

Briefing

Urban

Keywords:

Food and agricultural policies, urban food security, urbanisation, livelihoods, East Africa



Issue date
February 2016

Policy pointers

Population growth, urbanisation and environmental change in East Africa are generating distinct food security challenges for urban slum dwellers and the rural poor.

Rural-urban linkages are reshaping economic and social relations in both rural and urban areas, but need to be managed to ensure low-income producers and consumers benefit from these transformations.

Informal value chains and markets play a pivotal role for both the urban and rural poor, but there is a gap between the perception and reality of food safety in local, informal markets.

A new narrative is needed that views food security through the lens of consumption of the poor, drawing on research that supports more comprehensive methodologies, community-driven capacity building, greater understanding of rural-urban linkages, a stronger voice for civil society in policy/advocacy, and more effective and inclusive local regulations.

Informal food systems and food security in rural and urban East Africa

Urbanisation is reshaping the landscape of East Africa. By 2050, the proportion of urban residents in East Africa will increase from 25 to 44 per cent. This dramatic shift is transforming relations between rural and urban areas, particularly as they relate to food security. In urban areas, residents of low-income settlements depend heavily on informal food systems that have been traditionally ignored or penalised by governments. In rural areas, the impacts of climate change are heightening food insecurity and poverty. An emerging narrative views food security through the eyes of low-income consumers in both rural and urban areas. It seeks to value the role played by informal actors in the food system, and to give a greater voice to the poor wherever they live.

At a December 2014 workshop in London, participants laid the groundwork for a new understanding of food security. They identified key issues such as changes in consumption patterns in both urban and rural settings; the importance of mapping the origins of food; the blurred boundaries between rural and urban areas, and its implications for food; the need for more inclusive policymaking; and the important role of the informal sector.

Building on these themes, IIED, the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) and Muungano wa Wanavijiji (the Kenyan Federation of the Urban Poor) co-organised a follow-up workshop in Nairobi, Kenya in October 2015, the last of three regional meetings. The 39 participants from research, civil society and

international organisations explored emerging food security trends in East Africa, particularly Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

Although East Africa remains predominately rural, this is changing rapidly. By 2050, the urban population in Kenya is projected to grow to more than 42 million, or 44 per cent of the total population. In Uganda, the number of people living in urban centres is projected to reach 32 per cent by 2050, nearly double the current level. In Tanzania, where nearly one-third of people already live in cities and towns, the urban population is expected to reach 53 per cent by mid-century.¹

Urban demand for food can potentially lead to more intensive agriculture, improved genetics and profound changes to the rural landscape.

Street vendors are key players in the food security agenda

Although this may help feed a growing population and meet the challenges of climate change, it can also lead to the spread of zoonotic disease and other negative impacts for food safety.² Thus

while production may be the starting point of food security, access and consumption are equally important dimensions.

Population growth, urbanisation and

environmental change in East Africa are generating distinct food security challenges for urban slum dwellers and the rural poor. Urban and rural settlements come in all shapes and sizes. Even within a single city or village, income levels may vary, which increasingly fragments food systems. More than half of Nairobi's 4 million residents, for example, live in 150 slums.³ Half of these slum dwellers buy ready-made food rather than cooking in their homes.

Recent research⁴ in these informal settlements has shown how food can be the entry point for a more holistic understanding of urban poverty that includes food safety and security, but also access to decent public spaces and livelihoods. As such, the challenges facing slums require interdisciplinary solutions.

Food insecurity in urban slums

Recent research in Nairobi shows that half of residents in urban slums are severely food-insecure and 35 per cent are mildly/moderately food-secure, leaving only 15 per cent as food-secure. Close to 20 per cent have one or fewer meals per day, and close to 40 per cent have only two meals per day. High levels of unemployment and underemployment mean that income poverty is the root cause of food insecurity; in many cases, low-income groups cannot afford to pay for adequate quantities of good quality food.⁵ The emerging double burden of malnutrition is equally worrying among low-income groups: whereas up to half of children are stunted, one-third of their mothers are overweight and obese.

The urban poor have several strategies to cope with food insecurity. Many live in single rooms, especially tenants and single migrants. Lacking space to cook and store food, they buy street-cooked food. Some households prepare a family meal, but still buy pre-cooked food to save on energy for cooking. Scavenging for food in Nairobi, especially discarded airline meals, is also an emerging trend.

Although often overlooked by policymakers, street vendors are key players in the food security

agenda. They provide accessible and affordable food, sometimes on loan and in small quantities — an essential service for the urban poor.⁴ Selling street food within slums also generates incomes for women; as an additional benefit, they can work as food vendors in their own neighbourhoods while looking after their children.

Unlike their counterparts in the central business district, street vendors in informal settlements do not need to rent space or pay for transport, and are less likely to be harassed by local government officials. But they also face severe challenges, including low earnings; lack of storage for food leftovers; exposure to health hazards due to limited sanitation, poor drainage, lack of solid waste collection and poor access to clean water; insecurity, especially at night; and limited support from local government/civil society.⁴

Food insecurity for the rural poor

The economies of East Africa depend heavily on smallholder agriculture and pastoralism, making them particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Reflecting the blurring distinction between rural and urban areas, rural residents are not only food producers but also, and increasingly, net food buyers.

In rural Kenya, drought kills livestock, while floods disrupt road networks and transportation. This leads to higher food prices in local markets. During food shortages, local people rely on casual labour, trade, food aid and cash programmes to survive. Non-farm activities, however, do not generate sufficient incomes. Lack of employment opportunities means pursuing activities such as charcoal production that deplete natural resources and damage already fragile environments rather than building resilience.

Government agencies and non-governmental organisations offer a wide range of social protection programmes in East Africa's dryland areas. These include direct social transfers, climate adaptation funds, free primary education, school meals, livestock insurance and food-for-work. Recipients use the money for basic needs or to buy animals for income-generating activities. These programmes, however, are not sufficient to compensate for increasingly frequent long-term droughts where asset depletion becomes a real problem.

A twin-track, holistic approach is needed. This would combine short- and long-term assistance, and invest simultaneously in sustainable agriculture, intensification of alternative productions, increased use of early warning

systems, enhanced disaster risk management and better access to markets.

Rural-urban linkages

Participants looked at how urbanisation is affecting rural areas, people and activities, and the need for policies to support rather than undermine positive rural-urban development.

In rural mountain areas of Tanzania, rural-urban linkages are reshaping economic and social relations. For example, farmers are shifting from cash crops like coffee to perishable food aimed at urban markets. Rural households also generate income in other ways, including working in cities or medium-sized/small towns. As a result, farming increasingly involves the use of waged labour and contract farming.

Such changes are closely related to new commercial relations with a growing number of traders/intermediaries who mediate the uncertainties of a fragmented market. The boundaries between formal and informal value chains are porous. For smallholders with little capital, poor access to credit, poor product standardisation and low production volumes, informal channels offer better access to markets than formal ones.

Emerging urban centres are another important manifestation of rural-urban transformation. In these mainly informal and dynamic sites of 'in situ' urbanisation, large villages with increasingly diversified economic bases act as market nodes for the surrounding rural region. They are essentially consumer markets, driven by increased demand for foodstuffs, which in turn is linked to higher rural incomes. They attract farmers, traders and buyers by providing services, jobs and market space for agricultural products. Growing connectivity and better infrastructure, with growing penetration of non-local staples and cereals, are essential elements of these transformations.

The informal nature of these centres, however, delays investment in infrastructure and services. Without formal status, local authorities cannot raise revenue through taxes. These constraints also limit the capacity to reduce the vulnerability of marginal farmers living on the fringes of these large villages.

Transforming these emerging urban centres into townships brings service and governance, leading to a potentially positive impact beyond urban boundaries. A successful transition from rural to urban, however, requires political will from local authorities, as well as supportive rules and legislation related to food markets and trade.

Box 1. Informal settlements: low income, high impact

In Kenya, the chaotic appearance of informal settlements, or slums, hides a high level of community-led initiative.¹ Knowledge is power, and the first step towards the co-production of solutions. Grassroots organisations such as Muungano wa Wanavijiji collect information essential to urban planners and local governments. For example, in Nairobi around 95 per cent of residents of slums are tenants and around 90 per cent of women own their own business. This has implications for policies: tenants may not be entitled to compensation in the case of eviction, while women who run their own informal business can benefit from targeted support. Enumerating housing and infrastructure gives residents a platform to negotiate for improvements in service provision and, if necessary, negotiate evictions and resettlements.

Muungano and local food vendor associations have also mapped street vending locations and their proximity to environmental hazards. This has stimulated action such as local collection of solid waste, which city workers then pick up at designated points. Street vendors have begun to form savings groups and buy food collectively to reduce costs. Women are recognised as experts and play leading roles in decisions.

Community-led initiatives tend to be more holistic than sector-specific programmes driven by external actors. Action on housing, for example, raised concerns about inadequate sanitation, which particularly affects the health of women. A subsequent sanitation campaign used public health legislation to leverage action, showing the sophistication of low-income communities.

¹ Githiri, G *et al.* (2016) Nourishing livelihoods: recognising and supporting food vendors in Nairobi's informal settlements. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/10762IIED.html>.

The value of informal markets

Contrary to the popular view that informal markets are marginal and temporary, recent research in East Africa suggests that informal markets are large and here to stay.⁶ It is estimated that unregistered transactions contribute to 55 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's gross domestic product and 80 per cent of its labour force.⁷ The reach of informal markets into the city is pervasive, making a considerable contribution to feeding the urban poor.

Moreover, 'informal' does not necessarily mean 'unsafe'. In Kenya's dairy sector, for example, local cultural norms and household practices such as boiling milk minimise risk of contamination. Conversely, modern retail systems (especially in the case of pork) lead to higher levels of bacteria in the product.

A gap exists between the reality and perception of food safety in local, informal markets. This results in an array of inadequate policies and regulations that tend to penalise the informal sector. A better understanding is needed of how informal markets help manage the inevitable tension between producers (who want better prices) and consumers (who want, and often can only afford, lower prices).

An emerging narrative

Traditionally, the food security agenda has pitted formalised approaches against 'backward' and 'unsafe' informal food systems. This drive to 'modernisation', however, has often ignored the valuable role played by informal actors, particularly in meeting the food security needs of both urban and rural poor.

A new, consumption-oriented narrative is emerging that puts the needs of low-income urban and rural groups first. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations seeks to build the capacity of all actors across the food system. For its part, UN Habitat is working with, rather than against, informal food markets/vendors through training, improved infrastructure and sanitation, better shelter for kiosks and communications technology to connect producers with consumers.

One-size-fits-all policies fail to grasp the diversity of factors affecting food insecurity for different groups. Governance systems must integrate the voices of civil society, taking time to build trust with grassroots movements. Through deep dialogue, such partnerships must help communities identify their own needs and priorities to co-produce innovative solutions.

Further research

Participants identified six key thematic areas for interdisciplinary work that includes action-research and policy dialogue:

Methodology. Statistical data (with key indicators) must inform dialogue with authorities who work on a quantitative level. At the same time, narratives are needed to put the data into context and create a big picture. Together, the two can be greater than the sum of their parts.

Capacity building. Community needs should drive the capacity building agenda, and include monitoring, evaluation and learning elements. Training efforts should flow North-South, South-South and, crucially, South-North. This will enable researchers and practitioners to gain a real grasp of issues and solutions proposed by local populations.

Policy and advocacy. New policies are not needed. Rather, current norms should embrace the perspectives of both institutions (duties of people) and citizens (rights of people). Civil society organisations and researchers should speak with one voice to influence policies that support, rather than penalise, 'marginal' actors who are actually effective. These groups could be informal sector traders and vendors who link rural and urban worlds, and ensure access to food for the poorest.

Linkages. More research is needed to understand the nature of rural-urban linkages, and their impact on different food systems and actors' livelihoods. Information should be broken down by location, income, gender and age. It should explore how best to link producers and consumers to improve returns for smallholder farmers, while ensuring poor consumers are not excluded.

Local regulations. A wide range of regulations directly or indirectly relate to food security (environmental protection, access to adequate water and sanitation, food handling and production, trade and vending). Regulations must reflect a respectful dialogue between local government and civil society. Enforcement should balance duties and responsibilities with rights and entitlement to justice.

Additional evidence. As awareness in food consumption grows, more wide-ranging evidence is needed to support innovation and effectiveness. Apart from more data on urban slums, more information is needed on rural transformation and its impact on food security. This could include changes in food production systems under the combined impacts of climate change and urbanisation, access to markets and the role of small towns. Specifically, it should focus on groups left behind, including low-income net food buyers.

Cecilia Tacoli

Cecilia Tacoli is principal researcher in IIED's Human Settlements Group. This briefing reflects the input of participants of the Nairobi workshop in October 2015.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

Contact

Cecilia Tacoli
cecilia.tacoli@iied.org

Bill Vorley
bill.vorley@iied.org

80–86 Gray's Inn Road
London, WC1X 8NH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
Fax: +44 (0)20 3514 9055
www.iied.org

IIED welcomes feedback via: @IIED and
www.facebook.com/theiied

This research was funded by UK aid from the UK Government and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the donors.



Notes

¹ UN DESA (2014) World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/352). / ² ZED, Urban Zoo: disease emergence in urban areas. www.zoonotic-diseases.org/project/urban-zoo-project. / ³ Pamoja Trust and Shack/Slum Dwellers International (2008), Nairobi Slum Inventory, Nairobi. / ⁴ Ahmed, S *et al.* (2015) Cooking up a storm: community-led mapping and advocacy with food vendors in Nairobi's informal settlements. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/10734IIED>. / ⁵ Kimani-Murage, EW *et al.* (2015) Evidence of a double burden of malnutrition in urban poor settings in Nairobi, Kenya. *PLoS ONE* 10(6): e0129943. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0129943. / ⁶ Roesel, K and Grace, D (eds) (2015) Food Safety and Informal Markets: Animal Products in Sub-Saharan Africa. Routledge, New York. <http://bit.ly/1J8EUUr>. / ⁷ ADBG (27 March 2013), Recognizing Africa's informal sector. www.afdb.org/en/blogs/championing-inclusive-growth-across-Africa.