

CHAPTER 6

GOVERNANCE

Informal Food Markets in Africa's Cities

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KEY MESSAGES

- Urbanization is moving fastest in Africa south of the Sahara, with major implications for food security and other governance challenges.
- Large urban poor populations rely heavily on the informal economy for accessible, affordable food. Most eggs, meat, fish, and milk sold to the urban poor are from informal markets.
- Food security policies in urban Africa face institutional, administrative, and political challenges:
 - Lack of local mandate for food security under decentralization policies.
 - Lack of cross-sectoral, cross-ministerial policy integration.
 - Political contest over cities that occasionally leads to violence.

- Government interventions have focused on control, regulation, and often violent eradication of the urban informal food economy.

POLICY AND RESEARCH NEEDS

- What tools can institutionalize regular engagement between local governments and informal workers?
- How can the informal economy be actively incorporated into discussions of urban food security?
- How can vertical and horizontal cooperation across sectors and ministries be promoted to improve governance of the informal sector?
- What approaches, such as training informal sector workers, can improve food safety and support the benefits provided by the sector?



Urbanization is a global phenomenon, but in Africa south of the Sahara¹ its pace and impact are particularly notable. Africa's urban population is the fastest growing in the world. By 2030, the continent is expected to reach a tipping point, when for the first time the majority of the region's population will live in urban areas.² These broad trends capture a tremendous degree of variation across urban Africa, ranging from the megacities of Kinshasa and Lagos, which are home to more than 10 million people, to secondary cities like Tema in Ghana and Ndola in Zambia, with populations of fewer than 750,000 people.³ While these demographic shifts contribute to a number of urban policy challenges, including limited housing supplies, infrastructure bottlenecks, pressure on scarce public services, and environmental degradation, the implications for food security in urban Africa are equally significant.

The urban poor are more vulnerable than their rural counterparts are to fluctuations in food prices and exchange rates. Urban residents in Africa are less likely to produce food for their own consumption and they devote a higher share of their household budgets to food purchases than rural populations.⁴ This vulnerability was evident during the 2008 and 2011 global food price spikes, when Africa experienced the

highest incidence of urban food price riots.⁵ Africa's urban centers are characterized by both a growing middle class and growing urban poverty.⁶ Significant pockets of food insecure populations can be found in even the wealthiest countries in the region. For example, food insecurity is endemic in the poorest neighborhoods of Gaborone, Botswana, and Windhoek, Namibia.⁷ More broadly, diets in African cities rely heavily on starchy staples, and this lack of diversity contributes to malnutrition.⁸

The governance challenges to enhancing food security in urban Africa span institutional, administrative, and political dimensions. Institutionally, food security policies involve intersectoral coordination across multiple ministries, which typically occurs under the leadership of ministries of agriculture or health. When the focus is explicitly on the urban dimensions of food security, greater engagement is needed with ministries of urban and local development. National food security strategies, however, are often created parallel to, rather than in concert with, urban development strategies. This hinders full integration of urban food security into national planning. For example, Uganda's recent national urban policy focused on water, housing, and waste management but neglected food security.⁹

Administratively, many African countries are pursuing varying degrees of decentralization, which implies that a growing number of government actors are engaged in different dimensions of urban food security. But food security policy formulation is rarely devolved entirely to local or municipal governments, precisely because food security commitments require sustained financing and intersectoral capacity that is often even weaker at the subnational than at the national level. Moreover, local autonomy over food security could result in uneven progress across communities within the same country. In South Africa for instance, arguably one of the region's most decentralized countries, local governments have no clear mandate over food security.¹⁰ Local governments are, however, often granted administrative authority to regulate urban markets, particularly when it comes to monitoring adherence to food safety regulations. Yet this authority is often shared between urban councils and national ministries, which muddles accountability.

Politically, as cities become more economically important and home to a sizable share of voters, they can become a focal point for power disputes between mayors and presidents and between ruling and opposition parties.¹¹ At its most extreme, this culminates in political violence that disproportionately affects the urban poor, including their food security. For example, intense fighting during the 2000s in Côte d'Ivoire's commercial capital of Abidjan severely reduced dietary diversity among the city's population.¹²

This chapter explores the linkages between these governance dimensions and urban food security through the lens of the informal economy.¹³ Oversight of the informal economy rarely falls to any one particular ministry, and its regulation is typically shared between local and national governments. As an important source of votes, the sector is also sometimes politicized by presidents and mayors, especially around elections. While most of the urban poor rely heavily on the informal sector, including street traders and marketers, for access to affordable food, adherence to food safety standards is much less constrained than for those operating in the formal food sector. Concerns over food safety partially explain the difficult relationship between African governments and the informal sector, which is characterized by alternating periods of harassment and appeasement. This chapter reviews

these dynamics and highlights approaches that have enabled governments to protect the health of low-income urban consumers while allowing the informal economy to thrive and contribute to food security and nutrition.

THE INFORMAL ECONOMY AND FOOD SECURITY

In many African cities, the informal economy has long been the linchpin of food security for the urban poor.¹⁴ Despite the trend of supermarket expansion in the region, the urban poor continue to depend heavily on informal markets and street vendors for daily purchases and use supermarkets only periodically for bulk purchases of staples.¹⁵ Most of the eggs, fish, meat, and milk sold to the poor in urban Africa are from informal markets. In countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mali, and Uganda, 80 to 90 percent of raw milk is purchased from vendors or small-scale retailers.¹⁶ More broadly, a survey of over 6,000 households in low-income neighborhoods in 11 African cities found that 70 percent of urban households regularly purchase their foods from the informal market or street vendors.¹⁷ Notably, reliance on the informal sector varies depending on how wealthy a country is: 90 percent of households in the South African cities of Cape Town and Johannesburg buy their food from supermarkets compared with only 23 percent in Maputo, Mozambique.¹⁸

Indeed, many observers contend that supermarkets in Africa are still largely a niche element of food retail and will continue to be so in the near future.¹⁹ A study focused on Kenya predicts that supermarket chains will continue to capture only a fraction of the urban fresh fruit and vegetable market.²⁰ Similarly, despite the presence of supermarkets in Zambia for more than 20 years, they still serve only a small share of the population.²¹

The informal economy is critical to urban food security for several reasons. First, informal markets tend to be located closer to low-income housing settlements than are supermarkets, making informal markets the main source of food for many of the urban poor. Itinerant traders offer a convenient source of foodstuffs for busy urbanites. Physical proximity is especially important because in many African cities irregular provision of electricity makes long-term refrigeration difficult, requiring almost daily food purchases.

Second, the informal economy improves food affordability through both incomes and prices. Informal vendors can sell in smaller quantities, at lower prices, and on credit.²² Moreover, the informal economy is a critical source of income for the urban poor, accounting for approximately 72 percent of nonagricultural employment in Africa.²³ Street vending and informal trade are especially important sources of livelihoods and financial independence for women, who are the primary sellers of street foods and perishable goods, such as fruits and vegetables.²⁴ In addition, informal trade is often the entry point into urban employment for newly arrived rural migrants.²⁵

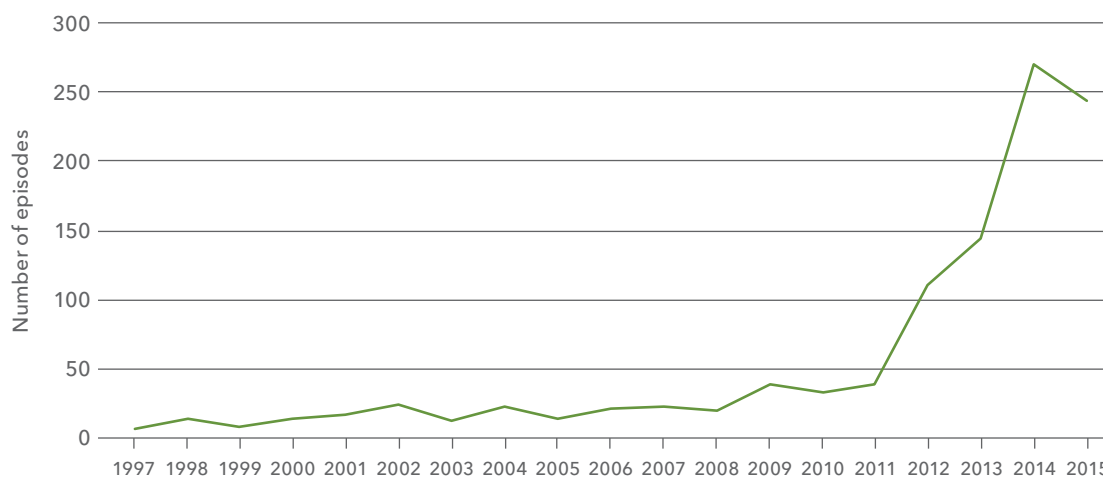
Third, the informal economy plays a critical role in the agricultural value chain. Many value chains have two tracks, with formal value chains serving middle- and upper-class consumers and export markets and informal ones serving low-income consumers in domestic markets.²⁶ Poor rural smallholders face lower barriers to entry when selling to informal traders and markets than to more formal and regulated markets. Yet even some large-scale agribusiness companies expand their markets by segmenting their consumers via the informal sector. In the dairy sector, for example, companies sell single-serving milk sachets to vendors who lack refrigeration and who in turn sell them to the poor.²⁷

GOVERNANCE OF THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

Despite the importance of informal markets to the food security of the urban poor, African governments have a difficult relationship with the sector. In fact, many African countries still retain colonial-era legislation on street vending that penalizes both sellers and buyers.²⁸ Unpredictable “decongestion” exercises by governments often involve arresting and fining informal vendors, confiscating their merchandise, and demolishing market stalls. The Accra Metropolitan Assembly in Ghana even established a Fast Track Court in the mid-2000s for trials of street hawkers who had been arrested.²⁹

Violence toward members of the informal sector, as reported in the media, has increased in the region over the last two decades (Figure 1). These episodes include Zimbabwe’s Operation Restore Order (2005), Malawi’s Operation Order (2006, 2015), Nigeria’s Zero Tolerance Campaign in Lagos (2009), South Africa’s Operation Clean Sweep (2013), and the Keep Zambia Clean and Healthy campaign (2007, 2015). This violence not only hurts a vulnerable sector of society that is already food insecure but also reduces access for others who depend on the sector for many of their fresh and nutrient-dense foods. For instance, in the wake of Operation Order in the Malawian cities of Blantyre, Lilongwe, and

FIGURE 1 Episodes of violence against informal workers in Africa



Source: Author’s calculations based on the Armed Conflict Local and Event Data Project (ACLED), www.acleddata.com.

Notes: “Informal” refers here to street hawkers, vendors, marketers, and traders. “Africa” refers to countries south of the Sahara. The events are gathered from media reports in cities and secondary towns.

Zomba, higher food insecurity was observed among the poor when vendors were forced to the cities' outskirts.³⁰ While harassment of informal vendors is not unique to Africa and is also present in Southeast Asia and Latin America, the scale of the informal economy and its importance to urban livelihoods is much greater in Africa than it is in those regions.³¹ Violent crackdowns on the sector can have serious consequences for Africa's urban food security.

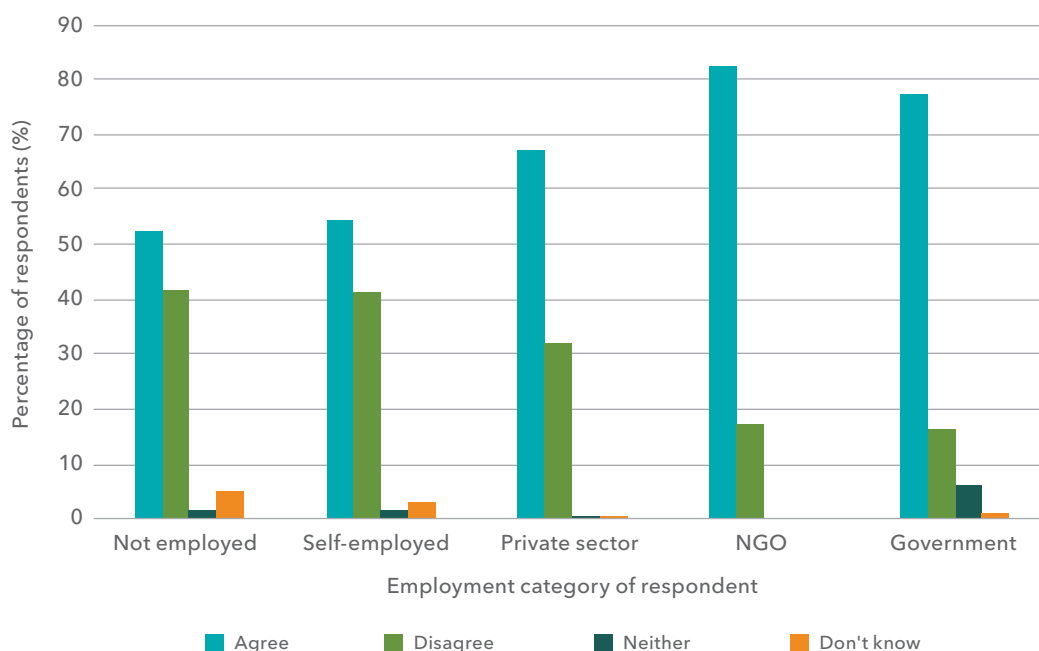
This behavior toward the informal sector reflects many of the region's urban governance challenges. Institutionally, it is rare to find high-level government ministries that explicitly promote the interests of informal workers. In the absence of such support, a vibrant set of informal sector workers' associations emerged in the region over the last decade to address government harassment.³² Yet many of these associations are too fragmented or underfunded to affect the policy process.³³ Administratively, authority over regulating informal sector activities can be extremely confusing. Higher levels of government may contravene the actions of lower tiers. For instance, in 2009, Zambia's Ministry of Local Government and Housing paid the Zambian police service to remove street vendors in Lusaka's central business district, thereby

directly intervening in an area of responsibility delegated to the Lusaka City Council.³⁴ Politically, informal markets can become infiltrated by partisanship, and informal workers heavily influenced by party politics, which can affect how both markets and vendors are treated by governments.³⁵ Zimbabwe's Operation Restore Order, for example, was launched by the ruling party in all major urban areas after the party lost the 2005 parliamentary elections in these constituencies. The violent demolition campaign caused over 700,000 urban poor to lose their homes and informal businesses and exacerbated already insufficient food access for this population.³⁶ As seen in Figure 2 with reference to public opinion in Zambia, such draconian policies toward informal workers enjoy relatively high levels of support from middle-class constituents who work in the private and government sector.

INFORMALITY AND FOOD SAFETY

While politics plays an important role, governments justify their harsh treatment of informal sector workers by pointing to concerns about tax evasion, trespassing on private land, traffic congestion, and food safety. Certainly informal markets are less likely to

FIGURE 2 Should street vendors be banned? Views in Zambia



Source: Afrobarometer, Round 6 Data (2015), <http://afrobarometer.org/data/zambia-round-6-data-2015>.

Note: N = 1,199. Statistics are weighted by population survey weights. NGO = nongovernmental organization.

take measures to assure food safety. Many vendors and marketers operate in settings without access to electricity, waste disposal, clean water, or appropriate sanitation practices, meaning that foods are often not handled hygienically.³⁷ This increases the risk of foodborne illness for the urban poor, with its own set of problems, but also contributes to micronutrient deficiencies.³⁸ While the informal food sector can offer consumers low prices, the trade-off is less regulation of quality control and labeling than is found in formal food value chains, leaving poor consumers more vulnerable to contaminated, adulterated, and spoiled foods.³⁹ Crackdowns and harassment do not necessarily improve these circumstances, though. In fact, research in developing countries such as Brazil suggests that frequent crackdowns reduce the incentives for those in the informal food economy to invest in the practices or equipment that would improve food safety.⁴⁰

LESSONS FROM POLICY INTERVENTIONS

One common policy intervention in Africa is to upgrade or build new marketplaces with proper sanitation and lighting in order to move informal vendors off the streets while also addressing food safety concerns. Yet these efforts rarely succeed in permanently discouraging traders from returning to the streets. Rising land costs in major cities, overlapping land claims in city centers, and a dearth of suitable land under public ownership often result in new markets being built on less expensive peri-urban land—often located far from informal workers' regular customers.⁴¹ Moreover, fees for stalls in upgraded markets are often expensive, so stalls go to more affluent vendors or foreigners rather than the poorest traders.⁴² Politics also plays a role in these processes, as seen in Dakar, Senegal, where a popular opposition-party mayor attempted to raise money for a new market for street vendors through a municipal bond, an initiative ultimately thwarted by the national government.⁴³

In addition to market improvements, governments could protect the interests and health of low-income urban consumers and still allow the informal economy to thrive by focusing more on education and training. In Kenya, where informal milk trading accounts for about 86 percent of milk sold, Kenya's Dairy Board established a Dairy Traders Association in 2009 that provides informal traders with training on the basics of milk hygiene

and simple quality tests. Upon completion of the short training course, traders receive a certificate to obtain a milk vending license and therefore avoid receiving a fine from the Dairy Board.⁴⁴ Similarly, in Nigeria, the International Livestock Research Institute designed a training course for butchers' associations in informal markets to improve hygienic behavior and develop best practices. In return, butchers can display their completion certificates to customers, and they often disseminate their learning to colleagues within their associations.⁴⁵ In Dakar, where women comprise a majority of those selling prepared food in the streets, illiteracy and poor education often contribute to a lack of awareness about sanitation standards. After a community was trained in food hygiene by a local nongovernmental organization, the participating women successfully lobbied for canteens where they could safely prepare foods.⁴⁶ Scaling up such interventions with street-vending and marketing associations, and capitalizing on mobile technology, could significantly contribute to the transfer of knowledge on hygienic food preparation practices and change behaviors accordingly ([Box 1](#)).

More broadly, a variety of options exist for improving the governance of the informal economy beyond addressing food safety concerns. These include institutionalizing regular engagement between local governments and informal workers within management units of city councils and marketplaces.⁴⁷ One attempt at this is Zambia's 2007 Markets and Bus Station Act, which aimed to place the control of markets and bus stations under management boards. In the case of markets, these boards include representatives of local authorities, vendors, and consumers who decide jointly how markets operate. This transparency and engagement in turn encourage many vendors to pay the requisite stall fees that cover investments in sanitation and other infrastructure.⁴⁸ Relatedly, improved transparency in the use of stall fees and other taxes enhances accountability between informal workers and the government. Fiscal earmarking of such payments explicitly for improved infrastructure in markets could build trust between authorities and informal workers while also increasing local government revenue.⁴⁹

Approaches in other regions are instructive and feasible in the African context. In Hanoi, Viet Nam, vendors and the government arrived at a

BOX 1 THE POWER OF PARTICIPATION: WHAT ROLE FOR INFORMAL SECTOR ASSOCIATIONS?

Informal sector associations representing the urban poor have grown tremendously over the last decade, facilitated by international umbrella organizations such as Shack/Slum Dwellers International and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing. While growth of these associations resulted in fragmentation and competition in some cases, useful examples show where they have played a key role in advancing informal sector interests.¹

For instance, Kenya's Federation of the Urban Poor (Muungano wa Wanavijiji) worked to establish a Food Vendors Association within some of Nairobi's informal settlements to map vending locations and their proximity to environmental hazards, such as flooding, sewage, and garbage heaps. Leaders of the association are all women and they undertake routine clean-ups of hazardous areas in their settlements.² Such practices could be replicated elsewhere with engagement of informal associations and support from local governments, donors, and the private sector. The resulting information could be communicated via text message to both consumers and food vendors so that such areas could be avoided and targeted for drainage and garbage collection by municipal authorities.

compromise approach known as "restricted tolerance"—street vendors can work freely during certain times of the day if they clean up any street litter at the end of their allotted time.⁵⁰ In Peru, informal workers are participating in developing a law on self-employment and working with Lima's city government to revise street-vending bylaws.⁵¹ In Africa, participatory engagement of street vendors and marketers in reforming anachronistic legislation that legitimizes arbitrary harassment of informal workers offers a likely first step in improving governance.

BRINGING URBAN FOOD SECURITY INTO POLICY

Urban spaces are not just characterized by demography and geography but also by a distinct set of legal, institutional, and governance dimensions that should be taken into account by any policy recommendations to tackle food security. Common policy efforts thus far to address urban food security include urban agriculture and biofortification programs. An equally important component should be more proactive incorporation of the informal economy into policy discussions on urban food security combined with less harassment of those whose livelihoods depend on the sector.

This is particularly important because Africa's urban expansion has occurred largely in the context of low per capita economic growth and only negligible shifts in the economic structure of most countries toward more formal sector employment.⁵² Without sufficient formal sector jobs, the

informal sector will continue to be a key source of employment and food access for the urban poor. Tellingly, the particular importance of food safety within the informal economy is a major issue in East and Southeast Asia as their growing middle classes become increasingly concerned with tracing the origin of their food.⁵³ This further suggests that food safety and urban informality will continue to dominate the agenda of African policy makers for the foreseeable future, as the middle class is only just beginning to expand in the region.

More broadly, in an era of decentralization and rapid urbanization in Africa, addressing urban food security requires horizontal cooperation across sectors and ministries as well as vertical coordination across tiers of government. Additionally, it requires novel approaches, including many of those discussed here, for addressing longstanding dilemmas for urban planners and local governments, including how to humanely manage the informal sector and harness its potential to improve food security. As policy interest grows in secondary cities and towns, which do not yet face such intense service delivery pressures and high land values, an opportunity exists to plan the design of markets to best accommodate informal workers as these cities grow.⁵⁴ Moreover, with the Sustainable Development Goal on inclusive cities (SDG 11) and the launch of the United Nations' New Urban Agenda, the possibility is greater than ever before to better integrate a focus on food security and management of the informal economy into urban planning processes.



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