

COMMUNITY KITCHENS AS COLLABORATIVE PLATFORMS FOR ENHANCING SOCIAL COHESION, WELLBEING AND NUTRITIONAL OUTCOMES

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Abstract

Food is essential for all living beings. Hunger is the sense no one can escape. Thus, it is the duty of the Society to arrange food for all living beings, including human beings. If food is made accessible, people would lead life depending on that. If it is not made available easily, one would resort to get it, by all means, which at times, could become anti-social activities, like begging, stealing & snatching, as per Vethathiri Maharishi. Thus, to make peace prevail in the society, it is critical that society should make food accessible for every living being. Lack of time on long daily commutes in Urban areas, the focus on healthy diet & cooking is coming down. At times, it also restricts the female partners in the family to give up full time jobs. Economies of scale are also not optimal when the cooking is made for micro families like two to three persons. Community Kitchen is a viable alternative to overcome these challenges. This journal explores the rationale behind community kitchens, focusing on their ability to optimize resource utilization amid changing family and work dynamics. Vethathiri Maharishi who is fondly identified as 'Common Man's Philosopher', in southern India, has established 'World Community Service Centre', with the aim to bring World Peace. Of many such initiatives recommended in the 'World Peace' book, Vethathiri Maharishi emphasizes Community Kitchen. This journal also explores to assess the community kitchen plan as envisaged by Vethathiri Maharishi in evolving lifestyle conditions across the world. This journal highlights key benefits, including enhanced social cohesion, improved nutritional outcomes through specialization & expert involvement, and economic gains for participating communities.

Keywords : *Food, Community Kitchen, Urbanization, Gender parity, Social cohesion, Nutritional outcomes, World Peace, Vethathiri.*

Introduction

Community kitchens (CK) are the shared spaces whereby individuals come together to collectively plan, prepare, and share their food requirements, emphasizing cooperation and mutual benefit rather than profit. They could potentially emerge as responses to evolving social dynamics and challenges such as urbanization, nuclear families, and dual-income households. In many urban settings, particularly in developing countries, the traditional model of cooking managed within homes — mostly by women — has been disrupted by the demands of modern life where both partners may need to work. Community kitchens could offer a possible solution by pooling skills and resources, freeing up individual time and fostering community ties.

Vethathiri Maharishi

Vethathiri Maharishi, founder of the World Community Service Centre, advocated individual transformation as the foundation for World Peace. He has lived through tough times in India, both the World Wars and freedom movement. With his quest for spirituality, he attained divine realisation.

Vethathiri Maharishi did not want to limit the benefits of liberalisation to himself, rather he wanted to spread, transform the life of individuals, thereby transformation to the whole world, thereby attain World Peace. With this motive, he established a system of 'Simplified Kundalini Yoga'. Vethathiri Maharishi explains that everyone lives in the triangle of Self (Individual), Society, and Nature. In that perspective on philosophy of life, he emphasized that harmony must begin with one's own body, mind, and behaviour. His philosophy of 'World Peace through individual peace' naturally extends to community initiatives like common kitchens, where nutritious, sattvic, and simple vegetarian food becomes a medium to nurture health, compassion, and unity among people. Through his teachings on disciplined food habits, moderation (limit and method), and charity, Vethathiri Maharishi highlighted that what and how eat directly influence our character and social harmony, making CK a living expression of his ideal that service, simplicity, and right nourishment can unite families and neighbourhoods in peace.

Vethathiri Maharishi's Common Kitchen plan

In the book, World Peace, Vethathiri Maharishi has suggested the 'Common Kitchen' as the plan for the future generation [1]. The poem is titled 'Common Cooking', as 101st poem, in the book. Tamil script of them poem is as under:

English **translation** of the poem is as below:

A kitchen built for two hundred souls, with twenty cooks to share the roles, Each day they take their turn to guide, preparing meals with love and pride. Menus planned in weekly rounds, together bringing joyous sounds, From every land, in ordered cheer, they share the feast, both far and near.

The poem describes the idea and operation of a CK set up to serve a set of two hundred people. It highlights how within this particular group, a smaller team of twenty individuals takes turns cooking meals daily, thereby sharing the workload efficiently. The poem emphasizes the organized planning of meal varieties weekly, which ensures a systematic approach to food preparation. Further, it reflects the broader adoption of this model worldwide, where meals are cooked and shared in a structured and harmonious way. Vethathiri Maharishi visualises the peaceful world with several changes. One amongst such reforms is CK. Through simple yet vivid imagery, this poem captures the essence of unity, cooperation and communal effort, and careful planning and strategy that underpin community kitchens. It symbolizes not just the act of cooking but the social solidarity and resourcefulness in meeting basic needs collaboratively. The poem elevates the CK from merely a physical space to a representation of unity, sustainability in food practices and shared responsibility.

In essence, the poem celebrates how community kitchens harness collective energy and organization to provide nourishment, strengthen social bonds, and promote an equitable distribution of labor and resources among people.

Community Kitchens (CK) : Benefits

CKs represent a transformative approach to food production and social welfare that optimizes both human resources and material inputs through collective action and shared responsibility. By centralizing food preparation efforts and leveraging participant expertise, community kitchens create significant efficiencies that benefit individuals, families, and communities at multiple levels.

Resource Optimization Through Economies of Scale

One of the most substantial benefits of community kitchens lies in their capacity to achieve significant cost savings through pool purchasing and collective resource allocation. Community kitchens enable participants to leverage 'economies of scale' by pooling financial resources and purchasing food ingredients in larger quantities [2].

This approach reduces the cost per unit substantially compared to individual household purchases [3]. Research in Australia demonstrates that community kitchens establish budgets of approximately Rs.150/- to Rs. 300/- per serve against Rs.600/- otherwise, making nutritious meals accessible to low-income populations while maximizing purchasing power [4].

The systematic review by Iacovou and colleagues, published in *Public Health Nutrition* and cited by over 149 researchers, confirms that "community kitchens may be an effective strategy to improve participants' cooking skills, social interactions and nutritional intake." [5][6] This landmark study analysed ten studies (eight qualitative, one mixed-method, and one cross-sectional) across multiple countries and found substantial evidence that collective food preparation creates measurable nutritional benefits [5][7].

The procurement efficiency extends beyond mere price reduction. By purchasing ingredients in bulk, community kitchens reduce packaging waste, decrease transportation costs through consolidated ordering, and establish direct supplier relationships that facilitate better pricing [8]. Additionally, shared purchasing allows groups to negotiate better terms with suppliers and diversify their ingredient sources, including local and seasonal produce that might be cost-prohibitive for individual households [2].

Utilization of Human Capital and Talent

CKs fundamentally restructure how societies mobilize and deploy human talent, particularly addressing time constraints faced by dual-income and time-scarce households. In contemporary urban environments, especially in developing countries, micro-families with dual working partners face significant time constraints. Traditionally, women bore disproportionate responsibility for cooking and homemaking, limiting their capacity to pursue professional and personal development. Community kitchens alleviate this pressure by centralizing food preparation, allowing both genders to redirect their energies toward professional productivity and personal advancement.

The participatory model of community kitchens ensures that diverse skills within a community are systematically deployed. By rotating cooking responsibilities among 20 participants serving 200 people (as reflected in the poem written by Vethathiri Maharishi as cited earlier in this article), community kitchens create opportunities for skill transfer, apprenticeship, and capacity building [2]. Every participant contributes according to their abilities—some may excel at menu planning, others at procurement, food preparation, or budgeting [4].

Research on workplace teaching kitchens demonstrates that hands-on cooking instruction significantly enhances food literacy skills, with improvements evident even after a single class [9]. This principle scales to community kitchens, where experienced cooks mentor novices, and collective problem-solving generates innovative solutions to food preparation challenges. The process evaluation by Lee and colleagues in the *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* documented that facilitators and project partners recognized community kitchens' capacity to develop "food

knowledge and cooking skills" among diverse participants [10].

Gender Empowerment and Economic Liberation

CKs provide particular benefits for women by recognizing and valuing their domestic skills while liberating them from the time burden of individual household cooking. Research indicates that CKs enable women to redirect the approximately 15-20 hours weekly spent on cooking and meal-related tasks toward educational pursuits, employment, or income-generating activities [2]. By "sharing expenses, Community Kitchens have shown to improve dignity and enable women to devote their time for further studies and employment." [2]

The qualitative research conducted by Ibrahim and colleagues in *PLOS ONE* with Syrian refugee and CK worker populations revealed that women reported not merely financial benefits but also profound psychological empowerment. Participants stated that kitchens provided "peace of mind" by eliminating constant worry about food provision [11]. The study documented that CK workers experienced financial independence that "empowered them psychologically," with participants noting "The kitchen did really give us strength and motivation." [11]

Financial Resource Efficiency and Income Generation

Beyond immediate food cost reduction, community kitchens create sustainable income opportunities. The Ibrahim study specifically found that community kitchen workers who received monthly salaries in addition to food provisions reported markedly improved perceptions of food security and financial stability [11]. This employment dimension distinguishes many modern CKs from purely consumer-focused models, creating local job opportunities while simultaneously addressing food insecurity.

Commercial CKs extend this principle further. Research by Addae-Wireko examined commercial CKs in Manitoba and found they serve as innovation spaces for small-scale food producers [12]. By providing access to certified commercial kitchen facilities, equipment, and production space on an hourly or daily basis, these kitchens "reduce small-scale food production and processing costs by eliminating the cost their users would have incurred by buying production and processing tools and equipment." [12] This model enables entrepreneurship among resource-constrained populations while optimizing existing infrastructure.

Reduction of Food Waste and Environmental Efficiency

CKs systematically address food waste through collective meal planning and portion management. By involving participants in collaborative menu planning and preparing meals in bulk quantities, these kitchens reduce the per-serving waste that occurs in individual household preparation [4]. The systematic planning inherent to CK operations enables mindful consumption practices, proper food storage techniques, and creative utilization of leftovers [13].

The collective approach also facilitates sourcing decisions that prioritize sustainability. Community kitchens can establish partnerships with local farmers, reduce transportation distances for ingredients, and implement composting systems for food scraps [3]. This efficiency extends to energy consumption, water usage, and packaging reduction when compared to multiple individual households preparing meals separately.

Social Capital and Community Resilience

Beyond tangible resource optimization, community kitchens generate substantial social capital that enhances community resilience. The Iacovou systematic review documented that participants experienced "improved social skills and enhanced social support," with studies consistently reporting that community kitchens broke cycles of social isolation [14]. The safe environment provided by collective cooking and eating "established a healthy social environment not only for themselves but also for their families." [6].

The Ibrahim qualitative study conducted in Lebanon during the Syrian refugee crisis demonstrated that CKs created social cohesion across ethnic and economic lines. CK workers reported that "the kitchen's friendly atmosphere increased social cohesion and companionship between Syrians and Lebanese within the kitchen," while also generating "increased sense of empathy towards [refugee] beneficiaries." [11] This social dimension enhances community bonds and creates informal support networks that provide psychological and practical benefits beyond food provision.

Sustainability and Long-Term Viability

Research emphasizes that the self-help and voluntary nature of CKs is fundamental to their sustainability. The Iacovou review noted that "the self-help or voluntary and community-run nature of the cooking interventions appears to be an important element for success." [6] By implementing partnership-based models that utilize existing community resources—church kitchens, school facilities, community centers—organizations can establish community kitchens with minimal ongoing funding requirements [4].

The Lee process evaluation found that successful CK required facilitation support during establishment phases but could transition to largely autonomous operations [10]. This capacity building and self-sufficiency model contrasts sharply with welfare-dependent approaches, fostering participant ownership and long-term commitment [4].

Limitations and Research Gaps

While evidence strongly supports CK's benefits, researchers acknowledge that "despite the preliminary findings of the review, there is a lack of high-level evidence that would be required to establish causal links." [14] The Iacovou review called for "more rigorous research methods, for both qualitative and quantitative studies" to enable definitive causal claims [7][9]. Additionally, while CK addresses short-term food insecurity effectively, "long-term solutions are required to address income-related food insecurity" rooted in systemic poverty [6].

Conclusion

Community kitchens exemplify a transformative paradigm of collective action that systematically optimizes utilization of resources, deploys human skills toward shared welfare objectives, and develops sustainable social ecosystems amid fast urbanization and evolving family dynamics. Through mechanisms such as bulk purchasing for economies of scale (cost reduction), time-efficient, wage employment for skilled facilitators and workers, waste minimization via collaborative planning (food scraps reduction), and cultivation of social capital through participatory governance, these initiatives generate compounding multiplicative benefits far exceeding basic food provision.

This model resonates deeply with Vethathiri Maharishi's prescient blueprint in his 1957 World Peace plan, where he envisioned community kitchens serving 200 individuals via 20 rotating cooks

operating on weekly schedules—transforming domestic drudgery into organized harmony. Rigorous evidence from systematic reviews and qualitative studies substantiates these gains. When implemented in participatory ownership, gender-sensitive design, and scalability — as Maharishi envisioned — community kitchens could emerge as premier people-centered interventions against food insecurity, social fragmentation, and nutritional deficits in dual-income urban economies like India's. Policymakers should prioritize infrastructure partnerships, while addressing gaps in systemic poverty solutions.

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