CONSUMING URBAN POVERTY INFORMATION BRIEF

The Informal Economy - Vital To Urban Food And Nutrition Security

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Consuming Urban Poverty

This brief is part of a four-part series containing information to assist informal traders and their allies in advocating for policies that support urban food and nutrition security. It draws on research done on urban food systems in cities across the global South, highlighting the critical role that the informal economy plays.

What the findings tell us

Informal food traders are key to ensuring access to nutritious, affordable food. City and other governance actors need to appreciate the central role played by the informal food trade economy.

- The urban poor strategically use all food retail access options available to them, from formal to informal, in ways that meet their specific needs. The informal economy provides the urban poor with a measure of food-related resilience and stability. Informal actors—that is, street and market traders—are as important as formal actors (e.g. supermarkets) in ensuring access to food.
- Food security is not simply a matter of scarcity; rather, it involves the ability to access/afford nutritious, culturally-appropriate food that can be utilized by households. Ensuring food security requires a rights-based and sustainable systemic approach.
- Quantitative food security assessments miss deeper understandings of how poor people access their food and the reasons for their choices. Qualitative methods, such as interviews, surveys and focus groups, shed more light.
- Policies and practices that undermine the efficiency and viability of the informal food trade ultimately undermine food and nutrition security for urban residents.
- Copying Northern, and at times colonial, city management approaches does not serve the food access needs of the urban poor in Southern cities, which have particular characteristics and concerns. Policy and governance approaches in the South should embrace the distinct nature of these cities.
- Infrastructure deficiencies influence food and nutrition security outcomes in poor neighbourhoods. For many poor households, the informal food vending economy is the refrigerator, the stove, the storage cupboard and even the food preparation site.
- Access to reliable infrastructure—including safe, hygienic places to clean, cook and store food, as well as reliable energy to keep food fresh—is essential and influences the choices made by traders.
- The informal food vending economy is not uniform. Its wide diversity enables urban food and nutrition security. One size fits all policy, licencing, permitting, and development support serves little purpose often privileging one group over another, generally to the detriment of informal traders and their customers.
- For cities seeking to develop and govern in pro-poor ways, the informal economy needs to be actively supported so that it thrives. This has economic, health and development benefits.

Evidence in this brief

This evidence focuses on recent work carried out as part of the Consuming Urban Poverty project (CUP) in three cities:

- Kisumu, Kenya
- Kitwe, Zambia
- Epworth, Zimbabwe

https://consumingurbanpoverty.wordpress.com

The brief also draws on urban food research conducted by the African Food Security Urban Network in other African cities:

- Cape Town, South Africa
- Windhoek, Namibia
- Maputo, Mozambique
- Lusaka, Zambia
- Maseru, Lesotho
- Mbabane, Swaziland
- Johannesburg, South Africa
- Msunduzi, South Africa
- Blantyre, Malawi
- Gaborone, Botswana
- Harare, Zimbabwe

http://www.afsun.org

Perspectives are also informed by recent work in diverse cities across the global South through the Hungry Cities Partnership:

- Kingston, Jamaica
- Mexico City, Mexico
- Cape Town, South Africa
- Windhoek, Namibia
- Nairobi, Kenya
- Maputo, Mozambique
- Bangalore, India
- Nanjing, China

https://hungrycities.net/the-partnership

Reconceptualising urban food security

Questions of food, and of food/nutrition security, have traditionally been seen as rural issues that are of concern for national and regional governments, but not for city governments. Cities in Africa, and the global South more generally, have been slow to appreciate the increasing role they play in food security. In all the countries in which the African Centre for Cities and their partners have worked, excepting China, food is not something that city governments focus on. Yes, they licence and tax informal food traders, and they approve the development of shopping malls, but mostly they focus on revenue collection and compliance—not ensuring that their citizenry have access to adequate, appropriate food.

Some Southern cities have done work on urban food issues, such as Belo Horizonte in Brazil,[1] and Medellín[2] and Bogota[3] in Colombia. However, approaches to "urban food governance" are dominated by Northern cities. But while some Southern cities are seeking ways to include access to food and nutrition within their planning and practice, the focus is on urban agriculture or emergency food relief. Although informal traders are a critical source of food for the majority of urban residents, their role in food and nutrition security is seldom included in official planning. Instead, cities target informal food traders through the management of city markets and the collection of fees, or through the policing and control of vendors. The essential role played by food traders in feeding people, however, is overlooked.

Examining "food security" in policy

The understanding of food insecurity has shifted significantly over the past 50 years. Earlier definitions were framed around the problem of scarcity and the need to grow more food. Now, food security is seen as being achieved when food is available *and* accessible, when it can be utilized in ways that provide nourishment and are culturally appropriate, and where food supply is stable and sustainable. A central tenet is that communities can determine the nature of their food system. These dimensions of food security present particularly challenging governance questions for urban policymakers.

> Food security is "… a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life"
>
> FAO, 2002

Food and nutrition security has risen in prominence in the post-2015 Development Agenda, specifically with the ratification of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda. Focusing on urban food systems offers important possibilities (for policy, for research, and in wider governance) to examine urbanization in the global South and the relationship between governance, poverty and the spatial characteristics of cities and towns.

In 2020, a High Level Panel of Experts at the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations released a report on reshaping the global narrative on food security (HLPE, 2020). This report argued that the framework for understanding food security needed to be expanded. The report proposed incorporating two new pillars—agency and sustainability—alongside the existing four pillars of availability, accessibility, utilization and stability. These new pillars align food security within a rights-based and sustainability framework, which will require a greater emphasis on systemic approaches. This better aligns the urban food security challenge with the framing of the New Urban Agenda.

For food and nutrition security to support just urbanization, policies and programmes need to be contextually specific. Food security is not about simply producing enough food (availability), despite the dominant policy framings in most countries. In most Southern and African cities, plenty of food is available; the challenge is that this food is either inappropriate, or that healthy nutritious food is unaffordable for most urban residents (accessibility).

In Asia and Africa, informality is an additional challenge. Informal systems dominate in housing, access to services, economic activity and food access. The absence of adequate infrastructure and services determines what foods are purchased, and how these foods are stored and prepared (utilization). Climatic variability, political instability and wide disruptions (such as COVID-19) all impact the sustainability and stability of food access.

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[1] See, for example, https://www.futurepolicy.org/food-and-water/belo-horizontes-food-security-policy/ and https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247516831_Urban_Governance_for_Food_Security_The_Alternative_Food_System_in_Belo_Horizonte_Brazil.

[2] For Medellín see: http://www.fao.org/in-action/food-for-cities-programme/toolkit/governance/food-governance-structures/en/.

[3] For Bogota, see: https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01349982/document.

Figure 1: Identifying six dimensions of food security in the current FAO definition

Source: FAO HLPE, 2020: 10

Despite ambitions within the New Urban Agenda for greater democratic processes at the local government level, agency to engage in democratic processes is limited. Agency in "food democracy" (Figure 1), is even more constrained. Historical marginalization means that voices of the poor—who are most likely to be food insecure—seldom gain access to platforms where issues related to specific urban food systems can be addressed. Equally, given the narrow way national governments perceive cities across the African continent and the often tenuous relationship between cities and national governments, urban governments also often lack agency in the food security domain.

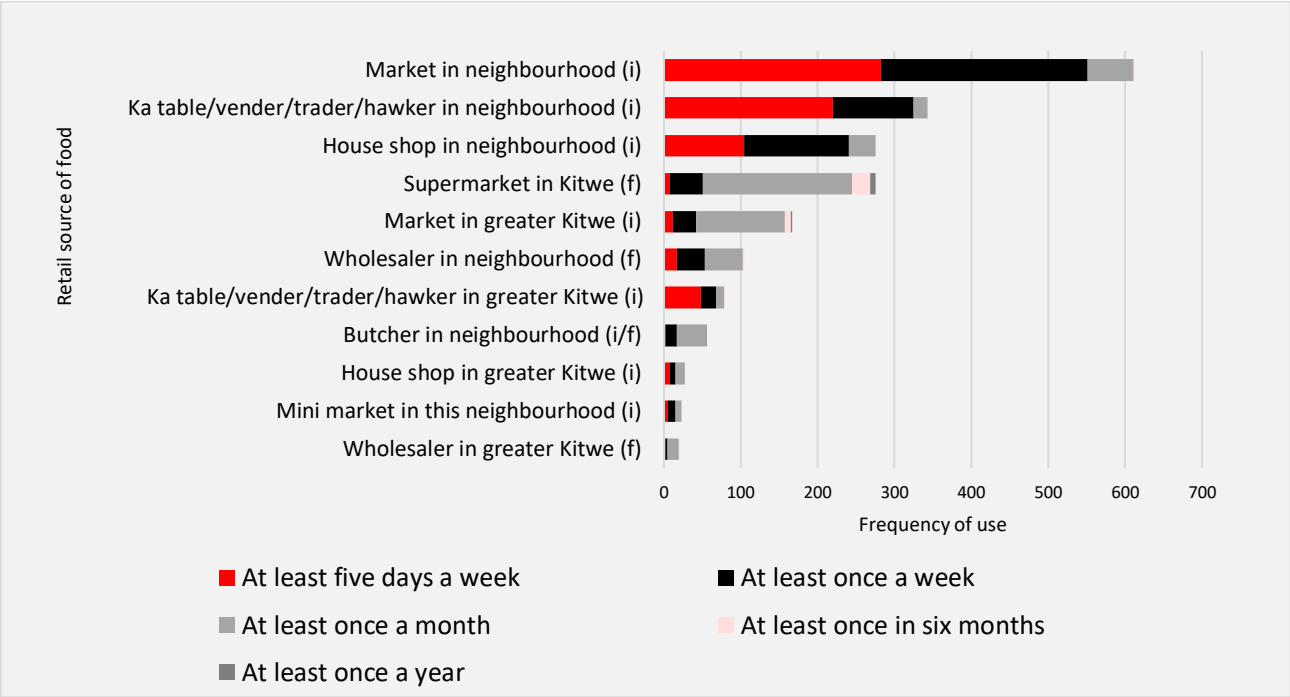
The most significant transformations to the urban food system taking place across the global South are formalization and supermarketization (das Nair et al, 2018; McFarlane, 2012; Reardon et al, 2007). These are enacted in the name of food and nutrition security and food access—but the outcomes are far different. Food traders are often the first food access point for urban residents, who frequent local traders for daily and weekly provisions. As urban food systems transform, and as urban managers seek to sanitize and "modernize" their cities—for example, by approving supermarkets and "sweeping away" informal traders—diverse food systems that offer many access points are undermined.

Measuring urban food insecurity

Different survey methods are used to make determinations about food insecurity. For example, in South Africa, the national statistical agency (Statistics South Africa) suggests that food insecurity is around 25 per cent (StatsSA, 2019), but this is informed by using the Food Poverty Line (FPL). However, detailed urban surveys, carried out in the 11 AFSUN cities using internationally applied food security measures, found much higher incidences among poor households. The Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance (FANTA) suite of measures—the Household Food Insecurity Access Prevenance Scale—found that 80 per cent of poor households surveyed were either moderately or severely food insecure (Battersby 2011: 13).

While important to understanding the state of food insecurity, such food security assessments miss deeper understandings of how the food insecure access their food and the reasons for their choices. In food security assessments carried out in the CUP and other aligned surveys, we added questions that sought to understand where foods were purchased and the frequency of these purchases. The primary food access point for the urban poor, and many other urban residents, is the informal economy. Figure 2 reflects the example of Kitwe, Zambia, but similar profiles were noted in Kisumu and Epworth (Battersby and Watson, 2018; Opiyo et al, 2018; Tawodzera and Chileshe, 2019; Tawodzera and Chigumira, 2019), as well as in Kingston, Jamaica (Kinlocke et al, 2019), Bangalore and Nanjing (Koduganti et al, 2019; Si and Zhong, 2018).

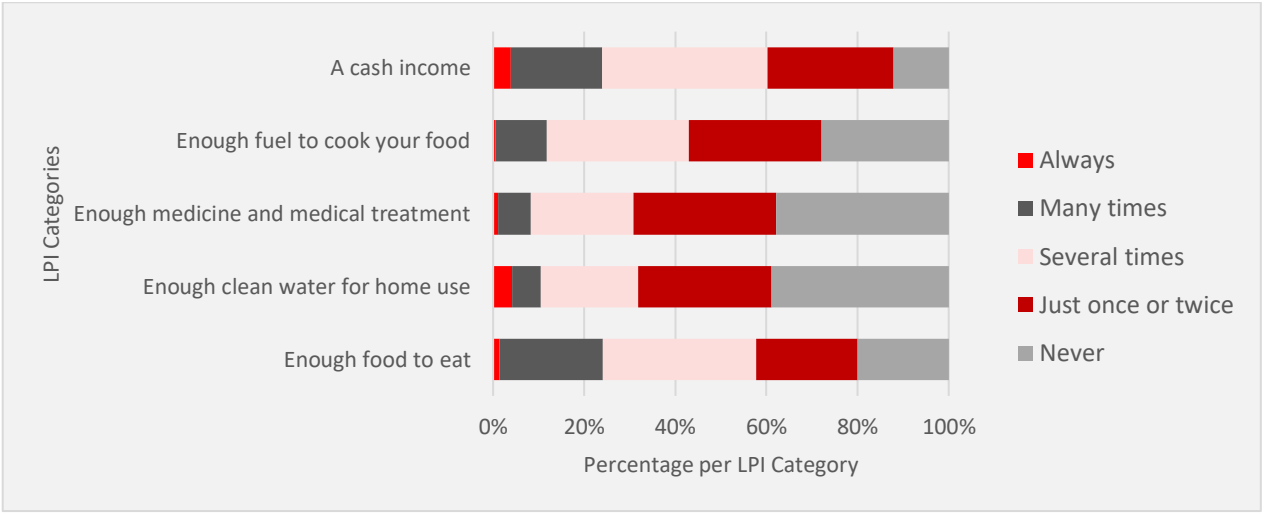
Figure 2: Food access points and frequency of access with formal (f) and informal (i) in Kitwe, Zambia



Source: Adapted from Tawodzera and Chileshe, 2019

Surveys and statistical information that assess poverty lines miss essential detail, too. Urban poverty is far greater than income poverty. Using a multi-dimensional poverty index allows a more robust understanding of urban poverty. The Lived Poverty Index (Figure 3) shows how lived poverty is experienced across different urban systems.

Figure 3: Lived Poverty Index (LPI) for settlements of Ipusukilo and Wusakile in Kitwe, Zambia (n=856)



Source: Tawodzera and Chileshe, 2019: 11

Qualitative interviews, conducted across cities of the South to support the quantitative surveys, have confirmed that when infrastructure is inaccessible or not trusted (as in the case of water quality), informal traders serve as key food access points by offering cooked meals, access to water sachets and many other services that residents need.

For example, in Epworth, Zimbabwe, traders were found to be pre-cooking dried beans in bulk, then selling family-sized portions of the cooked beans in a frozen form. This was in response to rapid increases in the costs of cooking fuels, which made it hard for families to afford this traditional source of nutrition.

"These days, because wood is scarce and other cooking fuel is so expensive, we cook a lot of these beans and then we place these in small packets and freeze them … otherwise no-one here would eat beans anymore; the tinned beans from the shops are also too expensive. Dry beans are not expensive, other costs [energy] are high and this takes beans from diets."

Informal vendor, Epworth, Harare, 2016

What does this mean for policy?

The aspirations of city leaders to create a "modern" African city, coupled with the limitations of modernist planning (Crush and Young, 2019), can result in informal food vending being "either subject to a policy environment that is at best benign neglect and at worse actively destructive, with serious food security implications" (Skinner and Haysom, 2016: 2).

Urban residents, in particular the food insecure, use a wide variety of food retail options, in highly strategic ways, to access food they can afford. These choices are diverse but might be informed by such factors as the option of short-term credit, the need to buy goods in quantities that suit both the budget and storage needs of poor households, and the need for partly- or fully-cooked foods due to the infrastructure limitations for many urban residents.

Deficiencies in infrastructure mean that for many poor households, the informal food vending economy often becomes the refrigerator, the stove, the storage cupboard and even the food preparation site for those households. Thus, informal traders are an integral part of urban infrastructure, as well as a key determinant in food access and diet quality. Informal traders are frequently embedded in communities, responding to specific cultural and dietary preferences. For the urban poor and food insecure, the services offered by informal food traders are fundamental to attaining a measure of food security.

But for informal food traders, the cost of doing business—of having to operate in the context of poor infrastructure and of multiple licencing costs and types—translates into higher food prices and compromises the overall viability of this vital component of the urban economy. Costs are all transferred to the poor, often the most food insecure, compounding food security outcomes.

Informal food vending is not a uniform retail type. In the cities studied, multiple informal food trading typologies were noted, from street traders to market operators, from specialist cooked food traders to those who sell very specific food types, such as beans or fish. Some operators may work out of homes or alongside roadways, while others conduct their businesses in structures that range from temporary stores to shipping containers. Policy responses need to consider these variations and the specific needs they present. Informal traders are best placed to articulate these needs, but they are seldom asked.

Conclusion

In cities of the South, particularly in Africa, high levels of food and nutrition insecurity exist not as a result of a scarcity of food but due to constraints in food access. Informal food vending is a key part of food and nutrition security. The informal food system does not operate in isolation. It interacts in dynamic and mutually supportive ways with the formal food system. Together, the formal and informal food retail options offer a diversity that best serves the poor. Those who are most food insecure in the city make use of this full range of food access options.

Seeing the food system of the South in its full range by including all food access points, from a single street vendor on a roadside to highly specialized supermarkets, is the key challenge for policymakers.

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