should cooperate with food vendors to design inclusive concession areas and promote them as tourist landmarks to ensure their sustainability and contribution to the city's economy.

Conclusion

This study stressed the critical need for demographic research to inform inclusive urban food policies. The current misalignment between population agendas and street food management has exacerbated tensions and led to policy designs with limited inclusivity. By leveraging labor force projection and manpower planning, the Thai government can tailor the support on the formalization of street vendors, in order to gear towards sustainable urban food systems that align with the goals of Sustainable Development Goal 11.

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