

Enhancing food system viability through spatial planning – Activating informal food trading

Information Brief #4 | 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 in cities of the South. This brief highlights the role that spatial planning and urban design plays in supporting the informal food traders who in turn secure urban food and nutrition security.

What the findings tell us

As urban policymakers strive to create more equitable and just cities, they must ensure that urban spaces can provide nourishment and promote health. Current urban systems, however, do not provide equitable access to safe, affordable and nutritious food for all. Addressing this inequity is a responsibility of the state, particularly urban government. Local government can influence and direct a city's food system through urban planning.

- Local governments may argue that they have no fiscal or operational mandate to engage urban food question, but the very nature of urban planning gives local governments a direct food mandate—one that can be enhanced through a food sensitive planning approach.
- Governance approaches to urban food issues must move from poverty relief projects to strategic responses that are embedded in wider urban governance approaches.
- Multiple urban systems and societal factors influence urban food system outcomes. From water to energy, from transport to waste, from time poverty to the gendered nature of household food provisioning to livelihood generation strategies, these systems are integral to food security and offer key urban governance opportunities.
- Food sensitive planning and urban design, as well as food specific planning, offer pathways to a more integrated approach to food, and urban, governance..
- Dominant planning approaches in cities of the global South overlook the essential services played by the informal food economy, the transversal nature of the urban food system, and the ways in which multiple urban systems intersect through food.
- A central feature in managing the urban food system and engaging in appropriate planning is a proactive engagement with informal food traders, who play an essential role. Because the informal economy often works in ways that are the antithesis to conventional planning, this is all the more complex and necessary.
- The rationale for supporting the development of supermarkets and malls does not take into consideration the needs of the interests of the urban majority, particularly poor residents.
- Governance actors need to embrace informal food systems to enable a diverse, equitable and effectively planned urban food system.

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: Food is a cross-cutting imperative for planning

Conventional, modernist and traditional approaches to urban planning have, for the most part, imagined food as something separate from urban function and processes. But food is central to urban health, urban economies and urban form. A city is both what it eats, and equally, how it eats. As cities have expanded and developed, their food systems have become more complex. However, for most cities in the global South, food and nutrition sensitive approaches are not part of economic and spatial planning imperatives. The end result is a food system that does not serve the needs of the majority of the urban population.

Informal food traders play a central role in the vibrancy, economy and food system of most developing world cities. In turn, these cities pay significant attention to informal food traders. This attention, unfortunately, focuses not on creating an enabling environment for these important food security players, but on governance, compliance and control through the management of city markets, collection of fees, and the policing of traders. This approach has its roots in an outdated mindset that saw food systems and nutritional outcomes as the rural, not urban, purview. Given the scale of urbanization globally, this governance approach needs to change.

The urban food system is already changing dramatically. This is most evident in the expansion of supermarkets in cities across the global South. Motivations for embracing supermarket and shopping mall expansion can be categorized into four key areas: 1) the aspirational vision

of the 'modern' city; 2) the imperative of economic growth; 3) the notion of the rising middle class as the investment frontier; and 4) the belief in public-private partnerships as the means to achieve development objectives (Battersby, 2018).

However, these reasons do not consider, and do not necessarily serve, the interests of the urban majority, particularly poor urban residents. Further, development decisions frequently disregard the needs of, and services provided by, informal food traders. Generally, informal food traders are adversely affected by such developments. At times, this includes being relocated for reasons that are unrelated—and often detrimental—to food system needs (see Figures 1 & 2).

Food traders are often the first food access point for most urban residents, who visit local food traders for daily and weekly provisions (see Figure 3). Typologies of food traders are diverse, often aligned to a specific need or product offering, and urban residents use this diversity strategically. This diversity adds resilience to the food system.

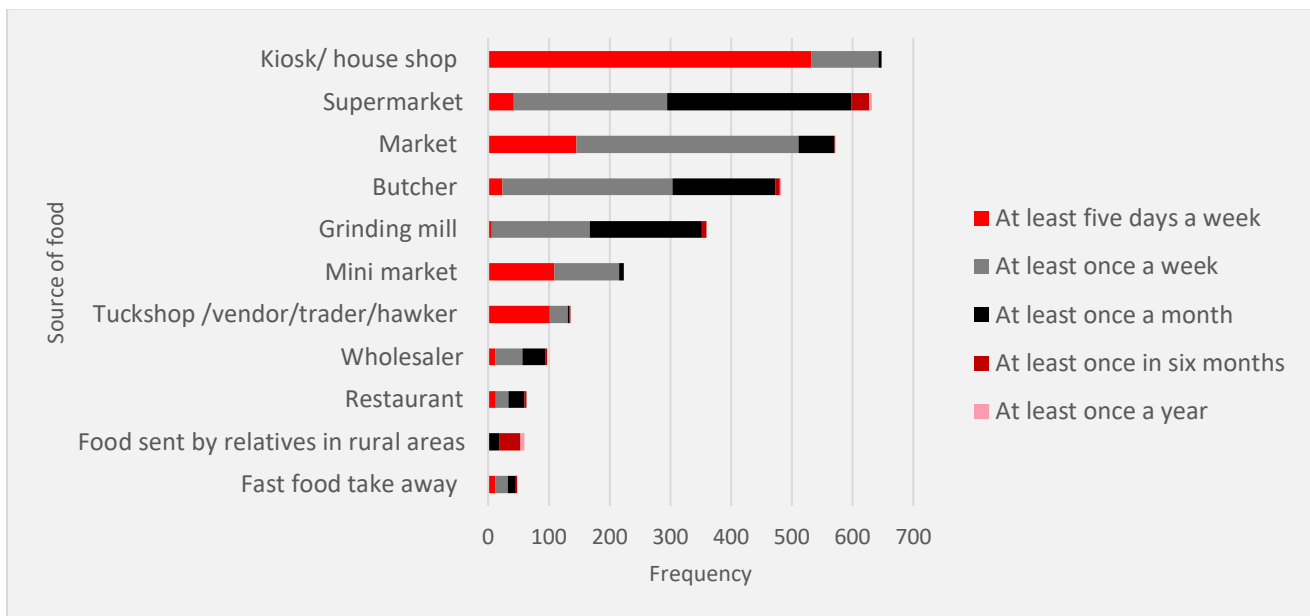
Figure 3 offers a number of insights into the functioning of the urban system. The findings shown are similar to those found across the other cities studied; the names of the store typologies may differ, but the trends are consistent. Both the quantities and types of foods purchased differ across these typologies. The kiosk or house shop (called many other names, including corner store, spaza, neighbourhood store, etc.) is the site of daily purchases of perishables, such as milk or bread, as well as small quantities of many other essential items. For poor households with little room or infrastructure, these outlets can serve as the pantry and even the refrigerator.

Figures 1 & 2: Traders located outside the downtown supermarket in Kitwe, Zambia, 2015 and traders removed in 2017 in order to make way for parking



Photos: Jane Battersby

Figure 3: Frequency of use by typology of food retail outlet – Kisumu case study



Source: Opiyo et al, 2019

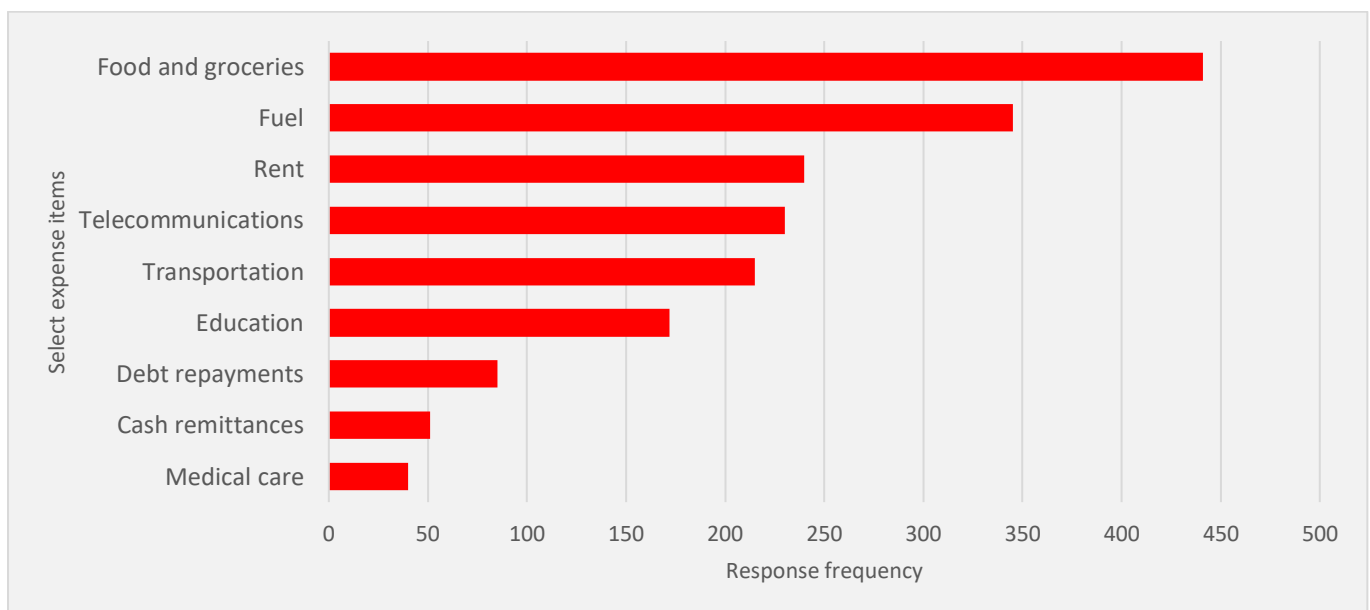
Most urban residents use the supermarket but do so strategically, buying key staples and non-perishable items in bulk to leverage bulk discounts, often after pay cycles, and generally on a monthly basis. Weekly purchases are made from butcheries and larger market areas.

Urban planners, however, rarely consider how these different food system actors are utilized or their infrastructure needs. Planning for and around such urban economic actors is generally approached from an urban management perspective, not a food systems

perspective. If the latter were applied, far greater efficiencies, increased food security, reduced food costs and many other benefits could potentially be achieved.

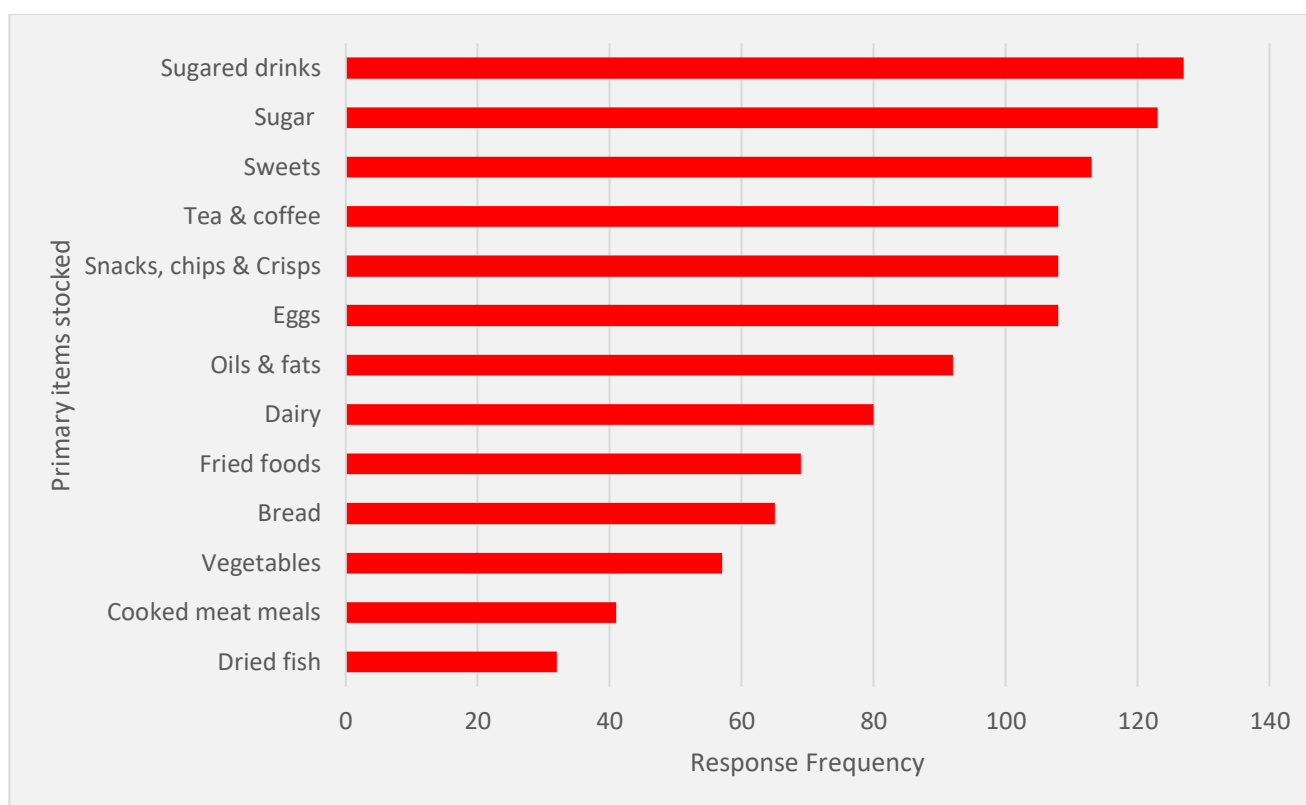
In addition to understanding the site of food purchases, it is important to examine where household incomes are being spent. A close enquiry into this offers further insights into the centrality of infrastructure, and how this might intersect in the neighbourhood. Figure 4 is a listing of the highest reported household expenses from the largely unplanned settlement of Epworth.

Figure 4: Highest reported household expenses by frequency of reporting for Epworth, Zimbabwe (n=483)



Source: Tawodzera et al, 2019

Figure 5: Most frequently stocked food items as reported by food traders in Kitwe, Zambia (n=375)



Source: Tawodzera and Chileshe, 2019

Given the high spend on food (Figure 4), it is worth examining what items are most frequently stocked by food traders. This offers further insights into both the decisions made by traders to cut costs through reducing wastage and limited storage, and through change in the food system. Figure 5 offers further insights into the changes taking place in the urban food system, often as a result of not seeing either the informal economy as a key food system actor or understanding how important urban food systems planning is in rapidly growing Southern cities.

Informal food vending interacts with a variety of urban activities and systems. The most obvious of these are the economy and food provision. However, vending often takes place in key locations intersecting with transport systems, education sites, key events, or market days. Because the food trade relies on a number of urban services—from water to energy, from space to transport, from health to wastes—cities have two choices. Firstly, they can ignore informal food traders, seeing them as an anathema to modern city life. The result is a constant state of disruption, conflict and ultimately compromised urban food system outcomes.

An emerging alternative is to embrace all food system actors, particularly the informal food economy, and to work with traders and their customers to pro-actively integrate informal traders into everyday city practice.

This approach requires an urban food systems planning approach. At the vanguard of this integrated approach is the urban planner.

Food and nutrition sensitive planning for urban governance

There is an emerging trend that seeks to de-scale food issues, with cities seeking ways to re-embed food within their planning and practice. Most examples are from Northern cities, with Toronto, Canada and Knoxville, Tennessee in the US being some of the first. Since then, cities such as Melbourne, Australia and Milan, Italy have proactively sought to use planning as a tool to enhance food system outcomes.

Importantly, food touches almost every aspect of urban governance, policy and economy.

“More than with any other of our biological needs, the choices we make around food affect the shape, style, pulse, smell, look, feel, health, economy, street life and infrastructure of the city.”

(Roberts, 2001: 4)

Given food's cross-cutting nature, the traditional silos of local government mean that efforts to govern food through a ministry of food (or similar) will not deliver the changes necessary to integrate the food system and drive a truly urban food agenda. Urban planning as a governance approach provides a more cross cutting way to engage strategically with current food system issues, while also understanding and planning for how the food system and rapidly growing urban systems can provide mutually beneficial outcomes.

That food needs to be an essential consideration for planners was recently affirmed by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), who stressed that "with the majority of people already living in urban areas – not only in large metropolitan areas, but also in secondary cities and small towns – a greater focus on urban planning as a way of influencing food systems development will be critically important" (Stamoulis et al, 2018: v).

This perspective confirms both the primacy of cities in the wider food system, but also the need for cities to pay far greater attention to food and the food system. Food sensitive planning and urban design concepts can be reconciled with the other aspirations of planning and urban design, such as:

- making sure we can enjoy attractive, liveable surroundings
- facilitating a strong and competitive economy
- facilitating major reductions in the environmental footprint of our settlements
- providing opportunities for stronger community interactions
- ensuring better shared spaces
- supporting fair access to the appropriate goods and services people need
- supporting environments for active living that make sure these qualities can be provided indefinitely and are resilient to challenges such as peak oil and climate change.

(Donovan et al, 2011:11)

However, any engagement in the food system of cities of the global South needs to proactively engage the informal economy, not just in terms of food traders, but across the entire food value chain. Informal actors are central players in diverse and resilient food systems.

In studies across cities of the global South, the food retail profiles of households resemble variants of those detailed

in Figure 3. The informal food trading system is the primary food access point for most urban residents, both low income and middle income. Despite their importance to society, food traders are often disregarded.

Planning has a central role to play in regulating the food system, in planning for a food system that best serves all urban residents, and in strategically articulating an urban food vision that is inclusive and nourishing. Where this sits in the urban governance structures is less important than its function. Different regions see different departments and governance approaches taking responsibility for what is broadly termed urban planning. Here the work of Rositsa Ilieva (2016) suggests four phases that support embedding a food sensitivity into urban planning (Table 1). Each phase demands different processes, information, consultations and resourcing.

Importantly though, given the urban transformation taking place across the global South, planning and design cannot stop at the design phase. Everyday food and urban systems are fluid, reactive and emergent. As a result, planners need to be far more reflexive. Once designs are enacted, processes are required to test, assess, evaluate and often adapt and then even perhaps, redesign, to ensure ultimate food system outcomes. This process of iterative engagement again requires different processes, information, consultations and resourcing.

In cities, the state of food and nutrition security and the effective functioning of urban food systems are directly impacted by governance decisions taken across scales and spheres of government. This challenge has been made abundantly clear during the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Food and nutrition security policy remains largely focused on the availability dimension of the wider food security definition, namely, growing more food, making food something that is seldom understood to be the responsibility of city or local governments. Additionally, traditional governance processes and incentive structures mean that departmental silos focus on single specific mandates, missing wider systemic or interconnected issues. Urban food and nutrition are cross-cutting in nature, spanning a wider variety of urban mandates, from health to economics, from planning to design, from land use to infrastructure, from social care to wider questions of well-being. The cross-cutting nature of urban food and nutrition require new and innovative policy and governance approaches at the urban scale, but also a politics that engages voice, as well as a full range of governance scales or spheres of government.

Conclusion

A city government can be hamstrung by siloed operating structures and systems that have been designed to ensure efficiency in formal environments, but are woefully inadequate in developing cities. Planning—urban planning specifically—offers a measure of integration. By its very nature, planning needs to engage across the silos of government, while at the same time, including projections and considerations of the future into its work. Food and the urban food system span multiple city functions and areas of responsibility. Combining food and planning makes sense and enables different approaches to both, and wider city engagement in the food systems challenges faced in Southern cities.

Engaging in such cross-cutting ways demands that the entire food system is considered. Central to this expansive view is the proactive inclusion of informal food system considerations into planning and governance. Cities are currently engaging multiple contemporary challenges, restructuring operating systems and processes to engage these challenges. Many of these challenges also demand greater integration and coordination, requiring city officials and politicians to find ways to address governance fragmentation. Food systems planning forms part of a new type of urban governance. Cities need to engage the entire food system—and the resulting food system outcomes—in a dramatically different way. More systematic engagements are required that integrate food system governance and planning into the existing city functions and obligations.

References

- Battersby, J. (2018). *Companion to Planning in the Global South*, Ch. 16. Abingdon/New York: Routledge. Online at <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781317392842/routledge-companion-planning-global-south-gautam-bhan-smita-srinivas-vanessa-watson>
- Battersby, J. and Watson, V. (2018). *Urban Food Systems Governance and Poverty in African Cities*. Routledge. Online at <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-edit/10.4324/9781315191195/urban-food-systems-governance-poverty-african-cities-jane-battersby-vanessa-watson>

- Donovan, J., Larsen, K. & McWhinnie, J. (2011). Food-sensitive planning and urban design: A conceptual framework for achieving a sustainable and healthy food system. Melbourne: Report commissioned by the National Heart Foundation of Australia - Victorian Division. Online at https://www.healthyplaces.org.au/userfiles/file/Design%20elements/foodsensitive_planning.pdf
- Ilieva, R. T. (2016). *Urban food planning: Seeds of transition in the global North*. Oxon, Routledge. Online at <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781315658650/urban-food-planning-rositsa-ilieva>
- Opiyo, P; Obange, N; Ogindo, H; & Wagah, G. (2018). *The characteristics, extent and drivers of urban food poverty in Kisumu, Kenya*. Consuming Urban Poverty Project Working Paper No. 4, African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town. Online at <https://consumingurbanpoverty.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/cup-wp-4-kisumufoodpoverty-1.pdf>
- Roberts, W. (2001). The way to a city's heart is through its stomach: Putting food security on the urban planning menu. Crackerbarrel Philosophy Series. Toronto Food Policy Council. Online at <https://sustainontario.com/greenhouse/custom/uploads/2019/03/The-Way-to-a-Citys-Heart-is-Through-its-Stomach-Wayne-Roberts-2001.pdf>
- Stamoulis, K., Lartey, A., & Morrison, J. (2018). Foreword. In Cabannes Y. & Marocchino C. (Eds.), *Integrating Food into Urban Planning*. London: UCL Press. Online at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/j.ctv513dv1.2.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A034dfef2537df0575ad78b5ec1f4e902>
- Tawodzera, G, & Chileshe, M. (2019). *The characteristics of the food system in Kitwe, Zambia*, Consuming Urban Poverty Project Working Paper No. 7, African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town. Online at <https://consumingurbanpoverty.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/cup-wp-7.-kitwefoodsystem.pdf>
- Tawodzera, G., Chigumira, E., Mbengo, I., Kusangaya, S., Manjengwa, O. & Chidembo, D. (2019). *The characteristics of the urban food system in Epworth, Zimbabwe*. Consuming Urban Poverty Project Working Paper No. 9, African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town. Online at <https://consumingurbanpoverty.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/cup-wp-9-epworthfoodsystems.pdf>

Acknowledgements

Funders

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) and the UK Department for International Development is gratefully acknowledged. The project is funded under the ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research (ES/L008610/1) and ESRC-DFID Joint Fund Follow on Funding Grant (ES/T015926/1).

Research team and contributors

This information brief was drafted by Gareth Haysom, and edited by Caroline Skinner and Leslie Vryenhoek. Information contained in this brief is thanks to the input of many research respondents from all the countries referenced on page 1. In each country, local research teams led the collection of data and conducted analysis of these data. The information and arguments made here are thanks to a hugely generative collaborative research process across cities and research institutions in the global South. All images, Samantha Reinders and African Centre for Cities.

