

# Urban infrastructure and informal traders – Improving food and nutrition security

Information Brief #3 | June 2021



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 highlights the critical role that infrastructure plays in the functioning and challenges faced by the informal food trading economy in Southern cities.

## What the findings tell us

Ensuring access to healthy, affordable food is not just about promoting food production—it is about effectively governing the entire urban food system. Informal food traders are key to ensuring food access in urban areas:

- Most urban residents access food through the market, not by growing their own food, so focusing on food access is essential.
- Infrastructure access and use across all food retail types is essential to an accessible and sufficiently nutritious urban food system.
- Inadequacies in access to and supply of infrastructure undermine the ability to safely prepare, store, and supply food. Infrastructural gaps thus become long term stressors for traders and the communities they serve.
- In Southern cities, urban residents make use of a wider variety of food retail options, based on everyday needs and infrastructural environments. Policymakers need to embrace a diversity of food retail options, from formal retail (such as supermarkets) to an array of informal trader types. All ensure access to food and must be considered in urban food and nutrition policies.
- Informal food traders often locate in areas where household infrastructure is lacking, supporting households in terms of both enabling food access, but also by responding to infrastructure deficits. This enhances food access and nutrition outcomes. If infrastructure for traders is also compromised, local nutritional uptake will always be sub-optimal, exposing households to poor nutrition outcomes, adding to the health, economic and social costs to society.
- Food types sold by traders are directly aligned to the infrastructure access of those traders.
- In cities of the global South, a key driver in food choices that result in obesity and non-communicable diseases relates more to infrastructure deficiencies than to personal choice and a sedentary lifestyle.
- Poor infrastructure increases operating costs, driving up the cost of food.
- Well located food markets provide a measure of food and nutrition security in urban areas. Ensuring such markets are developed as cities expand places food at the centre of development planning, but more importantly ensures that appropriate infrastructure is part of that development process.
- Popular, well located markets need to be protected and upgraded, in accordance with market operator needs, to ensure that they have the requisite infrastructure to effectively serve their patrons. Informal traders are best placed to articulate their infrastructure needs, but they are seldom asked.

### 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>

## The evidence: Infrastructure directly impacts food security

Urban governance approaches have a direct bearing on food trading, food and nutrition outcomes and general population wellness. However, a troubling gap exists in how food governance in cities, and how governance of the urban food system, is understood. The dominant trend has long been to focus on “historical policies strongly favouring the development of certain rural areas for commercial agriculture and certain urban areas for infrastructure and industry” (Zimbalist, 2017: 247). In this framing, food is generally seen as part of agriculture, and therefore the responsibility of rural governance structures, while cities are seen as sites of industry and commerce. Even when food needs are connected to urban governance focus, informal food trade is seldom considered. If it is considered, its critical role in urban food security is inadequately appreciated.

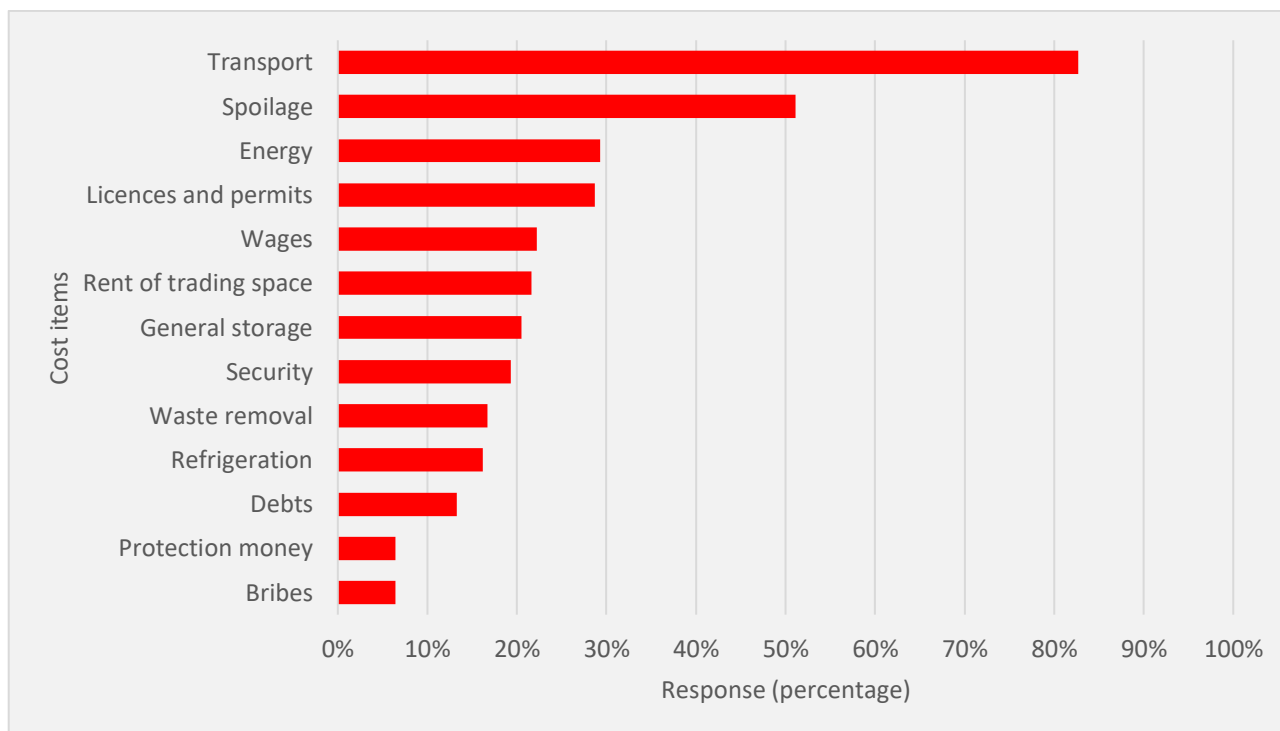
The rapid urbanization across the global South has exposed a policy vacuum. Cities lack both the political and fiscal authority to proactively govern urban food issues. Earlier work on the nutrition transition (from

Popkin, 1999) argued that the migration to cities was the cause of poor nutrition outcomes.

This view—which still dominates in policy positions—blames the poor, marginalized urban resident for making poor food choices, assuming “they desire for a modern, urban diet”. What this misses is the central role that urban planning and infrastructure access, coupled with urban poverty and precarious income, play in how food choices are made and what foods are accessible (Joubert, Battersby and Watson, 2018).

Poor infrastructure increases operating costs, driving up the cost of food. Surveys carried out in secondary Africa cities found that after the costs of goods, infrastructure-related costs accounted for the majority of trader operating costs. These costs included additional transport costs to ensure frequent stock deliveries, which are necessary because storage facilities were absent or electricity to power refrigeration was unreliable or unavailable. Some traders faced additional costs to supply their own water or to manage daily waste, despite paying market or municipal fees for such services (see Figure 1) (Opiyo and Ogindo, 2019; Sibanda and von Blottnitz, 2019; Tawodzera, et al., 2019).

**Figure 1: Kisumu food trader costs after stock purchase costs (multiple response option n=1839)**



Source: Opiyo and Ogindo, 2019

Infrastructure-related deficits influence stocking practices and, as a result, the food environments in the communities in which they operate. Information Brief #1 offered examples of the wide variety of ways that residents access food in the cities under review. The diverse retail options used are directly linked to the possibility of and costs of accessing essential urban infrastructure. Processed foods that are either pre-cooked (such as canned foods), foods that take less time and energy to cook (such as two-minute noodles), or foods that have an extended shelf life (such as par boiled rice or instant maize) all become strategic choices. These foods make sense, both for households and for food traders, when infrastructure is lacking.

In the cities examined for this study, lived poverty index reviews all pointed to constraints in access to key

infrastructural services, including energy for cooking, electricity and water supply. Costs associated with infrastructure access are having a direct impact on the nature and quality of foods consumed. Traders were all found to be making pragmatic choices related to risk mitigation and cost. Poor, food insecure urban households must make the same pragmatic decisions.

For example, in Kisumu, researchers found that children are often given a small amount of money each day to buy deep fried potato chips from local roadside traders for lunch, rather than eating a meal at home after school. This is because the chips are affordable when the energy costs are factored in. Also, the poor quality of water in many settlements can make these seemingly less-healthy foods actually safer for the children to prepare and eat than fresh food at home.

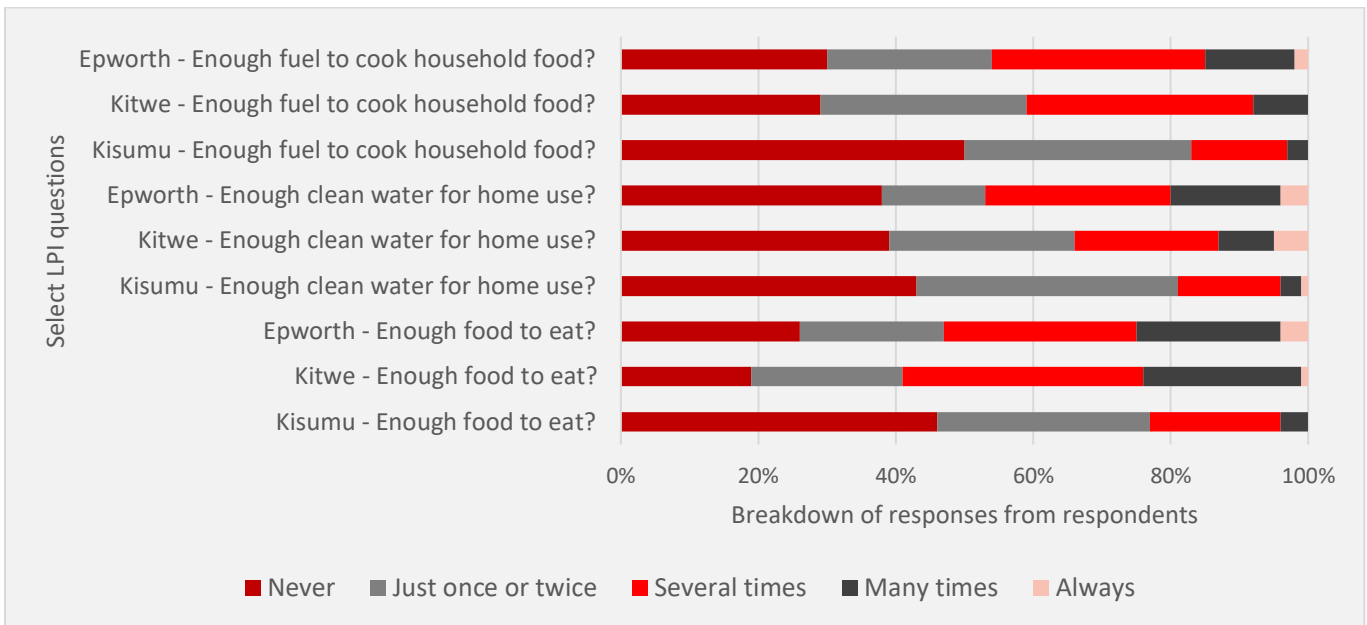


Image: A trader prepares fried chips for waiting children in a settlement in Kisumu, Kenya. (Photo credit: Samantha Reinders)

In the absence of adequate infrastructure and sites of sanitation, the wider food environment and its safety are undermined. Surveys sought to understand poverty in ways that went beyond just household income. An expanded multi-dimensional poverty assessment was conducted where households were asked how frequently they went without key urban services in the past year.

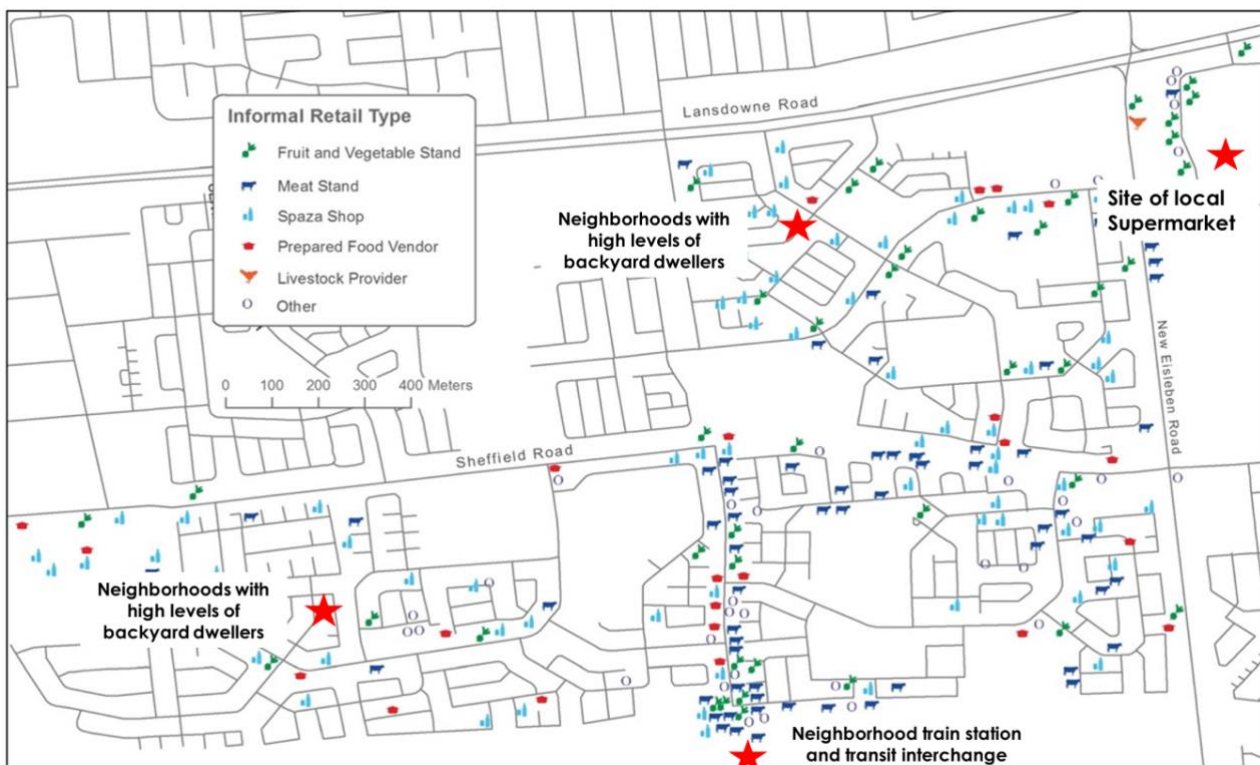
These services connect the urban system to the food system, demonstrating severe deficiencies. As Figure 2 highlights, many of the surveyed households are without a variety of essential infrastructure services several times, many times, or always. These deficiencies directly impact food choices, as well as where and how food is accessed.

**Figure 2: Lived Poverty Index results across three secondary Africa cities.**  
**Response to the question “How often did you or your family go without ...”**



Everyday life in cities also sees traders locating near key infrastructure, linking to city scale infrastructure, such as transport, important areas of foot traffic, entry points into neighbourhoods or sites of general congregation, such as markets. Figure 3 is an example of Cape Town, South Africa where both the congregation of traders can be seen, fresh fruit traders outside formal supermarkets, and many traders on. The main road outside the local train and taxi terminus. However, distributed across the neighbourhoods, spaza shops (kiosks or corner stores) and cooked meat sellers are clearly evident. These diverse food access options are also informed by the fact that the neighbourhood has a high proportion of so-called back yard dwellers, households living in the back yard of more formal housing. In these back yard areas, infrastructure access is even more constrained.

**Figure 3: Intersections between food trading and city infrastructure – Ward 34, Philippi, Cape Town, 2012**



Source: Adapted from Battersby, Marshak, Mngqibisa, 2016

In these settlements, informal food traders are providing an essential service, adapting to the infrastructure constraints of these settlements. Responses seeking to address deficits in infrastructure generally apply a formal market logic to these sites. This results in the development of facilities such as so-called “trader malls” or trader bays at roadsides but not near foot traffic. Trader malls imagine the clearance of the informal traders into easily governable facilities. Traffic planners imagine poor urban residents as if they each have their own vehicle.

Regrettably, both such examples were observed being developed in sites that did not serve the consumer food purchase needs. Additionally, gendered and class issues are often re-enforced<sup>1</sup> and licencing costs are prohibitive for most traders. The end result is that despite significant investment in new sites, traders generally return to their more regular sites of trade—sites that respond to the wider infrastructural needs of the traders and communities. This then creates a governance conflict. The infrastructural challenges faced by food traders are compounded by how the sector is governed and policed (Skinner and Haysom, 2016). This intersection between infrastructural deficits and absent inclusive urban food governance has a direct bearing on the foods and products sold by traders in many Southern cities, with negative impacts on food security outcomes.

The food and nutrition security of marginalized urban populations is shaped through a precarious relationship with a range of basic infrastructural services (Battersby and Watson, 2019; Hawkes, et al, 2017), most of which are not provided in a stable manner through access to a formal, city-wide ‘grid’ (Pieterse et al, 2018). But food and nutrition security is dependent on multiple forms of infrastructure (Roberts, 2001; Frayne and McCordic, 2015; Battersby and Haysom, 2019)—from transport (Behrens, 2014; Gollin and Rogerson 2010; Pirie 1993) to communications (Opiyo and Ogindo, 2019), from fuel and energy availability (including but not limited to electricity) for cold-storage and cooking (Sibanda and von Blottnitz, 2019; Smit, 2016), to water and sanitation for safe food preparation (Skinner, 2016) and disposal of human waste (Myers, 2014). Inadequacies in access and supply can undermine the ability to safely cook, clean, store, supply, manufacture and grow food (Sibanda and von Blottnitz, 2019; Morgan and Sonnino, 2010; Morgan, 2009). Infrastructural gaps thus become long term stressors.

Moreover, gaps in local authorities’ knowledge and assumptions about the relationship between infrastructure and food (including how people meet their needs at the interstices of ‘on-’ and ‘off-grid’) undermines or even criminalizes existing food provision (such as street trading). In turn, this undermines both health and livelihoods (Battersby and Muwowo, 2019; Steyn et al, 2013; Mboganie Mwangi et al, 2002; Skinner, 2016; Bénit-Gbaffou, 2016; Roy, 2005). For cities of the global South, an essential governance approach needs to be one that proactively considers the inter-relationships between informal food trading and infrastructures services in a range of urban contexts.

## Conclusion

Food is central to urban health, urban economies and urban form. In cities, the state of food and nutrition security is directly influenced by how the food system functions, how key actors are enabled or constrained, and the governance systems that ensure an equitable and just food system. The high levels of urban food insecurity and rapid rise in diet-related non-communicable diseases indicate that the food system is not working to serve the interests of urban residents. Informal actors in food trade are all essential to food access, utilization and stability in urban environments. Infrastructure-related deficits afflict Southern urban households (not just those living and/or working in informality), and informal food system actors across the food retail chain. Ensuring access to safe, affordable and efficient infrastructure is the direct mandate of local government.

One of the most significant impacts that a government can make to food system, and thus nutritional outcomes, is directly aligned to infrastructure provision. This is important to all urban residents, but for informal food traders and supply chain actors, it is an imperative.

<sup>1</sup>See Information Brief #2 for a discussion on gender differences among traders.

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