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DEVISING URBAN FOOD SECURITY POLICY FOR AFRICAN CITIES

by James Sgro

Key Points

- Informal food services are one of the few options for financially disadvantaged families. Food access policy needs to be created in partnership with informal economy actors to ensure that those who rely on informal systems are not ignored.
- As household size increases, the likelihood of food insecurity grows exponentially. Adequate social protection programs are required to support household dependants including children and the aged and improve food security.
- Secondary school completion is a specific milestone that significantly increases one's food security outlook. Free primary and secondary school policies could return dividends in terms of nation-wide food security, and subsidized uniforms and feeding programs are a good starting point.

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations agreed on a new agenda for world development. As the old Millennium Development Goals came to a close, a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were created with the intent to end poverty by 2030. To achieve the second SDG, Zero Hunger, the United Nations set forth strategies to invest in rural infrastructure and improve agricultural productivity and sustainability. However, such an emphasis on productivity fails those living in cities, where accessing food is more important than producing it. Viable policy recommendations in urban areas must focus efforts on SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities) along with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) to improve food security for residents.

Prior to the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals, the Sustainable Development Report called for a second 'green revolution', modernizing agricultural inputs, practices, and technologies for the sake of feeding the upcoming nine billion people by 2050 (United Nations 2009). Of those nine billion people, 2.3 billion are expected to reside in Africa, more than doubling the continent's population (Pieterse 2011). Currently, global food production is net positive. More food is being produced than the world consumes, yet malnutrition still abounds. To realize universal food security, policy makers must balance the concerns of ensuring there is enough food to eat with the requirement that it reaches those who need it most. The food in question must be spatially accessible and financially affordable. Often, the food that is affordable is of poor nutritional quality, contributing to the undernutrition of the household.



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Policy Considerations

A re-emphasis on food systems is required to meet the goal of Zero Hunger. Thirty-three countries in Africa currently have Global Hunger Index levels at the ‘significantly concerning’ mark (von Grebmer 2017). This signals that the distribution of food in the current system is failing those most vulnerable. As a means to achieve both SDGs 2 and 11, governments and non-governmental organizations must first recognize that rural and urban environments differ greatly. In Southern Africa, an overemphasis on researching rural lifestyles and inferring those results to the urban setting has led to uninformed urban policy recommendations. Not only are food security strategies quite different in these two environments, urban food security is consistently revealing itself to be more nuanced than first perceived. As such, it is critical to have reliable and consistent measurement tools to quantify food security in rapidly urbanizing areas.

Most of the growth in Africa will happen in cities that have yet to fully form. Currently, approximately 700 million Sub-Saharan Africans live in urban informal settlements. The number of urban dwellers in Africa is also expected to increase by 20% by 2052 (Pieterse 2011). This transition will result in fewer small holder farms and more urban residents whose work will not involve growing food. Residents of informal settlements also tend to not benefit from many public services other urbanites might enjoy, and are thus left with many of their basic needs unmet.

The conditions of those living in informal settlements are often quite difficult to quantify, reasserting the importance of deriving consistent metrics to measure the extent of food insecurity at local levels. From these measurements, informed policy recommendations can meet the needs of vulnerable groups in their own local context. An international study focused on urban Africans at the household level found that education, wage, and household size are effective metrics to predict food security (Sgro et al 2018). Therefore, policies that attempt to alleviate food insecurity are encouraged to focus on these topics as they relate to households.

This brief suggests policies addressing urban household characteristics in Africa that relate strongly to food security. Emphasizing reproductive rights, free primary education, and flexible food systems are all specifically identified interventions that benefit vulnerable groups. Lastly, to properly

implement these policies, it is vital to properly identify those who are food insecure, which should be done through accurate and systematic sampling.

So long as food costs money, consistent wages are vital to guaranteeing a food secure household. Findings from the research of Sgro et al (2018) suggest that wages are the most important metric for predicting food security. In the urban context, household food security is about access to affordable, nutritious food. Whether the food is sourced from a local market or nearby informal vendor, it must remain both affordable and accessible.

As supermarkets become more prevalent, increasing pressure is placed on stakeholders to eliminate informal food systems. Eradication campaigns that seek to disestablish already existing food distribution systems limit food access for those most vulnerable. Correspondingly, actors in the informal economy who are already politically excluded are pushed further towards the periphery.

Instead, building lasting partnerships between government and public spheres can act as a bridge to ensure spatial accessibility and financial affordability. A blended approach to food access requires ensuring that the otherwise marginalized members of the informal economy are part of the decision-making process. Such partnerships help lay the foundation for a well-functioning food system.

Larger families are much more likely to be food insecure. The evidence indicates that food insecurity is extremely likely when household size exceeds a certain point (Sgro et al 2018). Household size varies between rural and urban environments, as does the role it plays relating to food security (Sidhu et al 2008). Where in the rural context, more household members might mean more farmhands, urban households are unable to participate in agricultural activities on the same scale (Battersby et al 2015). What is of more importance in cities is whether additional household members can earn an income. Larger households tend to have larger numbers of dependants which can add to the food security strain (Amaza et al 2008). Dependants are categorized as household members who are too old or young to work.

Adequate social protection arrangements that accommodate household members in childhood (e.g. child grants) and in old age (e.g., state pensions) would help to curb the food security challenge for those already financially disadvantaged.

Completing secondary school is a specifically important milestone to increase one's food security outlook, not just for themselves, but for their family. Family heads with more education tend to earn higher wages and make more informed decisions around their family's eating habits. Initiatives like Malawi's Free Primary Education policy helps gear the nation towards meeting the goal of a quality education, however similar initiatives must be implemented in gradual and well-defined phases to maintain educational quality.

Education needs to be accessible for all. While initiatives like Zimbabwe's 1996 Education Act help align the nation as a whole by mandating a nondiscriminatory teaching framework, state actors must remain accountable so that action matches vision. Past research on Southern African education reflects the broader finding that girls are less likely to attend school (Wamba and Mgomzulu 2014). Because children who drop out tend to come from marginalized groups, school programs that specifically support disadvantaged students would benefit attendance rates and address disparities in enrolment. Such strategies can include subsidized uniforms and feeding programs.

Sgro et al (2018) suggest that secondary school completion is a better predictor of food security than primary school completion. This supports policy initiatives that are concerned with making secondary school more accessible. While it may be pragmatically challenging to provide universal secondary education, it is worth noting that free primary school should be just the first step towards universal education.

These recommendations are only effective when the vulnerable groups are properly selected. To do this, it is recommended that stakeholders conduct studies that incorporate surveys at the household level. Evidence suggests that education, household size and income are effective predictors of household food insecurity. Therefore, household surveys conducted for the purpose of informing policy should be guided through these three central themes.

Conclusion

The countryside is not the same as the city, yet too often policy confuses the two. The United Nations has framed food security solutions around production – focusing on increased investment in rural agriculture. Yet the contemporary food system is equally composed of production and access. Not only does there need to be enough food to go around, there also needs to be enough infrastructure in place to distribute it. If food security issues for the urban poor can't be solved now, then that challenge will only increase given the rapid urbanization that is expected to take place in the next 30 years. Most of this growth will be felt in Asia and Africa, and policy needs to be ready to handle population strains as cities are pushed to capacity. A study targeting poor Southern African urban dwellers found that food secure households tend to be financially stable, smaller in number, and have higher education (Sgro et al 2018). Policy initiatives focused on school attendance and welfare arrangements for household dependants could help transition vulnerable families into the 'food secure' category. In terms of access, members of the informal economy need to be included in decision-making processes for local food systems, since food insecure families often depend on informal food systems as the only nearby affordable option. Lastly, to identify where these strategies would be most effective, stakeholders should conduct surveys at the household level that involve inquiries on education, food affordability and household size.

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James Sgro is an MA candidate in the Global Governance program at the Balsillie School of International Affairs. His research interests revolve around applying predictive analytics to better understand food insecurity for the financially disadvantaged.