INTRODUCTION: HUNGER IN AFRICAN CITIES

The human right to adequate food and nutrition has to be guaranteed for the residents of African cities, where many live in informal settlements and cannot afford to buy food. Food is expensive and employment opportunities are scarce. Over three quarters of lower-income urban people suffer from food insecurity according to a survey carried out in eleven cities in Southern Africa by the African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN). In Kenya, people living in urban slums have been identified as among the most malnourished groups. Some residents have only one meal per day, and the chances of eating protein are low because the cost of buying meat, fish or even milk and eggs is prohibitive. Regarding dietary diversity, the AFSUN study also found that 96% of the food intake of the urban poor in Southern Africa was starchy staple foods. Those that were food insecure (the majority) had access to only five of the twelve food groups measured, two of which were sugar and beverages. This causes obesity and poor health, including vulnerability to the so-called non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes.

URBAN AGRICULTURE’S CONTRIBUTION TO NUTRITION

Around 40% of urban households in Africa are thought to be engaged in urban farming. Most farm to supplement their diet and save on food expenses, but many, especially urban livestock keepers, also sell part of their production, such as milk and eggs, which provides a secondary source of income.

Urban agriculture significantly contributes to health and nutrition by providing fresh produce for lower income families. In Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, urban farms provide 90% of the city’s leafy vegetables and over 60% of its milk. In Yaoundé, Cameroon, the growing of a variety of traditional leafy vegetables provides 8% of the protein and 40% of calcium consumed in the city. Statistical analyses have demonstrated that children in urban households consuming animal source foods (ASF) are healthier, indicating urban livestock keeping is beneficial to health and nutrition.

Women predominate among urban farmers, especially in East and Southern Africa. Agricultural tasks are divided by gender, with women sometimes excluded from owning and controlling large livestock. Women are also disadvantaged in their access to land in sub-Saharan Africa as compared to men, and this also affects their position in urban agriculture. Due to women’s inferior land rights, female-headed households predominate among the urban poor, who lack access to space for urban farming.
In some medium-sized towns in Tanzania as many as 90% of households farm in town, while in large capital cities very few do so, especially among the low-income households, with about 5–10% farming inside the capitals. In Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, around 20% of households farm in the city, while 7% keep livestock. This adds up to 200,000 households, with thousands of cattle, sheep and goats counted in the 2009 census.7

Even though it may seem surprising, it is not always people living in poverty who practice urban farming. Middle and upper income households also farm—and it is easier for them to do so because they have space in their backyards. In contrast, for those affected by poverty, living in slums or crowded, unserviced informal settlements, it is hard to find space to farm. They usually farm in open spaces that are less secure. Due to a lack of planning for urban agriculture, poor people are constantly losing their access to a place to grow crops or keep livestock, and thus their right to adequate food and nutrition is continuously under threat from changing and competing land uses. High-density slums with no nearby open spaces are the equivalent of ‘food deserts’ in African urban areas.

Planning urban open spaces for low-income households, especially female-headed households, to grow crops and keep livestock should therefore be a priority in realizing the right to food. Until recently, however, few national or local governments have actively supported urban agriculture through policies and programs. The authorities have often turned a blind eye to what is considered a leftover rural practice; however, in times of disaster or civil war (for example in Uganda, Mozambique, Liberia or Sierra Leone) urban farming has been more actively encouraged as a survival strategy.

But things are changing. Despite no country in Africa having reached the stage of Brazil’s pioneering ‘Right to Food: Zero Hunger’ approach, which includes land access for urban farming, some cities—including Kampala (Uganda), Cape Town (South Africa), Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and Nairobi (Kenya)—now have departments or administrative units of food or agriculture within their local governments. For example, the City of Kampala, which created an Agriculture Department following decentralization in the 1990s, passed urban agriculture and livestock ordinances in 2006. Nairobi established a Directorate of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries in 2013 and is currently in the process of passing supportive legislation.

The situation in Nairobi is helped by an active civil society organization, the Nairobi and Environs Food Security, Agriculture and Livestock Forum (NEFSALF). Hosted by the Mazingira Institute, an independent research and development organization, NEFSALF has been training both male and female farmers for the last decade, including on the right to food, in collaboration with government extension trainers. Farmers joining the Forum also formed a network with over a thousand members.8

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CONCLUSION

Despite some progress, none of the African city administrations have yet adopted a right to food approach. Rather, the support systems aim at developing value chains and food systems planning to improve production levels. The alignment of urban agriculture policies with the nutritional needs of urban families living in poverty, including female-headed households, has yet to be articulated by African cities.

Currently, there are popular assumptions supported by media statements that urban malnutrition and obesity result from higher urban incomes, poor dietary choices and changing lifestyles. However, data evidences that they are mainly caused by urban poverty and the lack of access to adequate quality and quantities of affordable food. As urbanization increases, urban poverty and undernutrition are becoming critical issues in achieving the right to food.

In addition to supporting small-scale food producers in rural areas to reach urban markets—on terms that are beneficial both to them and to urban consumers living in poverty—what is needed are policies that recognize and support urban land access for agriculture and livestock-keeping in African cities, and that prioritize people living in poverty and female-headed households. Also needed are institutions capable of planning urban food systems to address the human right to adequate food and nutrition.