

Lessons learned from a city-to-city partnership on nutrition, linking to the Smart City agenda.

Feasibility Report

Shaleen Meelu and Anna Taylor

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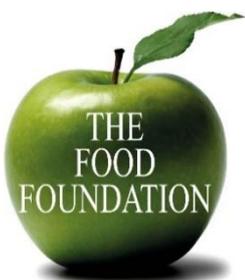


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Abbreviations

BCC	Birmingham City Council
BINDI	Birmingham India Nutrition Initiative
MOU	memorandum of understanding
MUFPP	Milan Urban Food Policy Pact
PMC	Pune Municipal Corporation
SHEFS	Sustainable and Healthy Food Systems
UK	United Kingdom

Introduction

The Birmingham India Nutrition Initiative (BINDI) is a Nutrition Smart City initiative which involves the development of policies and practices through a learning partnership between Birmingham City Council (BCC), the United Kingdom (UK) and Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC), India. This report focuses on the lessons learned from a city partnership on nutrition, linking to the Smart City agenda. Through this unique partnership, there are emerging lessons and themes for consideration by other cities aiming to accelerate their approach to the food environment.

Lessons Learned from the Partnership

Lesson 1: Technical support provided with the benefit of strong professional networks is required to support cities to develop their leadership on nutrition

Public health nutritionists have struggled to retain a position within local governments despite the high burden of malnutrition experienced in cities worldwide. In 2015, the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) offered an opportunity for local governments to address food system challenges like malnutrition, food waste and feeding a growing, urbanising population. The following year was the start of the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition, designed to reinvigorate national and international efforts to address the dual burden. City authorities are key to achieving the ambitious goals set, and the BINDI partnership facilitated by the Food Foundation sets out to provide the technical expertise and support required by policy leaders.

The Food Foundation team have a combined experience of nearly 40 years working as public health nutrition specialists. They introduced both authorities to their networks, which include academic experts in the field, technical/business networks such as the Innovation Alliance and international networks focused on sustainable food systems (MUFPP secretariat and Eurocities). Both cities responded proactively and engaged with key contacts within these networks.

Lesson 2: Exchange visits were crucial for laying the foundations for the partnership and building trust

BINDI raised awareness of the dual burden of malnutrition amongst senior elected officials and appointed local government officials. An early 2018 brief visit to Birmingham by PMC Commissioner Kunal Kumar was followed by a visit by the then Additional Commissioner and Director of Health to Birmingham. The return visit from Birmingham to Pune included the Director of Public Health and Council Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing. At the launch, Cabinet Member Paulette Hamilton said, “For this project to grow and work, we all have to work together, both the partners in Pune and us in the UK. I’d like to see partners come together with a common vision...Let us work together, let us be big, let us be absolutely wanting to make a change, let us think out of the box, we can move mountains to ensure that the future life chances of our citizens are increased, let us make a difference.”

None of this work would have been possible without the financial support provided by the UK’s Department for International Development and the Tata Trusts.

The partnership between Pune and Birmingham was developed because of the comparison between the two cities economically and demographically: both are young cities with diverse economies and balance deprivation and affluence alongside complex landscapes of cultural and personal identity set against a global narrative for food and a rapidly progressing food economy and environment.

These exchange visits helped develop both the interpersonal relationships for the project and the system relationships. One key learning was around the similarities between some of the population beliefs and behaviours, especially in the context of gender roles and the power dynamics of food in the home and outside the home. These initial contrasts are being further explored as both cities undertake population surveys on out-of-home food consumption, which will allow further discussion of differences and similarities between the cities and reflection on variance between the different communities and segments of the populations that live within each city.

Lesson 3: The challenges which cities face are very similar in different parts of the world, and there are considerable opportunities for mutual learning from very different country contexts

The partnership was set up deliberately considering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—which apply to all countries whether high, middle or low income—in the hope of setting up an equal partnership with opportunities for learning in both directions. The [2017 Global Nutrition Report](#) states that it will be ‘a challenge to achieve the SDGs without addressing [the challenges of] nutrition’. However, it was still surprising to discover so many ways in which the cities can learn from one another’s (very different) settings and apply lessons back in their home contexts. Discussions covered how to prevent the erosion of home cooking, how to prevent the dominance of fast food, how to provide public institutions with nutritious food and how to support the poorest families in accessing nutritious foods.

Lesson 4: Stakeholder support is required for galvanising political and senior leadership commitment to ensure that tackling malnutrition remains a priority

There is a shared recognition that politicians are influenced by external stakeholders as well as by data and evidence and that stakeholder support is crucial both to delivering change and ensuring it continues through periods of political churn.

Both cities organised stakeholder meetings and site visits to demonstrate projects tackling malnutrition. Feedback from stakeholders (spanning public-, private- and third-sector voluntary organisations) focused on the urgency and scale of the food-related problems faced by citizens. Stakeholders applauded and demonstrated support for the partnership, encouraging senior leadership buy-in. Kunal Kumar, reporting directly to the Prime Minister of India, is now the head of India’s Smart Cities Mission, and there may be an opportunity to formally include tackling malnutrition as a key area for India’s Smart Cities. The Smart Cities Mission is an urban renewal and retrofitting programme by the Government of India with the mission to develop 100 cities across the country, making them citizen-friendly and sustainable.

The BINDI partners developed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) focusing on food produced out of home as a result of input from stakeholders.

Lesson 5: Partnership documentation is useful for sustaining political commitment but can be very time consuming to put in place

The MOU was finally signed by the Chief Executive of BCC and Commissioner of PMC in May 2019. The partnership accelerated an awareness amongst leaders that malnutrition is a food system problem and that they/local governments have the power to enable healthier, more sustainable food systems by supporting the transformation of the food environment.

As well as providing leadership commitment to the partnership, both cities:

- Identified an officer/officers with responsibility for operational support to the partnership on a routine basis.
- Consulted and continue to consult with key city stakeholders on the priorities that the partnership should focus on.
- Are currently preparing individual action plans for engaging citizens on the priorities that they have for the city food environment.

A key challenge is maintaining senior officer support. In both cities, senior officers have been replaced multiple times. The Director of Public Health has been replaced twice in Birmingham and the Additional Commissioner has been replaced once in Pune. Officers in Pune are unable to identify a suitable official for proposed bilateral meetings in October until local elections take place in September. In Birmingham's case, the re-election and reappointment of the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing will confer stability for the next four years.

Facilitation is a key requirement during this early phase, and despite the signing of an MOU, for example, progress would not have been maintained without the support of the Food Foundation. The latter is an independent think tank that tackles the growing challenges facing the UK's food system. It has received regular positive publicity since launching due to its campaigns and reports. This public and media support has garnered great respect amongst local and national politicians and local authority officers.

Lesson 6: Data is often not available at the city level and critical gaps need to be filled

There are significant issues with accessing adequately robust data on nutrition at a subnational level in both the UK and India, and although there is national commitment to tackling malnutrition, the national datasets are not granular enough to inform strategic decision making at a local level.

The partnership has prompted creative approaches to collecting nutrition and food data. Pune and Birmingham are exceptionally diverse, young cities. Food environments and population subgroups within them vary from ward to ward. It is difficult to extrapolate a local picture of food behaviour from national surveys, especially in relation to such cities. Both are therefore sharing creative approaches to collecting data and information from and about their citizens.

BCC and Innovation Alliance for the West Midlands (which includes the Smart Cities Alliance) hosted a [‘digital data hunt’](#) in June 2019. This used the energy and passion of digital experts, activists and amateur digital sleuths to hunt down digital data available on the web to help Birmingham understand the food environment of the city. Pune will use crowdsourcing of citizens’ ideas to inform its approach and has partnered with the Wellcome Trust–funded [Sustainable and Healthy Food Systems \(SHEFS\)](#) initiative to secure support for a city survey of residents’ out-of-home eating habits and views on policy options.

Lesson 7: Engaging citizens in policy development brings insight and legitimacy

Citizen-driven approaches are considered key to Smart City approaches. Pune has experience collecting data from millions of its citizens. Birmingham typically receives feedback from hundreds of its citizens through a consultation portal, Be Heard. As a result of dialogue and joint learning, both authorities are implementing plans for larger-scale citizen engagement to understand factors affecting food choices across diverse groups and their preferred policy options.

In Pune, the citizen engagement will include four elements: questionnaires for adults and children, focus groups, mapping and online engagement through the PMC engagement portal. Birmingham is commissioning a series of focus groups targeting harder-to-reach groups who do not typically respond via Be Heard. BCC is adapting the methodology used by PMC to conduct a food survey and will explore a variety of platforms to understand what works best for cities when budgets are restricted.

Pune has started data collection (funded by SHEFS), and Birmingham is currently in the process of commissioning ‘Seldom heard food conversations’/food focus groups and finalising the online survey. The Director of Public Health has allocated funding for the focus groups and has commissioned a short film about food in Birmingham to encourage citizens to complete the survey.

This may be the first time two local authorities gather data from diverse groups across the city and, in parallel, consult on food policies proposed by stakeholders. A new narrative is emerging that reflects cultural heritage, rapidly changing food environments and citizenship status, as well as established factors such as socioeconomic background, access and availability.

In summary, the aim of both engagement exercises is to:

1. Understand what food choices citizens are making and why they are making them.
2. Determine which of the policy options proposed by stakeholders will support citizens to make healthier food choices.
3. Use the information gleaned in 1 and 2 to help implement policies and strategies that enable healthier food choices.

Data collected through surveys will be compared by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine as part of the Wellcome Trust–funded SHEFS project.

Lesson 8: Technical support needs to be flexible and responsive and demand is not easy to predict

The partnership has evolved slowly and partners have had to be patient in being adaptable to the shifting priorities and staffing in both cities. Similarly, the technical support needs which were anticipated at the start have turned out to be somewhat different. The Food Foundation has provided a lot more input on data collection than anticipated, and in the end, the digital platform the cities would need for capturing their partnership was not deemed a priority. Funders need to have a degree of flexibility to support cities' emerging needs through their stakeholder and citizen engagement.

Lesson 9: Smart approaches should be pursued with the appropriate foresight

The partnership was trying to identify new opportunities for action that combined the goal of tackling all forms of malnutrition with the Smart approaches. Some great ideas have emerged as a result of this focus. For example, Birmingham is in the process of commissioning a tech start-up to produce a solution for nutrient profiling of the out-of-home sector to potentially guide consumer choices. This is a Smart solution in which Pune has also expressed an interest. Both cities have previously discussed the importance of aligning health and safety tools to support consumer choice. Additionally, other ideas have emerged which contribute to the overall goal but which are not explicitly Smart in nature.

Policy options identified during stakeholder meetings included a focus on street and hotel food, food retail in low-income communities, advertising, food in schools and Anganwadi/children's centres, employee wellbeing and training of health professionals. Taking advertising as an example, early results from fieldwork in Pune suggest that citizens are more concerned about billboard advertising space than online advertising. Similarly, across both cities, there appears to be a need to offer culinary and related training to those interested in entering the food sector—based on experience gleaned in the UK, both Smart (i.e. using technology to support learning) training and face-to-face, hands-on practical training need to be explored.

Lesson 10: An international partnership helps to increase ambition and visibility

The international partnership has also helped to maintain visible commitment and enhance the political ambitions related to nutrition and food.

Birmingham has used the learning from BINDI to directly inform its approach to successfully applying for the UK Government's Childhood Obesity Trailblazer programme. The programme focuses on tackling upstream drivers of obesity, understanding differences in rates of obesity between different groups, enabling a 'healthy food economy' and creating a 'Birmingham Basket' to monitor changes in local food habits as the vision and strategy for a healthy food city is implemented.

Pune has used the BINDI partnership to support the political commitment to sign up to the MUFPP and has used the international angle of the project to leverage visible senior political commitment to engage in nutrition and food system conversations.

Further, Birmingham is hosting the 2022 Commonwealth Games and is using the opportunity to broaden the network of cities participating in the partnership. A workshop, held as part of the MUFPP annual meeting, will allow a space for Commonwealth cities to come together to share learning, explore potential partnerships and reflect on how they can materialise the commitments of the Commonwealth Charter through the opportunities of the MUFPP. BINDI will be a case study at this meeting.

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India has offered to sponsor 22 of India's Smart Cities to attend the Commonwealth Games if they implement Nutrition Smart policies and practices. This commitment took place in a meeting attended by Councillor Paulette Hamilton, the previous Director of Public Health from Birmingham, the Food Foundation and the Department for International Development, set up to discuss the Birmingham-Pune partnership.

Pune has signed up to the MUFPP. Both cities will present the citizen engagement activities and action plans at the next meeting in Montpellier, France.

Gender-related issues

The BINDI project has been supported by powerful female and male leaders. In terms of the former, Councillor Paulette Hamilton is a senior cabinet member with the largest portfolio for health and social care across Western Europe. Her continued support has been key to securing leadership buy-in. Both Additional Commissioners and the Director of Health in Pune are also women and well-respected within PMC. The stakeholder meeting in Pune was well attended and also dominated by women from voluntary sector organisations and supported by Asia's first female bariatric surgeon, Dr Jayashree Todkhar.

Following a visit to Pune in March 2019, Birmingham's former Director of Public Health, Dr Adrian Phillips, noted, 'The latest data suggests that over 22 percent of children are stunted. There is a marked female/male difference with girls and women more likely to be underweight or stunted. For example, nearly 15 percent of women in Pune are below normal weight compared to 9 percent of men'.

The Food Foundation highlighted the UK's record of breastfeeding at stakeholder meetings in both cities. According to 2015 data, breastfeeding initiation occurs in 71 percent of babies in Birmingham (compared to 74 percent England average), which reduces over the following eight weeks post-partum to around 50 percent. Birmingham has not been able to accurately report rates and it has been near impossible to access services designed to support pregnant women. This is an area of concern that is currently being investigated, to consider how to support families to adequately breastfeed their children.

In Pune, charities noted that more women are joining the workforce and this may be having an impact on food choices. In Birmingham, small-scale ethnographic research provided some evidence that food choices made are influenced by affordability, accessibility and time pressures. This anecdotal evidence is being explored through food focus groups and food surveys currently taking place in both cities. The current Director of Public Health, Dr Justin Varney, is commissioning a series of food focus groups, 'Seldom Heard Food Conversations', to capture the opinions of communities that do not typically respond to public-sector consultations, such as young women (18–25 years) and pregnant mothers.

To ensure women's voice is represented and increase the likelihood that women (the target respondents) will be comfortable responding, all of the field workers collecting qualitative data in Pune are women. Although the field workers are comfortable engaging with the communities they typically work with (in slum and low-income areas), there is some reluctance to visit middle- and high-income households. Researchers propose additional training to provide data collectors with the skills and confidence required to gather data from a broad range of households.

Stakeholders have proposed opportunities for low-income/stay-at-home mothers to take part in a healthier food economy. The Tata Trusts highlighted an initiative led by the Taj group of hotels in which

Taj chefs trained local unemployed women to produce hotel-quality food to participate in Mumbai's dabbawala scheme. They proposed replicating this in Pune with proactive organisations. Jobs, gender equality and the food economy will be key areas of focus for both cities during the second phase of BINDI. In Birmingham, the current Director of Public Health is setting up a Healthier Food City board to consider how such initiatives can be mainstreamed.

Conclusion

Opportunities to engage authorities on nutrition are scarce and need to be created and nurtured. This city-to-city partnership is creating an opportunity to solicit political commitment to the prevention of malnutrition. The implementation of policy actions by both cities will require continued support. Whilst funding for the Food Foundation's support work will cease, it is hoped that the relationship between the two cities is now sufficiently solid and, underpinned by the MOU, will continue to flourish.

Both cities are due to attend the next MUFPP meeting in Montpellier. They will discuss initial results from the citizen engagement exercise and will also consider policy-related interventions they can work on together as well as policy changes that are unique to the challenges faced by their cities.

Moreover, Birmingham's plans to expand its international engagement in the run-up to its hosting of the Commonwealth Games provides a vehicle for sustained momentum and action. Creating partnerships that are grounded in social goals is never easy to establish, but our journey has generated some important lessons that could be applied in future partnerships of this kind.

BINDI provides us with a unique opportunity to reflect on the truly global nature of citizens' relationships with food. The rapidly changing digital world connects our communities across the world more than ever before; citizens in Birmingham through social media and direct digital chat are as informed about the local goings-on in their extended family and friends in India as they are with what is going on three streets away. This is creating a reality of beliefs and behaviours that is no longer just influenced by the immediate environment but driven by parallel narratives of place and heritage. International partnerships between cities, like Birmingham and Pune, are fundamental to creating successful and sustainable shifts in nutrition that reflect the lived reality of individuals in today's global digital world.

—Dr Justin Varney, Director of Public Health, Birmingham City Council

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