This policy brief is informed by the findings of the ESRC/DFID-funded Consuming Urban Poverty Project (CUP) (formally called “Governing Food Systems to Alleviate Poverty in Secondary Cities in Africa”) on work carried out in low-income neighbourhoods of Epworth, Zimbabwe, from 2016 to 2017. The central focus of the study was to understand the connections between poverty, governance and urban space. This brief presents key findings related to multi-dimensional poverty and food poverty in Epworth and makes strategic action recommendations around improving infrastructure as a lever to address issues of poverty.

Introduction

For nearly two decades food poverty in Zimbabwe has been consistently high. The food poverty situation in urban areas is dire. Epworth is a particular case in point: The Consuming Urban Poverty research found that less than 8% of residents of Epworth could be classified as food secure.

This policy brief presents findings on urban food poverty research carried out in Epworth, a large urban centre 15km outside the capital, Harare. It draws on findings from a survey of 483 households across Epworth. A key component of the survey, carried out in 2016, was to consider the nature of multi-dimensional poverty in Epworth. The brief argues that normative views of economic improvement will not be adequate to address the high levels of food insecurity and food poverty. Significant structural, economic, planning and infrastructural changes are required if residents of Epworth are to be lifted out of poverty. This brief suggests two key strategies: First, irrespective of politics and past state actions, what is required of the designated state actor is significantly increased support for the Epworth Local Board and associated government departments so as to enable real development in Epworth. Second, if the systemic drivers of poverty are to be remediated, a more systemic and integrated approach to poverty alleviation strategies in Epworth is required.

Zimbabwe’s dire economic and political situation has been well documented, with different actions and phases compounding the challenge. These factors all influence the current situation in Epworth. However, there is a slight window of opportunity to reconsider urban governance differently. The Epworth case offers some insights into what these may be.

Food insecurity and multi-dimensional poverty in Epworth

The basis for the multi-dimensional poverty approach is the assertion that poverty is defined as the failure of some basic capabilities to function, rather than the low level of income. Not only were high levels of food insecurity recorded in Epworth in the CUP surveys carried out in 2016, but the mean household dietary diversity score was 4.12 out of a possible 12 where a score of less than 6 is seen as a proxy indicator for malnutrition. Additionally, over 80% of the surveyed households were consuming foods from five or fewer food groups. Poverty in Zimbabwe is frequently argued to be linked to the cash shortage and depreciation of the currency. While these factors play a significant role, other factors deepen poverty in ways that cannot be resolved through conventional economic-recovery interventions. To fully understand poverty levels in Epworth, this CUP study used the Lived Poverty Index (LPI), a multi-dimensional measure of poverty that captures current poverty dynamics as indicated by the ability of a household to access a variety of essential goods and services.

The LPI “measures a portion of the central core of the concept of poverty not captured by existing objective or subjective measures.” Developed by Afrobarometer, the LPI is an experiential measure, based on questions about how frequently people go without basic necessities in a year. The LPI assesses access to food, fuel for cooking that food, water, energy, medical treatment, as well as income. As LPI scores increase, lived poverty increases. The respondents answered the question if they had ever experienced the parameter

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1 This draws largely on Sen’s Capabilities Approach and since the early 1990s has been central to more nuanced – not just income or poverty line-based measures – views of poverty.
never”, “just once or twice”, “several times”, “many times” or “always”. Across the 482 valid cases included in the calculation of the LPI score, results indicate that the surveyed residents were lacking all essential goods and services – such as a cash income, fuel to cook with, electricity, medicine, clean water and enough food to eat – but the lack of access differed across parameters and in frequency.

As Table 1 indicates, energy poverty was particularly high in Epworth, with 73% of households always without electricity in their homes. Regarding food, more than one-fifth of the households (21%) indicated that they lacked enough food to eat “many times” while 27% lacked enough food to eat “several times”. Water is also a challenge in the area. As survey results show, only 38% of the surveyed households reported that they had never experienced shortages of enough clean water for home use. It was observed during the survey that most households were fetching water from open wells. As the settlement expands, increasing demand for water is expected. As seasonal water table fluctuations become more extreme, there is an increased risk of households being exposed to diseases such as cholera or other water-borne diseases. When combined, these multiple deprivations shape a household’s ability to ensure food security and dietary diversity. The costs of energy to cook food also curtails food choice, as does access to water to clean and cook foods safely.

A far more encompassing response is required if poverty in Epworth is to be effectively addressed. Limited food access not only affects the current poverty challenges but the consequences of malnutrition and limited diets mean that children and infants who do not get the requisite nutrition will carry the consequences of this deficit into later life. This challenge becomes inter-generational. Given the multiple forms of poverty recorded, development agencies and civil society actors need to move away from project-based interventions and concentrate on longer-term systemic changes in infrastructure and service provision.

Such strategic action requires working with authorities to ensure integration, to avoid duplication and to hold the state to account. Despite the politics associated with such collaborations, the Epworth Local Board has a mandate to respond to these multiple poverty/infrastructure issues. Food offers a unique lens through which to understand the intersections between poverty, food insecurity, infrastructure and economic activity. Food-system-related policy actions often reach beyond just food, enabling far greater policy and development benefits.

### Policy suggestions

- The CUP survey used food as a lens to understand the multiple deprivations experienced. Required are similar surveys that engage other ways of understanding infrastructure, such as water, energy, shelter, etc.
- Development interventions need to apply a far more integrated approach, one that ensures the combined activation of intersecting projects such as energy and water provision.
- New place-specific solutions are emerging in the infrastructure space, with micro-grids and others gaining traction. The state is often unable to engage such systems on its own and civil society is well placed to initiate such interventions.
- Civil society actors have a dual role to play in the alleviation of multi-dimensional poverty in Epworth. First, they need to lobby government collectively to develop an integrated development plan for the area. Second, they then need to work with government to align implementation and infrastructure provision rather than the current model where the state and civil society each “do their own thing” with piecemeal projects, as opposed to integrated actions being the norm. Finding ways for both sets of development actors to work collaboratively is essential.